White Memory and the (Counter)Stories We Might Tell

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ABSTRACT

White Memory and the (Counter)Stories We Might Tell examines public history narratives to explore how Virginia Tech, a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), tells stories about its relationships with marginalized communities. I ask what we should do with archives that exceed institutional progress narratives. Specifically, I foreground White memory, a process through which (mis)remembering public history creates a network of meaning-making practices that undergird and support hegemonic storytelling and worldmaking. To explore White memory, I constructed two case studies of Virginia Tech public history events. Using queer and decolonial archival methodologies, I practice what Mira Shimabukuro (2015) called "rhetorical attendance"; then, I construct counterstories to call storytellers to account for flattening and compression in progress narratives. First, I examined 1872 Forward, VT's sesquicentennial celebration, held in March 2022. Then, I explored Denim Day Do-Over, a 2019 event in which White memory obscured queer protests. Through juxtaposition, I discovered and highlighted narratives in tension. These tensions make clear the struggle for equity at a PWI and challenge the notion that progress is linear. Successful institutional diversity work with and for marginalized people requires three key characteristics: ongoingness, accountability, and relationship. One-time diversity events are not enough to change the conditions of institutional inequity. Rather, to combat tendencies towards White memory, Virginia Tech must create ongoing, accountable relationships by working in coalitions with marginalized communities. Ultimately, I argue that institutional work with

marginalized communities must continue beyond special events to make material, in addition to symbolic, changes.

Keywords: public history, progress narratives, hegemonic storytelling, narratives in tension, institutional accountability

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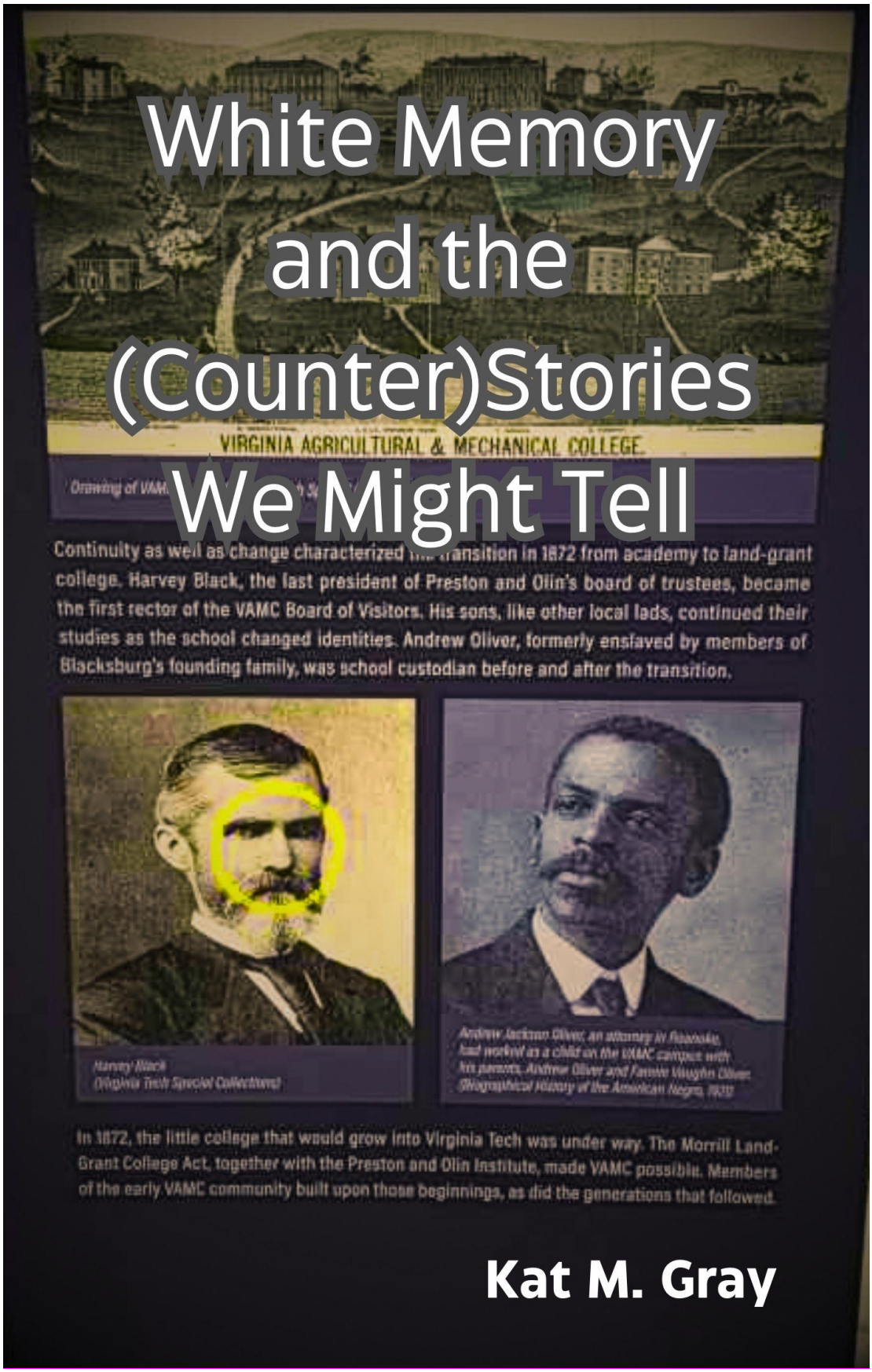
GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This project explores who tells stories about Virginia Tech and how these storytellers create the university's public history. I focus specifically on narratives about VT's relationships with marginalized people, or those people for whom the university is not designed, specifically non-White and non-heterosexual people. I am interested in understanding how composers and designers of commemorative events can tell full, complex stories to the public. Opposing this goal, I identified the phenomenon of White Memory. Storytellers who use White memory in their narratives misremember the past in order to center Whiteness as the central narrative of American history. To explore White memory, I constructed two case studies. One case study examines 1872 Forward, Virginia Tech's 2022 sesquicentennial celebration. The second explores Denim Day Do-Over, a 2019 event in which White memory obscured queer protests. I practice what Mira Shimabukuro (2015) called "rhetorical attendance" to listen to both public history narratives and archives, and I weave these strands together in counterstories. Counterstories are narratives in tension, which challenge the notion that progress on equity issues is linear. One-time diversity events are not enough to change the conditions of institutional inequity, so I argue that if institutional diversity work is to be successful, institutions must center relationships with marginalized people, accountability towards them, and an ongoing commitment to evaluation and change. I advocate for institutions creating stories with marginalized communities through coalitional work. Ultimately, I argue that institutional work must continue well beyond special public history events to

make material, as well as symbolic changes.

White Memory and the (Counter)Stories We Might Tell



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Dedication

To my committee, for believing in this project and reminding me that this is necessary work, especially when it is complex.

To Gwen, Sev, Iris, and Jenn, the most loving and supportive queer family I could have asked for.

To Beignet and Ivy, my sweet, patient cat and dog, for coming with me on this journey.

To my dad for encouraging me to follow my dreams, and to my stepmother Frances for encouraging my dad to follow his.

To the Grays for always reminding me to celebrate my wins and helping me feel loved like one of their own.

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From the beginning of this project, I considered it a labor of love. That is to say, I fell in love with the stories the institution *wasn't* telling, and I wanted to foreground them. Further, I did not work alone; I had a community of engaged, incredible mentors and friends guiding me every step of the way.

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Zosha Stuckey for helping me develop an initial understanding of how I might do tell these stories. Her class, "Archive Fever," birthed this project and asked me to think deeply about archives and counterstories. Without her help, I would not have found the meaningful work that helped me develop my scholarly identity over the past five years.

My committee also played an instrumental role in bringing this project to fruition. I'd like to thank my chairs, especially. First, Dr. Jennifer Sano-Franchini guided me in the early stages of the process and challenged me, always, to ask more and harder questions. Second, Dr. Jim Dubinsky stepped in to help me form and plan the project and see it through; he reminded me that scholarly justice work is worth doing. I thank the other committee members, Dr. Silas Cassinelli, Dr. Chris Lindgren, and Dr. Travis Webster, for their helpful, thoughtful comments on my (many, often quite disorganized) drafts. My committee members helped me find what I wanted to say and to flesh out a rich theoretical and methodological background to support the project. I am also grateful for their many reading suggestions, which were often both useful and fascinating. Truly, working with this committee has been a joy, even when the project frustrated me or deeply challenged my understanding.

I also want to thank the other graduate students in the Rhetoric and Writing Program at Virginia Tech. This project was born in 2019, primarily in small-group peer review discussions. I am grateful especially to Jon Adams, Matt Homer, and Kate Natishan who, upon hearing me describe my findings, knew that I had a dissertation project in my lap and encouraged me to pursue it. They have known the Denim Day chapter since it was a baby, and without their nurturance, it would not have grown into a larger project discussing White narratives.

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I am lucky to have supported and cared for throughout this process, which has been challenging, but also vulnerable. Truly, it takes a village!

“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

Once upon an Archive: White Fairytales and Memory Disputes

Meeting the Gay Student Alliance of 1979

I returned to graduate school in the fall semester of 2018 after nine years of full-time teaching in the University System of Georgia because I had questions about writing and rhetoric that I could no longer answer without further training. At 34, I entered Virginia Tech's PhD program as a nontraditional learner, nearly a decade since I last engaged in graduate study. I was earnest and ready to work hard, but apprehensive about my ability to meet what were no doubt rigorous requirements. In my first semester, I felt lost, and more than that, scared to take risks. I had no idea how ripe I was for an encounter with the archives, one that would change not only my research interests, but also my identity as a scholar.

In my second semester, I took a course with Dr. Zosha Stuckey called "Archive Fever." We read scholars who continue to influence my work (Rawson, Karabinos, Houdek, Royster, Epps-Robertson, Glenn, and Ratcliffe, to name a few) and helped me come to a new understanding about what we are analyzing when we rhetorically analyze archives. More important than the readings, however, was Zosha's assignment to visit and engage Virginia Tech's Special Collections. Talking about archival theory is one thing; the visceral experience of becoming absorbed in an archive is quite another.

I chose VT's LGBTQ+ Timeline because I wanted to get a sense of the queer history around me as I simultaneously became a part of it as a queer student and faculty member at Virginia Tech. Early events in the timeline revealed what you would expect: homosexual professors being outed then fired, for example, or a sense that homosexuality

was acceptable, as long as it was performed in a certain polite, euphemized way. However, because of the readings in Dr. Stuckey's class (particularly Rawson, Houdek, and Karabinos) I knew that I entered the archives with a narrative already in mind. Instead of focusing on finding evidence to support that narrative, I listened for surprises. I moved slowly and recursively, re-reading and re-encountering sources, taking notes, and asking questions.

I moved through the timeline in chronological order, but my progress slowed considerably when I ran into a dense cluster of sources centered on an event in 1979: Denim Day. Part of a larger Gay Awareness Week (the first of its kind at Virginia Tech, though not in the US[1]), Denim Day generated ads, editorials, news reports, photographs, administrative memorandums, student government votes, and even phone calls from the then-Governor of Virginia John Dalton. The controversy was hard for me to understand initially, particularly given the Gay Student Alliance's inoffensive promotional materials: "Support Gay Rights – Wear DENIM Today!" (Gay Student Alliance, 1979). The Gay Student Alliance, scarcely 30 students, managed to upset an entire campus with the mere suggestion. I went over and over the question I scribbled in my notebook: "What is so threatening about Denim Day?"

We talked about our archival explorations in class, and my story about Denim Day caught my friend Cassandra's attention.

"Did you know there's a commemoration for the 40th anniversary of Denim Day this year?" she asked.

---

[1] Most of the schools hosting Denim Day events had either been in the northeastern US (Rutgers, NYU) or western US (San Diego State, Sacramento State).

“Really?” I remember the feeling of my eyebrows shooting up my forehead.

“Yeah, I’ll forward you the email.”

She did; that was how I learned about Denim Day Do-Over in April 2019 and the slate of Pride Week events meant to teach VT about its queer history and to “show how far we’ve come” (Garay, 2019). Consulting with Zosha, I planned a project using what I learned in the archives to understand how archives fuel and support public history narratives. Through feedback sessions, Zosha and my classmates helped me attune to the most interesting information in the archives. As Denim Day Do-Over approached, the pile of materials that dropped serendipitously in my lap began to take shape.

Then I attended Denim Day Do-Over, and everything changed.

*

April 5, 2019 dawned rainy, like many other spring days in the New River Valley; I threw a light jacket on over my button-down shirt and jeans and headed to campus. Earlier that morning Dr. Jordan Harrison sent the LGBTQ+ Caucus listserv a quick email: “RAIN LOCATION CHANGE: #VTDenimDayDoOver will now be in Moss Arts Center at 12:05 PM!” The heavy rain meant the Drillfield would be flooded, so the location for one of campus LGBTQ+ Pride Week’s signature events would be inaccessible.

Denim Day Do-Over was in the works for at least a year, since alumna Nancy Kelly visited her alma mater for the first time since graduation. Kelly attended VT in the late 70s and early 80s; in 1979, she headed the Gay Student Alliance and helped organize the first Denim Day at a rural university campus. Because of her work, Kelly experienced

what VT later called “ridicule and abuse” (@virginia_tech, 2019). I came to know Nancy Kelly, Beth Benoit, Andrew “George” Alvarez, Lisa Barroso, Steve Noll and others through the archival stories they left behind. Today, many of them returned to campus for the first time in decades.

I arrived at the Moss Arts Center and walked down the wide steps leading to the first floor. Someone handed me a pin shaped like a pair of jeans (Figure 1.1) and I thanked them. As I looked around, I wondered whether the rain had affected the turnout. I smiled and waved at someone I knew from my feminist theory class, but for the most part, everyone stood in small knots, chatting with people they already knew.

Figure1.1: Commemorative Denim Day Do-Over Pin.

No one seemed to know where the photographers were. They arrived fifteen minutes after the Do-Over picture was scheduled to set up ladders for a wide shot. Word went through the crowd that we were waiting for President Sands. I recognized Nancy Kelly in the crowd, and presumed the other members of the Gay Student Alliance stood with her. After another fifteen minutes, President Sands had arrived, and the photographers decided they couldn’t get the right angle from above. They moved us to the stairs, and as a mass, everyone shuffled into place, filling the stairs from the top down. As the size of the gathered crowd became obvious, a huge smile passed over Nancy Kelly’s face.

“Where the hell were all of you forty years ago?” she asked us.

Everyone laughed, and the crowd loosened up. We took some pictures, and we took a video, which VT's official Twitter account later posted (Figure 1.2). Virginia

Figure 1.2: VT's Official Denim Day Do-Over Tweet.

Tech's official message acknowledged that "many" LGBTQ "Hokies were ridiculed and abused" (@virginia_tech) at the first Denim Day in 1979. Thus, the university "call[ed] on Hokies to rock denim in support of gay rights" and closed with an orange heart emoji and the phrase #YouAreWelcomeHere (@virginia_tech). The Tweet presents the story of an institution recognizing its faults and opening a public conversation about and with its history; the Do-Over aims to show institutional support for queer Hokies in ways that were unthinkable in 1979. In itself, this is laudable: the university identified a fault in its prior responses to queer students and, with the originators of Denim Day 1979, created a public event to address the problem. However, the passive voice in the Tweet stuck in my

mind: *who* “ridiculed and abused” queer Hokies in January 1979? The subsequent call for “Hokies” to wear denim in 2019 implied that everyone affiliated with Virginia Tech was responsible for participating. Using such broad terminology allowed the university’s institutional responses to Denim Day 1979 to slip through the narrative without notice or description. Though students, faculty, and alumni did respond negatively to Denim Day, university administration ultimately enacted the informal ban on Denim Day events, which lasted until alumna Nancy Kelly suggested the idea of a do-over.

For that reason, the idea of a “do-over” for the university gave me pause. One sense of the phrase conceptualizes a do-over as “an opportunity to do something again or repeat it, especially when it did not turn out well the first time” (OED, 2014). Repeating Denim Day in 2019 struck me as strange, considering the large differences in cultural context: wearing denim to support gay rights had a different rhetorical resonance than it did in 1979. The Do-Over was an opportunity to show support for the queer community. However, the archives suggested that the Gay Student Alliance of 1979 knew that Denim Day would not be widely supported (Noll, 1979). In fact, they considered Denim Day “an exercise in oppression” (Benoit, 1979) against the heterosexual campus community. I started to think of Denim Day as an instance of what Alexander, Jarratt and Welch (2018) called “unruly rhetorics,” which reject conventional notions of politeness and civility to speak against abuses of power. The original Denim Day event achieved the purpose its queer rhetors intended. Denim Day Do-Over, on the other hand, was clearly not for the Gay Student Alliance, but for the university. To retell the story of Denim Day as merely a show of support is to transform it into a progress narrative intended to show how the university has improved. Indeed, another definition describes a do-over as “a renovation”

(OED, 2014). The image of the university is renovated by its participation in an event that was never intended to be about counting the GSA's supporters; it is here that the institution runs the risk of re-marginalizing its queer population in order for its non-queer population to feel better.

*

The night of April 5, the Graduate Life Center hosted a film/theater production called "Jeans Noticeably Absent." The performance blended interviews, archival materials, and readings of those materials by VT theater students. In the darkness of the Moss Arts Center Cube, I re-encountered the materials I read in the archives. This time, instead of listening in chronological order, I heard the materials excerpted and styled into a different narrative.

"Jeans Noticeably Absent" cast Gay Student Alliance members as main characters and instigators.

"We knew they hated us," Nancy Kelly said onscreen, "we just did it anyway."

Nancy Kelly laughed onscreen and in the audience.

Other GSA members told similar stories. They knew they were doing something radical. They knew there would be consequences though they had no idea how far-reaching those consequences would be (see Chapter 5 for more information). They knew they might be putting themselves in danger, yet many experienced a sense of freedom simply from planning and participating in the event. Though most of them had not returned to Virginia Tech or Blacksburg since graduation, many thought of their time at Tech as particularly formative of their queer identities.

Most GSA members also spoke of their lives post-graduation and offered their perspectives as queer community elders. The overall theme returned to progress: one interviewee even called it “trendy” (Kelly, 2019) to be queer today as they reflected on the cultural change of the past forty years.

By this point, the event had gone well over time. The auditorium was cavernous and cold, so in between scribbling in my notebook, I rubbed my hands together. I felt a vague sense of disappointment about the day’s events that I could not immediately untangle. Something about this university-sponsored portrayal of Denim Day felt hollowed out like a jack’o’lantern: a reasonable approximation, but scooped of its unruly guts.

*

Since 2019, I have listened to the story of Denim Day (1979 and 2019) over and over because I wanted to understand that feeling. I wanted to know, as Japanese-American scholar Mira Shimabukuro (2015) asked, “what tells us *something is missing*? How do any of us know *it's more complicated than that*?" (p. 14). As I broadened my project to include a case study of 1872 Forward, Virginia Tech’s sesquicentennial history program, I learned how to listen for discord, for the places where the neat seams of public history events felt fit to burst with archival sources that exceeded institutional stories. I came to understand that feeling as an effect of what James Chase Sanchez (2021) called “hegemonic storytelling” (p. 47). Sanchez argued, “[hegemonic] storytelling becomes a means of community building and knowledge production” that allows “hegemonic communities [to] construct their own identities and keep marginalizing others” (p. 48).

The discomfort I identified had everything to do with narratives promoting *institutional assimilation* as the solution to marginalization.

Mignolo (2011), Tuck and Yang (2012), Walton, Jones, and Moore (2019), and Dougherty (2016) suggested that scholars who examine hegemonic rhetorics are responsible for revealing their workings, and I seek to enact this responsibility in my studies of Denim Day (Chapter 5) and 1872 Forward (Chapter 4). As Irish-American Tim Dougherty (2016) wrote, we do cultural rhetorics work best by "knowing [our] people's story" (pg 3). In many meaningful ways, I am the descendant of the people in these stories: though I am not writing about any "blood relations," often, I am related to these storytellers through Whiteness, class, and cultural background. I was born in the Reagan 80s and raised in a Southern Baptist family in suburban Birmingham, Alabama. My relatives experienced deep conflict and anxiety about our family's working-class roots. Education offered a guaranteed path to material success, but a "young lady" didn't need *too much* education distracting her from her ultimate responsibilities of home and family. Ultimately, I disappointed many of those expectations. I am a nonbinary queer person; I am a long-time exvangelical; I am a leftist who never voted as their grandfather told them to vote.

I often felt a twinge in my stomach reading Nancy Kelly's stories. We grew up queer in different times, but we both knew the pain (and the danger) of *not fitting*. I grew up without having words for myself: not knowing *lesbian*, *queer*, *nonbinary*, *neurodivergent* robbed me of the words to tell my entire story. More than once, I wished I had been as brave as Nancy Kelly was, brave enough to announce my queerness to the world at 20 by planning a university-wide protest.

Simultaneously, I must acknowledge my Whiteness, which serves as a ticket for most institutional rides. Whiteness has always afforded me opportunities, even though no one taught me to name and examine it until I was well into adulthood. My queerness and my experience with trauma and neurodivergence set me apart from the "norm" in many ways, yet I always had a good understanding of the expectations placed upon me by polite (White) society. If I wanted to, I could alter my behavior to fit in ways that people with non-White bodies cannot do. Balancing these identities, in fact, offers me an opportunity to examine what it means to *fit* somewhere, who is asked most often to alter themselves to fit, and how a focus on *fitting norms* obscures the power structures behind those norms as cultural constructions.

I felt these processes at work when I attended Denim Day Do-Over and the day's subsequent events. The stories I knew from the archives resonated with and pulled against the stories told at commemorative events. In those stories, I could easily read the invitation for a particular subset of queer people to enter the university community. At the same time, I felt the way institutions flatten and smooth narratives to make them less threatening, to make them *fit*. In this, I could feel a loss: "my" community of queer people was invited into the university community, but what was the price of admission?

"That's a dissertation," Jon said when I brought those questions to a feedback session.

Kate agreed.

The rest, as they say, is history but also present, and future. In fact, one of the most important considerations for those who create public history narratives is the impact those narratives will have. Narratives can magnify, distort, confuse, and complicate.

Narratives can harm *or* heal. That is to say, narratives are not inert–histories are stories still in process, and the way we tell those stories reflects our current cultural values. Those cultural values resonate and echo through time as stories are told and retold; thusly do stories rhetorically accrete. These stories become "calcified" (Ore, 2017) into structures which may obscure other formations. Calcified narratives prevent us from knowing that some stories even exist. Once we break through calcified cultural narratives, we can describe how they are structured and how they function. As someone who grew up with a very particular understanding of Whiteness and its value in Southern culture, I had to start there.

Whiteness as a Cultural Narrative

Though I didn't have a name for the phenomenon as a child, I have grown up with/in narratives of Whiteness that portray "majority culture" in a very particular, racialized way. It was impossible not to hear these White stories; I grew up in Birmingham, an epicenter of Civil Rights and labor movement history, I was a curious kid with a million questions, and my family members had a predilection for storytelling. It was more than that, though: living in Alabama involves a complex calculus for White storytellers. How does one acknowledge the "painful past," as it was termed at 1872 Forward, without implicating one's ancestors, and even oneself, as part of the group of aggressors who caused the pain? That it would have been easier simply to admit one's involvement, ancestral or personal, in oppressive practices seemed not to cross many folks' minds. Throughout my life, I heard stories that attempted this balancing act.

When I ran into the story of Denim Day in the archives then attended Denim Day Do-Over, I felt a tension that was familiar. As I noted above, it was Dr. Mira

Shimabukuro who helped me put that tension into words: “How do any of us know *it's more complicated than that*?" (p. 14). I am especially grateful for a comment from Dr. Silas Cassinelli, which pushed me towards an answer: what might my recognition of *missing pieces* at Denim Day Do-Over have to do with my growing up White in the South? The remainder of this project traces my process of answering these questions and reports my findings. I explore in depth the working of White normative narratives, particularly those that tell institutional histories, because institutional histories say a great deal about the characteristics we want our cultures, local and larger, to have. My case study chapters on Denim Day and 1872 Forward explore options for re-presenting history as a complex dialectic rather than a progress narrative intended to congratulate “majority culture” for work that is not yet finished.

Below, I use creative nonfiction as a way to explore my personal connection to Whiteness, Southernness, and other normative expectations into which I was born. I intend these stories to help readers understand my positionality as a researcher; however, in the vein of cultural rhetorics scholarship, story must be understood as theory and method. These stories theorize how Whiteness and normativity mutually reinforce each other using my own life as the evidence for analysis. I utilize creative nonfiction as a counterstory genre to emphasize that, although it is normativized and made invisible, Whiteness is only the story of one culture. I reveal these stories not out of a sense of obligation or shame, but simply because they are the truth. These are my experiences of growing up White and, even if I could not name Whiteness as the central preoccupation of the culture, I knew what it was by *knowing what it wasn’t.*

*

As a kid, my family went to church regularly. Our small extended family initially went to the church my grandparents chose, which was walking distance from their house. My early memories of church reflect my experiences as a kid with undiagnosed ADHD. During the sermons, I laid on my back on the uncomfortable church pew and stared up at the ceiling, into the recessed lighting that seemed miles above. I didn't like the pastors, red-faced and yelling about hell. Sunday school was better: my teacher was a kind older woman who helped us learn Bible verses and make crafts.

I talked and read early and learned words quickly and I loved music, so songs at church had a special appeal. "Jesus Loves the Little Children" was a favorite.

"Red and yellow, black and white," I sang, "They are precious in His sight."

Children, of course, take things literally. To me, the song seemed clear, and I got the message. At four, five, six, I understood the message "God is love," but hell didn't make any sense. However, I had missed something important.

When I was six, a large Vietnamese immigrant family moved in down the street. Their oldest child, Nancy, was my age, and in my class at school. When they first arrived, their mother made handmade eggrolls for the neighbors on our street, and the kids came as a group to deliver them. My father answered the door and thanked them, then brought the plate to my mother, who put it in the refrigerator.

In my mind, this seemed a perfectly normal neighborly act. At six, I knew the themes of American suburban culture: everyone knows their neighbors by name, and they do small favors for each other as a matter of course. The kids in the neighborhood play

together, usually under the watchful eye of many mothers, and they all come in at sunset as they're told.

My grandmother had some different ideas. My grandmother's business was an interior design workroom, and my mother and aunt were the two employees; they saw each other every day and knew the details of one another's lives intimately. Most of the time. My mother told her about the egg rolls and the new family as they worked.

My grandmother looked up from the panel she was sewing.

"I wouldn't let Katie play with them," she said, glancing over at me.

"Those egg rolls smell weird," my mother said.

"I wouldn't eat those either," my grandmother said, giving my mother a knowing look.

I wanted to ask why, but I was already pushing my luck being in the workroom. I was always "in the way" as far as my mother was concerned.

That day, when we got home, she threw away the eggrolls. I wasn't allowed to play with Nancy outside of school anymore, and my mother started shooing the family's kids out of our yard when they walked home from the bus stop.

I hadn't thought the eggrolls smelled weird, just different. I didn't understand why different was weird, or why that meant I had to keep my distance.

This was the first of many times I would receive this lesson from my family: there was a standard for "difference" beyond which "normal" people could not engage.

*

The first time I understood racism, I was eight. I didn't understand it *well*, and I didn't understand it because of anything my family taught me. In fact, I understood it through my friend Robert, another eight year old.

Robert and I were both on the math team, and his dad was the coach. We spent a lot of time talking and one day, he sat on the steps outside our classroom with me to ask me why I didn't want to go in.

"Rachel was really mean to me at dance class last night," I said.

"Why?"

"I was wearing all black," I said, "and she asked me whose funeral I was going to."

Robert was silent for a moment, and then he gestured at himself.

"Now you know how I feel."

We were both quiet after that, but we sat on the steps until the teacher made us come in. I understood something new in that moment, though I did not know how to say what it was.

That an eight year old Black child taught me more about racism than my family is significant. Robert and I were the same age, but already, he was expected to carry lessons about race and difference that I, as a White child, was simply not expected to bear. Robert needed to be aware of Whiteness and able to name it. My biggest problem was being a misunderstood eight-year-old goth. I had never once had to think about my skin color as a reason people might react to me differently.

For reasons I could not understand at eight, *my* skin color was not seen as something to which others should react. I knew that what Robert experienced wasn't fair. I knew that Jesus said we were all "precious" to him. For the first time, I couldn't make the parts add up. I *felt* a moment of tension in "majority culture," of which I was a part – I understood affectively, through embodied experience, that the narratives of majority culture do not always match reality.

I couldn't personally understand Robert's situation, but his story planted a seed of discomfort in my belly. Obviously, the story stayed with me: I remember it vividly three decades later. Now, I also understand that this moment of discomfort opened me to a non-White perspective. I understood my own Whiteness through someone else's experiences. In many ways, Robert knew me more intimately than I knew myself.

*

Ultimately, I misinterpreted many of the cultural messages I received through the church, my family, and White majority culture at large. Kids are literal – but I was perhaps more literal than most. My family, for example, meant me to interpret a particular message about the word "different" in my story about our Vietnamese neighbors. I missed the message.

My family also emphasized the value of church teachings, and I took the messages about equality before their god literally. My father, to his credit, reinforced that message; he was the only person in my life to say explicitly that it was wrong to discriminate based on the color of someone's skin. However, my father, like many 80s and 90s dads, was expected to be the "breadwinner," and he spent most of his time at work. Often, he was downtown six days a week.

I spent almost all of my time with my mother and, as a result, my mother's family. They didn't speak clearly like my father did. They expected me to understand, for example, that if someone was "different from us," they were disqualified from churchly ideas of God's love. They expected me to have a particular understanding of *us* without saying aloud specifically who made up that group.

In other words, there was a cultural framework in place prior to my arrival. My family members grew up White in the Jim Crow South, living first in Montgomery, and then moving to Birmingham around the time of the bus boycotts. My mother, the oldest child, was born in 1953, and my aunt, the youngest, in 1964. Their definitions of *us* and *them* were informed intimately by their experiences of the Civil Rights Movement, desegregation and busing, and George Wallace's governorship.

In other words, I was born into a family, within a place, within a culture, which already had a narrative. Us and them were categories set before I was born, even if they evolved with White Southern culture. The stakes for keeping these categories clear were high, and as I learned through experience, there were consequences for failure. Part of getting the narrative right is refusing to name who *we* are and who *they* are. Polite culture demanded that I hit the mark. I didn't know where the mark was, but I was certainly informed when I missed it.

As I grew up and grew older, I started to resent these contradictions. I resented being unable to talk about my Black friend Taylor with my mother's family. I resented the idea that I was supposed to marry a nice White boy and that I wasn't even supposed to *consider* dating outside my race for reasons no one would tell me.

"Why?" I asked why all the time.

“Because they’re different than us.”

Nothing more. I grew dissatisfied with this answer. Eventually, I grew very angry about this answer.

*

As a junior in high school, I was still a history nerd. My 11th grade history teacher was one of only two in my high school that dared go past World War II, and she assigned us an interview project about the Civil Rights Movement.

The day it was assigned, I told my mother about it. We were sitting in the den at home; she had brought work home, and she didn’t look up from hand-sewing the hem of a curtain.

“Why don’t you interview your granddad?”

It made sense. My grandfather, born in 1931, graduated from Huntingdon College with a degree in English. An injury kept him from shipping out overseas to Korea, so he started a career in broadcast journalism. Since he worked in Montgomery, he covered the Civil Rights Movement for years and had interviewed movement leaders for the news. Through his career, he knew many of the main characters we read about in our history books.

Memories of my teenage years have become patchy from trauma. I don’t remember what I asked my grandfather, or much about what he said. Because of my Complex PTSD, I experience many memories as embodied affective echoes–I *feel* memories. In this instance, I remember the knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach because even though I didn’t know what he would say, *I knew what he would say*.

I knew he had interviewed Martin Luther King, Jr., and I had to ask about it. The first I knew of Dr. King was a day off from school in January that also happened to be my birthday (the 18th). My grandfather grumbled about me having the day off; for reasons I didn't yet understand, he didn't like the holiday.

When I visited the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in fourth grade, I heard the entire "I Have a Dream" speech delivered for the first time. I learned about Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat through a life-sized replica of a Montgomery bus. I walked along the line of white stone statues of civil rights leaders, going forward, the museum implied, into the future. At ten, I couldn't understand why someone would argue against Dr. King's ideas of equality.

At seventeen, I asked my grandfather about his time spent with Dr. King.

"I interviewed him several times," my grandfather said.

He paused and looked me in the eyes for emphasis.

"You know, he spoke very well during his interviews. He wasn't very impressive off-script when the cameras were off."

I didn't know what that meant. It seemed (and felt) like another instance of subtext I was meant to read, but didn't.

I didn't know how to follow-up, either. My mother taught me that my grandfather was not a man with whom a woman could disagree; he told the women in my family how to vote and, when I turned eighteen, he told me how to vote as well. He encouraged me to do well in school, called me his "pal," and took me out to share a banana split when I got all A's on my report card. He also regularly used ableist slurs about women's intelligence

and, by the time I turned 18, he was advising me about how to dress and act so I could find a husband and care for him.

I was supposed to love my grandfather, and I did. At the same time, I experienced deeply conflicted feelings about his views, and the views of other family members. My previous experiences with getting the narrative wrong—mentioning things that were supposed to go unsaid, missing unspoken messages—left me with only my trauma responses to draw from. I froze. My mind went somewhere else, the same way it did when I had to report on my project in front of the class.

I didn't know how to parse what I heard. I knew how to reveal Whiteness at work, and I know that when I gave my presentation, I did not hide the responses I found unsavory. I had a sense, even then, that unsavory ideas, especially those that govern the unspoken Whiteness undergirding majority culture, must be exposed. I just had no idea what to do once I had revealed them.

*

In my early 20s, I attended the University of Alabama at Birmingham. I spent one semester as a Psychology major before returning to writing, my first love. I double-majored in English and History, and I began refining my critical, analytical lenses. I took upper level history courses on Southern history because we had access to such rich archives in downtown Birmingham. In ways I didn't recognize then, I was trying to understand myself, my experiences of Southernness, and how the South, to which I was expected to give my loyalty, had evolved as a cultural entity. I imagine I will continue asking these questions for the rest of my life.

I became very interested in my family's history, and I asked my father about genealogy work my grandmother did for our family. One day, my father and I sat with my grandmother at her little house in Homewood. We had cake, she played some records, and then she pulled out the small hardbound book that contained the information. She talked me through what her cousin found: on her side, we were hardy Scots-Irish folk who first came to the country through Virginia, then migrated south to Georgia. She showed me black-and-white pictures of her family's farm in Georgia and told me about her and her sister sneaking kittens under the covers in their bed when they thought their father wasn't looking.

Though my dad's dad passed away many years before, my father knew about his side of the family as well. A long line of working-class folks from England, our surname (Abrams) came from the family's long-term role as Abraham in traveling passion plays, a role handed down through male descendants. The Abrams family came into America through South Carolina, and then migrated south to Georgia.

"You've been here a long time on both sides," my father remarked. "If you wanted to, you have the documentation to apply to Daughters of the American Revolution."

"Did any of the family own slaves?" I asked.

My father frowned.

"One of our ancestors had a small farm before the Civil War. He did own a few slaves, but no more than ten. He treated them very well, so they loved him like a father, and he freed them after the war."

I wasn't unfamiliar with this trope. *My ancestor owned slaves, but he treated them well, and they loved him* is a common White racial narrative in the South. It's a narrative I dislike for obvious reasons, but even those must be stated. The idea that a White ancestor "treated their slaves well" is an equivocation that allows White-bodied people to lessen their ancestors' contributions to a violent, exploitative system. I must reveal this equivocation for two important reasons. First, acquitting one's ancestors of the "worst" behavior is a rhetorical dodge, something we do to make ourselves feel better about our history. Second, absolving our ancestors allows White folks to sidestep conversations about the continued presence of systematic racism in the South, and in America at large.

I am not interested in continuing conversations that are disingenuous at best. Instead, I want to understand more clearly how the narratives of Whiteness that underlie notions of majority culture come to be. Further, I want to track how those narratives adapt over time; Sanchez (2021), himself a mixed-race scholar, argued that such analyses are critical because they allow us to understand the process of marginalization, which must occur rhetorically in order to occur materially. That is to say, my project is an intervention in cultural rhetorics that attends to the narrative features of Whiteness in order to imagine other possibilities. In this, I am particularly interested in storytelling about Southern history and the processes through which it is extended and remixed. Beyond critique, I also seek opportunities for what Jones and Williams (2020) called "the just use of imagination." This project uses critical imagination (Royster and Kirsch, 2012) to think beyond clichéd historical narratives told about Whiteness in/and the American South.

A note on my use of the term White

Upon initial examination, the term White seems to refer to race and only race. However, my personal experience growing up White suggests that the term is intersectional. In fact, White covers a multitude of identity vectors aside from skin color or racial phenotype. The scholarship I review in Chapter 2 approaches this topic in more depth, but it is important to give an accounting of my use of the term White at the outset of the project.

To be clear: when I use the term White or any variation thereof in this project, I refer to a collection of qualities that, taken together, form the basis for a concept of the "normative body" in American (Southern) culture. Whiteness, or apparent racial heritage, is perhaps best seen as what Asian-American scholars Monberg, Yoon, and Sano-Franchini called the "sustaining thread" (2017) that joins these intersectional characteristics together. Whiteness presumes binary sex and gender expressions (one is either male *or* female) and conforms to ideals of Euro-American patriarchy that value masculinity over femininity. Whiteness therefore also presumes reproductive heterosexuality as a norm and values most those relationships that, at least on the surface, center sexual monogamy for the purpose of having children. In my family, to be White was also to be (or at least seem to be) middle-class, with a steady job gained through an approved educational path. Whiteness also presumes an able, neurotypical body. Such a body is seen as "normal," and its perspectives, abilities, and needs thereby *become normalized*.

In the American South, Whiteness also has distinct regional qualities, beginning with a general pride in one's regional identity as a Southerner. A certain defensiveness

can, but does not always, accompany this identity. American pop culture often broadly portrays Southerners as slow, stupid, or backwards; our accents are caricatured and impersonated, our rural poverty becomes the butt of jokes, and our history makes it easy for the rest of the country to place all the blame for American racism at our feet. Southerners, as a result, can view non-Southern cultures (and people) with deep suspicion. This tension sometimes causes Southerners to value different elements of Whiteness. For example, though my family was very concerned about being seen as middle class, they also held a deep suspicion towards certain middle class jobs (such as university professor). Though my family wanted me to attend college, doing so outside of Alabama was out of the question. They viewed large, "prestigious" Northeastern or Western universities as the home of the "Coastal Elite," made up of people who did not share their values and with whom they could not relate. Additionally, college education may be less valuable depending on one's proximity to other elements of White identity. In my own experience, my mother's family made it quite clear that there was *too much* education for a White woman; after all, her primary tasks were in the home, and her career would serve only as a supplement to the family's finances.

This last element of my own experience illuminates the fluidity of White identity: though I am White, I was assigned female at birth and that, by necessity, moved me farther away from the characteristics of the ideal White body. A shift away from maleness affected all the other areas of my White identity. As a "female" person, for example, my education and career options are circumscribed. I was discouraged against careers in veterinary medicine and aerospace engineering; when I chose English, I was encouraged to write children's books or work for Southern lifestyle magazines. Rather

than seeing White as a label that simply describes skin color, then, it makes more sense to see Whiteness as a web of interlinked characteristics, where some locations are closer to the center (or norm) than others. Distance from the centered, normative body changes the way a person relates to Whiteness and changes the vantage point from which one views their Whiteness—this is how, at times, I was able to view Whiteness when it otherwise might remain invisible. Whiteness is a deeply intersectional identity associated with the conferral of significant societal privileges. Whiteness is a moving target; because there are so many ways to slip away from the center, only certain bodies receive the full benefit of those privileges. Whiteness is complex and shifting and it has deep ties to normativity through mutual reinforcement. It is a centuries-old narrative that perpetuates itself through its ability to adapt; White morphs to include and exclude different bodies, changing in response to its need to remain hidden in plain sight.

White Memory and Cultural Rhetorics

By 2022, I had a second case study in mind: 1872 Forward, a series of events celebrating Virginia Tech's "triracial history"[2] in its sesquicentennial year. Again, I spent time in the Digital Special Collections prior to the events, and again I felt a strange sense of stories left unsaid when I attended public history events. At 1872 Forward, Virginia Tech in turn made explicit efforts to promote inclusive history. They planned events with community constituents and featured community leaders from the Monacan Nation, the Black community of Wake Forest (descended from the slaves of Kentland Plantation), and the Fraction family (descended from the slaves of Smithfield Plantation). White descendants of William Preston, the owner of Smithfield Plantation, acknowledged the

[2] In Chapter 4, I discuss problems with the "triracial" framing in some depth. Here, it is sufficient to say that the framing is both inappropriate and incorrect.

wrongs of their ancestor, acknowledged benefitting from those wrongs, and opened an exhibit at Smithfield that focuses on the truth about its history as a plantation. However, though Virginia Tech hosted the events, there was often no institutional perspective offered. No VT representatives, for example, discussed the circumstances of the Morrill Act, which gave the university land that rightfully belongs to the sovereign Monacan Nation. No VT representatives discussed how the campus benefitted from slave labor or offered ideas about how the university might correct this wrong with meaningful action.

Silence, however, is not meaningless. In this case, it transmitted the message that, although unspecified bad things may have happened on land that "belongs" to the institution, the institution is not interested in discussing its own culpability or the need to continue justice work into the future. I wish to be clear that I do not infer malice in the institution's silence; rather, I believe that White institutions prefer progress narratives because a *nice* story makes us feel better. Progress narratives are attractive, and, indeed, they celebrate what we have done. Finding joy in justice work is inherent to that work and something we must do as part of practicing care. But true coalition (and meaningful decolonization), as Tuck and Yang (2012) reminded, means ongoing commitment. This means that institutions must sit with their own discomfort and center the voices of marginalized populations as they consider their narrative responsibilities. This is difficult work.

Accountability becomes more difficult when Whiteness undergirds the power structure in question. The normative White body is "centered" (Ahmed, 2007) in a way that allows it to disappear: the farther one is from the center of the web I described above, the more *noticeable* one's body becomes. If you do not fit in, you stick out. Denim Day

Do-Over, for example, expanded the definition of VT community to include queer people, but the lack of focus on intersectional identities flattened queerness into Whiteness. Queer bodies were allowed closer to the center as long as they performed (or mimicked) White normativity. 1872 Forward, on the other hand, attempted to acknowledge the complex and often-painful history of Virginia Tech as an institution. At crucial moments, however, the institution chose not to participate in difficult conversations. This not only sets up a progress narrative ("it used to be bad, but it's better now"), it also disappears institutional responsibility for materially addressing its continued actions to marginalize those who do not fit.

I conceive of the flattening and norming in these public history events through the term White memory, which I see as a process of what Black scholar Dr. Ersula Ore called "rhetorical whitening" (2017) enacted through public history narratives. I owe an intellectual debt to Dr. Ore's Black memory, which she defined as "a political resource that combats racial oppression by making visible what has been excluded, and what has been forgotten" (2019, p. 7). Further, Black memory shows "an attunement to 'ethical evaluations of the past' and 'living engagement with the past'" (2019, p. 7). If Black memory works as a "making visible," then White memory obscures, excludes, and forgets. Black memory resists erasure through ethical engagement with the past; White memory smooths over and waves away conflict in order to create progress narratives. White memory comprises processes of misremembering that situate Whiteness as a neutral norm.

I define White memory as *a process through which (mis)remembering public history creates a network of meaning-making practices that undergird and support*

hegemonic storytelling, and therefore worldmaking. White memory often seeks to erase a painful settler-colonial past to paint modern-day America as a culture cured of racism and other –isms. In the rhetorical world of White memory, we pretend painful histories never happened. White memory recasts the past to make White bodies more comfortable in the present and situate them for ongoing dominance in the future. However, Whiteness is slippery. Whiteness disappears from descriptions in favor of notions of "factual truth" or "objectivity." This dictates whose stories get told and whose stories get *legitimized*. Those who have suffered the violence and exclusion engendered by these processes are silenced and this creates public history that is both intellectually dishonest and unethical.

Memory studies enmeshes memory, place, and culture in rhetorically complex ways. By nature, memory is a story about the past that affects the present and offers a particular vision of the future. Scholars suggest that the rhetorical use of memory has a long history; it is, after all, one of the five traditional canons of Greek and Roman rhetoric. Seeing memory through this lens reveals a strong connection between memory and place: Lamp (2011) argued that "systems of memory contained a strong visual and spatial element, influencing invention and likely the ways the Romans understood and constructed their environments" (p. 180-1). In the visual and spatial rhetorics she analyzed, memory links to place and place, thereby, creates memory. In turn, "if people were routinely exposed to the same spaces, images, words, and symbols, those things would impress themselves in their memories" (p. 183). The word *impress* is key: it echoes Ahmed's *habit* (2007) as something that wears a groove over time. Routine exposure wears a groove in the viewer's memory and, Lamp suggested, this process may be turned outward, "thereby creating a public memory" (p. 183). Public memories

impress through the rhetorical design of space, and a place itself can be a rhetor by providing the repeated exposure that normalizes particular ideologies, cultures, and narratives. Thusly described, I believe it becomes obvious why the public history events at Virginia Tech caught my attention: the stories an institution tells are rhetorically significant and deeply linked to the material histories of White neocolonialism and the bodies and places on which those histories are enacted.

As a "willful actor" (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994), place exercises power. Place manages "relationships of exteriority" with "targets or threats" (p. 295). Such relationships are key to understanding Lamp's argument that rhetors "[manipulated] their environments in order to utilize either the memory of a place or object" (p. 188). Places, as "[repositories] for memory, meaning, or emotion" (Lamp, p. 188), prescribed relationships with outsiders. Lamp's research explicated a long-term affiliation between people, places, and stories; it is not unusual, in other words, for places to be used rhetorically. Place creates a lens through which to engage public memory. This lens is a flexible foundation for analyzing our current rhetorical situation, which merges the material with the digital. Place mutates in digital culture: one can be *there* while being *not there*. Systems of memory spread across material and digital media and users with access to proliferating digital technology regularly remix these media. The exchange between the rhetorical program and the bodies it affects is increasingly complex and features more voices. Old narratives and their remixes circulate alongside entirely new narratives.

In this contested material/digital agora, we find narratives we already know as well as surprising new stories. In most cases, the narratives that catch our attention

depend on our orientation (Ahmed, 2006) within the network, but we sometimes contact the unexpected when a rhetor manipulates the network. In a colonial context, and especially in the United States, we should expect to find White supremacy. *How* we find it is variable–adaptable, as is White supremacy itself. Strategic White rhetorics form a network of memory that supports Whiteness in spaces public and private. White memory serves as one way to observe, critique, and rewrite those narratives of Whiteness that claim neutrality. I am particular about situating my use of the concept within my own experience growing up White in the South; I have no doubt that White memory would be useful in other White cultural contexts, but its workings may look quite different from other vantage points.

Project Outline

White Memory and the (Counter)Stories We Might Tell is a cultural rhetorics project exploring how Whiteness becomes an invisible narrative underpinning the concept of "majority culture," particularly in the Southern United States. I draw on archival sources from Virginia Tech's Digital Special Collections, listening and attending to those voices from the past as a way to complicate the progress narratives often presented at institutional public history events. Examining rhetorics of Whiteness with queer and decolonial archival methodologies, I explore how we might use the means at hand in a local rhetorical situation to tell accountable public history stories. I ask questions about how institutions story themselves (and thereby create their identities) as they reorient towards populations they wish to recruit. I studied the archives and attended public history events using a recursive process best described by Sano-Franchini's (2017) concept of "slow scholarship." I read "along the grain" (Gopinath, 2017) as a way to

understand the contested rhetorical acts that lie beneath progress narratives. Then, I juxtapose archival sources and analysis in conversation to produce counterstories that challenge narratives of institutional assimilation. I assemble counterstories queerly: I highlight contradictions, complexity, multiple meanings, and multiple center points. Ultimately, I suggest that the tension between remembering and forgetting inherent to White memory offers a framework for spotting rhetorics of Whiteness at work. Being able to identify "hegemonic storytelling" (Sanchez, 2021) allows us to work in coalition on public history projects to tell responsible stories, even if they are uncomfortable.

In this first chapter, I explore narrative, positionality, and the ubiquity of public history stories, which discipline the paths a body may take in order to be defined as a citizen. In this chapter, I use creative non-fiction as a vehicle to explore the exigence of my project, along with my positionality as a White, queer, neurodivergent researcher. In particular, I explore connections between my own Whiteness and the public history that has surrounded me since I was a child. I root my understandings of Whiteness in this personal history and weave strands of story together in order to examine the exigence for this project and I introduce the idea of White memory as an embodied phenomenon. I view this chapter as an experiment in theory/story guided by cultural rhetorics principles (laid out by Powell et. al, 2014; Bratta and Powell, 2016; Arellano, Brentnell, Hsu, and McGee, 2020).

Chapter 2, "White Memory in Theory," explores White Memory as a way of "hegemonic storytelling" (Sanchez, 2021) and world-making. I think through White memory as a strategic White rhetoric using Nakayama and Krizek's (1994) framework; through their understanding of Whiteness, I outline three characteristics key to spotting

White memory in action. First, I explore how White memory defines institutional norms. I am particularly interested in Sara Ahmed's (2007) work on the phenomenology of Whiteness, which described Whiteness as a series of habits that create institutional grooves. Those grooves then proscribe how a body may act; if a body cannot fit within these predefined grooves, it sticks out from the White background. Using scholars like Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe (2017), Ore (2017), and Watson (2013), I explore how these grooves portray Whiteness as a universal characteristic, unremarked and unremarkable. Another notable characteristic of White memory is its ability to resist exposure. I begin by mapping Nakayama and Krizek's characteristics of White strategic rhetorics against Tuck and Yang's (2012) "settler moves to innocence" (p. 11), a move which allows for a robust understanding of how Whiteness disappears even when it is centered. I also examine how Whiteness ties to ideas of the neutral, individual, Western subject (Mignolo, 2011) and how Whiteness hides utilizing strategic defenses (Sanchez, 2021). Last, I explore how White memory colonizes space and time. In this section, I use Ahmed's (2007) work to explore how some bodies feel "at home" in particular places. Then, I investigate what Ersula Ore (2017) called "racial-spatial practices" and other visual and material composition practices that allow White memory to take up space and time. I close this section by exploring how, when Whiteness "trails behind" (Ahmed, 2007, p. 32), it takes space from other bodies.

Chapter 3, "Call and Response: A Cultural Rhetorics Methodology," uses the metaphor of call and response to understand how to listen for and then react to marginalized stories. In the first section, "The Call," I consider queer and decolonial archival studies work in order to understand how to interact with the archives. I construct

a framework that allows me to think about tracking master narratives, then practicing queer cartography to upset the normative mapping that leads us towards those narratives and away from the disruptions and discord that indicate places where we can read "along the grain" (Gopinath, 2018, p. 14). Then, I review work on rhetorical listening, first examining Krista Ratcliffe's (2005) scholarship. Then, I explore Mira Shimabukuro's work (2015) on rhetorical attendance, which critiques and extends Ratcliffe's framework with particular attention to access. I create a framework for listening care-fully, which asks scholars to practice rhetorical attendance, listen ethically, attend to Whiteness, and listen to and for silences. In the second section, "The Response," I consider how to use counterstory as a methodology for responding to White memory. I begin by considering Native scholarship on storytelling, and how this applies to storying Whiteness. Then, I consider ideas of counterstory and countermemory to understand how we might "raise a hammer" (Slotkin, 2022) to inequitable narratives. I conclude the chapter with a framework that helps scholars think about how to constellate archival sources, then attend to counterstories and countermemories.

Chapter 4, "1872 Forward (and Backward)," is the first of two case study chapters; here, I explore 1872 Forward, Virginia Tech's sesquicentennial history celebration, which purported to explore the institution's "triracial" history. In it, I explore how university narratives utilized White memory in order to avoid complicating progress narratives. I begin by exploring how Virginia Tech, as an institution, is always already White, and I reveal how the university shied away from discussions of its Whiteness even when its "guests" at 1872 Forward did not. Next, I explore how the university concealed student activism in its narratives about renaming Lee and Barringer Halls in 2020.

Institutional representatives argued this was the "first time" students made a "cogent argument" (Gendreau, 2020; "Rededicating Hoge and Whitehurst Halls," 2022) about changing the dormitory names, and in doing so, forgot the story of two decades of student activism leading to the changes. Finally, I examine new memorial markers at Virginia Tech that celebrate the diverse history of marginalized constituents. Alongside the story of their dedication at 1872 Forward, I explore the story of James Lane, a university "founding father" whose marker served as the design inspiration for the Historic Markers Committee. Ultimately, I ask how Virginia Tech might have done more. That is to say, although Virginia Tech made remarkable strides toward responsibly centering marginalized voices and hosting challenging and provocative conversations, it often opted out of participating in those events from an institutional perspective. VT often remained silent about its past, and in doing so, opted out of difficult conversations in the present about the future.

Chapter 5, "Denim Days, 1979 and 2019," is the second case study chapter, in which I examine Denim Day 1979 and Denim Day Do-Over as a way to understand invitations to participate in institutional communities and the stakes of recruitment (Ahmed, 2007) and assimilation. I begin by discussing how Denim Day 1979 reinforced White, heteronormative culture on campus, and how Denim Day Do-Over sought to rewrite that history by redefining those norms. Then, I consider how White memory hides in plain sight at events like Denim Day Do-Over. In the first subsection, I examine how Denim Day Do-Over took what Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch (2018) called "unruly rhetorics" of queer protest and attempted to make them polite. Then, I examine how Denim Day Do-Over flattened queerness into Whiteness through processes of rhetorical

whitening (Ore, 2017). The university continues to celebrate Denim Day each Pride Week, so I conclude the case study by thinking through what repetition means for White memory and how it does (or doesn't) make both symbolic and material changes to Virginia Tech.

In the final chapter, "And They Lived Accountably Ever After: Tools for Telling New Stories," I think through how rhetoric scholars might continue to use White memory as a tool for justice work. I consider what the field of cultural rhetorics gains from a deeper understanding of hegemonic storytelling. In particular, I think through how we might use a concept like White memory to theorize how White rhetorics attempt to maintain hegemonic power and how other stories move around the restrictions White memory attempts to impose. I emphasize above all that, although White memory stories are ubiquitous, they are not monolithic. Other narratives circulate and challenge these histories. Regardless of an institution's tendencies towards assimilation, scholars of White rhetorics must continue finding and revealing the loopholes in the institutional fabric. In fact, we should see such work as a responsibility since it often reveals practices of survival, rhetorical and otherwise, within institutions that seek to normativize and discipline "the American citizen." I explore these possibilities through three themes: ongoingness, accountability, and relationship. It is through these themes that we might think about responsible justice work, and all three must be present, as Tuck and Yang (2012) and Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) suggest. I examine where my project might have done more in each of these areas and end each section with questions intended to extend the work I have done. I conclude by arguing against conclusions, which is to say, I

end the project with an emphasis on the ongoing, accountable relationships that Virginia Tech must center if its justice work is to be meaningful.

Framework and Goals

Commemorations have great narrative powers, an assertion made obvious by each of our personal experiences, but also by the volumes of scholarship examining memorials, monuments, and historical anniversaries. As historian Jean O'Brien (2010) argued, commemorations, particularly those that tell "local histories" (xvii), provide legitimization to the narratives they tell; that is to say, acts of commemoration make "implicit arguments" (O'Brien, xvii) about the value of particular people and their cultures, as well as the material and non-material components that make up those cultures. In this project, I examined narratives in two primary ways. Prior to attending university commemorative events, I explored VT's archives for the stories of marginalized people, particularly the Timeline of LGBTQ+ History at Virginia Tech, Black History at Virginia Tech Timelines, and the Indigenous History at Virginia Tech timeline. Archivists described the timelines as a work in progress and none of them extends into the present time. After reviewing archival sources, I attended events at Denim Day Do-Over in 2019 and 1872 Forward in 2022; I took brief field notes at most events, then wrote reflections afterward. These commemorative events used the same archival sources I consulted, but planners told different stories than I expected, sometimes stories that misrepresented source materials outright. However, my concern is not whether claims about VT's institutional histories were *true*. I am more interested in the following questions about these narratives: what kinds of stories did institutional representatives tell about VT at commemorations? Who spoke to add the weight and

depth of historical evidence to these stories? What relationship to the institution did these storytellers have? Most important, *why these stories*—what purpose did they serve for VT?

I sought answers through constellation, a cultural rhetorics practice that juxtaposes narratives in order to understand them as the situated, particular cultural productions they are. I constellated archival sources from VT's Digital Special Collections with my experiences attending commemorative events. With these, I juxtaposed research by rhetoric and communications scholars, particularly those projects that addressed characteristics of White rhetorical strategies, cultural rhetorics methodologies, rhetorical listening, and counterstories. Together, this web of sources helped me to understand growing up White, queer, and neurodivergent in the South, which is to say that the experience of constellating sources for this project made visible the White rhetorical strategies always already circulating around me. At Virginia Tech, those strategies underwrote a hyperlocal history communicated through progress narratives about VT's relationships with marginalized people. Institutional representatives admitted that, under the purview and in the name of VT, administrators, faculty, students, and alumni mistreated Monacan, Black, and queer people. However, institutional histories often attributed harm done to individuals—rarely did Virginia Tech representatives place blame on the institution for systemic discrimination occurring within its walls, literal and metaphorical. These historical narratives portrayed Virginia Tech as an institution who could admit it once harbored "bad actors," but their ejection expelled "bad values" from campus spaces. Through counterstories, my project seeks:

(1) to understand more profoundly the web of narratives that situate Virginia Tech as a modern institution with modern values;

(2) to parse the meanings, benefits, and pitfalls of inclusion in Virginia Tech's public histories;

(3) to decompress marginalized people's narratives as a way of seeking meaning(s) in tension;

(4) to reveal and attend to the concerns marginalized people raise(d) about having relationships with Virginia Tech, a White, settler-colonial institution.

These goals are complex, and I do not claim that my project has answered fully the questions they raise. The project models White attendance and counterstory and I hope it serves as a call to action for other cultural rhetoricians, particularly those raced White, to further and extend the theories and methods I offer. Ultimately, I hope that more White folks in the field will feel a need to rethink the stories they've heard all their lives. Laid alongside others, these stories show us a complicated, uncomfortable American history, which cannot be legislated away. Its material evidence is all around us, should we choose to remember.

White Memory in Theory

Within and outside cultural rhetorics, scholars are (and have been) interested in Whiteness: how it works, where it lurks, and how it perpetuates itself. Rhetoric and communications scholars have analyzed Whiteness since at least 1994 (Nakayama and Krizek); this early work explored the rhetorical significance of White narratives as strategies for knowledge creation and institutional preservation. Two decades later, scholars in Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe's (2017) edited collection analyzed White rhetorical strategies in spaces as diverse as novels, dating websites, teacher education programs, and spaces of national symbolic importance (like the White House). Other rhetorical scholarship (Sanchez and Moore, 2015; O'Brien and Sanchez, 2021; Sanchez, 2021; Slotkin, 2022) focused on the import of place, race, and memorialization. Ahmed (2006; 2007; 2012; 2019) and Watson (2013) theorized Whiteness from outside the field but their interests cross through rhetoric in productive ways; in particular, their work raised questions about how bodies are created, normed, and institutionalized. Calls to examine the rise of White supremacist rhetorics both violent and polite underscore the critical and continuous nature of this work (Sanchez and Moore, 2015; Dougherty, 2016; McHendry and Larson, 2019; Rice, 2020; O'Brien and Sanchez, 2021; Sanchez, 2021; Slotkin, 2022). As I complete this project in 2023, acts of White extremism are intensifying nationwide[3], further emphasizing the urgency of attention to, and action against, the strategic rhetorics that support White supremacy.

[3] Recently, for example, men waving Nazi flags and holding a banner reading, "There will be blood" protested a drag brunch in Columbus, Ohio.

"Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric" by Thomas Nakayama and R. L. Krizek (1994) is a central text framing both my understanding of Whiteness and the subsequent theoretical framework I constructed to examine White memory. The exigence for their work rested on the *problem* of Whiteness: it is at the same time invisible and universal, full of multiplicity and contradictions. They sought to understand "the influential political position of Whiteness" (p. 294) to explain how Whiteness "makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over everyday life" (p. 293). In this conception, Whiteness is "a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of both those within and without its domain" (p. 291). Further, Whiteness "affects the everyday fabric of our lives but resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours" (p. 291). As Nakayama and Krizek found, "discourses of Whiteness are relatively hidden in everyday interaction, but when Whites are confronted, when they are asked directly about Whiteness, a multiplicity of discourses become visible" (p. 298). When these discourses are revealed, we can see how "contradictions are an important element in the constitution of Whiteness, as it is by these contradictions that Whiteness is able to maneuver through and around challenges to its space" (p. 302). Contradictions and multiplicity "[drive] the dynamic nature" of White power relations[4], "always re-securing the hegemonic position of Whiteness" (p. 298). As a result, it is difficult to identify Whiteness at work *and* to critique or change the discourses that support it. To do this work, scholars need very particular tools.

[4] Because Whiteness is itself dynamic, it requires a dynamic response. I address this necessity in Chapter 3.

Nakayama and Krizek built on de Certeau's (1984) *strategies* and *tactics* to create a rhetorical framework for researching Whiteness. Using these terms, they highlighted the difference between a rhetor acting with and without power. Rhetors with power utilize *strategies*, which extend from "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated" (de Certeau, p. 35-6). However, strategies require more than a subject with will and power because they "postulate a *place*" that can be "delimited as [the subject's] *own*," "from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed" (p. 36, emphases in original). Power and place intertwine inextricably in this formulation: without a place the subject "owns," no exercise of power can take place, and strategies cannot manage relationships. If a subject occupies a place owned by another subject, they must utilize *tactics* instead. A tactic is "a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus" which works "on and within a terrain imposed on it and organized by law of a foreign power" (p. 37). A tactic cannot "*keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection," and is therefore, de Certeau argued, "the space of the other" (p. 37). These concepts are already useful to my project because they allow me to understand how institutional narratives interact with the narratives that emerge from, and often exceed, the archive. However, Nakayama and Krizek's study provided the basis for examining specific strategic rhetorics of Whiteness, which enriched and sharpened my analysis.

Nakayama and Krizek created a "nominalist rhetoric" which, "by naming Whiteness… displace[s] its centrality and reveal[s] its invisible position" (p. 292). To do this, they identified six strategies of Whiteness, which I will briefly review; not only did I see these strategies at work in my case studies, they formed the basis for the framework of Whiteness I designed for identifying and speaking back to White memory. The first discursive strategy "tie[d] 'White' closely to power in a rather crude, naked manner" (p. 298)[5]. Although Whiteness prefers invisibility, "naturalized dominance is not entirely hidden from view, which is critical if it is to function as powerful" (p. 298). Open White supremacist beliefs, then, are not the *only* White rhetorical strategy, but they serve a critical function of reinforcing, often in a *physical* sense, the dominance of White culture. The second strategy centered "negative definitions" of Whiteness in which "one can only be White by not being anything else" (p. 299); negative definitions create a "lack" of "any other racial or ethnic features" so rhetors can claim to be "White by default" (p. 299). This characteristic "guarantees [Whiteness'] unstratified future," which is "a characteristic of domination" (p. 299). A third strategy "naturalizes 'White' with a scientific definition" which "holds little meaning other than reference to what people perceive to be superficial racial characteristics" (p. 300). When we discuss Whiteness through a scientific lens, "the historical and experiential knowledge of Whiteness is hidden beneath a scientific category" (p. 300). This is a crucial rhetorical move because it "mask[s] irrationality and contradictions with a rational image possessing cultural currency" as a way to "elude any recognition of power relations embedded in this category" (p. 300). In other words, if a category is scientific, it is therefore neutral, and

[5] A good example is the promotion of "white genocide" and "Great Replacement" discourse by mainstream news outlets.

there are no power relations to discuss. The fourth strategy positioned Whiteness as nationality, "a legal status conferred by social institutions," which helps to "bound" and "recenter" Whiteness (p. 300). This strategy expresses power by "relegating those of other racial groups to a marginal role in national life," particularly in the United States, where we find "relentless efforts to retain and guard the boundaries of nationality with Whiteness" (p. 301). A fifth strategy has to do with "those individuals who refuse to label themselves" (p. 301). This is a particularly insidious form of colorblindness; if a person refuses to label and discuss their own racial experiences, there is very little room to discuss the racial experiences of others. Finally, some of Nakayama and Krizek's interviewees "saw their Whiteness in relation to European ancestry" (p. 302). As with other strategies they identified, this one creates an interior (European) from which to manage relationships with an exterior (non-European). I saw many of these strategies at work in my project and, further, the logics they created (and create) undergird continuing White supremacy.

White Memory as a Strategic Cultural Rhetoric

I used Nakayama and Krizek's work to construct a theoretical framework for identifying and responding to White memory. This is a critical and necessary scholarly task because Whiteness "garners its representational power through its ability to be many things at once, to be universal and particular, to be a source of identity and difference" (p. 302). A frame to do this work must be dynamic, flexible, and reflexive because of its goal: to circumvent "the power relations imbedded in Whiteness" (p. 302). This is critical work because "[w]hether or not one discursively positions oneself as 'White,' there is little room for maneuvering" (p. 302). In other words, Whiteness is a rhetorical strategy

that *acts in the world*; Whiteness pushes us into (or out of) spaces, often without our consent. Whiteness affects people, places, spaces, times, memories, stories, imagination, and more in its attempts to make itself ubiquitous.

As I constellated scholarly work for this project, I focused especially on the voices of non-White scholars. These writers, forced to address demands to comply with White standards, see White standards and demands most clearly. As a person raised (and raced) White, I had the ability to "opt out" and see Whiteness as neutral, objective, and standard. Non-White scholars provided an important counterpoint to the institutional White memory I observed at commemorative events, and without their work, this project would not be possible. Throughout this literature review, I identify marginalized scholars as such in order to pinpoint more precisely their positionality. However, it is important to note that, as a White scholar, I do not attempt to *assimilate* their views. Rather, their scholarship informs mine, helping me to see and understand Whiteness from a position not normally afforded a White scholar. From this vantage point, I pry Whiteness open, naming and retelling my own experiences with race and racial identification. This work is critical because naming and explicating White rhetorical strategies helps break apart what Dougherty (2016) called the "seeming stone of Whiteness" (pg. 20). That is to say, Whiteness seems like a unitary, monolithic figure so large that it always has been and always will be, particularly in American culture. However, as many of the scholars reviewed in this chapter point out, Whiteness *came to be that way* through design practices. Through this project, I follow the design practices of White memory because I am especially interested in understanding how we might move *beyond* such a limited and limiting style of storytelling.

In my case studies, three particular characteristics of White memory as a strategic rhetoric stood out. First, *White memory defines institutional norms*. Whiteness *seems* to reference race but it constructs a larger network of bodily and cultural norms against which all bodies are measured. Setting such norms helps White memory to define who is a "body at home" and who is a stranger (Ahmed, 2007). Second, *White memory evolves to resist exposure*. White memory can hide in plain sight because Whiteness becomes nonspecific or typical; when Whiteness is exposed, it adopts rhetorical and material tactics to defend itself. Third, *White memory colonizes space*. As Ahmed (2006, 2007) suggested, spaces and bodies impress meaning on one another: rhetors design space for particular bodies and bodies that "fit" use that space most comfortably. Over time, such use becomes habit, which allows some bodies to over-extend into space, colonizing and appropriating bodies and resources. Below, I detail and expand this framework to account for how White memory warps and alters the past, present, and future that we experience through public history stories.

White Memory Defines Institutional Norms

As a strategic rhetoric, White narratives create habitual orientations that suggest and enforce what Ersula Ore (2017) called "somatic norms" (p. 209). That is, strategic rhetorics shape institutions for particular bodies: *fit* takes *work*. As Nakayama and Krizek conceived it, a strategic rhetoric requires "a subject with will and power" and "a place that can be defined as its own"; then, strategic rhetoric is enacted through "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships" (p. 295). The establishment of an institutional location is key to a strategic rhetoric's power because place "serve[s] as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats… can be managed" (p.

295). Institutions strategize about which bodies are in and out, along with how to treat bodies on either side of this edge. Institutional edges are *practiced*, which is to say that they are "habitual" (Ahmed, 2007) and "sedimented" (Dougherty, 2016). Practices add up over time and this accretion is persuasive; through practice, institutions orient bodies and then assimilate, coopt, or reject them.

Prohibitive Grooves: Norms as Straightening Devices

Practices create grooves, and grooves, in turn, proscribe which bodies fit. This is why practices are key to building a strategic rhetoric. British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed (2019) referred to these grooves as "well-worn paths" (p. 15) that come into existence only *through use* and continue to be used because they are *already in use*. Via well-worn paths, Whiteness becomes "a habit… which becomes a background to social action" (p. 149). In other words, Whiteness is an act, but as we act and reenact it, Whiteness fades away and is "lived as a background to experience" (p. 150). To understand how Whiteness becomes a background, I imagine the white spaces and margins in a text document, such as a traditionally designed academic article. In general, an audience does not notice white space unless it is deployed in nontraditional ways: it must surprise to be noticed. However, even if the audience reads past white space or finds it unremarkable, it did not arrive on the page by accident. The margin of a page is empty space, but it is neither purposeless nor meaningless. Ahmed (2007) wrote that though "Whiteness is invisible and unmarked" it functions as "the absent [center] against which others appear only as deviants or points of deviation" (p. 157). To interpret a text is to notice the dark marks that stick out from the light background. If something emerges from the background, it becomes obvious: it does not fit and is inflected with meaning by

its lack of fit. Nakayama and Krizek (1994) argued that such practices "secure the center" (p. 295), a rhetorical act that projects Whiteness as universality.

In subsequent decades, rhetorical scholars continued exploring the projected universality of Whiteness. In the introduction to their edited collection, for example, Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe (2017) explained how Whiteness "haunts" in order to "function as an unstated norm" (p. 15). Other writers in the collection conceived of Whiteness as a "normative principle" (A. H. Powell, p. 37) which was founded on "the assumption of the normative position of White affect" (Jay, p. 29). Austin (2017) wrote that Whiteness is "taken for granted as ordinary," which allows it to "[solidify] and [perpetuate] hegemonic structures, power inequities, and discrimination" (p. 92). Bebout argued that Whiteness "positions itself as the norm or universal, occluding its particularity and subjectivity" (p. 127). Through this process, Dougherty (2016) wrote, "sedimented moments of rhetorical action—of doing—accrete into the seeming stone of being *simply white*" (emphasis mine, pgph 16). That is to say, though rhetors pass Whiteness off as ordinary and normative, it *came to be that way* through the work of bodies and the habits they enact in places.

The acts of strategic rhetoric that make up Whiteness cover a wide swath of territory, "taking up space" (Ahmed, 2007) as they push non-normative bodies into negative space. Ore (2017) argued, "Qualities conventionally associated with Whiteness are not innate or normal but rather *made commonsense by design*" (p. 121). As Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe wrote, the "associated discourses and cultural scripts" of Whiteness "socialize people into ways of seeing, thinking, and performing Whiteness and non-Whiteness" (p. 16). Ahmed (2007) argued that Whiteness "puts certain things in

reach," such as "physical objects… styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, [and] habits" (p. 154). This creates a culture in which "Bodies that might not appear White still have to inhabit Whiteness if they are to get 'in'" (p. 159). This is how, Ahmed wrote, Whiteness becomes "a straightening device" (p. 159): a device intended to bring unruly bodies back to institutional paths already well-worn by previous passings (2006). Ahmed's description shows the depth and complexity of Whiteness as a cultural formation. Whiteness is not only prescribed actions, but also a set of material, affective, and aesthetic performances within a person's reach. These performances solicit adoption and reproduction.

Whiteness is intersectional in its prescription of somatic norms; it is never *only* about race. Black scholar Veronica T. Watson (2014) described how "Whiteness emerges as a way of seeing and knowing the world that masquerades as universality" (p. 5). Although Whiteness "is shaped by skin-color privilege," it is also "inextricably enmeshed with other vectors of identity such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and the organization of space" (p. 5). The "body-at-home" in such spaces, Ahmed (2007) argued, "is one that can inhabit Whiteness" (p. 153). Jay (2017) concurred, writing that Whiteness makes "the implicit claim that nonwhites must perform for those norms in order to deserve White sympathy" (p. 29). Ore (2017) termed these processes "rhetorical whitening" (p. 209) and explained that without them, some rhetors never come close enough to the cultural center to be seen, heard, or acknowledged. This scholarship indicates that because Whiteness is presumed normative, its workings are everywhere, even if they are not detected at first glance.

Race and Persuasion

White strategic rhetorics utilize multiple vectors of persuasion. If, as Nakayama and Krizek (1994) suggested, we think of an institution (a university, for example) as "a subject with will and power," then it must be flexible to manage the "targets and threats" exterior to its borders (p. 295). As Victor Villanueva (2017) wrote, "…race and its racism are social constructs, changing, shifting over time, mutable, shifting with shifting ideas concerning class and gender as well as race" (p. 197). Bebout (2017) suggested that logics of White storytelling "interpenetrate and work in mutually reinforcing ways" (p. 129). My project focuses on these interpenetrating logics in order to understand more deeply how White strategic rhetorics undergird the public history events centered in my case studies. I expect that, given the flexible characteristics of White strategic rhetorics, many more stories exist in many more institutions, adapted for particular institutional needs.

White strategic rhetorics utilize rhetorical appeals framing Whiteness as desirable, trustworthy, practical, logical, and more, depending on the situation. Monzó and McLaren (2017), for example, wrote about what Ahmed (2012) termed institutional "happy talk," which attempts "bringing the other into compliance" as a way to "[coopt] or [sanitize] our ability to see the world differently" and "[destroy] our ability to make whiteness visible and create the structures that decenter it" (2017, p. 10). The very *purpose* of Whiteness, in other words, is to center itself and disappear. In turn, Jay (2017) wrote, White strategic rhetorics feature "[ideologies] that [obfuscate] white privilege and [make] the rooting out of racial injustices more, rather than less, difficult" (p. 38). Whiteness is difficult for White constituents to perceive, Jay wrote, because it "[provides]

the white subject with the affect of moral superiority" (p. 38). Once this invisible institutional border exists, disturbing the border causes the institution to respond, depending on whether it finds a body susceptible to cooptation, appropriation, or rejection. For this reason, Ahmed (2007) wrote that we should strive "to notice institutional habits" in order to bring "what is behind… to the surface" (p. 165). Such work is vital for White scholars. However, since Whiteness is a flexible set of strategies, investigations into its nature must remember it has always evolved to hide.

White Memory Resists Exposure

Whiteness evolves because of an unwarranted sense of "White precarity" (Sanchez, 2021). White precarity provokes rhetors to preserve the invisibility and normalization of Whiteness. We see such preservative actions in narratives like the Great Replacement theory, claims of "white genocide," and the fight over how to discuss (neo)colonial history in schools and in the public. Key to understanding these narratives is the desire of White storytellers to *hide* Whiteness: White "hegemonic storytelling" (Sanchez, 2021) relies on Whiteness remaining unnamed. Nakayama and Krizek (1994) conceived of Whiteness as "uncharted territory" that "resists, sometimes violently, any extensive characterization that would allow for the mapping of its contours" (p. 291). This mutability ensures evolution over time, persistence, and reproduction; this makes Whiteness what Sara Ahmed (2006) would term "sticky." It sticks *to* and it sticks *around*. As Sanchez (2021) succinctly put it, "White supremacy is built to survive and evolve" (p. 116). Because of its protean qualities, Whiteness hides in plain sight. Whiteness constructs plausible excuses for its contours to remain unmapped, and it is defined more clearly by *what it is not* than *what it is*. Scholars in and beyond rhetoric have catalogued

White responses to exposure and identification, and these responses show the adaptability that Nakayama and Krizek predicted. Therefore, we can expect White memory to use a set of adaptable strategies allowing Whiteness to maintain power and to remain concealed. The literature I review below allows me to construct a preliminary model for observing the evolutionary characteristics of Whiteness.

Here Be Dragons: Keeping the Center off the Map

The "unmapped" nature of Whiteness is one of its most critical features. In fact, White rhetors often adopt strategic rhetorics to defend Whiteness when it is exposed so that it may *remain* unmapped. The critical factors determining whether a subject uses strategies or tactics are place and relationship: a subject must have "a place that can be delimited as its own" from which "relations with an exteriority… can be managed" (Nakayama and Krizek, p. 295). Whiteness positions itself as the unrevealed center around which all culture orbits; as a result, Whiteness necessarily uses strategic rhetoric because *everything else* is positioned as an exteriority. Nakayama and Krizek (1994) explicated six characteristics of strategic rhetoric to show how Whiteness "makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over everyday life" (p. 293). I briefly defined each of these characteristics above, and I now interlace them with Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) six "settler moves to innocence" (p. 11). Using these concepts together allows for a more precise mapping of Whiteness, particularly one that understands its colonial aspirations, past and continuing.

White strategic rhetoric insists on the continued invisibility of Whiteness, but it is critical to understand that Whiteness remains concealed through *labor*. This labor often takes surprising forms; for example, "individuals who refuse to label themselves

[racially]" (p. 301) may seem to be passive when, in fact, this refusal is a rhetorical strategy. A lack of response, in other words, is not neutral, but enables Whiteness to slip into unmapped spaces where it is raceless and blameless. The malleable, nondescript nature of Whiteness feeds into what Tuck and Yang (2012) called settler nativism and settler adoption fantasies. Settler nativism allows settlers to "deflect a settler identity while continuing to enjoy settler privilege and occupying stolen land" (p. 11). Settler adoption fantasies, on the other hand, create a "mythical trump card" through which "an individual can become innocent, indeed heroic and indigenized, against a backdrop of national guilt" (p. 14). When these strategies work together, a person can be White and Indigenous at the same time: guilt and blame for settler colonialism shift onto another (absent) body while the White body at hand still keeps all its White privilege. A clear example is Virginia's "Pocahontas Clause," which allowed White people to claim Indigenous identity without losing their "status" as White. Through this strategy, settlers perform pain and suffering to construct themselves as "innocent non-oppressors" (Tuck and Yang, p. 15). A necessary precondition of this strategy is relegating Indigenous populations to the past, which supports cultural narratives like the Myth of the Vanishing Indian[6]. These strategies show the power of White memory to refocus all stories on Whiteness, while also denying the Whiteness of its narratives. This, however, is only one way that Whiteness can refuse mapping.

Rhetorical strategies tying Whiteness to key concepts valued in modern Western democracies also offer an avenue for hiding in plain sight. Concepts like logic, scientific rationality, nationhood, and ancestry undergird and support these Western cultural logics

[6] https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-myth-of-the-vanishing-indian.

with an intricate web of relationships. As Nakayama and Krizek argued, this perspective requires audiences to see Whiteness as "scientific classification" (p. 296) rather than cultural construction. Such strategies hide "the history that constructed and centered Whiteness" while also "conflating the discourse of Whiteness with the label of science" as a way to "mask irrationality and contradictions with a rational image possessing cultural currency" (p. 300). Framed as scientific, Whiteness is valueless; logic, after all, does not involve emotions, and is therefore less susceptible to questions. When conflating "whiteness with nationality," these strategies used "a legal status conferred by social institutions" to "[relegate] those of other racial groups to a marginal role in social life" (Nakayama and Krizek, pp. 300-1). To be non-White is to be *distanced from* U.S. citizenship; the farther a body is from the center (which is White, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and middle-class), the more marginal its role in society and culture. It is important to be clear about the effects of this work: during the era of Manifest Destiny, for example, Whiteness remained unmapped by literally exiling Native populations from their land. Through exile, Whiteness mapped itself onto the land as the norm, first by claiming that it was the White creator's will that White people take the land, then by claiming it has been too long to return the land. This work is not theoretical, but *material*.

White strategic rhetorics work together even when they seem to contradict one another. In fact, Nakayama and Krizek theorized that contradictions enable Whiteness to avoid mapping by moving "through and around challenges to its space" (p. 302). This is how acts that do not seem harmful at first glance can support the same cultural logics as acts of overt White supremacy. One such act is conscientization, which focuses on

"decolonizing the mind" (Tuck and Yang, p. 33) to the exclusion of meaningful engagement with land relinquishment. On its face, conscientization seems harmless, and perhaps even necessary. This is because "[s]ettler sovereignty imposes sexuality, legality, raciality, language, religion, and property in specific ways" so decolonization must *begin* with "settler harm reduction" that centers "the resuscitation of practices and intellectual life outside of settler ontologies" (p. 21). That I emphasize the word *begin* is purposeful–decolonization cannot end here if it is to be effective. As Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) suggest in their framework for technical communication, justice work must go beyond recognizing oppression; it must also reveal, reject, and replace it. If "decolonization of the mind" is the only step, then it works together with more extreme, overt logics of White supremacy and neocolonialism to suppress "outsiders." It does not matter that the strategies conflict; it matters that Whiteness remains concealed. These strategic rhetorics and moves to innocence preclude solidarity because they do not engage honestly with the past, present, or future. Thusly unmapped, Whiteness provides territory for individual White subjects to hide behind ideas of neutrality.

Whiteness and the Neutral, Individual Subject

Myths of neutrality and colorblindness allow Whiteness to disappear in a different way: we claim that it is possible in White majoritarian culture *to stop seeing color altogether*. Ersula Ore (2017) described this as a process through which Whiteness becomes "commonsense by design" (p. 209). For Ore, the space from which White strategic rhetoric operates is "comprised of a set of orthodoxies—accepted views, expectations, attitudes, and practices" (p. 209). She argued that "through invariable repetition—what we might call *tradition*—[orthodoxies are] calcified so flawlessly that

they express as commonsense, as natural, as the unquestioned norm" (p. 209). The metaphor of calcification is evocative: this cultural hardening creates a rigid structure into which all bodies must fit, regardless of their ability or desire to do so. For Dougherty (2016), these structures are built through "sedimentation," which creates space for raced-White bodies to believe that "colonization and white supremacy happens to others while we remain un-raced, un-impacted by colonization" (pgph 20). This is how Whiteness becomes a habit, which is both "background to social action" and "lived as a background to experience" (Ahmed, 2007, pp. 149-50). Metaphors like calcification, sedimentation, and backgrounding show how Whiteness play-acts neutrality. Colorblindness may project aspirations for a society that no longer uses race in discriminatory ways, but it denies reality in ways that continue to harm people, especially those racialized as non-White.

Regardless of our intentions, pretending that we do not see color is a way of bypassing hard discussions about race, racism, and accountability. As A. H. Powell (2017) wrote, "[t]he appeal of colorblind neutrality and postracialism rests in the fact that race can be submerged so that any substantive or critical discussion of race is avoided" (p. 25). When race is submerged, key elements of justice work are unattainable; most importantly, we cannot enter the contested and uncomfortable space of solidarity that Tuck and Yang (2012) described as key to meaningful participation in decolonization. Avoiding such discussions might make White constituents more comfortable, but it also preserves "structural or systemic inequality… in the name of neutrality" (p. 25). This is how Whiteness becomes the absent center as Ahmed described. Ahmed (2007) and Ore (2017) agreed that although Whiteness seems to slip effortlessly into neutrality, our understandings of it must account for the labor this takes. Ahmed called this labor

institutionalization, through which "the institution comes to have a body" (p. 157). The institution, in other words, embodies a normative body, and then asks others to embody that norm. An institutional space is a *fit* for that normative body, and others feel *out of place*. Through this process of embodiment, Whiteness secures its space as the absent center.

Understanding Whiteness as absence, something so commonplace it is unnoticeable, enables other methods of resisting exposure. One potent method utilizes tropes of individualism, which McDuffie (2017) described as a narrative in which "individuals are responsible for their own destinies and… systemic and institutional influences are minimal" (p. 69). Under these narrative conditions, systemic examination and institutional critique are pointless because institutional effort is the only action through which individuals can advance. The institution is a neutral force, so if an individual does not advance, it is their own fault. Bebout (2017) argued that this allows White individuals to "[see] themselves as raceless" and thereby "view individuality as an ideal and racial identification as a strange, retrograde choice" (p. 128). Because White people do not identify with their own Whiteness, a White ideal *becomes* raceless. Racial identification is then both "strange" and "retrograde" because the reification of individuality allows Whiteness to disappear, thus making identification with individuality both innocuous and immune to critical response.

Excused from critical examination, Whiteness has far-reaching consequences, which affect not only the present, but also how we perceive the past and how we imagine the future. Seeing Whiteness as neutral, in other words, is a story with a history. Centuries of cultural practices calcified the idea of the neutral White subject, and this, in

turn, affects how White-identified people understand their histories (personal and cultural), their present positions, and their future possibilities. Whiteness becomes synonymous with what Argentinian scholar Walter Mignolo (2011) called the "modern subject," which was "an idea of Man, introduced in the European Renaissance" that "became the model for the Human and for Humanity, and the point of reference for racial classification and global racism" (p. 19). "Christian, white, and male" Europeans introduced this model by "assum[ing] heterosexual relations as the norm" and "classif[ying] gender distinctions and sexual normativity" (p. 9). Taking up the identity of the modern subject imbues a person with the power to classify others while remaining unclassified oneself. Neoliberal values serve as a support structure for these formations of Whiteness. I refer specifically to those neoliberal values Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet Jakobsen (2013) described, which are part of a "cultural project in which market rationalities become embodied by self-regulated, self-responsibilized subjects" (p. 3). If subjects become "self-regulated" and "self-responsibilized," then they are unlikely to see, much less comprehend, institutional influences over their success. Western heteropatriarchal individualism covers Whiteness from exposure by convincing people they are singular bodies, rather than parts of a larger coalition or collective.

Strategic Defenses

When Whiteness cannot otherwise be concealed, White-identified rhetors deploy strategic rhetorical defenses. I understand these defensive strategies through the work of Sanchez and Moore (2015), O'Brien and Sanchez (2021), and Sanchez (2021). Their studies explore how histories of Whiteness extend White supremacist practices into the present and future, a process which Sanchez (2021) described as "reinforcing dominant

narratives" (p. 54). Strategic rhetorical defenses "[protect] white supremacy" rather than "interrogate the realities of [a given rhetorical] situation" (p. 66). I focus on three specific strategies designed to avoid critical discussions of race: strategic ambiguity, (self)-silencing, and rhetorical remembering and forgetting.

In *Salt of the Earth* (2021), Sanchez wrote about "hegemonic storytelling" (p. 62) in his hometown, Grand Saline, Texas. His book is especially relevant for its focus on Sanchez's experience as a mixed-race resident of Grand Saline, often considered White, but never White *enough*. One of the most important defenses he identified was strategic ambiguity, which allowed residents of his hometown to participate in circulating racialized and racist narratives without guilt. Sanchez was particularly interested in racial/ist narratives of questionable veracity: storytellers could not confirm whether these stories were true, but repeated them regardless, sometimes with great enjoyment. He argued, "[d]ifferent people in different occasions tell these stories for different reasons" (p. 62). Hegemonic storytelling techniques, in other words, are rhetorical. In his project, Sanchez identified storytellers who "want[ed] to explicitly spread a white supremacist agenda," those who "believ[ed] they [were] simply reciting historical truths," and those who were "just joking with their peers" (p. 62). Intent was not a factor; Sanchez argued, "people can reinforce dominant narratives without knowing that they do" (p. 54). As these findings indicate, stories circulate in complex networks and interact with one another in unpredictable ways. In fact, in a rhetorical lifeworld full of "deliberate ambiguity of motives," those who did want to circulate racist stories were able "to mask their true intents" (p. 63). On its own, this rhetorical defense justifies great care in how we understand (and enact) knowledge creation.

Another strategic defense is (self-)silencing. I represent this term with a parenthetical to emphasize what our discipline already knew: silence is meaningful (Glenn, 2004). In *Salt of the Earth* (2021), Sanchez identified how silencing functions in two registers: culture-to-self and self-to-self. In the first instance, "the culture" attempts to silence "those who have spoken out" (p. 108). Sanchez experienced this type of silencing when he worked on the documentary *Man on Fire* (2018), which explored the public suicide by immolation of social justice minister and former Grand Saline resident Charles Moore. Moore indicated that he saw this act as a public protest against racism via a note he left on his car, yet his death did not provoke wider community discussion, and unknown hands removed informal public memorials to Moore quickly. When Sanchez completed his documentary, some towns refused to show his film, and in some cases, local press was outright hostile and refused even to hear his perspectives. Open hostility, however, is not the only way to effect silence. Here, Bernstein's and Jakobsen's (2013) "self-regulated" and "self-responsibilized" (p. 13) subject reappears: it is reasonable to expect that subjects embedded in White narratives will also learn to *silence themselves*. In this way, Sanchez wrote, hostile environments "challenge people not to speak in the first place" (p. 108). During his project, Sanchez found interviewees in Grand Saline who supported his work and answered questions truthfully; once the film was finished and publicized, some residents felt uncomfortable continuing their association with him because they feared social repercussions. These fears were not unfounded: one woman, editor of a local paper, supported *Man on Fire* in the press and was subsequently removed from her position in the resulting argument. Grand Saline, in other words, demonstrated a willingness to eject community members who refused to promote the

town's preferred narrative. In turn, this pressured other community members to self-silence in order to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their reputations. This finding suggests that if White culture demonstrates that it takes borders seriously by ejecting *one of its own*, others will police both themselves and the borders of Whiteness without being told to do so.

Acts of remembering and forgetting are also defense strategies for White majoritarian culture. In "Racial Countermemory: Tourism, Spatial Design, and Hegemonic Remembering" (2021), O'Brien and Sanchez called Whiteness a "method" of memory, one that "has more to do with forgetting than remembering, as well as what and whom we are remembering" (p. 8). Their project examined the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a memorial to the victims of lynching located in Montgomery, Alabama. It sits down the street from the First White House of the Confederacy, another local memorial, which tells a version of the Lost Cause narrative popular in the post-Civil War South. These narratives circulate in close physical proximity and present clashing representations of slavery and racial violence. The NMPJ is the newer monument and exists, in part, to challenge easy, familial representations of the "peculiar institution" of slavery. This juxtaposition of memory places is an excellent example of how the relationship between remembering and forgetting determines not only *how* public histories are told, but also *who* those stories center, and *why* we tell stories in the first place. Through careful rhetorical use of place, the NMPJ shows how White historical organizations misremember the past. In other words, remembering and forgetting histories is neither neutral nor accidental. Remembering and forgetting are political and,

as rhetorical strategies, they do work to defend Whiteness against challenges from "outsiders" who question its occupation and use of space and time.

White Memory Colonizes Space and Time

Another prominent White storytelling strategy uses narrative to colonize spaces and times: when White histories take over, they erase other narratives and preclude possibilities for non-White stories and bodies to utilize spatial and temporal resources. In fact, Mignolo argued, "the two pillars of Western civilization" are "the colonization of space and time" (p. 6). Western colonial heteropatriarchy depends on narratives that extend into space and time, appropriating all available resources in support of the status quo. Appropriating space and time enables their use to create what Nakayama and Krizek called places: locations from which a subject with will and power assigns relationships of interiority and exteriority. Whiteness *becomes* place as much as it affects place. Whiteness assigns normative positions and sinks into invisibility; it defends its borders by incorporating, coopting, punishing, and exiling bodies that violate norms.

Whiteness evolves, as the previous section shows. Whiteness is neither static nor predictable because it must be adaptable in order to inhabit the neutrality that enables territorial claims. Because of this, as Nakayama and Krizek noted, Whiteness can utilize contradictions to avoid challenges. Claims to space and time in this formulation do not have to make sense, be "rational," or possess logical coherence. Rather, the purpose of claims is to manage place through monitoring and policing borders, bodies, and subversions. These management strategies allow Whiteness to expand its places into spaces and times it seeks to own.

Bodies-at-home in Their Dwelling Places

Whiteness has to do with bodies and their dwelling places. Through Whiteness, we can chart how bodies become bodies-at-home and extend into space and how habits form grooves in a place that extend into current and future bodies. Ahmed, who is part Pakistani, neatly summarized this experience as "the politics of who gets to be at home" (2007, p. 159). It is primarily through her work on the phenomenology of Whiteness that I understand the veins and sinew connecting places and bodies. Deep connections between bodies and places determine who feels "fit" and who does not, and these connections express themselves physiologically, emotionally, intellectually, aesthetically, culturally, and otherwise.

Ahmed called these connections "orientations," which "are about the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (p. 151). Key to Ahmed's work is understanding Whiteness as "an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space and what they 'can do'" (p. 149). She argued that orientation determines action, and action occurs based on what is *in reach* from a particular place. What is in reach includes "not just physical objects, but also styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, habits" (p. 154). A body adopts an orientation by dwelling in a place from which it can reach particular things. Orientations, in turn, are predetermined by habits, traditions, calcifications (Ore, 2017), and sedimentations (Dougherty, 2016; Houdek, 2017). The orientation of a body is historical and it produces a history. Histories, habits, and orientations produce particular grooves, or "well-worn paths" (Ahmed, 2019) which lead the user where others have gone before. These paths are also narratives, and an old, familiar, comfortable story has its temptations.

Public spaces are often examples of these memory narratives at work. Ahmed wrote, “public spaces take shape through the habitual actions of bodies such that the contours of space could be described as habitual” (2019, p. 156). If bodies taking habitual actions shape spaces, we can understand how, as Nakayama and Krizek argued, Whiteness resists exposure with violence if necessary. As Ahmed wrote, “spaces are orientated ‘around’ Whiteness, insofar as Whiteness is not seen” (2019, p. 157). Habitual actions taken in support of Whiteness must seem innocuous, which explains the appeal of strategies that set Whiteness as the norm while insisting on its neutrality. When Whiteness is exposed, a body becomes aware of the constructed nature of the groove in which it fits, thereby making spatial fit less comfortable.

In other words, colonized space is only comfortable for bodies that fit into its habitual grooves. Exposure reveals that the grooves are constructed features of a space, not natural occurrences. The supposedly natural fit of certain bodies in space is the basis for arguments that public spaces are neutral when, in fact, “white bodies gather and cohere to form the edges of such spaces” (Ahmed, p. 157). At these borders, places and bodies are guarded and policed, recruited or rejected. Ahmed argued, “recruitment functions as a technology for the reproduction of whiteness” (p. 147). At the border, bodies can be admitted (or not) depending on their willingness to be recruited. Recruited bodies volunteer to reproduce Whiteness. In this way, “whiteness itself [becomes] a straightening device” (Ahmed, p. 159). Straightened bodies reify Mignolo’s (2011) “modern subject” by sensing their fit in White spaces. Feeling fit, in turn, draws continued recruits. This is how, as Ahmed argued, “Whiteness gets reproduced by being seen as a form of positive residence” (p. 154). A sense of positive residence makes

recruitment and reproduction seductive options, particularly for bodies seeking the comfort of a "neutral" orientation from which to exercise power. This dwelling place is the result of countless habitual actions calcifying across times and spaces.

Strategies for Colonizing Space and Time

Strategies for colonizing space, therefore, are habitual actions. Ahmed (2007, 2012, 2019), Ore (2017), Houdek (2018), and Dougherty (2016) offered useful metaphors of well-worn paths, calcification, and sedimentation as ways to understand how seemingly small actions "congeal" (Houdek, 2018) Whiteness over time. As Whiteness accretes, it becomes difficult to separate constituent habits, objects, and bodies from one another. Thusly, as Ore (2017) argued, Whiteness becomes a singular whole: it occupies the present and extends into the past and future at the same time. Whiteness becomes a place. It becomes universal through labor, which is *made invisible*. In this way, as Ore wrote, Whiteness becomes "commonsense by design" (2017): White storytelling claims territory through a wide array of self-justifying habits. I examine these habits first through Ore's "racial-spatial practices" (2017) in order to understand the network of traditions that justify territorial claims. Then, I consider how Whiteness claims space through visual and material composition practices that make places rhetorical and extend their rhetorical influence through time.

Racial-Spatial Practices. Dr. Ore defined racial-spatial practices as "legal, social, economic, and political practices that designate particular spaces as exclusively inhabitable by particular raced bodies" (2017, p. 203). Racial-spatial practices dictate who is interior and exterior to a place. These practices, in other words, create and enforce borders: they dictate who is allowed and who is not. Ore's project examined these

practices through President Obama's presence in the White House, "a physical and historical space normed white through a network of rhetorically situated racial-spatial practices" (p. 200). The White House, an important national icon, is subsumed in "racial and racist epistemologies" that "are the always already of rhetorical space" (p. 202). We can identify Whiteness in places by looking for practices that "discursively [police] space" (p. 202). The networks in which these practices are situated are both ubiquitous and massive; because they are historical, they are also ever-expanding. As Ore concluded, "all space is raced space" which is "comprised of a set of orthodoxies" that are "calcified" "through invariable repetition" (p. 209). Research into rhetorics of Whiteness must uncover these orthodoxies by revealing the unquestioned norms inherent in habitual practices that support networks of hegemonic storytelling.

The spread, reproduction, and calcification of Whiteness in space is no metaphor: Ore reminded that "white racialized space is *real space* that produces *real material effects* upon *real material bodies*" (p. 201, emphasis mine). To talk about White rhetorics, then, is to foreground considerations of material and bodily rhetorics. In fact, Ore contended that "racial-spatial awareness is a rhetorical necessity for non-white rhetorics operating in white space" (p. 202), yet this awareness is under-discussed and often untaught. Operations in and on White space and time must account for the danger of creating counterstories. Orthodoxies are powerful and disturbing tradition comes with risks; as Sanchez (2021) put it, "monuments and memorials exist not as means just to represent the past or history but to substantiate identity" (p. 30). Counterstories that challenge White remembrance in White spaces are subject to the network of racial-spatial practices that regulate raced space. All research into rhetorics of Whiteness must seek to

uncover White orthodoxies by revealing the unquestioned norms that govern place-building practices.

Visual and Material Composition. Visual and material composition play a vital role in the ability of Whiteness to colonize space and time. As Austin (2017) phrased it, "[t]he elements of visual composition take on and reflect meanings of human experience, directionality, and embodiment because positioning in space reflects our positioning in reality and the meanings that are attached to those positions" (p. 97). Our orientations in space matter because they confer both material conditions and meanings. Further, places and the objects in them do rhetoric; they are active participants in a system of narratives that are always already imbued with meaning. As Sanchez and Moore (2017) discovered, these meanings change with time: "Racialized material objects are constantly being rewritten and revalued by different audiences who either visit [a] site, or, to draw from Laurie Gries, see circulated (and or iconic) images of that site" (p. 3). In a rhetorical culture of ubiquitous technology and social media, this means that a body can be affected by a site that is geographically distant, which is to say that digital places extend and alter material places, and vice versa.

Spatial rhetorics wield broad influences because places have reach that affects other places and bodies. Rhetoricians have explored this topic in a variety of cultural rhetorical situations, even those considered "canonical." Kathleen Lamp (2011), for example, argued, "The technique of associating symbols with objects ha[d] potentially important implications" (p. 183) in the Roman Empire. Lamp found monuments and other purpose-built structures "gave Romans a shared rhetorical vocabulary from which they could efficaciously draw that would be immediately intelligible to their

interlocutors" (p. 186). These visual and spatial rhetorics created a "rhetorically significant cityscape" (p. 188) that was "meant to elicit a reaction," (p. 172) especially among a populace "predisposed… to look for visual narratives in the environment" (p. 188). Lamp's research shows how populations easily learn to seek out and read these narratives in their home surroundings. In this case, for example, statues of the emperor, buildings dedicated to a specific purpose, and memorials and monuments to the Empire's great acts instilled particular narratives about what it meant to be a citizen of the Roman Empire. In turn, citizens think, listen, and respond to the cues in their spaces, changing their actions to match with their culture's rhetorical needs. These narratives also help determine who is interior and exterior to the space: a "foreigner" will not be predisposed to read the same narratives and may thereby miss critical cultural cues, especially those that dictate the in/appropriateness of particular thought patterns, cultural logics, or actions.

Lamp's research suggests that hegemonic storytelling is the visual and material occupation of space and time: spaces and times become places, circulate, turn into icons, and then function as what Lamp called a "system of memory" (p. 183). Lamp described how places "function rhetorically" and are "consciously used… for the purpose of instructing [audiences]… how to participate as citizens" (p. 188). This fits well with Ahmed's observation that something becomes habitual through repetition. If, as Lamp argued, rhetors "were in the practice of not only using but also manipulating their environments" (p. 188), then memory and place are always already intertwined in relationship. It is worth considering the continued impact of this pairing, and I am particularly interested in the implications of visual and material composition for projects

analyzing (neo)colonial narratives. If, as Lamp implied, visual and spatial rhetorics are instructive, then there are consequences for failing to follow these instructions.

Finally, it is important to understand how symbolic places (in the sense of the term used by Nakayama and Krizek) also participate in the calcification of Whiteness. This is especially true for spaces that "already have symbols imposed on them in the form of words and images" (Lamp, p. 183), such as monuments. Because these spaces are used to "form public memory," they can "act persuasively with or without the mediation of a rhetor" (p. 183). I argue that, in this case, place *becomes* a rhetor. Cultural rhetorics scholar Alexander Slotkin's study (2022) suggested much the same: he found that "[i]n creating monuments, communities both forward and actualize specific narratives by embedding them within the monuments' materiality" (p. 4). Thus embedded in a culture, monuments become "multimodal actors" (p. 4) involved in "claims to both land and power that are ideologically and materially memorialized and carried into the future" (p. 10). Spaces carry stories, and stories create habitual grooves in spaces. Visual and spatial compositions do more than "take up" space; they write the stories that form space and time into a significant *place* and create particular versions of the past, present, and future to support the cultural logics of hegemonic storytelling. Public memory acts in ways that are much more temporally complex than the word memorialization suggests. When acts of public memory intersect with Whiteness, attempts to create a place often become attempts to misremember. Misremembering becomes easier when a person is located in a place where it is difficult to *notice* their Whiteness.

Trailing Behind

Nakayama and Krizek showed that Whiteness is not universal; rather, it uses negative definition (we know what is White by knowing what is not White) to create a narrative of universality. In fact, Whiteness is a "historically contingent" construction of a particular "social location" (Nakayama and Krizek, p. 293). V. T. Watson (2013) agreed, arguing that "…space, place, and violence are constitutive elements of the identity of whiteness" and that, therefore, "we need a new conceptual framework that recognizes the racialization of space as a primary mechanism by which whiteness comes to know itself as distinctively human" (p. 14). If the "racialization of space" is the primary mechanism through which Whiteness conceives of its humanity, then the stakes of interiority and exteriority become obvious.

Because Whiteness does not wish to be mapped, it is risky to draw the attention of White strategic rhetorics and risky to name White rhetorics as such. To name White strategic rhetorics is, as Sanchez (2021) discovered, to name oneself an outsider. Becoming exterior to Whiteness means that rhetors must accept roles as "targets or threats" (Nakayama and Krizek, p. 295), particularly if they seek to expose the cultural specificity of Whiteness. White narratives "guard the boundaries of nationality" and make "territorial claims to vital political terrain" (Nakayama and Krizek, p. 301), so conflicting with Whiteness inevitably means being *pushed out*. Whiteness moves in, sets norms, and disappears, and in order to do this, it trails behind White bodies so it cannot be seen, taking up the space of Othered bodies (violently if need be).

As I explored in the previous section, Whiteness possesses extraordinary evolutionary capabilities: when it is close to exposure, it wriggles away from observation

using whichever rhetorical strategies are appropriate for a situation. As both Sanchez (2021) and Villanueva (1999) wrote, Whiteness, White supremacy, and racism are adaptable, though not necessarily stable: they are built to survive. Ore (2017) argued that this happened through "calcification," while Dougherty (2016) and Houdek (2018) called the process "sedimentation." Both metaphors explain how, over time, rhetorical acts add up or "congeal" (Houdek, 2018) as a way to defend against critique. Because sedimented structures seem whole and natural, White people do not have to acknowledge or be conscious of their role in the continuing calcification of Whiteness through "tradition" (Ore, 2017) or "habit" (Ahmed, 2007). Through habit, Whiteness gains the ability to trail behind. When Whiteness trails behind, "…white bodies do not have to face their whiteness" (Ahmed, p. 156). Refusing to face what trails behind is an (in)action often motivated by a desire to avoid "bad feelings." Regardless of motivation, a refusal to face what trails behind is also a refusal to engage ethically with the consequences of one's Whiteness. Trailing behind, Whiteness disappears for those who are White, and there is little motivation for bodies designated White to turn towards the background and examine it carefully. Most important, such refusals cause reverberations that do not end in the body that refuses. Refusals to face Whiteness trailing behind accrete and, when massed, form a calcified structure. Since an institution "comes to have a body as an effect of this [accretion] work" (p. 157), institutions are *made of* White bodies while they also *are* White bodies. Because White bodies refuse to acknowledge trailing behind, both individual White bodies and White institutional bodies intrude into space and time and racialize them. As Whiteness racializes and neutralizes space and time, it centers itself and pushes non-Whiteness to the margins.

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As this literature review indicates, narratives of Whiteness are complex, culturally situated stories that relate and adapt to rhetorical lifeworlds, particularly those affiliated with Western colonial heteropatriarchy. I reviewed White storytelling with particular attention to the way that it defines cultural norms, evolves to resist detection, and colonizes space and time. These three aspects of White hegemonic storytelling are most evident in the cultural rhetorics literature I reviewed, but they are not the only rhetorical means available. Whiteness, as the literature shows, is both sticky and slippery, all around us and yet at the same time nearly impossible to identify and track. White colonial heteropatriarchy conceals itself as a cultural center, but from that location, it defines and measures the fit of bodies, then manages those bodies through the binary of interior/exterior. Whiteness trails behind, stretching into spaces and times it wishes to appropriate while refusing to acknowledge that it does so. Since Whiteness is adaptable, it does not always respond to encroachment upon its occupied territories with physical violence. Sometimes that violence expresses itself through the reproduction of Whiteness on bodies (standards of polite discourse and civility for example) or the cooptation of "outsiders" into Whiteness (i.e. queers can come in, but only if they are homonormative). Whiteness offers invitations into the center, but those invitations often require a person to flatten and deny their experiences to conform to White expectations.

Reviewing literature on White strategic rhetorics led me to an important conclusion: it is not enough to stop at analysis. I wish to do scholarship that is ethical and accountable, so to recognize only the White strategic rhetorics at work in my case studies leaves little space to understand the context in which they operated. As the literature

showed, White strategic rhetorics are *responsive*; the White institutional rhetoric I recount, in other words, is *responding to something*. Searching for the source of this institutional angst sent me into the archives, where I discovered rich, layered stories about the people who challenged White strategic rhetorics with their non-normative bodyminds. These stories exceeded the narratives that Virginia Tech wished to memorialize: they were rebellious, impolite, "unruly" (Jarratt, Welch, and Alexander, 2018) rhetorics that were full of anger, humor, pride, and determination (often at the same time). I knew from my own research experiences that the stories of Denim Day Do-Over and 1872 Forward were complicated, and that something was missing from institutional memorializations of these events. To understand what to do with the many strands of narrative I wished to stitch together, I explored cultural rhetorics methodologies, which offered me an understanding of how to slow down, listen, and constellate.

Call and Response: A Cultural Rhetorics Methodology

I had to understand my own White history to understand White memory and in this process, I had intimate experiences with intuition, doubt, and conflict. Pulled between sources, experiences, and histories, I saw patterns, especially in *normative* narratives: stories that claimed a neutral point of view, but used Whiteness as the unspoken center of *the* culture. Sometimes, I could clearly hear the refrains intended to teach Whiteness as the normative center from which deviant narratives derive. Other histories forwarded progress narratives, which make their centering of Whiteness much harder to notice; such stories argued that *where once, a culture failed on an equity issue, those bad times are in the past*. Progress narratives are aspirational, and there is nothing wrong with aspiring to end inequity. However, recirculating progress narratives creates rhetorical sedimentation (Dougherty, 2016) and calcification (Ore, 2017). As calcification and sedimentation continues, it becomes harder to perceive continuing inequity. As a rhetorical construction, progress narratives risk convincing us that there is no more work to do. Aspiration is not enough: the stories we tell as a culture must enable us to act.

Stories called me early in life. I learned to listen for them with avid interest and later, through cultural rhetorics scholars, I came to understand story as theory. Taking a cultural rhetorics viewpoint allowed me to understand the weight of the stories I encountered investigating Denim Day Do-Over and 1872 Forward. My use of rhetorics in the plural is intentional because this work starts from a conception that *all rhetorics are culturally specific*. A public, broadly conceived, is never made of only *one* rhetorical regime; cultural rhetorics interact and it is that interaction which produces the fullest

possible picture of the conditions under which knowledge is created, distributed, elevated or disappeared.

Cultural rhetorics suggests a flattened notion of diversity that equates to conformity with White colonial heteropatriarchy can be unpacked and thickened through constellation. Through arranging and rearranging stories, we derive a complex, multi-dimensional understanding of cultural stories: how they interact, and what those interactions may mean. Constellation is a process of mapping the rhetorical networks in a specific context more accurately. Cultures and their stories are multiplicities and juxtaposing them emphasizes that each narrative is *one story among many*. Through this work, I understood that histories are never *just* stories, never *just* recounting facts. Instinctively, I understood the way stories call audiences to listen, but scholarship on archives, listening, and counterstory helped me to understand that stories do much more. Stories *call us to respond*, regardless of whether we clearly identify the terms of that call. There is a complex relationship between *what, why,* and *how* stories are told, *who* tells stories *about whom* and *from where*.

The method/ology for this project needs to account for how cultural narratives called me, and how I responded. I referenced the African-American rhetoric concept of call and response, which African-American scholars Keith Gilyard and Adam Banks (2018) described as a "dynamic" of African-American communities. This dynamic "has been and continues to be central to the language used by African-Americans to make individual and collective statements about politics and culture" (p. 6). Their use of the word "dynamic" is crucial: conceived thusly, call and response becomes a motivating force for individual and collective action. This dynamic is a primary feature of what

Gilyard and Banks called "gospel literacy." Though I attended a majority White church, I had a cursory familiarity with broader Southern Black gospel culture. However, most of my direct experience with call and response came from years of school choir, where we sang gospel arrangements by Black composers like Moses Hogan. Singing his call and response songs was an embodied rhetorical experience: standing among a large choir, you feel reverberating voices, your own and others'. Voices interweave, play, harmonize, and clash. Voices call to and respond to each other in sequence, each call becoming a response and each response becoming a call.

Call and response allows me to show how I received (both intellectually and corporeally) the cultural rhetorics stories I encountered as well as how I considered and constructed my responses (Chapters 4-5) using counterstory. Both case studies (1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over) involved examining university archives and attending public history events. Sano-Franchini (2017) described a "recursive" approach to "slow scholarship" which influenced my work as I moved between listening, constellating, and creating counterstories. *Going over* my sources and experiences allowed me to attend to tensions and gaps between archival sources and the public history events that narrativized them.

In the first section of this chapter, I recount my approach to the call of public history stories. Utilizing decolonial and queer archival studies and rhetorical listening studies, I attended to content in the Virginia Tech Digital Special Collections and listened for their echoes in the commemorative events I attended. In the second section of the chapter, I discuss how I used the critical race theory (CRT) method of counterstory to respond to public history narratives that center White institutional achievement at the

expense of flattening non-normative stories. I understand the process of creating counterstories primarily through the work of Dr. Aja Martinez (2020, 2022), and I link this with work on countermemory (Medina, 2011). I account for storytelling as a facet of justice work in cultural rhetorics, then I explain the genres of counterstory I used in the project. At the end of each section, I present a brief summary of the methodological framework derived from the concepts I review.

The Call: Constellating in the Archives

Cultural rhetorics tells us that all narratives are rhetorical and affiliated with particular cultural contexts. We arrive on the scene already embedded in cultural contexts that center particular narratives, which means each of us carries within an archive of narratives that, summed up, create the orientation through which we approach the world. Cultural rhetorics methodologies center relationship, accountability, and response, and constellation is the foundation of this work. I see constellation as a process of juxtaposing stories to make meaning from their coming together, a moment to notice harmonies, tensions, and the interplay of voices and stories. Thinking of story as method/ology in my project is about decompressing archives and refusing simple progress narratives in order to make local histories *thicker*. Through this process, we understand how narratives are inherently cultural productions that precondition, enable, and foreclose material possibilities. My work to enact these requirements revealed the narratives in tension that subsequently became my focal points for analyzing institutional public memory events at Virginia Tech.

Queer and Decolonial Archival Orientations

Pairing queer and decolonial archival scholarship taught me to emphasize how the structure and content of archives alters possible pasts. In other words, *what* and *who* wind up in the archives matters a great deal, as does *how* we collect and organize materials. The rhetorical circumstances surrounding archival collection and use enable and limit particular narratives. Scholars K. J. Rawson (2009, 2014, 2015), Michael Karabinos (2015), Matthew Houdek (2016), and Therese Monberg (2016) called attention to the ways cultural master narratives appear in the archives. Their studies ask us to consider which people or institutions control archives; whose perspectives are centered and how other perspectives are represented; whose cultural logics control archival collection, sorting, and labeling practices; and which items are considered worth archiving in the first place. Awareness of cultural master narratives is important: as the previous chapter indicated, narratives control material lives. Archival narratives support and enact temporal and spatial regimes that grant and restrict access to material resources.

Thinking through the structurally embedded logics of the archives changed how I paid attention, and to what. Influenced by Karabinos (2015), Rawson (2009, 2013), and Gayatri Gopinath (2018), I was particularly sensitive to the power represented by the archive. Archives are not neutral receptacles for historical materials. They are institutions that project cultural values and "display themselves as purveyors of collective memory, as heritage institutions, and as the formers of national identity" (Karabinos, 2015, p. 3). Karabinos (2016) argued that unless we "completely contextualize" (p. 3) archives, we lose awareness of what is missing from them; we cannot afford to do so because "…the absence of representations just as equally shapes reality" (p. 7). In "Accessing

Transgender // Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics" (2009), trans scholar K. J. Rawson argued that archival logics are not inert, but that "the language that an archive 'speaks' has wide-ranging consequences" (p. 130). If we are unaware of these narratives, our perspectives become clouded so that we cannot notice the overlooked histories an archive contains.

An archive's narrative is a matter of consequence because it uses and supports a particular version of reality. As Matthew Houdek (2016) wrote, archives "function as rhetorical weapons capable of shoring up power for the ruling elite as well as sites of resistance that can militate against those who sought to use them for political control" (p. 207). An example of the former occurred in 1933 when Nazis destroyed the archives at Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sex Research, thereby destroying evidence of sexual and gender variant people. In 2023, we see echoes of this action when anti-trans rhetoric claims that gender variance is new or faddish. Without evidence of trans narratives, a lifeway disappears, and queer and trans people cannot fully understand their history. In turn, narratives that explore queerness and transness in historical contexts become powerful acts of resistance through recovery and remembrance. Houdek (2016) suggested that we might highlight the versions of reality in an archive by asking "who controls the archives (and who does not), what is archived (and what is omitted), and to what ends archives are put to use (and at whose expense)" (p. 206). I asked these questions about my case studies in order to map power structures, rhetorical and otherwise, and to repurpose the archives for highlighting marginalized narratives.

Matthew Houdek (2016) and Marika Cifor (2017) explored how this work is only possible because archives are not static. We never view an archive's stories neutrally, but

through the lens of the culture in which we are situated. Archival sources speak to us through time, but we hear them differently depending on our orientation. History is not simply factual because archives are what archival scholar Marika Cifor (2017) called "lively." Lively archives are "animate and imbued with a particular kind of agential and affective vitality" which allows scholars to examine how "the relations of archival records, the space of the archives, and the other actors (human and non-human) involved can be understood as moving, changeable, and interrelated constructions" (p. 6). In lively archives, we can see "translations of matter and meaning" (p. 6) produced by the relationships between all of the actors involved. If archives are lively, we can think of archival studies as a push and pull between narratives. Rawson cautioned us to be aware of the logics of power that construct archives and restrict access to them, but Cifor argued that archival materials always exceed those logics.

Further, the relationship between researcher and archives supersedes the archive's perceived boundaries. Queer cartography lets us map this queer excessiveness and open up space for new possibilities. Gayatri Gopinath (2018) suggested that the "queer cartographic imagination," can "bring into the field of vision precisely those bodies, desires, and modes of affiliation that are elided within dominant colonial–or, indeed postcolonialist nationalist–cartographies" (p. 6). Majoritarian stories in the archives attempt to control which narratives appear and how we interpret the past. Such stories affect *how* and *what* we know and, critically, "obscure the interrelation of imperial, racial, and settler colonial projects as they produce racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities" (Gopinath, p. 7). My project queerly maps the hegemonic narrative I have chosen to call White memory. Gopinath argued that such actions "disrupt the normative

ways of seeing and knowing" which requires "a retraining of our vision and a reattunement of our senses" (p. 7-8). Reattunement requires time and care, and rightfully so, given the stakes of archival narratives.

As I moved recursively through the archives, I reattuned using what Gopinath (2018) called *disorientation*: a process of "getting and staying lost, that diverges from the straight and narrow paths prescribed by heteronormativity" (p. 61). Disorientation enters spaces of "unknowing, and unlocatability" and then "demand[s] that we remain there" (p. 71). I felt most disoriented when I felt dissonance between narratives in the archives and institutional public history narratives, and in my case study chapters, I seek to recreate this dissonance. Gopinath suggested we "layer multiple times and spaces atop one another and, in doing so, suggest different forms of relationality that may in fact reorient our vision toward more capacious and hospitable futures" (p. 85). In more concrete terms, we might "place seemingly incommensurate texts, geographic locations, and temporal moments in relation to one another, not to empty out their historical and temporal specificity but to map the continuities and dissonances between different regimes of power as they discipline and 'disappear' bodies in particular ways" (Gopinath, p. 57). Inducing disorientation allows me to question institutional knowledge production at Virginia Tech, and explore how the institution might best enact its stated equity goals[7].

I refined a lens that allowed me to enter and interact with the archives and the public history events that narrativized them. I saw disorientation as a practice of "*caring for* the past" in which archival scholars "carefully [attend]" to the archives and see their research as an obligation to "impart that *caring about* to others" (Gopinath, p. 4). This

[7] Detailed in Virginia Tech's strategic plan, summarized here in the document "The Virginia Tech Difference: An Inclusive Process."

work requires slow scholarship because of the necessary attention to detail required to *care about* archives. As Gopinath pointed out, these practices center "a sense of obligation to document, analyze, archive, and value the small, the inconsequential, the ephemeral, so much of which make up the messy beauty and drama of queer life-worlds" (p. 4). I paid careful attention to the complicated, layered stories that the archives revealed when juxtaposed with public history celebrations. As Rawson argued, it takes intentional construction "to help destabilize where we find history, what it looks like, who gets to produce it, and how we use it" (2013, p. 3). To practice intentional construction, we must be prepared to listen *carefully*, using all our senses.

Queer and Decolonial Archival Studies Framework

This framework pays close attention to the structure and content of archives so that scholars can:

Track master narratives

- Purpose: Revealing how power relations relate to the narratives in archives, and how those archival narratives create and support particular versions of reality.
- Key Concepts: master narratives, power relations, versions of reality
- Methodological Acts: contextualization, mapping

Practice queer cartography

- Purpose: Mapping White memory queerly, paying particular attention to liveliness in the archives, access, and space making practices.
- Key Concepts: queer cartography, liveliness, participatory archive

- Methodological Acts: mapping, disorientation, caring for the past

Questions

- Which people and/or institutions control the archives?
- Whose perspectives are centered? How are other perspectives represented?
- Whose cultural logics control collection, sorting, and labeling?
- Where are the borders of archival space? What is kept in and out? What is considered worth archiving?
- How do the archival sources themselves queer and exceed the structure and content of the archive?
- Who participates in the archive, and how?
- To what ends are archives put to use?

Listening with Care

Learning to listen to archives and public history narratives was (and is) a complicated, evolving process that is very particular to my positionality as a White, neurodivergent, queer graduate student researching at a predominantly White institution (PWI). As someone enculturated into White racial formations that tend to dominate dialogue, listening studies is particularly relevant. To center care, to *listen carefully*, I consider rhetorical listening, which has been a topic of interest in our field for nearly two decades. Understanding how to listen rhetorically allowed my project to achieve its aims: revealing dissonance in public history narratives, and using dissonance to create new, thicker histories that enable new possible futures.

As cultural rhetorics scholar Jennifer Sano-Franchini argued (2017), listening means taking time for recursive movement and treating listening as an *active*, rather than passive, process. I begin by thinking about White feminist rhetorician Krista Ratcliffe's (2005) work on rhetorical listening. However, as Japanese-American scholar Mira Shimabukuro (2015) pointed out, Ratcliffe's initial model lacked in-depth consideration of how access affects both listening and being heard. Through Shimabukuro's concept of rhetorical attendance, I pay particular to intersubjectivity. I am assisted in this work by Lisbeth Lipari's work on ethical listening (2009, 2010, 2012), which conceived of listening as a dwelling place from which we enact accountable relationships with others. Finally, as Asian-American scholars Therese Monberg, Hyoejin Yoon, and Jennifer Sano-Franchini recommended (2017), I consider moves that allow us to attend to silences as a function of seeking "overlooked histories." Rearticulating these histories is a process of creating what Monberg, Yoon, and Sano-Franchini called "alternative institutional memory" (p. 9); these memories reveal the complexity of institutional histories and thicken histories in productive ways by giving space to voices silenced by master narratives.

In *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness* (2005), Krista Ratcliffe wrote that rhetorical listening "signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (p. 1). Ratcliffe saw listening as a productive challenge to "the *logos* that speaks but does not listen" (p. 23) and argued that rhetorical listening creates "an ethical responsibility to argue for what we deem fair and just while questioning that which we deem fair and just" (p. 25). Listening is slow, recursive, reflective work without which we flatten realities that do not conform to a

narrow conception of what is normative. Ratcliffe was particularly attentive to how Whiteness is difficult to hear, writing that it "is a privileged norm split from other cultural categories in ways that render it invisible, hiding its violence behind parlor manners and polite language" (p. 39). Because Whiteness is positioned as "a privileged norm," it can require "parlor manners and polite language" of any discourse seeking legitimization. The privileged status of Whiteness allows it to dictate the terms of the discussion. Further, Ratcliffe explained, "[o]ut of necessity, non-whites have been quite savvy in articulating the power, privilege, and violence of whiteness throughout U. S. history. Out of privilege, many whites have refused to see it, let alone critique its dysfunctions" (p. 103). To put it another way, "non-whites" must learn how to *perform* Whiteness, which "is often an invisible practice for white people, many of whom assume that not thinking about whiteness is the norm" (p. 112). As a White researcher, I must learn to hear in more complex ways than listening has previously required of me. Without rhetorical listening, Whiteness remains concealed; in a project like mine, this inability to listen to Whiteness enables public histories founded on "objective" narratives that *actually* center White perspectives and archival practices.

Mira Shimabukuro expanded Krista Ratcliffe's work on listening because "access (both in terms of the bodies of students and teachers of color *and* of materials in multicultural-ized curriculum) continues to override the good intent behind Ratcliffe's models" (p. 16). Missing from Ratcliffe's initial models of rhetorical listening was attention to the material conditions of equity, access, and inclusion, particularly when considering how to assemble a story out of the sources to which we listen. In her book *Relocating Authority* (2015), Shimabukuro proposed *rhetorical attendance* as a model

that considers these missing elements. Rhetorical attendance is a model "of the deeper forms of intersubjectivity reception" which require "stretching toward with mental vigilance, with physical readiness, with intent" (p. 21-22). Attendance is not passive; it is an active *stretching toward* in both a literal and a figurative sense. Attendance "requires an explicit *awareness* and *mention* that culture and experience inform our decisions about when to ask questions and when to stay silent, about how to contemplate the implications of our work and anticipate the feelings of those with whom we stand" (p. 27, emphasis mine). Becoming aware of how culture and experience inform us requires sustained energy and attention. As Shimabukuro wrote, we must "look, listen, and look again" in order to "attend to the no-shows, to the what is not said" (p. 28). To attend is to *go over* in order to reorient towards the strange: the stories that reveal discordant notes, complicated causality, and previously unheard voices. Such repeated *going over* is especially necessary for White scholars; without it, marginalized narratives as well as White rhetorical strategies disappear.

Rhetorical attendance asks scholars to recognize and center the unexpected, the dissonances we encounter when we access archives, and to consider what those discordant moments have to do with the cultures in which we live. Shimabukuro forwarded two key questions for this work: "what tells us *something is missing*? How do any of us know *it's more complicated than that?*" (p. 14). To answer these questions, scholars must "[attend] to the social position of the archive, an active site of remembering and forgetting" (p. 31). If archives can remember and forget, then narratives made from archives are never neutral, but are culturally inflected and always changing. Conceived as rhetorical attendance, archival work is "a complex interacting array of knowledge still

being collected, still being shared, still being redistributed back to the people whose material lives served as the source of that knowledge" (p. 44). Rhetorical attendance helps scholars practice "archival recovery as a means to bring truth to power, as a means to hear what's been denied" (Shimabukuro, p. 54). Recovering narratives matters because "cultural traditions are still under invention, still being formed, still being impacted by both the material experiences people encounter in the present and the ones they carry from the past" (p. 74). In other words, the stories we pass on are cultural heritage; these stories contain values, judgements, and cultural truths. These stories are not stagnant but constantly reinterpreted when publics interact with historical narratives from their own cultural perspectives. As Shimabukuro wrote, this means that "cultural concepts… can, like any and all signifiers, 'slip' in various directions and become occupied by different ideologies" (p. 75). Archival scholars must be aware of this slippage and wary of the idea that we *report* what we find when the stories we tell are fluid and partial at best.

Thinking of rhetorical attendance as an act of "intersubjectivity reception" means that archival research must emphasize embodied experience. That is to say, intersubjectivity requires *presence*. Communications scholar Lisbeth Lipari wrote about listening (2009, 2010, 2012) as a *state of being that obligates an ethical response*. Listening is integral to ethics such that "ethics arises from a process of listening that is committed to receiving otherness" (2009, p. 45). Ethics, she wrote, "speaks through listening" (p. 45) and asks us to "attend, observe, attune–and in doing so receive the otherness of the other" (p. 47). Ultimately, "[w]ithout listening, no ethical response can arise" (p. 47). Listening is "a transcendence from self-in-separation to self-in-relation" (p. 53) which ultimately "challenges the ego and the illusion of control and sees how the

distortions that arise from our insistence on innocence, certainty, and understanding damage our capacity for compassion" (p. 54). It is this capacity for compassion that takes a listener beyond what they already know to be true, because listening is "a process of defamiliarization in which we renounce the familiar and embrace the strange" (p. 55). Listening ethically in some way *upends* us: the dialogue of the other exists in a strange (one might say queer) register that forces us to change perspectives and give up control of the narrative.

Ultimately, Lipari conceived of embodied listening through the concept of *listening being* (2010). Listening being is "a listening that does not merely tolerate but openly embraces difference, misunderstanding, and uncertainty, and invites entrance to a human communication and consciousness beyond discursive thinking, to dwelling places of understanding that language cannot, as yet, reach" (p. 360). Ethical listening is "a *dwelling place* from which we offer our ethical response, our hospitality, to the other and the world" (p. 350). Listening being issues "an invitation" for the "hosting of [the] other… as a guest, as a not-me" (p. 350). Listening being requires that we "come to the conversation empty–not empty of [our] experience or history–but empty of the belief that [our] experience or history defines the limits of possible meaning and experience" (p. 355). Because listening being positions us "outside of understanding," it "enables us to step outside of the quotidian order of things, of knowledge, conviction, and fundamentalisms of all kind" (p. 359). Thusly framed, listening also becomes a powerful tool meant for understanding how orthodoxies and fundamentalisms distort our thinking.

Further, we must be prepared for silences, gaps, and aporia, for they too are rhetorical. In *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts* (2011), Krista Ratcliffe and Cheryl

Glenn argued that silence and listening "are particularly effective for historicizing, theorizing, analyzing, and practicing the cultural stances and power of both dominant and nondominant (subaltern) groups" (p. 2). Considering both silence and listening emphasizes the idea that silences are not meaningless; that is to say, silence does not indicate that there is no story to tell. As Kristie Fleckenstein wrote in the same collection, "silence is not bereft of meaning; rather it is the beginning of meaning and a conduit of meaning" (p. 53). Nancy Myers wrote of *purposeful silence*, which uses "restraint and choice" and "includes deciding when to speak, to whom, and about what; it is self-enforced even though socially sanctioned" (p. 64). If we consider silence meaningless, we risk missing critical elements of interlocutors' experience. Silence does not necessarily indicate a lack of participation, and, further, a lack of participation is not meaningless.

Farmer and Strain, in fact, considered *genres of silence* and argued, "Silence shapes the meanings that emerge between interlocutors" (p. 232). Viewing silence as rhetorical phenomena, they wrote, "Silences differ according to a variety of situational contexts and purposes" (p. 243). Their chapter identified five genres of silence (ambient, enthymematic, meditative, kairic, and strategic), each of which serves a different purpose. Ambient silences between interlocutors are "deeply, thoroughly contextualized" (p. 243); they may indicate deep comfort, deep discomfort, or any other affect, depending on the particular rhetorical context in which they occur. Enthymematic silences "reside in the shared but unspoken assumptions between interlocutors" (p. 244). Meditative silences, in turn, foster reflection, consideration, memory, and reconstruction. In such silences occur deeply meaningful metacognitive activities. Kairic silences are "the right silences at the

right time: the appropriately mute, rhetorically powerful, and well-placed silences that occur in dialogues with others" (p. 244). Finally, strategic silences "can convey resistance, lack of interest, comfort, anger, weariness, embarrassment, and a host of other sensibilities" (p. 245). Their work suggests that silences are not only deeply meaningful, but also rhetorical, and deployed by intelligent, attuned interlocutors. In other words, silence is as purposeful as speaking. Choosing not to attend to silence when we listen ensures that we only value certain types of rhetorical activity.

Listening requires listeners to be willing to experience discomfort about what they hear and asks, in addition, that listeners use discomfort as a place from which to *rethink*. As a queer scholar, I am particularly interested in the listening interactions that reveal or create dissonance between perspectives. Dissonance draws our attention: it jars our perspective out of what Sarah Ahmed (2006) might call perceptual grooves. Encountering dissonance when we listen reminds us that public histories and bodies are contextual, and they interact in complex, unpredictable ways. We can never consider a public history complete because stories are always *in process*. Oversimplification, particularly the creation of progress narratives, stifles some possibilities in favor of others. We may find stories in archives and public history narratives that are disheartening, stories that reveal uncomfortable truths and force us to reconsider values we hold dear. In recent years, people from the privileged norm (White, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, employed, housed) have resisted calls to sit with discomfort, arguing that no one should be made to *feel bad* about history. If we as a culture focus on using archives to tell stories that stave off *bad feelings*, we foreclose any possibility of resistance. Refusing rhetorical attendance is an exercise of privilege not available to all audiences. I

undertake this methodological approach aware that, as a White scholar, I must be both accountable and responsible for attendance.

Listening Care-fully Framework

This framework postulates how to listen care-fully through a stance of openness, and recursive and reflective scholarship. It pays particular attention to how we might better hear Whiteness. This framework allows us to:

Practice Rhetorical Attendance

- Purpose: Practicing "intersubjectivity reception" (Shimabukuro, 2015) to attend to and then to reveal interacting arrays of knowledge.
- Key Concepts: intersubjectivity reception, remembering and forgetting, slippage
- Methodological Acts: stretching toward, explicating how culture and experience inform us, archival recovery

Listen Ethically

- Purpose: Listening to emphasize intersubjectivity through practicing listening as an openness and a state of being.
- Key Concepts: embodiment, listening as a state of being
- Methodological Acts: defamiliarization, attending, observing, attuning, hosting, decentering

Attend to Whiteness

- Purpose: Paying attention to the call to listen, and listening carefully for Whiteness, since its tendency is to remain hidden.

- Key Concepts: hearing without listening, accountability, cultural logics
- Methodological Acts: practicing accountability, paying attention to commonalities and differences, analyzing claims and their cultural logics

Listen to/for Silences

- Purpose: Attending to silences, which are often rhetorically chosen and meaningful; using silence to induce the discomfort required for rethinking a subject.
- Key Concepts: purposeful silence, ambient silence, enthymematic silence, meditatic silence, kairic silence, strategic silence
- Methodological Acts: inducing and experiencing discomfort, rethinking

Questions

- What tells us something is missing?
- How do archives and public history events remember and forget particular narratives?
- How does our own culture inform our experience and interpretation of materials?
- What actions allow us to attend, observe, and attune to our materials?
- How is our listening to these materials embodied? What embodied experiences do we bring to, and have within, archives and public history events?
- How can we highlight and juxtapose difference, misunderstanding, and uncertainty?

- What claims do these materials make, and which cultural logics support those claims?
- Where do we find gaps, aporia, and silences in our materials? What (rhetorical, cultural, material, etc.) circumstances attend these silences?
- Where do we experience discomfort when we listen to our materials? How can that discomfort enable rethinking and new perspectives?

The Response: Counterstory and Countermemory

Research is always about how we respond to the call to listen with our stories about what we heard. To take a cultural rhetorics approach is to demystify the idea of centers and margins in favor of revealing "rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical" (Powell, Levy, Riley-Mukavetz, Brookes-Gillies, Novotny, and Fisch-Ferguson, 2014). This orientation sees public histories as culturally situated rhetorical performances, which both contain and reflect a specific culture's genealogy, traditions, and values. In other words, there is no such thing as a neutral or objective perspective; neutrality and objectivity are narrative techniques intended for rhetorical effect. Once we listen, the research stories we create must acknowledge the culturally inflected circumstances of their composition. Below, I detail my response to the call of the archives. I think through how cultural rhetorics methodologies ask us to deal with stories through constellation. Then, I describe how my project used counterstory and countermemory to create complex responses that decompress perspectives flattened by institutional progress narratives.

Telling Stories about Whiteness

White memory is a particular type of story, albeit a story with a great deal of power over how we envision the past, present, and future. Whiteness, which Indigenous scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) described as "heteropatriarchal colonization" (2016, p. 99), is one perspective among many; however, the structure of Western neocolonial culture centers that perspective *over* others. If we conceive of Whiteness as a cultural rhetoric, we turn our critical lens back upon narratives of neutrality, objectivity, and normality in order to examine the cultural logics that necessitate and create this rhetorical network. In *The Truth about Stories* (2003), Greek and Cherokee scholar Thomas King argued that stories "can control our lives" (p. 10) because we "imagine our world" and "imagine ourselves" "through our stories" (p. 68). Simply put, stories are foundational to the way we create our worlds, and so are the rhetorical techniques we use to create and distribute narratives. Stories create networks of meaning on which cultures rest. Rhetorical techniques preserve and extend cultures, center particular values, and, in the case of Whiteness, expand in an attempt to colonize the spaces, and thus realities, of other cultures.

Stories matter in emotional, ethical, logical, *material* ways. Stories, King reminded, cannot be called back once they are told. He wrote that "stories [are] medicine" and that, therefore, "a story told one way could cure [and] the same story told another way could injure" (p. 66). There is much more at stake in which cultural narratives we choose than "bad feelings"—stories affect the life trajectories of very real people. Narratives in tension are a notable feature of neocolonial rhetorical life worlds; in such worlds, progress narratives offer relief from this tension by pushing dissenting

voices to the cultural margins. As King put it, "[w]e trust easy oppositions. We are suspicious of complexities, distrustful of contradictions, fearful of enigmas" (p. 20). The colonial heteropatriarchy recirculates progress narratives, which draw White attention because they offer blanket absolution for ongoing systemic and institutional discrimination. Seeking simpler narratives, then, is not a matter of preference, but a high stakes rhetorical confrontation. Neglecting, overwriting, or simplifying a story destroys a reality. For that reason, we who tell stories about realities (as all academics inevitably do) must recognize our own responsibility: "Want a different ethic? Tell a different story" (King, p. 113). Thus framed, storytelling is a practice of honesty, accountability, relationship, and imagination. From our current cultural orientation, we must find the rhetorical tools to shape new worlds; this is an ethical, creative charge.

Listening and storytelling are acts of deep relationship. Rhetoricians are responsible for carefully positioning their work to be aware of what types of space they open. Because storytelling is an ethical response, it is more than transmitting a message: storytelling is not a stream of unbroken dialogue issuing forth from a storyteller, but an *interaction*. Indigenous studies scholar Malea Powell (Miami, Shawnee, Euroamerican) framed this interaction as a "listening game" in which to practice relationships (1999, p. 2). The listening game allows a listener to hear unheard or silenced stories, which enables them as storyteller to "tell a story that respects and aids the people whose voices and spirits construct a larger web of existence for [them] than ever can (or should) be explained in scholarly discourse" (p. 3). Stories, we must be aware, always exceed the frame in which we attempt to put them. At the same time, stories *are* relationships and

stories *construct* relationships. Scholars must be conscious of this interrelating, intersectional web of existence to attempt ethical responses.

Scholars must take up a storytelling orientation with purpose. Academic storytelling in this style positions itself "within [a] distasteful collection of [colonial, heteropatriarchal] narratives" in order to make space for "existing stories that might run counter to the imperial desires of traditional scholarship, stories that have been silenced by its hegemonic drone" (M. Powell, 1999, p. 4). Powell emphasized that these are *existing stories*. The stories for which I made space are not *imagined*, but *preexisting*; my work was to amplify them above the "hegemonic drone" of White memory. By thinking of rhetoric as a discipline that *listens*, we engage in "reimagining" (Powell, p. 11). Rather than civilizing complex and messy topics, we lean into complexity, and we transgress disciplinary rules to change the spaces, academic and otherwise, in which we exist.

Storytelling is ultimately knowledge creation, sanctioned or otherwise. Engaging with and writing stories as contextualized knowledge lets us critique "whose stories are told, who is trusted to hear some stories, and why who listens matters" (Novotny, 2020, pgph. 5). Whiteness may *become* neutral as an effect of the way it narrates itself, but Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilyn Brookes-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson (2014) reminded that all stories we investigate center "meaning-making as it is situated in specific cultural communities... [i. e.] any place/space where groups organize under a set of shared beliefs and practices" (2014). Standardized White cultural narratives take their place alongside narratives already framed as explicitly *cultural* (a term that seems to stand in for *marginalized*). Thus do standardized narratives become eligible for constellation; a standardized narrative

juxtaposed with other cultural narratives with which it interacts in a particular context creates a complex, layered pastiche that represents a particular rhetorical lifeworld. Constellated, our sources show narratives in tension, and from that tension, we create rhetorical models that allow us to describe, analyze, and reimagine the narratives interacting in a particular culture.

If the goal of cultural rhetorics scholarship is, in part, to "retrain and reorient how we listen to stories" (Novotny, 2020) then constellation is critical work. Through it, Novotny wrote, we "think about all bodies in relationship in relationship with our own positionality" (pg 15). Constellation requires us to ask, "How do we make transparent the reasons for our actions, given the positionalities we embody?" (Novotny, pg 16). Responding to this question involves "mak[ing] our own body transparent alongside the other bodies that we work in coalition building with," remembering that such work "is messy and takes time" (Novotny, pg 20). We *feel* listening and storytelling, and cultural rhetorics conceives of both as inherently embodied processes. Understanding that storytelling is embodied is to focus on feeling how bodies, in relationship, compose stories. Indigenous rhetoric scholar Sarah Klotz (2019) wrote that focusing on embodied experience allows scholars to examine "how social conditions emerge from daily practices of communication and meaning making" (pg 4). Daily listening and storytelling practices form the basis for embodied experiences within a specific, localized culture. Using constellation to bring these practices into view allows scholars an orientation from which they can examine how stories interact and what happens when they do.

Using constellation to reveal dominant narratives for the situated cultural practices they are opens space for new possibilities, particularly in the areas of

knowledge creation, validation, and dissemination. According to Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (Chippewa), using cultural rhetorics methodologies allows us to acknowledge that we "carry stories" by being "attentive to the materials we use to practice and make knowledge" (2016, p. 544). "Knowledge," she wrote "lives in our bodies and is affected by what bodies experience" and "sometimes, we have to wait for knowledge" (p. 544). Practicing cultural rhetorics methodologies, then, requires trial-and-error, awareness of the embodied experiences of self and others, and a healthy attitude towards constant accountability. Riley-Mukavetz reminded that while "[i]t is easy to write joyfully about the practices that are easy and uncomplicated," it is even more important to write about "the practices that scare us, challenge us, leave us with few answers or unarticulated meanings" (p. 546). Constellation does not always (or ever) reveal neatly packaged knowledge; in fact, it often reveals fissures and conflicts; the most critical cultural stories reside in these places.

It is not always obvious how to respond to the spaces that cultural narratives open. Our responses are both limited and enhanced by our particular positionality, or the nature of our embodiedness in a particular space. This is why rhetorical scholars emphasize creativity through concepts like "critical imagination" (Royster and Kirsch, 2012), "decolonial imagination" (Driskill, 2016), and "just imagination" (Jones and Williams, 2020). To imagine in these ways means thinking beyond oppressive heteropatriarchal cultures. Driskill (Cherokee) argued (2016) that responses utilizing the decolonial imaginary should be "a retelling and imagining of stories" (p. 3) which recognizes that "dominant histories are stories that do particular work in the world" (p. 6). To expose the work that dominant histories do is also to do particular work in the world. My responses

to White memory narratives embody a carefully considered unruliness that refuses to accept neocolonial heteropatriarchy as a foregone conclusion. Driskill suggested that such responses represent "an intentional and named trouble" which "critically interrogate[s]… how we choose to remember" (p. 42). My project is particularly concerned with *how we choose to remember at Virginia Tech*, a process complicated by the intersecting narratives constituents and participants carry within their bodies.

To retell memory, Driskill suggested that first, "…we have to unweave the strands of stories that have created the cultural memories we currently carry" (p. 102). Then, we tell our own stories, which "reweave the world" (p. 170). Cultural rhetorics creates stories with the intention of changing and complicating dominant narratives, which are deeply enmeshed with ideas of tradition that provide comfort, belonging, security, and other *good feelings*. However, cultural rhetorics scholars can take neither good feelings nor tradition at face value. Driskill warned "…the idea of tradition can be a trap that uses a particular formation of cultural memory as a tool of power and control" (p. 149). Therefore, the challenges presented to dominant narratives by cultural rhetorics must be reflective, accountable, and purposeful.

Counterstory, Countermemory

My project unweaved and then rewove stories of the archives and public history events I attended. I thought recursively and reflectively about how constellating sources produces particular meanings, and I sought understanding of which constellations most keenly portrayed the dissonances I felt. Through this process, I came to counterstory as the most appropriate methodological response. Counterstory is a Critical Race Theory (CRT) methodology emerging from the work of legal studies scholar Dr. Derrick Bell,

and it is "characterized by frequent use of the first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of law, *and the unapologetic use of creativity"* (qtd. in Martinez, p. vii). African-American rhetorics scholar Dr. Carmen Kynard (2020) wrote that CRT is "[r]ooted in deep traditions of everyday protest, resistance, and survivance" and that its exigence is an "urgency [for] an alternative intellectual and political legacy" outside of "the academy and its published scholarship" (Foreword to Martinez, p. xiii). Because counterstory began in Critical Race Theory, it offers scholars a chance "to bring to the foreground the workings of racism in the daily lives of all people" and, in addition, to highlight that "we all function within the hegemony of systems of domination and subordination, advantage and disadvantage, structured according to racial categories" (Martinez, p. 27). As Ore (2017) and Dougherty (2016) suggested, calcified formations of Whiteness make it very difficult for us to encounter perspectives outside of the normative; counterstory creates an opportunity to step around and/or through these challenges. Counterstory draws on the creativity of not only the researcher, but also the communities in which we live and work, and the very real people whose stories we tell.

In *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* (2020), Dr. Aja Martinez drew CRT methods into rhetoric and writing studies. Counterstory is necessary, she wrote, because "we've *all* been telling stories *all* along, but some stories are elevated to the status of theory, scholarship, and literature, while, too often, minoritized perspectives are relegated to marginalized or overlooked 'cultural rhetorics' methods or genres" (p. 2). She suggests that because *all stories are cultural rhetorics*, counterstories are an appropriate scholarly response to one story's elevation over others. Counterstories center narratives that cannot be seen immediately; in the case of both my

project (as Chapter 2 indicated) and CRT, the "unseen center" around which we must tread lightly is Whiteness. Whiteness sponsors *majoritarian stories*, which "privilege whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, heterosexuals, and the able-bodied by naming these social locations as natural or normative points of reference" (Martinez, p. 23). This results in what Martinez called "color blindness and [a] sense of white supremacy" which "mean that whites cannot see or understand the world they've made and are in many cases quick to dismiss or deny the inherited privilege associated with whiteness" (p. 10). In other words, counterstories are necessary interventions because they expose this inherited privilege through stories. Counterstories deal with the unseen by telling a story to make it visible, and this is particularly important work in the case of White memory.

Martinez considered with great care what such methods bring to the discipline of rhetoric and writing studies. One important task of counterstory is to draw attention to the majoritarian narratives at the center of our discipline (and others). Counterstory can do this work because it "functions through methods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies" (p. 3). Counterstory is "for telling stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" while we "expose, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories of racialized privilege" (p. 26). Such work is particularly important in our discipline, which must account for its origins. As Dr. Jaime Armin Mejia wrote in the Afterword, (in Martinez). Counterstories, he argued, "represent one of the most important ways of opening up academia and challenging the status quo so as to disrupt the racism that continues keeping us apart" (p. 143). Originating as it does in Critical Race Theory, counterstory provides a vehicle for our discipline to rethink the absent center of

Whiteness in our canon, our research practices, and our teaching practices. For me, counterstory provided the means to make White memory visible.

Beyond mere visibility, however, counterstories must enable us to act. Martinez argued that they do so because they "help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival, resistance, and justice" (p. 26). Counterstories are not just acts of revelation, but also of "just imagination" (Jones and Williams, 2020). Counterstories call us to understand our intimacy with the communities we research. Counterstories are also interactive; as Martinez saw it, counterstories invite an audience to "reflect… on the narratives of their lives and on the carriers of those stories – the ancestorship of the storytellers in our lives who have illuminated pathways for those of us who would continue the story" (p. xxv). Connecting to stories is familiar and easy to each one of us, and counterstory, thoughtfully constructed, invites us to ask who tells stories, why, and to whom. We are invited to respond by thinking about how to continue the story, and then carrying that story with us. In many ways, counterstory is an activist methodology that perpetuates itself: counterstories beget more counterstories.

Given the centrality of memory to a project purporting to examine the ways Whiteness remembers, countermemory is a key concept in my construction of counterstories. Critical Race Theory scholar Jose Medina (2011) thought through countermemory using Foucault, who wrote about how *subjugated knowledges* create countermemories when we reveal them. According to Medina, "subjugated knowledges remain invisible to mainstream perspectives" because they are "impossible to detect by those whose perspective has already internalized certain epistemic exclusions" (p. 11). In other words, in the same way Whiteness can disappear, Whiteness can also *make other*

perspectives disappear through epistemic exclusions. This epistemic flattening enables progress narratives to be constructed and distributed. Taking a historical view of these epistemic exclusions allows scholars "to see, diachronically, different substrate or deposits of ongoing epistemic subjugations by calling attention to the social struggles and conflicts that have been part of the production of institutions and discourses, but have become buried in their interstices" (p. 17). I think of counterstory, then, as a process of *decompression* that reveals buried stories. In my project, those buried stories portrayed the struggles and conflicts that built Virginia Tech as a modern institution.

I am particularly interested in using countermemories against what Medina called *official histories*, which "are produced by monopolizing knowledge-producing practices with respect to a shared past" (p. 14). Official histories, according to Medina, do very specific work. Their primary function is to "create and maintain the unity and continuity of a political body" and they accomplish this "by imposing an interpretation on a shared past" and "by silencing alternative interpretations of historical experiences" (p. 14). Official histories cover up particular types of knowledges, particularly those that "are not articulated or voiced in the proper way, knowledges without accepted credentials" (p. 17). Medina explained the reason for this lack of credentialing: "the history of epistemological exclusions and marginalizations that have kept [knowledges] out of official markets for epistemic transactions" (p. 18). Because subjugated knowledges do not set the standards for credentialing knowledge, they are often at a disadvantage: they must prove that their perspectives are valid considerations for majoritarian culture.

Countermemories, however, cannot be swept away by official histories. They dwell in communities, and they exist "because there are people who remember against

the grain, people whose memories do not fit the historical narratives available" (Medina, p. 12). Centering the subjugated knowledges at the center of these countermemories "makes social critique possible by calling into question official and hegemonic knowledges and interrogating the exclusions that they rest on" (p. 18). We do not center subjugated knowledges to make others *feel bad*, but to "energize a vibrant and feisty epistemic pluralism" (p. 12) which does not shy away from contention and discord but places the tension between stories and counterstories front and center. Critically, Medina noted that "unearthing marginalized past struggle" benefits "the entire social body, which can now become critically conscious of the heterogeneity of histories and experiences that are part of the social fabric" (p. 20). In using counterstory against White memory, my project asks questions about, and responds to, histories that diverge from neat progress narratives that make an institution (and its constituents) *feel good*. I deliberately cultivate a "heterogeneity of histories and experiences" in order to foreground the "feisty epistemic pluralism" on which Virginia Tech as an institution is built.

The counterstories in my case study chapters highlight friction and focus on the unresolved; Medina argued that this represents a radical epistemic pluralism. This type of pluralism does not try "to resolve conflicts and overcome struggles" but instead "focuses on the gaps, discontinuities, tensions, and clashes among perspectives and discursive practices" (p. 24). Creating countermemories does not mean "simply [reviving] alternative memories that can act as correctives of each other" but "reactivating struggles and energizing forms of resistance" (p. 24). Through this practice, scholars help "make available multiplicitous pasts for differently constituted and positioned publics and their discursive practices" (p. 24). Multiplicitous pasts offer new epistemological options and,

placed next to one another, we see past struggles that, properly contextualized, relate to present struggles we already think we know intimately.

Using countermemories is not simply an action to increase equity and visibility. Rather, they force us to confront "our proclivity to forget how truths have been established" and instead examine "case by case, the diverse ways in which particular truths are settled, challenged, negotiated, evaluated, and re-evaluated in particular contexts" (Medina, p. 24). Through this lens, "truths are made, not given… through our practices, experiences, and valuations" (p. 24). Thinking of truth this way allows us to examine more closely, "those recalcitrant truths that take the appearance of being permanent and fixed" which, Medina argued, "hide ossified valuations and rigidified beliefs" (p. 25). Countermemories are instruments with great potential for revealing the workings of White memory, but they reveal complexities to which we must carefully attend. This is a process of "interrogating and contesting any settlement, making the past come undone at the seams so that it loses its unity, continuity, and naturalness" (p. 27). Making the past come undone is an act of radical epistemic pluralism, a "critical transformation" through which "new connections are brought to light, new possibilities of resistance are activated, and new forms of solidarity become possible" (p. 29). These new possibilities enable those who are outside of elevated White knowledge to use one of Whiteness' own powers against it: to move through and around challenges to their space, to move through and around Whiteness itself.

Cultural rhetorics scholars, particularly those studying monuments, archives, museums, and memorials, make good use of countermemory. O'Brien and Sanchez (2021) were particularly interested in the "spatiality of countermemory" (p. 6), indicating

a focus on how memories and countermemories *embed* in places. Their study was concerned with "how people collectively train to identify with public objects" and how memory "accentuate[s] the rhetorical dimensions of created objects, space, and memory, and how they convene publicly" (p. 6). Memory and countermemory reside *in* and *with* objects and spaces, and the "rhetorical dimensions" of these concepts in interaction create publics. My project is concerned with how Virginia Tech stories itself, because through those stories, the institution sponsors the public it wants to address. This is a complex process; Sanchez and Moore (2016) argued that "public memory forms (and constantly reforms) through material and rhetorical means" (p. 1). Their project examined the contested public memory represented by an act of defacement: activists spray-painted "Black Lives Matter" on the Confederate Defenders of Charleston monument. Through this defacement, they argued, "activists [rewrote] the public memory of these sites as a more complete symbol of reality: representing not just the Confederacy or Black struggles for humanization but the need for contesting injustice" (p. 6). As Foucauldian concepts of countermemory would have it, defacing the CDC centered ongoing struggles; this act showed how, in Charleston, the past is not dead, and the struggles it engendered continue into the present.

How we expose countertmemories, how we tell counterstories, matters a great deal. Alexander Slotkin's (2022) study of Confederate monuments was particularly attentive to what happened to those monuments once many were ordered removed in the wake of 2020's George Floyd protests. Slotkin was critical of "the gentle relocation of Confederate monuments imbued with a community's memory to spaces like museums or estates owned by the [United Daughters of the Confederacy]" because such acts "neither

uproot nor dramatically shift the social and cultural energy they embody" (p. 8-9). He was concerned with the idea that monuments that "materialize" discriminatory ideologies "need to be torn down, smashed, and destroyed for racist public memories and localized topoi to be utterly broken, changed, or fissured" (p. 9). It is not enough, then, to *hide* the past; we must think about how to break from it by breaking contact with the ideologies creating the White supremacist reality in which we now live. Slotkin argued, "we need to be cognizant of how these ideologies are materialized in our cities and their networked cultural and political geographies as well as when to raise a hammer to them" (p. 10). Throughout my project, I am particularly concerned with acts of revelation that show how such ideologies materialize in our spaces. I attend and attune to the unruly rhetorics that challenge, complicate, and fight against the progress narratives forwarded by the university. That is, I am interested in those rhetorical acts that took a hammer to Virginia Tech's desire to define itself through ease and progress. Further, I use counterstories to continue that history of resistance by raising the hammer myself.

Raising a Hammer: Construction and Genre. At CCCC 2022, the Council of Basic Writing sponsored Dr. Martinez's talk "Keynote on the Craft of Counterstory," and in this presentation she reviewed construction techniques for counterstories. Martinez was particularly clear about the use of counterstories against "polite white culture," which asks for "change without challenge." Counterstory, in other words, does not focus on creating good affect, but on "allowing people to express their own lived realities" regardless of the discomfort or tension such expression might create. According to Martinez, counterstory involves making both "the work" and "the practice" accessible for

the people the stories are *for*. In other words, not all stories are counterstories. Whether or not a narrative is a counterstory depends entirely on what one uses the narrative to *do*.

Martinez emphasized the careful steps scholars must take in order to create counterstories from their research materials. All counterstory projects, first, *must start with data*. In other words, scholars should not select approaches or genres beforehand; rather, the data should dictate how we tell counterstories. This, according to Martinez, centers the question of "what method/genre makes sense with the content?" This process is both intuitive and critical, and it requires a careful *going over* of our data. Once we have done so, the options for genre are wide open. Martinez cites both Tara J. Yosso, who explored the effectiveness of autobiography, biography, and composite counterstories, and Richard Delgado, who examined counterstories through narrative, dialogue, allegory/fantasy, and chronicle. There is a great deal of room for critical and just imagination in this process, and to do counterstory is to think creatively about how to use our data.

In the introductory chapter, I experiment with creative nonfiction (CNF) as I tell stories about finding my project and through it, my own Whiteness. I used this approach to center my experiences of growing up White in order to explain how these experiences led me to White memory and its workings. Writing her own autobiographic reflection in the form of an imagined octalog, Martinez centered scholars who "take up the tools of story, metaphor, history, and philosophy, leavened with empirical claims, all of which are integral to truth-telling and policymaking" (*Counterstory*, p. 87). Martinez argued that we turn to counterstory because "memory simply cannot be adequately portrayed in the conventional discourse of the academy" (p. 89). For a White scholar to do this work is to

engage in “critical self-reflection on their own Whiteness” (p. 89). As a critical act, counterstory turns the lens back on Whiteness. Martinez argued that White scholars “will need to learn the practice of excavating memories of our own racialization” so we can then “connect those memories to the crucible of history in which the idea of race was forged and the practices of racism, of white supremacy in particular, were justified, legitimated and reproduced” (p. 89). This type of writing requires going beyond “certifying those strands of the story with which we are most comfortable” and asks us, instead, to “[give] voice to those strands that discomfort, that mortify, that disrupt our sense of goodness and righteousness” (p. 89-90). I centered these experiences in Chapter 1 in order to help the reader understand the narratives to which I am responding and how I arrived on the scene in the midst of narratives already in progress.

In each case study (Chapters 4-5), I construct counterstories as dialogue, utilizing narrative techniques to allow sources to speak to one another across time. This practice centered conflict and complication, using dissonance to make progress narratives into more complex stories. I do this as a way to highlight and speak against what Martinez called “stock stories,” which “feign neutrality and at all costs avoid any blame or responsibility for social inequality” (p. 34). Stock institutional stories, in other words, intend to *smooth over* bad feelings, and this is why they appeal to White audiences. The purpose of counterstories, on the other hand, is to “expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege” and “to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance” (p. 34). As I worked on the case studies, I kept in mind that “a perspective’s relation to power is too often what determines whose story gets told, listened to, and believed as truth” (p. 51). For this reason, I was careful to highlight

stories flattened by institutional progress narratives. I did this with a focus on the unruly excessiveness of lively archives, which overwrites any attempt an institution might make to create a progress narrative and situate it as a stock story.

Using counterstory, scholars move the audience away from reality in order that when they return, "messages are left behind that provide a new perspective or set of lenses" (Martinez, p. 57). This is important work because "historians and readers alike tend to believe and subsequently proceed as if some stories were truer than others" (p. 73). We are particularly liable to do this in the United States where, Martinez argued, "there has never existed a context in this nation's history in which white supremacist systems of race and racism did not define economic, social, political, and cultural arrangements" (p. 69). This is how my project, centering White memory as it does, opens space for counterstories that challenge white supremacist systems and attempts to see through and around the ossified Whiteness that blocks our view. Ultimately, I suggest that such practices of critical imagination are an inextricable part of justice work.

Telling Counterstories with Countermemories Framework

This framework thinks about how to make meaning out of constellation using counterstory and countermemory to highlight White memory and the fractious narratives that have always exceeded its grasp.

Constellations

- Purpose: To see Whiteness as one story among many to understand the cultural logics that center it. To see other *existing stories* and make space for them.

- Key Concepts: story as contextualized knowledge, cultural logics, progress narratives, ease, stories exceeding their frames
- Methodological Acts: constellation, imagination, unweave/reweave

Counterstories

- Purpose: To displace majoritarian “stock stories” (Martinez, 2019) as a way to strengthen survivance, resistance, and justice.
- Key Concepts: stock stories, survivance, resistance, justice
- Methodological Acts: displacement, telling stories, inviting reflection

Countermemories

- Purpose: To highlight conflicts in official histories in order to create a “feisty epistemic pluralism” (Medina, 2011) that opens up and continues resistance.
- Key Concepts: official histories, feisty epistemic pluralism, against the grain memory, spatiality
- Methodological Acts: decompression, interrogating exclusions, raising a hammer to ossified formations in order to see beyond them

Questions

- Which majoritarian stock stories or official histories dominate the rhetorical situation(s) we are investigating? What are the cultural logics that support these histories?

- When we constellate and listen carefully, what existing stories come into view?
- How might we push our discipline's boundaries in order to make space for these stories?
- What method/genre of counterstory makes sense with the data available to us?
- Who in a given rhetorical situation is remembering against the grain, and how might we incorporate and enhance their perspectives in a counterstory?
- How can we use counterstories to interrogate the exclusions on which majoritarian stories rest?
- How do we make transparent the reasons for our actions, given our positionalities as storytellers?

1872 Forward and Backward

In 2022, Virginia Tech celebrated its sesquicentennial anniversary with a program of commemorative history called 1872 Forward. Individual events with titles like "Honoring the Native American Lands" and "Contested Spaces: A Tri-Racial Conversation" suggested the university intended to focus on race relations between Native (Monacan) people, Black people, and White people in the place that became Blacksburg. I wondered why Indigenous, Black, and White were the chosen perspectives; not only did this choice create rigid, non-intersectional categories (Lethabo King, 2019) between the named races, but it also left out other significant populations (Chinese and South Asian, for example) important to local history. Further, flattening Monacan identity into a racial classification is reductive. As Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) wrote in *The Transit of Empire* (2011), "the conflation of racialization into colonization and indigeneity into racial categories dependent upon blood logics underwrites the institutions of settler colonialism" (xxiii-iv). The 1872 Forward events page did not explain the choice, but stated that the events "will bring to life how the past shapes the present and leads the university into the future" (1872 Forward: Celebrating Virginia Tech). Given the celebration's name (1872 *Forward*) and its stated purpose, I was wary of the potential for institutional progress narratives.

Analyzing 1872 Forward, I considered what Nakayama and Krizek (1994) expected from White rhetorics. I attuned especially to the way "discourses of Whiteness are relatively hidden in everyday interaction," but when confronted, "a multiplicity of discourses [about Whiteness] become visible" (p. 298). As a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), Virginia Tech used (and uses) White strategic rhetorics to avoid

uncomfortable challenges to White space. By 1872 Forward, conversations about Whiteness centered space sharing, which is to say that Virginia Tech made space for non-White narratives. However, as Nakayama and Krizek reminded, White power relations may sometimes center contradictions and multiplicity. Still, even in such situations, White strategic rhetorics are "always re-securing the hegemonic position of Whiteness" (p. 298). Byrd described this profess as one which "proffer[s] assimilation into the colonizing nation as reparation for genocide and theft of lands and nations" (xxiv). In other words, intentions do not matter when our rhetorical choices work to reinforce White colonial heteronormativity. Analyzing and critiquing how we create public histories is necessary to ensure that PWIs do not continue to overshadow the tactical rhetorics that marginalized people have always used to speak back to such institutions.

Commemorations raise questions about power, and especially about storytelling and institutional memory. In particular, I wondered how Virginia Tech would commemorate a history focused on broad themes rather than specific events. 1872 Forward covered events ranging from unveiling historical markers to launching scholarly books, dedicating dorms, visiting a newly revamped Smithfield Plantation, and having a public conversation about race and relationships. The four-day celebration promoted a racial reckoning of sorts, a series of events at which Virginia Tech could examine its complicity with racist, White supremacist ideologies. Further, the institution promised to center accountable relationships with the Monacan and Black communities who were displaced and exploited to build the institution, from its beginnings as the Preston and Olin Institute (built by slave labor) through the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862. 1872 Forward focused on race as a single, isolated vector of inequality and, as I have

mentioned, this designation is inaccurate. Although 1872 Forward did rhetorical work to distance Virginia Tech from its past mistakes, such a flat understanding of race complicates any examination of systemic oppression. Initially, I had two questions: (1) How would the institution remember itself? (2) How would the institution apologize for its actions in the "painful past?"

As I explored the answers to these questions, I found White memory at work in Virginia Tech's conversations about its "tri-racial" history. In making this claim, I highlight the difficulty of identifying and excising White memory from institutional histories. The "tri-racial" frame, as Byrd argued, is a "conflation" that "masks the territoriality of conquest" (xxiv). "Under this paradigm," she asserted, "American Indian national assertions of sovereignty, self-determination, and land rights disappear into U.S. territoriality as indigenous identity becomes a racial identity and citizens of colonized indigenous nations become internal ethnic minorities within the colonizing nation-state" (xxiv). Even when institutional planners seem to act from "the right place," it takes extensive thought and a careful plan to avoid whitewashing institutional histories with progress narratives that center what Jean O'Brien called the "origin story" of Whiteness in the colonies (xv). In the first section, "Always Already: Hiding Institutional Whiteness in Plain Sight," I explore an 1872 Forward event called Contested Spaces: A Tri-Racial Conversation. I compare institutional stories gathered from the Digital Special Collections Timeline of Black History at VT to those told at Contested Spaces, examining what Black and Monacan community members asked of the institution during this conversation.

In the next section, “Making a ‘Cogent’ Argument: Student Activism Versus Institutional Resistance,” I examine how hidden Whiteness, in turn, sets White norms. In 2020, Virginia Tech renamed two dormitories because of recent student activism. However, these dorms, originally named for men with questionable and repugnant racist beliefs, were on the university’s radar since at least 1997, when students initially discovered problematic information about Claudius Lee and Paul Barringer. In fact, students have *always* spoken out about harmful White racial norms on campus, and I bring this history to light by examining the student activism that ultimately forced institutional change.

In the third section, “Mixed Memorial Messages: Reshaping Space and Time on Campus,” I explore how Whiteness colonizes space and time, especially at a PWI. I am particularly interested in work done by the Historic Markers Committee to add markers commemorating Virginia Tech’s diverse history. Though these markers represent a step towards accountable institutional history, some markers dedicated to White men with racist beliefs remain on campus, muddling the message. Ultimately, I explore what institutional accountability might mean if we are attentive to how White memory lurks in *all* histories at a PWI.

Always Already: Hiding Institutional Whiteness in Plain Sight

On March 26, 2022, Hahn Hall hosted “Contested Spaces: A Tri-Racial Conversation,” the closing event of 1872 Forward. Forty to fifty participants gathered in the small auditorium, and a smaller audience (less than twenty viewers) watched via YouTube livestream. Aside from Dr. Menah Pratt-Clarke, Vice President for Strategic Affairs and Vice Provost for Inclusion and Diversity, no Virginia Tech administrators

attended or presented at Contested Spaces. Virginia Tech invited Black, Monacan, and White speakers to this event. White speakers from Smithfield Plantation and the Preston family discussed the responsibility of White institutions to tell honest histories, even when they are uncomfortable. Black descendants of Wake Forest and the Fraction family told stories about rediscovering ancestors who left behind slavery to create new possibilities for their descendants and spotlighted their requirements for ongoing, accountable relationships with Virginia Tech. Representatives from the Monacan Nation discussed institutional responsibilities to tell better stories reflective of multiple points of view. They challenged VT to think about how White institutional spaces create White protagonists and White stories.

Initially, I found it strange that no one highlighted stories of Virginia Tech's embedded institutional White supremacy rather than allowing Smithfield Plantation to stand in for the institution. VT hosted Contested Spaces, so speakers were guests on institutional territory; rather than using time and space to acknowledge its own Whiteness, Virginia Tech positioned itself as a neutral ground on which Black, Indigenous, and White communities could begin healing historical racial wounds. The institution erroneously classified the Monacan people and flattened their experience of colonization into one that could be discussed only through race. This institutional deflection allowed deeply ingrained institutional Whiteness to hide in plain sight rather than acknowledging that the university is imbued, always already, with White values. I examine this facet of White institutional memory by constructing dialogues between stories told at Contested Spaces and stories in the Timeline of Black History at VT. Side by side, these narratives (1) foreground the needs of Indigenous and Black populations

concerning institutional public memory and storytelling; (2) highlight Whiteness hiding in plain sight in the Digital Special Collections archives; and (3) explore the responsibilities of White storytellers, both individual and institutional, towards the painful past.

Taking Responsibility: Representing Smithfield Plantation

Ryan Spencer and Brokie Lamb spoke as representatives of Smithfield Plantation, one as a curator and docent, and one as a Preston family descendant. Their stories revealed institutional Whiteness to reject and replace it (Walton, Moore, and Jones, 2019). Earlier in the day, my partner and I walked to Historic Smithfield, as it is known in promotional materials (https://www.historicsmithfield.org), to see the new exhibit pieces at the plantation house. The new tour foregrounded histories of Black enslaved people on the lands where we stood. Docents showed us the new parlor, which featured rusted iron manacles in a case and other artifacts relating to the people enslaved at Smithfield. Ryan Spencer, a Smithfield docent, charged White historians to tell the unvarnished truth about our ancestors instead of centering our feelings of discomfort about their (and our) failings. Working at Smithfield entailed responsibilities to ensure that the plantation is "remembered for what it was" (2022). Prior historical interpretations of Smithfield, which ignored slavery, amounted to "historic gaslighting" (2022) intended to cover the horrors of slavery for the benefit of White comfort. Spencer apologized for this and argued, "If Smithfield does not engage its past, then it should fail" (2022). Engaging with the past is the only way to "foster healing" over "willful ignorance" in Blacksburg (Spencer, 2022). In forthright terms, Spencer apologized for Smithfield's institutional wrongdoing and explained plans for more inclusive narratives. Spencer

stepped *around* White memory to acknowledge that a Southern plantation is always White supremacist, even when portrayed as an antebellum, Lost Cause idyll. If we do not engage honestly with the painful past, then we continue the wrongdoing of our ancestors and extend the systems of "colonial heteropatriarchy" (Driskill, 2016) that brought us here (literally, in the case of White colonizers and their descendants).

Brokie Lamb, a descendant of William Ballard Preston, discovered the painful past of his ancestor, which made Whiteness visible to him in a new way. From this new vantage point, he modeled individual responsibility as opposed to institutional responsibility. Lamb was "raised on a myth" of his ancestor's "string of great accomplishments" (2022) such that he saw Preston as a model for his own life. Preston was a powerful man who served in the Virginia House of Delegates, and in 1831-32, he argued that "happiness [was] incompatible with slavery" (2022). Preston found himself in the minority, and his efforts to abolish slavery in Virginia failed. Yet, between 1832 and 1862, Preston changed his mind; he owned more than 200 slaves by the advent of the Civil War and made the motion for Virginia to secede from the Union. Lamb asked why and how his ancestor could fight to abolish slavery, then embraced it with such vigor that he argued for "liberty built on slavery" (2022). Lamb reckoned with his ancestor's "yes, but concepts of humanity, money, familial duty, community regard, and political and social mores" (2022). That is to say, Preston acceded to the pressures of his time and allowed himself to believe that some people are more human and deserving than others. Encountering this dissonance helped Brokie Lamb ask questions about other stories that create "yes, but" humanity, which is ultimately a matter of considering "what [we] revere

and don't want to pull down" so that we can "remember what our ancestors forgot, or chose not to remember" (Lamb, 2022).

Bringing Whiteness to the fore and centering it as the driving motive behind Preston's decisions about slavery forces White individuals and White institutions to confront attitudes about White achievement that ignore harmful racist ideologies as a product of their time. White institutions and individuals, in other words, must take responsibility for their participation in the painful past, and this means not only apologizing but also telling better histories and making space for a multiplicity of perspectives. However, neither Spencer nor Lamb addressed Monacan people, several of whom were present at Contested Spaces. This created what Jean O'Brien (2011) called a White "origin story," in which Native histories disappear so that White people appear to be the first inhabitants of a place, in this case the lands that would eventually become Blacksburg, Virginia. By omitting any discussion of colonization, representatives of Historic Smithfield erased Native history at the plantation altogether. To do so escapes difficult questions: who originally lived on these lands? Why did they leave, and where did they go? How did White people come to occupy these lands?

Irving Peddrew Faces White Expectations

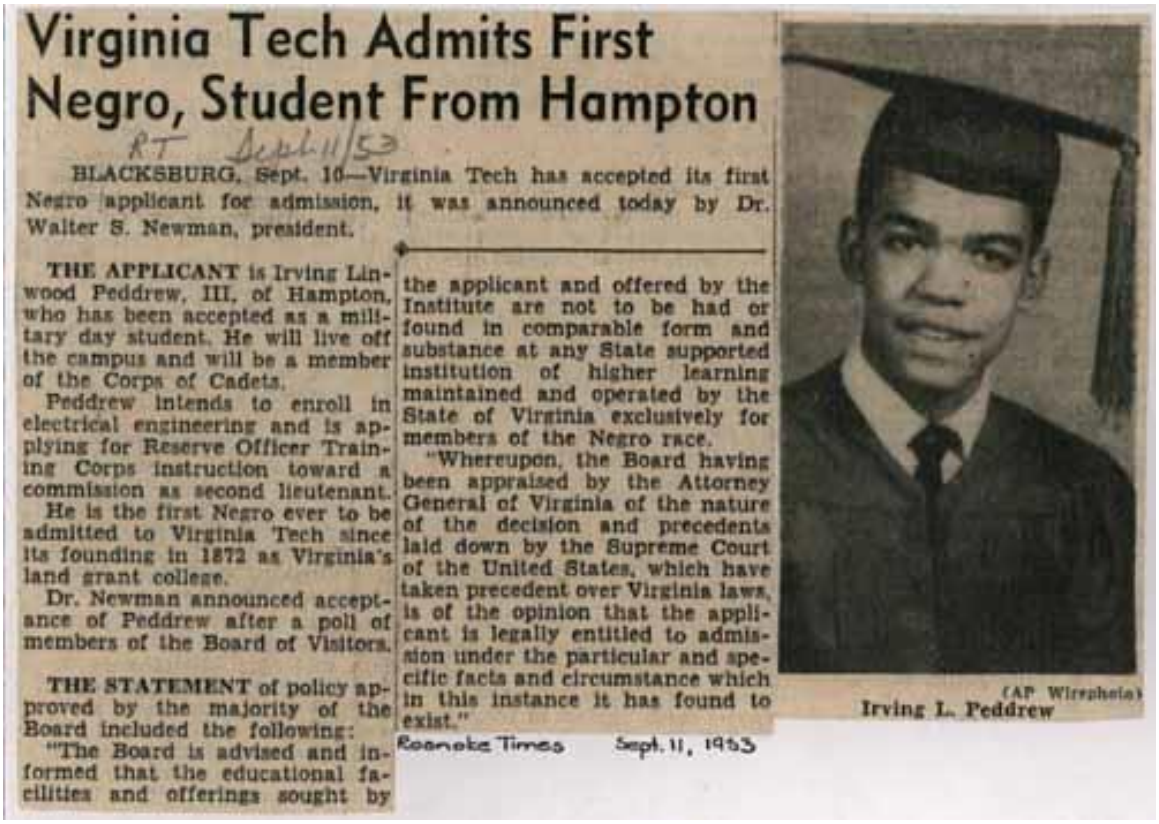
Before March 2022, I explored the Digital Special Collections archives at Virginia Tech for a deeper understanding of the history to be showcased at 1872 Forward. The Timeline of Black History at VT is thorough. That is to say, there were far more materials in the archive than the university could present over one weekend, so I went into 1872 Forward aware that the university would not engage all the topics in the timelines. I attended carefully to the archives, examining their content, and, as trans

studies scholar K.J. Rawson (2009) suggested, their construction, phrasing, tone, images, media tags, and descriptions. Digital archives serve as a brand new provenance for archival materials (Rawson, 2013), so I expected the structure of the archives would tell a story, one I might not see at 1872 Forward. In the Timeline of Black History at VT, I found Whiteness hiding in plain sight, dictating the presentation of Black stories.

One example is the story of Irving Peddrew, the first Black student at VT, who entered as a Corps of Cadets member in 1953. The 1950s Timeline of Black History places the entry for Irving Peddrew just before an entry for the 1954 Brown desegregation ruling, subtly commending the institution for admitting a Black student before it was legally obliged to do so (Black History Timeline–1950s). But Irving Peddrew's timeline story is incomplete. Peddrew stayed only two years at Virginia Tech before leaving because of racism he experienced on campus (2002). Even 1872 Forward, an event promising honest examination of race relations at Virginia Tech, only alluded to the conditions Peddrew faced. Professor Peter Wallenstein explained that Peddrew left VT because "he didn't take to the Corps (of Cadets), or perhaps the Corps didn't take to him" (Dedication of Hoge and Whitehurst Halls, 2022). Whiteness hides in this statement, even though Wallenstein framed Peddrew's departure as a mutual "lack of fit" (Ahmed, 2012). Peddrew was the only Black cadet attending in 1953, and the occasion was so notable that the *Roanoke Times* reported (Figure 4.1), "Virginia Tech Admits [its] First Negro" (1953). The Board of Visitors voted to accept Peddrew's application. Still, their statement clarified that they only did so because "the educational facilities and offerings sought by the applicant and offered by the Institute are not to be had or found in comparable form and substance at any State supported institution of higher learning

maintained and operated by the State of Virginia exclusively for members of the Negro race" (1953, *Roanoke Times*). Not only was Peddrew the only Black

Figure 4.1: Roanoke Times Article Announcing Irving Peddrew's Acceptance at Virginia Tech.



Virginia Tech Admits First Negro, Student From Hampton

RT Sept 11/53

BLACKSBURG, Sept. 10—Virginia Tech has accepted its first Negro applicant for admission, it was announced today by Dr. Walter S. Newman, president.

THE APPLICANT is Irving Linwood Peddrew, III, of Hampton, who has been accepted as a military day student. He will live off the campus and will be a member of the Corps of Cadets.

Peddrew intends to enroll in electrical engineering and is applying for Reserve Officer Training Corps instruction toward a commission as second lieutenant.

He is the first Negro ever to be admitted to Virginia Tech since its founding in 1872 as Virginia's land grant college.

Dr. Newman announced acceptance of Peddrew after a poll of members of the Board of Visitors.

THE STATEMENT of policy approved by the majority of the Board included the following:

"The Board is advised and informed that the educational facilities and offerings sought by the applicant and offered by the Institute are not to be had or found in comparable form and substance at any State supported institution of higher learning maintained and operated by the State of Virginia exclusively for members of the Negro race.

"Whereupon, the Board having been appraised by the Attorney General of Virginia of the nature of the decision and precedents laid down by the Supreme Court of the United States, which have taken precedent over Virginia laws, is of the opinion that the applicant is legally entitled to admission under the particular and specific facts and circumstance which in this instance it has found to exist."

Roanoke Times Sept. 11, 1953

(AP Wirephoto)
Irving L. Peddrew

student on campus, most students knew he was there only because he wanted to be an engineering student; otherwise, he would have been forced to attend a Black school. At 1872 Forward, Wallenstein did not describe Peddrew's experience in these terms. Subsequently, the university did not have to admit its role in supporting Whiteness to the extent that it did not punish the racist behavior among the Corps of Cadets that ultimately caused Peddrew to leave the school. Though Wallenstein may have intended the audience to understand his remarks as a critique, his phrasing did not attribute fault to the White cadets who vented their White anger towards Irving Peddrew.

The Monacan Nation Critiques White Institutional Storytelling

Vicki Ferguson, representing the Monacan Nation at Contested Spaces, critiqued White colonial storytelling that frames "slaveowners and cowboys" (2022) as protagonists and heroes, making our public histories into narrow, poor-quality narratives. Such public histories evidence what aboriginal scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Dandrubin Gorenpul) called a "white possessiveness" (2015) over stories. She argued that White possession "functions socio-discursively through subjectivity and knowledge production" (p. 52). The way that White people story themselves and their cultures is important because "white subjects are disciplined, though to different degrees [than non-white subjects], to invest in the nation as a white possession that imbues them with a sense of belonging and ownership" (p. 52). White investments, in turn, become "a means of controlling differently racialized populations enclosed within the borders of a given society" (p. 52). How we cast protagonists in public histories, then, is a matter of consequence and we must be wary of the consequences of our narrative choices.

Centering better storytelling means rejecting assimilationist narratives about Indigenous peoples. To do so, Ferguson argued, historians must center "the how" alongside "the what" (2022) in public history accounts. That is to say, we cannot understand *what happened* unless we also know *how it happened*. Without careful consideration, public history narratives repeat false stories like those termed "the myth of the vanishing Indian" and "settler-adoption fantasies" by Tuck and Yang (2012). These public history narratives prompt us to envision Native Americans as "from the past," "not real," or "gone" (Ferguson, 2022). Indigenous people become romantic historical characters who tragically disappear in order to make way for White colonial origin stories

(O'Brien, 2011). Subsequently, White settler culture co-opts "Nativeness" and uses this imagined quality as a measure of who is "Indian enough" (Ferguson, 2022). Thusly, Tuck and Yang argued, Nativeness is "handed over to White settlers" (2012). Ferguson described these moves as assimilation, which "tries to take culture, then says you aren't authentic" (2022). To solve this problem, Indigenous public history must allow Indigenous people to tell their own stories; as Ferguson put it, the goal should be "to learn from us, about us" (2022). By doing so, we create a more complex history that allows for more diverse interpretations and, simultaneously reveals the unmarked, hidden Whiteness that constructs "make-believe Natives" in the first place. For Ferguson, speaking and sharing the truth is a way to "heal wounds" (2022) between Indigenous and settler populations, but work like Contested Spaces is a first step. Ferguson ultimately argued that fraught conversations about the painful past at 1872 Forward are a beginning, not a conclusion. Such complex, difficult work is key to reconciliation.

Floyd Meade Becomes a Symbol

Later, when I reflected on Vicki Ferguson's words, my mind returned to the Timeline of Black History. She charged the audience, as historians and storytellers, to consider whom we cast as the protagonists in our stories. I could not help but think of the story of Floyd Meade in the pre-1950s section of the timeline, a story in which Virginia Tech tradition takes precedence over examining obvious signs of White racism. When the racist content and context of archives became uncomfortable, institutional stories relied on associations with beloved university traditions rather than examining or critiquing prior portrayals of the institution's relationship with Black people.

Floyd “Hardtimes” Meade (Figure 4.2) appeared on the Pre-1950s Timeline. I was initially surprised to see so many photographs of him until I read his story, which clarified his connection to Virginia Tech athletics in general and the football team in particular. Floyd Meade was born in Blacksburg in 1882; the timeline explained that he “lived with” the Thomas family, although it is likely that, since they were White, he was a servant’s child (Black History Timeline–Pre-1950s). At seven years old, Cadet N.W. Thomas brought him to campus, where he “became a favorite of the cadets and unofficial mascot of the V.A.M.C. athletic teams” (Black History Timeline–Pre-1950s). As a boy, Floyd Meade promoted university athletic events by ringing a bell in downtown Blacksburg. Although this story sounds harmless, it raises ghosts of White paternalistic feelings towards subjugated Black people. Meade may have been a “favorite” of the cadets, but the fact that he was considered the “unofficial mascot” of their athletic teams indicates that he was also seen as a novelty. Further, as Native American people in the United States have argued through repeated petitions and court cases, it is not a compliment to be chosen as a mascot.

Later, Meade received a promotion of sorts: “As the mascot of the football team, he traveled with the gridmen on their trips, frequently dressed as a clown in orange and maroon colors” (Black History Timeline–Pre 1950s). When he got older, “Meade trained a huge turkey to go on a leash of orange and maroon ribbons. When he tapped the turkey with a whip, it would gobble” (Black History Timeline–Pre-1950s). Meade’s

Figure 4.2: Floyd Meade with His Turkey at an Early VT football game.

turkey gave the football team its first name, the Gobblers, which later became the Hokies. Entering students learn the story of Floyd Meade as part of their institutional acculturation.

However, becoming a character in an institution's history does not guarantee that you will be seen as a person. This story flattens Meade into a carrier of institutional tradition such that problematic racist elements of the story go unremarked. The Timeline of Black History normalized the institution's use of a Black boy's body as a mascot without exploring the implications. There is no indication that the institution paid Meade for his work, nor any record of his feelings about this work. The timeline names both a Black boy/man and a turkey as "mascots" but offers no critique of the former. That Virginia Tech's much-beloved mascot emerged from the spectacle of a Black body is significant. However, since Meade's story is an important community myth, deeply problematic institutional racism goes unremarked. Meade is portrayed through a

paternalistic institutional lens that professes a fondness for Black bodies, but does not welcome them to campus in a way that entails having access to resources. Floyd Meade's story, rather, upholds institutional myths about VT traditions; such myths, as Brokie Lamb (2022) noted, are not often subject to critical content analysis.

As a White audience member, I had questions about the institution's framing. Who, for example, is the assumed audience for the timeline? Why didn't the timeline entry acknowledge the Black bodily labor that went into creating institutional traditions? How might a Black audience member feel about a Black man who could not have attended Virginia Tech for another 50 years described as a "mascot?" Most importantly, who is this story's protagonist: Floyd Meade or the institution? The archive does not question why Virginia Tech made a Black child into a mascot but instead retells a feel-good story about institutional traditions. From 1872-1953, Black people could have been only workers at Virginia Tech, and most held jobs like a janitor, cook, and athletics trainer (Wallenstein, 2022). Peter Wallenstein claimed at 1872 Forward that "Virginia Tech was never an all-White institution" (2022), but those words dodge institutional responsibility. That Black people physically occupied campus space during the first 70 years of the institution does not indicate that the space was somehow less White. Rather, the story uses paternalistic Lost Cause (Encyclopedia Virginia) narratives to portray a happy, multiracial campus "family." But serving White students at a White university is not the same thing as attending, and representation in space is not equal to equity.

The Fraction Family Critiques Institutional Whiteness

Dr. Kerri Moseley-Hobbs and her sister Valerie of the More than a Fraction Foundation closed Contested Spaces with the foundation's film, "We are Tomorrow's

People." They presented the video not only *about* the Fractions, but also *for* them, since the video uncovered history previously unknown to Jack Fraction's descendants. Jack Fraction, their common ancestor, was a Yoruba man once enslaved on Solitude Plantation (part of William Ballard Preston's lands and still located on Virginia Tech's campus). The Fraction family emphasized slavery did not circumscribe Jack Fraction's life; his name was "born of rebellion, not submission," and "slavery was his predicament, not his identity" (2022). Because of "the deep reluctance of our elders to discuss the past," they said, "[we] disappeared from one another not knowing we were lost" (2022). Learning and telling their story is a process of reuniting, recovering, and healing from the wounds imposed by slavery. The Fraction family reminded me that knowing your ancestors and having a story is a luxury not afforded to all people. Fraction family members, as a result, have a shared responsibility to "honor the lives and sacrifices of our ancestors," "represent the dignity of all Black survivors whose own stories may never be told," and "teach [the young] early what we learned late" (2022). These histories are a "sacred trust" that tells a "sacred story" (2022). This sacred story admits a new viewpoint, one that sees Black existence beyond White racist systems. Jack Fraction may have been enslaved, but he was a complex, dynamic, independent person who provided a legacy for Black survivors of all White-dominated oppression.

More than any other speakers at 1872 Forward, the Fraction family held Virginia Tech responsible for its violent, White supremacist legacy. Although they praised Virginia Tech for creating Contested Spaces as an opportunity for conversation, they refused to celebrate the institution's legacy by joining their stories to institutional progress narratives. As Dr. Moseley-Hobbs explained, "This place [Virginia Tech]

reminds us of a graveyard" (2022), foregrounding the continual rediscovery of the painful past in a place built by slavery. Contested Spaces was only the beginning of the conversation; as the Fraction family argued, "Having turned on the light, we must now face the monster" (2022). Facing the monster means that the institution cannot continue to ignore its own Whiteness, and must understand how Whiteness suffuses place at Virginia Tech. The institution must not create White "origin stories," but must account honestly for not only the enslaved people who labored to build Preston-Olin, but also the indigenous people dispossessed to claim the land. To effect change, the institution must remain in coalition with its constituents. "If you are serious about giving us something we can use," Dr. Moseley-Hobbs said, "let's talk tomorrow" (2022). As Tuck and Yang (2012) argued, a coalition is conditional and must be renegotiated and renewed constantly. If the institution is truly interested in justice work, it must do that when the world is not watching, when the work is not an opportunity to gain a reputation.

*

Overall, the speakers at Contested Spaces emphasized the *ongoingness* of the complex conversations and institutional commitments required to initiate just, accountable relationships with marginalized populations. Unlike at other events, White speakers from Smithfield highlighted the role of White institutions in doing harm. Spencer and Lamb spoke painful truths, acknowledging the fault of ancestors who upheld slavery and critiquing and changing institutions that covered up White enthusiasm for slavery to construct a neutral, romanticized narrative of the antebellum South. Ragged edges were obvious. Ryan Spencer apologized for Smithfield's wrongs as an institution. On the other hand, Dr. Moseley-Hobbs and her sister noted their unresolved feelings and

emphasized they attended 1872 Forward to honor their ancestors, not to celebrate Virginia Tech. Given the willingness of both Fraction family descendants and representatives of the Monacan Nation to attend Contested Spaces and begin a conversation about how to heal rifts caused by racist, colonial practices, the university missed a powerful opportunity for accountability and frank conversation. Prepared statements by Smithfield docents and Preston descendants did not (and could not) go far enough to expose the university's complicity in the systems of White supremacy on which (and by which) it was built.

Making a Cogent Argument: Student Activism versus Institutional Resistance

Because Whiteness can hide in plain sight, it becomes normative, which is to say that a White institution like Virginia Tech can claim *not* to be White. However, even when Whiteness is not mentioned, as the previous section showed, it dictates norms and narratives. To return to Nakayama and Krizek (1994), VT, as a PWI, dictates that Whiteness and those who possess it are "in," and those who do not or cannot possess it start from a "relationship of exteriority" (p. 45). Initially, Virginia Tech was all White, male, and military, traits that created a very particular institutional history, which is to say that the institution constructed a "somatic norm" (Ore, 2017) for the protagonist of its stories. Setting, keeping, and altering that norm is necessarily fraught. At Virginia Tech, the struggle over White norms left traces in the archives, and I turn to those stories as I examine how and why Virginia Tech chose to rededicate dormitories Hoge and Whitehurst Halls at 1872 Forward. I juxtapose the story told by Virginia Tech

representatives at the rededication ceremony with stories of historical student activism against White norms at VT.

Renaming Lee and Barringer Halls

Dr. Peter Wallenstein presented on Black history at Virginia Tech at the dorm rededication on March 25, 2022. During this presentation, he claimed, “VT was never an all-White school” (2022). He supported this assertion by introducing the audience to Black community members like Felix Johnson (a mason who helped build Preston-Olin, the predecessor institution to VT); Andrew Oliver (a servant, then a janitor); Gordon Trigg Mills (barracks janitor); Alonzo Freeman (barracks barber); and Doc Tyler (athletics trainer) (Black History Timeline – Pre-1950s.). There is little doubt that the early university could not have existed without the labor of these Black men, but implying that working as a servant, janitor, or barber on campus is equivalent to being a student, professor, or administrator is rhetorical sleight-of-hand designed to conceal White norms. These men may have given their labor willingly, but they did not have power; despite their labor, the institution remained under White control during their tenure. Racial norms at the university dictated that Black bodies, until 1953, occupied roles supporting the White normative bodies in charge of the institution, its resources, and its favor.

Honorees at the rededication were Janie and William Hoge, and James Whitehurst. Though the university renamed the dorms in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented a public ceremony until 1872 Forward (Rededicating Hoge and Whitehurst Halls, 2022). The Hoges (Figure 4.3), a Black couple living on East Clay Street, housed the first Black students at Virginia Tech in the 1950s (Black History Timeline, 1950s).

Though the school accepted Black students, they were unwilling to house them; the Virginia Tech administration personally asked the Hoges to open their home. Black students paid the Hoges for room and board and, in return, had a safe place to sleep, eat, and clean their uniforms (Black History Timeline – 1950s). Evidence of their support appeared throughout the archives. In one photograph, the Hoges stand in the background as Essex Finney, an early Black cadet, prepares for his graduation in June 1959. The couple gave early Black students a safe place in what was otherwise a hostile world: Black students could not stop to eat or drink on campus, get their hair cut at White barbershops, or attend VT's traditional Ring Dance in their junior year. The Hoges did not only provide a residence but structure and safety for young Black men away from their families at an institution that did not welcome them. Where the institution was unwilling, the Hoges provided familial care and support.

Figure 4.3: Essex Finney, foreground. William and Janie Hoge, background.

The third honoree, James Whitehurst (Figure 4.4), was also an early Black cadet and one of the first Black students to graduate from VT. He was the first Black student to attend the Ring Dance in the early 1960s and later became the first Black Board of Visitors member, serving from 1970 to 1974 (Black History Timeline – 1960s).

Figure 4.4: James Whitehurst Attending a Board of Visitors Meeting.

THE BOARD OF VISITORS

Virginia Tech's official governing body, the Board of Visitors, is composed of fourteen members. These people are recommended by the Alumni Association and the Administration and formally appointed by the Governor of Virginia. Meeting four times a year, the Board does such things as approving capitol outlay, budgets, and establishes and reviews the controlling policies of the University.

Pictured; Captain James Whitehurst, Mr. Adger S. Johnson, Mrs. E. H. Lane, Mr. R. O. Goodykoontz, Mrs. M. M. Gibbs, Dr. Roy R. Smith and Mrs. Edeanor Prescott, Assistant Clerk.

Whitehurst confers weight to the institution's claims of inclusivity, particularly since he later returned to the institution as a successful adult to take a position on the BOV. Institution building is an oft-commemorated act at Virginia Tech, and it should be. Without such commitments, institutions stagnate. However, the institution honored Black institution builders without acknowledging the systemic racism they experienced because of their dealings with Virginia Tech. The institution renamed Barringer and Lee Halls, but the names of White institution builders remain on other campus buildings, even when those people are associated with White supremacist beliefs. Inclusion in the racial norm at Virginia Tech means standing alongside these people as an equal honoree, a case where inclusion asks the audience to relinquish critique (Ahmed, 2012).

Virginia Tech renamed Hoge and Whitehurst Halls in 2020, which Henri Gendreau, writing for the *Roanoke Times*, covered. Gendreau interviewed university president Tim Sands, several student activists responsible for the most recent name-change petition, and Professor Peter Wallenstein. During the rededication ceremony,

Wallenstein repeated about his beliefs about renaming the dormitory. In 2003, the university dedicated Peddrew-Yates Hall, named after Irving Peddrew (the first Black student to attend VT) and Charlie Yates (the first Black student to graduate from VT). Until 2020, Peddrew-Yates Hall sat directly across the lawn from Lee Hall, renamed Hoge Hall. Though he spoke at an event rededicating the dorms, Wallenstein expressed disappointment about the decision because he "liked the aspect of confrontation" (2020) between Lee and Peddrew-Yates Hall. Wallenstein spoke for the Black student community, claiming that Peddrew-Yates Hall said "Yo, Claudius [Lee]! We here!" (2022). Such a critique about name changes at a dormitory rededication, putting aside its accuracy or relevance, was inappropriate for a White professor to express.

Further, it seems inappropriate for a White speaker to use Black language to make such a critique at a ceremony honoring Black community members. Whether audience members like the "conflict" between dormitories is irrelevant and, more importantly, these comments ignore considerations of impact over intent. According to Gendreau's (2020) article, Black students felt uncomfortable living in Lee and Barringer Halls. The rededication centered Black honorees, but the university undermined its own intentions with these remarks. Not only did this call into question the seriousness of the institution's actions, but it also emptied them of context since the institution knew about Claudius Lee's racist past since 1997.

Forgetting about Student Activism

Decontextualizing the rededication of Lee and Barringer Halls disappeared 20 years of student activism leading up to 1872 Forward and concealed the story of students recognizing and rejecting White institutional norms. Gendreau's (2020) *Roanoke Times*

piece reported student activism on the subject occurring as early as 1997, and public opinion pieces about student activists petitioning for changes to Lee and Barringer Halls appeared in the *Roanoke Times* as early as 2004 (Miller). Though subsequent institutional representatives claimed that 2020 was "the first time students presented a cogent argument" (Wallenstein, 2022) about changing the dormitory names, close analysis shows that students expressed their discomfort with Lee and Barringer Halls from the moment they discovered archival materials linking the two men with racist ideologies. Dr. Wallenstein's 1997 archival history class first discovered this evidence. Students researching *The Bugle*, Virginia Tech's yearbook, found a page naming Claudius Lee the head of the institution's KKK chapter and calling him the "Father of Terror" (Gendreau, 2020). Dr. Wallenstein and his students brought their discoveries to President Torgerson, who charged a task force to investigate Claudius Lee (Gendreau, 2020). Once the task force reported their findings, President Torgerson concluded that "the reference [to the KKK] was seen… at the time [as] being a possible 19th century [sic] prank" (Gendreau, 2020). Virginia Tech declined to act further and closed its investigation into the dormitory's name. Students, however, were not satisfied with this response.

University archives do not record evidence of subsequent student activism, but the local press provides ample evidence that it continued. Seven years later, in 2004, an opinion piece by Kevin Miller ran in the *Roanoke Times*, indicating persistent student dissatisfaction with Lee Hall and continued requests for change. Miller made plain his disagreement with student activists, and the majority of his article defends Claudius Lee by linking him to institutional and local tradition. Lee, Miller wrote, was a "mechanical genius" who "made many notable contributions to Virginia Tech during his 60-plus years

on campus" (Miller, 2004). Lee was an institution builder: not only did he "[help] create the university's Department of Electrical Engineering while still a student in 1893," he "dubbed the Tech yearbook 'The Bugle'–the name it still carries more than a century later" (Miller, 2004). Lee, Miller argued, is an institutional father. Even as a student, he shaped the future of the engineering program for which the institution is known. Further, Lee "installed Blacksburg's first telephone switchboard and helped spread electric light throughout the campus and town" (Miller, 2004). Claudius Lee became part of the town of Blacksburg itself such that student actions represented a "serious attack" on Lee's "legacy" (Miller, 2004). This unwarranted "attack" came as students "resurrected" the KKK page from the yearbook as a way to "pressure" the VT administration "to strip Lee's name from a dormitory" (Miller, 2004). Through word choice, Miller indicated his scorn for student activists while taking on the task of defending the institution against their attacks. Students should drop the matter, Miller wrote, because the KKK page was "merely an extremely distasteful joke by a bunch of young white men raised in the post-Civil War, segregated South" (Miller, 2004). This reasoning was familiar to me; as a Southern child, I was often told I shouldn't judge the racial attitudes of my elders because *that's just how they were raised*. This statement ended all discussion because, according to this teaching, it is impolite and unfair to hold older generations to standards other than their own. Miller's article seemed to concur, arguing that it would be unfair to ruin Claudius Lee's "legacy" over a "distasteful" joke (which is a mild word to describe KKK affiliation, imagined or otherwise).

Prior to 2020, the Virginia Tech administration supported their decision not to change Lee Hall with arguments about historical context. Typically, administrators relied

upon arguments made by local historians that "the Klan was not active in Virginia at the time of the photograph and would not be for several more decades" (Jones, 2018). In doing so, the university prioritized proving Claudius Lee's innocence over the impact his actions had on marginalized students attending VT. In fact, when the Claudius Lee "Father of Terror" page appeared in *The Bugle*, the institution was all White and male. Whether it was a joke or not, the students who created the KKK page did not envision alternatives to a White future at Virginia Tech. Including this page in the yearbook shows the type of White strategic rhetoric that threatens to defend White norms violently (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994, p. 298). However, considering the KKK page a "distasteful joke" and refusing to change the name of a dormitory because there was no *real* KKK chapter is also institutional White memory at work. Through this reasoning, institutionalized racism (to the extent that it was published without comment in the student yearbook) is excused; as Miller (2004) argued in the *Roanoke Times*, such behavior should be seen as typical for White men growing up in the post-Civil War South. Students argued (Jones, 2018; Gendreau, 2020) that it did not matter whether Claudius Lee belonged to the KKK or not. Black students, in particular, indicated discomfort about having to live in Lee Hall, but the university ignored these arguments until 2020. VT's prior arguments about how Lee Hall connects to institutional legacy (to the extent that requests for change are "attacks") beg the question: *whose institution is it?*

George Floyd, Cogent Arguments, and Institutional Storytelling

During the summer of 2020, racial discussions in the country shifted for a moment after widespread protests following George Floyd's murder. This context foregrounds Virginia Tech's decision to change the names of Lee and Barringer Halls

prior to the start of the Fall 2020 semester. For the institution, the matter was urgent. As President Sands said, “We needed to make these changes before students arrived in the fall” (2022). Sands attributed this quick movement to “changes in the national conversation about race” (2022), indicating VT’s desire to take action at a time when the national conversation about race lent institutional credibility to its actions. President Sands explained the change as a matter of “institutional storytelling” (2022), indicating that the university paid careful attention to shifts in public opinion and decided to act on that basis. In this case, the institution decided to change its story of White normativity. Ahmed suggested (2012) that such acts of memory relate to institutional discomfort about not acting (and *not being seen to act*). In this case, the institution’s *need to be seen to act* outweighed the stasis surrounding “calcified” (Ore, 2016) matters of tradition. Student activists pointed out problems with the White racial norm on campus since the 1950s, when early Black students and their allies formed the Human Rights Committee. The HRC continued to sponsor campus activism through the early 1970s when Black students and their accomplices fought the Highty Tighties Regimental Band over using “Dixie” as a spirit song at athletic events. The 23 years of student activism surrounding dormitory names is another chapter in this lineage of protest. Focusing on this legacy reveals institutional complicity with White norms; in particular, Virginia Tech participated in strategic rhetorics that refused to name Whiteness while continuing to center it (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994). This is particularly evident in arguments about the “cogency” of student arguments about Lee and Barringer Halls.

During the 1872 Forward, institutional representatives (particularly Dr. Peter Wallenstein) claimed that 2020 was “the first time students had clearly articulated a

cogent argument" about renaming the dorms (Wallenstein). However, Dr. Wallenstein served on the task force convened by President Torgerson to investigate Claudius Lee, and he was well aware of the results of this research. According to Wallenstein, subsequent VT President Charles Steger was "not interested" in pursuing the issue of renaming Lee and Barringer Halls during his tenure at the institution (2022). In this case, it was not the "cogency" of student arguments that prevented change but institutional disinterest. President Sands, in turn, said that renaming the dorms was "more than about honoring the past – it's about the future and what kind of community *we* want to be" (Rededication of Hoge and Whitehurst Halls, 2022, emphasis mine). Again, the question is not the "cogency" of student arguments. Rather, this is a question of "institutional storytelling" (Sands, 2022) and redefining the *we* that comprise the Virginia Tech community. President Sands' statement admits without admitting that the prior *we* centered at VT is White—that is to say, the statement does not mention or own the institution's Whiteness, but the idea of considering "what kind of community we want to become" implies a centered community that must reconsider its stance towards prior "outsiders." Rededicating the dormitories, then, was an opportunity to offer inclusion to a broader spectrum of racial identities than those usually at home in a PWI.

Although inclusion is an admirable goal, the manner in which Virginia Tech approached inclusion closed space for institutional reflection. Claudius Lee and Paul Barringer were the focal points of dormitory changes, and the university was eager to disavow connections with these two men. Prior to 2020, arguments against renaming Lee Hall centered on whether the university could prove a "real" connection to the KKK. In the summer of 2020, Virginia Tech representatives dropped this line of argument and

“quickly” (Sands, 2020) renamed the building Hoge Hall. Paul Barringer warranted more institutional commentary since he often adopted what Nakayama and Krizek (1994) called “crude” (p. 298) rhetorics of White supremacy. Paul Barringer is a “founding father” of the U.S. eugenics movement, and his publication history included a book arguing that Black people were “improved by slavery” (Gendreau, 2020). Dr. Wallenstein called Barringer “a very keen White supremacist” (Gendreau, 2020). At the dormitory rededication, President Sands called Barringer a “key proponent” of early eugenics theory with “a repugnant, racist ideology” (2022). Repudiating Barringer’s ideology and renaming the dormitory is critical work because, by doing so, the university acknowledged its wrongdoing and made a meaningful change by honoring Janie and William Hoge, and James Whitehurst for their contributions to the Virginia Tech community. Renaming dormitories is an institutional act that shows Virginia Tech was listening to students. However, they only *chose* to listen in 2020, when the “national conversation about race” changed (Gendreau, 2020). Excluding Claudius Lee and Paul Barringer is a meaningful act, but when their exclusion overwrites the story of student activism on campus, the university creates a community in which hospitality is predicated on polite acceptance of the status quo.

Further, although it is meaningful to rename dormitories, Virginia Tech is still reluctant to consider other changes. Henri Gendreau’s (2020) article in the *Roanoke Times* listed “at least seven” buildings on campus named for White supremacists, slave owners, and ex-Confederates. As it did with Claudius Lee, the university slows institutional change when they must account for a White individual’s contributions to VT. McBryde Hall, for example, is named for John McLaren McBryde, who served in a

Confederate volunteer company from 1861. Dr. Wallenstein argued, “Without McBryde, there is no Virginia Tech… it is a more complicated question of how to square an understanding of him as an enthusiastic Confederate as a 20-something, and as an extraordinary institution builder a generation later… both statements are true” (Gendreau, 2020). McBryde is an institutional father figure who can be absolved of his past since his actions were not *too* egregious, as judged by the institution and its (in this case) White representatives. How an institution chooses which changes to implement is a matter of institutional values. Further, an institution must enact change carefully to ensure it is meaningful. As Ahmed (2012) warns, acts like creating diversity statements (or renaming dorms) can come to stand in for actions that effectively address and redress institutional injustice without truly considering the legacy of Whiteness that necessitated renaming Lee and Barringer Halls. The university risks enacting equity in name only.

*

Ultimately, White institutional acts like renaming Lee and Barringer Halls are careful, considered responses. As Ahmed suggested, “Acts of naming, of giving buildings names, can keep a certain history alive” (p. 38). The institution (as seen above) often dragged its feet on making changes; Ahmed (2012) suggested this is a common institutional response to diversity work. She cautioned that “Institutions can ‘keep their racism’ by eliminating those whom they identify as racists” (p. 44). When the university made changes in 2020, it used the story of those changes at 1872 Forward to support the argument that Virginia Tech is a responsive, progressive campus that has outgrown its “bad habits.” However, as Ahmed (2006) argued, narratives do not change habits: only actions do. Progress narratives, on the other hand, allow an institution to move “around

and through" (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994) challenges to its space. These justice issues were never about how students argued their case or whether they made "cogent" points; rather, the university carefully considered whether it was prudent to acknowledge issues and announce changes. To say students had never argued rationally about White supremacist ideologies at Virginia Tech is untrue. This rhetorical move allowed the institution to claim it was unaware of racial injustice on campus until students spoke about it clearly. The evidence, however, shows that racial justice was not and is not a progress narrative at Virginia Tech but a protracted struggle.

Mixed Memorial Messages: Reshaping Space and Time on Campus

As I explored in Chapter 2, White memory expands itself forward and backward in space and time. This means that one key action against institutionalized White memory is a thoughtful reallocation of space, extending all the way to land rematriation. Although Virginia Tech did not go so far as to return university lands to their rightful occupants (in this case, the Monacan Nation), some of the work done at 1872 Forward made good use of campus space with the dedication of a historic markers trail. The trail was designed and conceived by the Council on Virginia Tech History, convened by President Tim Sands in 2017 to "[explore] how Virginia Tech might recognize and acknowledge its history in the context of today" (p. 1). Within the Council, the Historic Markers Committee did research and wrote recommendations about how to story "our shared past" on campus (Historic Markers Project). Their use of "our" and "shared" to describe the past indicates the Committee's interest in a multiplicity of perspectives. From their research came seven historical markers "examining the various histories of the university and the surrounding lands and people" (Historic Markers Project). The seven markers are

linked together in a trail; users may encounter the markers as they travel across campus, and each marker has a QR code which links to a website describing the project and giving the location of the other markers. Linking these markers together as a campus historical trail creates what Ahmed (2019) would call a "new use" for the space. Repeated use of the trail inscribes new narratives on the Blacksburg campus, as trail users learn institutional stories that were not visible prior to the placement of the markers. Yet, at the same time, White memory intruded on the institution's promises to share space. In this section, I examine the dedication and design of historical markers dedicated to institutional diversity stories to uncover how White institutions may share space without giving ground.

Honoring the Native American Lands

Two of the seven historical markers were unveiled and dedicated at an 1872 Forward event, "Honoring the Native American Lands," held on March 24, 2022. According to Dr. Emily Satterwhite, the markers explored VT's relationships with Native stewardship and the Monacan Nation by "[sharing] the history of the founding of the university" and "[honoring] the contested land, the peoples who lived there, and the peoples who live here now" (2022). There are unstated implications at work here. First, although the university is opening its space to explore relationships with the Monacan Nation, since "*the* history" (emphasis mine) on the marker pertains to "the founding of the university." This way of sharing space recenters Whiteness, since it explores history only in relationship to Virginia Tech's foundation; here, we can see an "origin myth" at work. Further, the phrase "contested lands" elides questions regarding which parties are responsible for the conflict. The statement also raises questions about *how* placing a

historical marker honors contested lands, particularly since the markers, placed on the Blacksburg campus, are more than an hour from the Monacan Nation's current home at Bear Mountain in Amherst County. The statement is not specific about who "the peoples who lived there" are, nor how (or if) they are different from "the peoples who live here now." However, if the markers explore Virginia Tech's relationship with Monacan sovereignty, as Dr. Satterwhite stated, one interpretation is to see the Monacan Nation as "the peoples who lived there." This interpretation frames the Monacan Nation as past peoples, and the resulting lack of clarity about "the peoples who live here now" hearkens back to Tuck and Yang's (2012) settler myths of innocence. In particular, this phrasing taps into settler nativism, which allows settlers to "deflect a settler identity while continuing to enjoy settler privilege and occupying stolen land" (Tuck and Yang, p. 11). Using this strategy, Virginia Tech casts itself as an "innocent non-oppressor" (Tuck and Yang, p. 15) rather than acknowledging institutional responsibility for taking (and keeping) Monacan lands. That is to say, even when an institution has good intentions, it must act with careful consideration and utilize coalitional relationships to ensure that public histories do something more than reinscribe colonial spaces and times.

Memorial Markers and Design

Liza Morris, Assistant Vice President for Planning and University Architect, served on the Historic Markers Committee; at "Honoring the Native Lands," Morris presented on marker design and landscaping plans. She walked the audience through the committee's process to decide which events should be memorialized and where and how they chose a design for the markers. According to Morris, the Historic Markers Committee considered four criteria: 1) markers should take campus construction into

consideration; 2) markers should be placed in high visibility areas; 3) markers should be ADA accessible, universally available, and open; and 4) marker placement should leverage existing infrastructure (2022). These criteria are a good example of inclusive design considerations for commemorative public history media, particularly when those media tell stories about institutionally marginalized peoples. This is how the committee decided, for example, to create an additional marker to complement the current Land Grand marker on Main Street as a way to "provide additional context about indigenous displacement" (Morris, 2022). The first land grant marker sits on a sidewalk facing Main Street, and the new marker sits roughly twenty to thirty feet away. Placing these markers in close proximity highlights the tension and indicates that the story of a land grant institution is both complex and uncomfortable. However, only the newer of the two markers is part of the historic markers trail, making it less obvious to an audience that the two markers create a linked narrative. Without explicit reference to one another, audiences must make their own inferences about the relationship of the markers—*if* they see both markers.

Morris closed the presentation by discussing designs for the new markers, which the Historic Markers Committee envisioned as "interpretive panels" (2022). The committee considered historical markers already placed in the Upper Quad for reference, although these markers are *not* ADA accessible, universally available, or open. Designs on one such panel resemble an infographic: visual aids pair with stylized text to emphasize particular public history narratives about the marker's subject. However, there is no built-in audio for the markers, so a visually impaired person cannot experience the markers at all. Since the Upper Quad markers were built before the new markers, they are

not connected by QR code to the website and are not considered part of the new trail. Further, the Upper Quad markers exist in an area of campus that is notoriously inaccessible. One elevator bridges the Upper Quad with the rest of campus, so if it is out of service, the only option to access the area is long flights of concrete stairs. The new markers are more accessible because of their carefully chosen locations. However, because the new markers "complement markers that were installed in 2021 on the Upper Quad to showcase the Corps of Cadets and the institution's earliest days" (Historic Markers Committee), they rely on the same visual design. Unspoken Whiteness lurked within these design considerations. Shanks Hall, the location of the Rhetoric and Writing Program, is in the Upper Quad area, and I walked past the interpretive panel for nearby Lane Hall regularly as I traversed VT's large campus to teach and attend classes. James Lane, the building's namesake, has a deeply troubling history, and I question the message of honoring campus diversity with markers identical to his.

James Lane, the Man Who Fought the President

Down a lane of wide sidewalks from Shanks Hall is Lane Hall, a brick-and-mortar building more than a century old. Henri Gendreau (2020) described Lane Hall as one of "at least seven campus facilities" that "honor men who at one time or another owned slaves, served in the Confederate military, or espoused virulent white supremacist views." According to Gendreau's article, James Lane was a Confederate Brigadier General, but the interpretive signage does not acknowledge this connection. Lane's connection to the Confederacy disappears from the marker; instead, the two-sided panel features black and white photos of Corps of Cadets members throughout VT's history. This design links Lane seamlessly to a long military tradition at Virginia Tech and, so tied to tradition,

Figure 4.5: Lane Hall marker, side 1.

Lane Hall becomes more difficult to critique. I begin this story by analyzing both sides of the marker, which ultimately served as the model for the Historic Markers Committee's design work. Then, I dig deeper into James Lane's history to ask difficult questions about what it means to consider such markers the model for a trail centering marginalized histories.

One side of the sign (Figure 4.5) introduced Lane Hall as a National Register of Historic Places site. According to the U.S. National Park Service, which maintains the list, such locations are "historic places considered to be worthy of preservation" as "America's historic and archeological resources" (pg. 1). The top right corner of the sign features a large portrait of James Lane. Other photographs include a full-color aerial view of the large brick VT logo set into the path outside Lane Hall and a 19th-century

photograph of the barracks accommodations. That most of the visuals are black and white emphasizes the age of the photographs and Lane Hall's lineage as a locus of Virginia Tech history. The text on the sign claims that Lane Hall "anchors the Upper Quad, which is the traditional center of Virginia Tech" (Figure 4.5). The sign links past, present, and future through tradition, and it helps today's students (and presumably tomorrow's) "continue the longstanding tradition of assembling for morning formation to raise the flag each day" (Figure 4.5). The building links to institutional history in a direct, material way; as the sign explained, "its bricks and mortar still bear hundreds of scratched signatures, some dating back more than 100 years" (Figure 4.5). Word choice is important: the building is an "anchor" for the campus and it (and the Corps of Cadets, by implication) is part of the "traditional center" of campus. Lane Hall is a site where "longstanding tradition" continues unbroken. The sign rhetorically constructs Lane Hall as an integral location in university history while making an argument about who owns space and time at the institution. Until 1953, the Corps was an all-White organization, and when Lane Hall was the "center" of campus tradition, Black students could not attend Virginia Tech.

The other side of the sign (Figure 4.6) features a cadet standing at attention outside Lane Hall along with stylized text reading "Lane Hall – 1888." This side of the sign also underscored the building's history: large orange text emphasized the year 1888, and the sign named Lane, "the oldest educational structure on campus," named after the "first commandant of cadets" (Figure 4.6). The images selected for this side of the panel conjure patriotic pride: a WWII-era cadet stands at attention in front of an American flag flying in the breeze. This side of the sign honored "Commandant James H. Lane,"

Figure 4.6: Lane Hall Marker, side 2.

although it gave no further information about him, who he was, or what he did besides command the Corps. Virginia Tech's Campus Buildings website included more information about James Lane. According to the page for Lane Hall, James Lane was "a Civil War veteran" and "professor of military tactics" (Virginia Tech). The institution characterized him as "a stern disciplinarian who expected students to toe the mark, both in the classroom and in the ranks" (Virginia Tech). Abusive behavior is implied through the phrase "stern disciplinarian," but VT excuses the effects of Lane's behavior by presenting him as a man who expected a great deal of rigor from his students (they must "toe the mark"). However, students were not the only people to conflict with James Lane. The remainder of the page told a story about Lane's

"fistfight with the college president," which subsequently "led to an erosion of public confidence in the school and one of the blackest periods in the life of the college" (Virginia Tech). There, the story ended, and I started asking questions: Why did Lane fight the president? Why did this affect public opinion so deeply? How did this affect the college? What was the significance of terming it "one of the *blackest* periods" (emphasis mine)?

I needed a clearer understanding of James Lane than the institutional histories at Virginia Tech provided, but I encountered additional complications when I started my search. In fact, there were *two* James Henry Lanes who fought in the Civil War, one for the Union and one for the Confederacy. Since VT only described Lane as a "Civil War veteran," I didn't immediately know which James Lane was the right one. After spotting the word "professor" on the Confederate Lane's Wikipedia page,[8] I found the right man. Prior to the Civil War, Lane taught at both VMI and North Carolina Military Institute. He served as a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army from May 1861 to April 1865 and was wounded in the Battle of Cold Harbor. At the war's end, he returned to Virginia Tech (then VAMC) as a professor of civil engineering and commerce. Lane fought the university president because he disagreed with loosening military restrictions at the college. According to Lane, operating VAMC as a civilian institution would have drastically changed its character to the extent that he was no longer willing to teach there. He left VAMC in 1881 and moved south to teach civil engineering at Alabama Polytechnic Institute, the predecessor institution to Auburn University.

[8] I use Wikipedia purposefully as a source to emphasize how simple it was for me to find the information, along with citations, about James Lane's identity, what he did, and what he valued.

James Lane and I had something in common. We both spent a number of years in Auburn, Alabama, due to our affiliations with Auburn University: Lane as a professor and myself as a graduate student. Lane died there in 1907 and he is interred at Pine Hill Cemetery, which I visited on a Halloween tour in 2007, having no idea that I walked past the resting place of a future research subject. A 2018 article in Virginia Tech's *Collegiate Times* called James Lane a "popular" professor and commandant (Jones). He was so popular, in fact, that by 1923, there was a KKK klavern in Auburn named after him (Jones, 2018). At Virginia Tech, Barracks #1 was christened Lane Hall in the 1950s, nearly half a century after Lane's death. It is impossible to know whether VT knew of the KKK klavern when the building was renamed, but the school was certainly aware of this history by 2018, when it chose to honor Lane with an interpretive panel on the Upper Quad. That James Lane is a key player in early university history is undeniable. However, I question the university's decision to match, even if only in visual design, a marker that honors a Confederate veteran known to be violent against those with whom he disagreed. The association is not only uncomfortable but also unremarked upon. That is to say, the marker dedicated to James Lane exists devoid of important context. Without context, I question whether the new markers adequately provide space for marginalized narratives. The James Lane marker eschews telling uncomfortable truths that might complicate its relationship with the seven markers created by the committee.

Seeking Comfort through Institutional Narratives

Representatives of White institutions (Virginia Tech and the town of Blacksburg) spoke at the marker dedication. Their words are key to understanding how Whiteness centers itself even when it is attempting to give space to marginalized communities and

narratives. First to speak was President Tim Sands, who presented two replica markers for placement on the Monacan lands at Bear Mountain as well as a pair of Eastern woodland rattles. Sands emphasized Virginia Tech's role in preserving Monacan stories, arguing that any history of VT must include how Blacksburg and Virginia Tech's expansion took life, land, and opportunity from the Monacan Nation. He described the historical markers as a gesture towards making sure Monacan peoples were no longer "underserved and overlooked" (2022) at Virginia Tech. It was not immediately obvious *how* placing markers enables the institution to make this guarantee. According to President Sands, continued historical work should center on "how stories overlap" and he encouraged constituents to "keep telling stories" (Sands, 2022). Sands signaled institutional openness to new and continuing stories, which is a prerequisite for the rhetorical attendance required to do honest institutional histories. However, enacting this openness at the institutional level is a fraught process, and telling stories does not enact justice.

Though President Sands did not deny the appropriative history of land-grant institutions in general and Virginia Tech in particular, his speech used strategic rhetorics of White memory to soften the impact of bad feelings that might result from shining a spotlight on White colonial guilt. For example, Sands told Monacan guests that it was good to see them "back on this land" and thanked them for "welcoming everyone present as guests" (Sands, 2022). Monacan people attended 1872 Forward, but to say they were "back" on VT land was untrue; they visited because the university asked them to attend the historical marker unveiling. Though such "decolonization of the mind" is "settler harm reduction" (Tuck and Yang, p. 38), such gestures are meaningless without land

rematriation. Further, it is presumptuous (at best) to anticipate that the Monacan would welcome settlers to their space. At worst, this statement elides the "contested history" of the land that was the central framing for 1872 Forward. The Monacan cannot extend a meaningful welcome to guests on university land, particularly when the university does not intend to return it. President Sands later presented Eastern woodland rattles to the Monacan Nation representatives, but this gesture raised ethical questions for me. Why should representatives of Virginia Tech be presenting sacred indigenous items to the Monacan? Where did these items come from? What did they signify? These questions went unanswered in a narrative that foregrounded institutional good feelings (Ahmed, 2012) about putting up historical markers.

Blacksburg Mayor Leslie Hager-Smith focused on acknowledging the collective histories converging in the town and institution. As she phrased it, "We drink from wells we did not dig and we warm ourselves with fires we did not kindle" (Hager-Smith, 2022). From her perspective, this means acknowledging that Virginia Tech and the town of Blacksburg are "inextricably entwined" and that "*we* were not the first at Virginia Tech" (2022, emphasis mine). That is, Hager-Smith did not claim a White origin story for the lands that became Blacksburg. Rather, Mayor Hager-Smith framed public history as a matter of telling "as full a story as possible" about the town, the university, and their shared history (2022). She envisioned a clear, responsible story that carefully considers which stories to tell, how to tell them, and whose voices to amplify. This work is part of the community's responsibility to "create a future" in which children experience life as part of a "wider community" (Hager-Smith, 2022). When we hear new stories, Hager-

Smith said, “Our world expands” (2022). “Whose world?” I scribbled in my notes. The unspoken meaning of “our” haunted me as I listened.

A wider concept of community with a greater assortment of storytellers is a step forward in terms of telling better and more complex institutional histories. Mayor Hager-Smith’s statement, however, conceives of an undefined “we” that still sees White settlers and their institutions as the protagonists. Mayor Hager-Smith argued that “we” must change “our” history, yet she did not specify the community to whom she referred. Eliding the Whiteness of both the town and Virginia Tech allowed Whiteness to continue taking up space. Who did “Honoring the Native Lands and Peoples” center: the Monacan Nation or the White institution seeking absolution from its painful past? Institutional representatives did not lie about the past. However, placing a series of historical markers is not a material commitment to changing the conditions of marginalization inflicted by White colonial heteropatriarchy. Placing markers and framing the event as a matter of expanding “our” stories seeks the comfort of a White audience without meaningfully returning space (or other resources) to the Monacan Nation. But the painful past was a reality, not simply a story. White settler colonialism still marks the land on which we live, work, and learn at Virginia Tech, and “settler harm reduction” (Tuck and Yang, 2012) is not enough.

Chief Branham: Calling the Institution into Coalition

Chief Kenneth Branham of the Monacan Nation focused on Monacan sovereignty and the responsibilities of settler-colonials and their institutions. He used the event as an opportunity to foreground the tenuous nature of coalition (Tuck and Yang, 2012; Rowe and Tuck, 2014) and the ongoingness of justice work (Walton, Moore, and Jones, 2019).

Branham created a sense of the Monacan past, present, and future by memorializing his grandmother, who refused to leave Virginia "for the love of the land" and reminding listeners that "we [the Monacan] will always be here" (Branham, 2022). This last point is particularly important since the Monacan Nation never ceded tribal territories at Bear Mountain in what later became Amherst County (Monacan Nation). Chief Branham thanked Virginia Tech for designing the markers but argued it was the institution's "responsibility" (2022) to educate the public about Virginia Tech's appropriative history. Further, if the institution wanted to connect meaningfully to indigenous people in the present and future, Chief Branham charged that Virginia Tech must make education affordable and accessible to the Monacan.

Chief Branham used narratives as a call for reparative, coalitional justice work. When he received the Eastern woodland rattle from President Sands, he told a story about the Monacan present. One week prior to the 1872 Forward event, the Monacan saved the land at Rassawek, "home to Monacan people through 200 generations" (Branham). The James River Water Authority intended to build a "water withdrawal and pipeline" at the Fluvanna County site, but the Monacan partnered with independent archeologists to prove there were tribal burials on the land (Branham). Having won, Branham said, "Our ancestors may now rest in peace, and the Nation will carefully consider a respectful future for the site together with neighboring landowners" (2022). In celebrating this victory, Chief Branham reminded the audience that we are obligated to return to the past and "add layers to history" just as we are responsible for "[working] together to create a sustainable future" (2022). Using these powerful narratives, Chief Branham charged the White listener to do much more than listen. This call to action centered on the need for

just codesign strategies that allow reparative work to be both intersectional and effective. Most important, reparative work must be *material*: the institution must relinquish space and resources to create opportunities for the people harmed by its White heteropatriarchal colonialist past (and present). Placing markers, educational though they might be, relinquishes neither space nor resources in a meaningful way.

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The new markers left me with questions. Why did markers memorializing James H. Lane go up in 2018, *years* before markers explaining Monacan history or Black history? Why should new campus markers, which ostensibly center a concern for "shared stories" (Morris, 2022), be designed to match a marker that eschews telling the truth about the painful past to save face for its subject? How do design and placement choices legitimize the markers that already exist? The interpretive panel for Lane Hall, for example, matches all the markers erected to honor and memorialize diverse perspectives and marginalized histories at Virginia Tech, although the story of James Lane does nothing of the sort. The history of James Lane and Lane Hall continues to emphasize White space and time at the university, framing White (often White supremacist) male cadets and their teachers as the "traditional" community of Virginia Tech. The new land grant marker, likewise, may or may not be obvious to campus visitors; should visitors see the old land grant marker first, there is no direction to the new marker for further context on land grant institutions. The new markers, in other words, may take up space on campus, and they may even wear new grooves of habit, but as long as the markers share space, unremarked, with the White history of the university, the invitation to be a part of campus space and history rings hollow.

Conclusions

By attending to the stories at 1872 Forward and in the Virginia Tech Digital Special Collections archives, I heard strategic rhetorics of White memory in conversation with the tactical rhetorics used by marginalized populations. The university used strategic rhetorics, acting from the place of power that is the Blacksburg campus. As "a subject with will and power," Virginia Tech can use "the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships" to its advantage (de Certeau, 35-6). Because the university has a space "delimited as [its] *own*," it has the ability to use events like 1872 Forward as a way to manage "relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.)" (p. 36). In this case, Virginia Tech managed the *changing* relationships with populations previously seen as outsiders; the university aimed to bring these populations (particularly Black and Monacan people) into the constituency of the university. Black and Monacan people must use tactical rhetorics to speak in these situations; that is to say, as many non-White speakers at 1872 Forward events acknowledged, Virginia Tech *was not and is not their space*. Tactical rhetorics work "on and within a terrain imposed on [them] and organized by the law of a foreign power" (de Certeau, p. 37). Monacan and Black people attended 1872 Forward as guests of the university, but hospitality alone does not create space for equitable, accountable conversations. The Blacksburg campus has embedded power relations. From such a place, power extends its reach, and without careful management, power replicates itself, regardless of intention.

1872 Forward was, indeed, a powerful step forward in which a large land grant PWI opened up space and time for marginalized narratives previously hidden by the institution. Examining and analyzing the events of 1872 Forward provides materials to reconsider how public history events may reinscribe marginalization even when those events are planned to do otherwise. The ceremony to dedicate Hoge and Whitehurst Halls is an example of an event that, while an institutionally necessary act, also concealed a long-term conversation about the discomfort of non-White students at Virginia Tech and the university's disinterested responses prior to 2020. Contested Spaces, on the other hand, offered an opportunity for descendants of settlers, enslaved peoples, and the Monacan Nation to come together and discuss thorny issues of colonization, marginalization, and the institution's responsibilities. Participants frankly discussed the painful past, but as the Fraction family, Monacan Nation, and Wake Forest community members repeatedly emphasized, a difficult, frank conversation is only the beginning of an accountable relationship. The new historical markers also recreate time and space on campus and, critically, may produce new institutional habits since the Historic Markers Committee also chose to link them together in a walking trail. However, as my counterstories indicate, Virginia Tech missed critical opportunities to participate in the conversations that set the stage for improved relationships with marginalized communities. Relationships between institutions and communities they have marginalized are painful and fraught. Concealing those difficulties smooths over uncomfortable stories for the benefit of White feelings and the reputation of White institutions. Contextualizing diversity stories on campus should take priority, which is to say that, as Vicki Ferguson did at Contested Spaces, marginalized communities must be

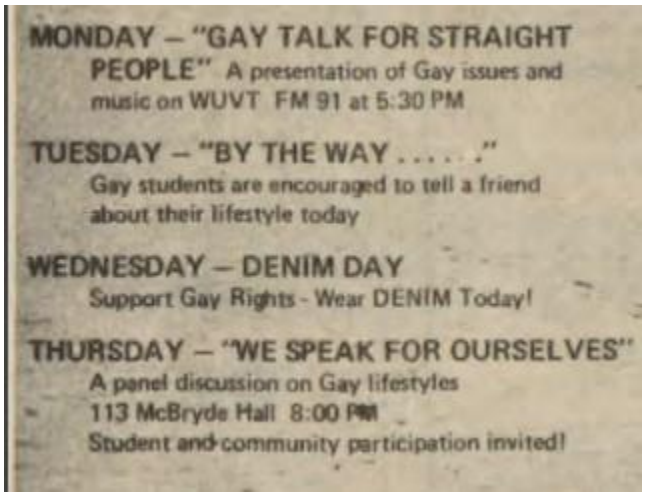
given the means to tell their own stories without regard to how that story may make the institution appear. To do otherwise is to recenter Whiteness and the feelings of White audiences at the expense of truly hearing and attending to marginalized narratives.

Further, the narratives of 1872 Forward ask us to consider whether and when a PWI has done *enough*. Disability studies scholar Jay Dolmage (2017) wrote, "Institutions (and their geographies) are powerfully rhetorical" (p. 8) so we must be aware that "spaces already convey information, and reconstructing or reimagining these spaces is an act of persuasion" (p. 42). Change, or institutional redesign, must entail careful action, lest it be what Dolmage called a retrofit. Retrofit solutions "can be used to subsume and overwrite movements towards diversity and inclusion" (p. 70) by making small movements towards change that actually stall larger, more effective changes. According to Dolmage, retrofits have "a timing and a time logic that renders them highly temporary yet also relatively unimportant," and are often "slow to come and fast to expire" (p. 70). Treating institutional counterstories as retrofits creates a situation in which "when [inequity] pops up, we slap it with a quick accommodation, and we just hope it doesn't pop up again" (Dolmage, p. 92). Dolmage wrote that while "retrofitting is limited, bordered, constrained, top-down, and rubberstamped," dealing with academic inaccessibility "will be difficult, messy, ongoing, bottom-up, and unpredictable" (p. 94). That is why Black and Monacan speakers emphasized *ongoingness*; progress is never simple or straightforward. Institutional commitments to this work must be meaningful, and meaningful actions occur repeatedly over time. As such, it remains to be seen how and whether Virginia Tech continues to make space for the long-term relationships needed to heal the painful past.

Denim Days, 1979 and 2019

Denim Day Do-Over differs from 1872 Forward due to its intense focus on one particular commemorative event. More to the point, the nature and purpose of these commemorative events are quite different. While 1872 Forward attempted to cover the "triracial history" of the university over four days, Denim Day events commemorated one particular protest event throughout Pride Week celebrations in 2019. In January 1979 (Timeline of LGBTQ+ History at Virginia Tech), a student organization at Virginia Tech hosted the first-ever Gay Awareness Week. While the Gay Student Alliance planned and hosted events over five days (Figure 5.1), the center of the controversy was Wednesday's Denim Day, an event that simply asked VT students to "Support Gay Rights – Wear denim today!" (Gay Student Alliance, 1979). The response, which Virginia Tech would later characterize as "ridicule and abuse" (VT Twitter, 2019), was far more complex than I anticipated. This case study analyzes Denim Day 1979 and Denim Day Do-Over, in 2019. Yet as Ahmed (2019) wrote, reenactment and reuse are meaningful, and after the gathering restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, Virginia Tech has continued celebrating Denim Day. At the end of the chapter, I return to this repetition to consider speaking back to White memory.

Figure 5.1: 1979 Gay Awareness Week Schedule.



It may not immediately be clear what White memory has to do with overwriting stories of queerness, but as I explored in Chapter 2, Whiteness is intersectional. To be clear, although the term White indicates race, I use it to encompass the "normative body" as a structure; this includes not only race but also secondary sex characteristics, heterosexuality, cisgender identity, belonging to the middle-class or higher, able-bodiedness, and more besides. Many scholars (Ahmed 2006, 2007, 2012; Ore, 2017; Sanchez, 2021; Nakayama and Krizek, 1994; Villanueva, 1999) have suggested that Whiteness is intersectional. The normative White body is "centered" (Ahmed, 2007) in a way that allows it to disappear: the farther one is from the center, the more noticeable one's body becomes. If you don't fit in, you stick out because Whiteness sets "somatic norms" (Ore, 2017) that go beyond apparent ethnicity or skin color. Driskill (2016) termed these norms the "colonial heteropatriarchy" (p. 15). As V. T. Watson (2014) wrote, "Whiteness emerges as a way of seeing and knowing the world that masquerades as universality" (p. 5). On the surface, Whiteness "is shaped by skin-color privilege" (p. 5). Still, it is also "inextricably enmeshed with other vectors of identity such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and the organization of space" (Watson, p. 5). To "inhabit Whiteness" and be a "body-at-home" (Ahmed, 2007) in a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), a body must be able to perform Whiteness properly. Denim Day 1979 reminded queer students of the proper (and improper) ways to perform Whiteness, and the "ridicule and abuse" (Virginia Tech, 2019) they experienced as a result of holding Denim Day attests to the prompt lessons given by predominantly White, heteronormative students and administration.

As Mignolo (2011), Tuck and Yang (2012), Walton, Jones, and Moore (2019), and Dougherty (2016) suggested, one responsibility of scholars engaged in examining rhetorics of Whiteness and colonialism is to reveal the workings of "hegemonic storytelling" (Sanchez, 2021). I consider this a core motivation for examining Denim Day and Denim Day Do-Over; as Dougherty (2016) said, we can only do justice work by "knowing [our] people's story." I am a queer, White, Millennial, exvangelical nonbinary person whose family was deeply conflicted about its working-class roots and taught me to see education as a path toward material success and fulfillment. In many ways, I am the descendant of the queer people in this story; though none of us are related by blood, we are related through queerness and often (White) race, class, and cultural background. Although we grew up queer in different times, I often felt a twinge in my stomach reading about Nancy Kelly, the "instigator" (Noll, 2019) of Denim Day. I wish I'd been brave enough to come out at 20, much less plan a university-wide protest. The story of Denim Day 1979 resonated within my body, the same body I brought to the Denim Day Do-Over; as I participated in photo ops and attended performances, I *felt* the institutional flattening of narratives to make them less threatening. This was particularly evident in the lost protest narrative of Denim Day. I felt a sense of loss that made me ask questions about the story Virginia Tech was telling about queerness. What about the courage of Gay Student Alliance members who risked their physical safety for a moment of visibility on campus? What about the university administration's efforts post-1979 to keep Denim Day from happening again? Denim Day Do-Over invited queer people into the university community, but what was the price of admission?

Denim Day Do-Over seemed to retell the "painful past" without fully acknowledging the institution's culpability or the need to continue justice work into the future. Progress narratives are attractive and, indeed, they celebrate what we've done. Finding joy in justice work is inherent to that work and something we must do as part of practicing care (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). Beyond practicing care-full justice work in one moment, true coalitional work, as Tuck and Yang (2012) reminded, means ongoing commitment. The institution[9] must sit with its own discomfort and center the voices of marginalized populations as it considers its responsibilities. This is difficult work, and accountability becomes more difficult when Whiteness undergirds institutional power structures. Denim Day Do-Over expanded the definition of the VT community to include queer people, but the lack of focus on intersectional identities flattened queerness into Whiteness. Queer bodies were allowed closer to the center as long as they performed (or mimicked) White normativity. This flattening and norming is a process of "rhetorical whitening" (Ore, 2017) enacted through public history narratives. I construct counterstories by alternating between archival perspectives on Denim Day 1979 and the public history stories told at Denim Day Do-Over to explore how this rhetorical whitening maps onto the characteristics of White memory I identified in Chapter 2.

In the first section, "(Re)Defining Norms: Expelling/Welcoming Queerness," I explore how Whiteness defines norms in a space and how those norms extend far beyond perceived skin color. The juxtaposed counterstories in this section show how queerness has been both expelled and welcomed at Virginia Tech, although the welcoming only occurred when Denim Day became a flattened, less threatening version of queer protest.

[9] I use the term metaphorically here to mean, in particular, the majority-White bodies that hold institutional power as well as those who identify with institutional power.

The second section, “Hiding Whitening in Plain Sight,” details how concepts of politeness and rhetorical whitening altered the story of Denim Day from 1979 to 2019. Initially, Virginia Tech condemned Denim Day 1979 because it was impolite and inconvenient for the heteronormative community on campus. By 2019, the process used what Ersula Ore (2016) called “rhetorical whitening” to make queer protests safe. Finally, the third section, “Delineating Space through Threats/Hospitality,” looks at how Whiteness managed campus space. In 1979, threats against queer bodies at Denim Day let the Gay Student Alliance know they were not welcome in campus space; by 2019, the university extended hospitality to queer bodies, but at the price of flattening their stories into an acceptable White-normative version of queerness that did not substantially disturb the institution.

(Re)Defining Norms: Expelling/Welcoming Queerness

A primary aim of institutional White memory is defining norms, claiming Whiteness as neutral, and then defending perceived threats to its borders (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994). At a local level, close analysis revealed strategic rhetorics designed to divide those welcome at VT from those not. In 1979, campus norms excluded queerness; students, faculty, and administration enforced these norms through various means. The lack of queer fit at Virginia Tech motivated Denim Day as a protest. By 2019, norms regarding queerness on campus changed, in no small part due to queer student, faculty, and staff activism. University representatives framed Denim Day Do-Over as an event to celebrate “how far we’ve come” (Garay, 2019) and I argue that it had less impact than its predecessor did. In 2019, wearing denim to support gay rights meant – and cost – very little. Here, White memory serves as institutional “happy talk” (Ahmed, 2012): the

university forwarded a narrative of individual responsibility for the “ridicule and abuse” (@virginia_tech, 2019) of 1979 that allowed individual actions to overwrite historical pain in 2019. In doing so, it suppressed administrative ridicule and abuse that set the stage for student behaviors.

Expelling Queerness

For the campus queer community, official university recognition was never a given. Though there were informal organizations (LGBTQ+ History Timeline), groups could not meet on campus for fear of reprisals. By the 1970s, students no longer preferred the safety of hiding in plain sight. It took them four years (1971-1975) to achieve their goal: organizing and getting VT to recognize a gay and lesbian student organization. Recognition afforded access to campus resources, including meeting places, funding, and advertising. However, from the beginning, the Virginia Tech administration treated gay students attempting to form a representative organization as bad actors. Administrators fought the idea of having a gay organization on campus at all. Once the organization was recognized, it was not allowed use of university resources and students were forced to meet at a church off-campus (LGBTQ+ History Timeline). By the time Denim Day occurred in 1979, the official gay and lesbian student organization (by then named the Gay Student Alliance) had only existed for four years. However, it had spent four years fighting over recognition, and when this battle came to a head on Denim Day, campus was primed to explode.

Administrative Suspicions. Initially, the university administration viewed queer students as bad actors who would corrupt campus space and they set to work guarding the institution’s borders against intruders (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994). The Commission on

Student Affairs (CSA), a student governance organization, approved the Gay Alliance at Virginia Tech in April 1971. In turn, administrators acted outside those governance systems to ensure GAVT could not receive university resources. Dean of Women Martha Harder complained that the CSA created a "problem of recognition" (1971) by approving the Gay Alliance at VT (GAVT) in a 4-1 vote. Harder wrote that the dissenting voter and "three other members of the Board" had "expressed concerns" (1971), which required the matter be forwarded to the University Council, a governance body composed of faculty and administrators. University administration responded to the GAVT with homophobic fear and an overriding concern about how recognizing the organization would make the university look to outsiders, particularly alumni and a vague idea of "the state" (Ryland, 1971). The main question revolved around what to do about the "attack" on campus space represented by a homosexual student organization.

Virginia Tech administrators were most concerned about whether the organization would allow groups of homosexuals to assemble. Dean Harder wrote that GAVT members "re-emphasized throughout the meeting that their purpose was one of [sic] education and not for gays to meet more gays" (1971), indicating concern over the latter. VT General Council Mr. Walter Ryland argued, "[t]he group should never sponsor activities designed merely to afford gays an opportunity to enjoy each other's company" (1971). Virginia Tech administrators were quite concerned with what homosexual people would do once together; they reviewed the organization's documents to ensure that GAVT did not give the impression it was "recruiting" (Ryland, 1971). Notably, the administration was against "congregating" and "enjoying" in particular—this indicates a general feeling that queer people on campus should have neither community nor

happiness. Merely giving homosexuals space to "enjoy each other's company" injures the university. If the university recognized the GAVT, Walter Ryland argued that Virginia Tech would be seen as "an outlet for the assembling of homosexuals" and "would suffer a corresponding detriment" (Ryland, 1971). No administrative documents specified the exact nature of these detriments. The institution, administrators claimed, can be injured if the wrong people are allowed to "enjoy" being inside.

Ultimately, the university wanted to create what Ahmed called "clogs" (2012) in institutional plumbing. Ryland recommended administrative stalling, asking, "[w]hat would happen if we drew out the approval process until next year? Would the group disband?" (1971). By delaying an institutional response, Virginia Tech could ignore the GAVT until they went away. The remainder of the memo listed some strategies the university might use to delay recognizing a homosexual organization on campus. Throughout the memo, Ryland wrote hyperbolic, homophobic statements about GAVT to enhance a sense of threat against the university community. His strategies and recommendations not only revealed deep-seated institutional homophobia but also isolated and shamed queer students. His memo framed a clear "us" in relation to the "them" represented by GAVT while foregrounding the university's priority to protect itself against outsiders. The university reversed the CSA's recognition of the GAVT, and the fight continued until 1975.

Denim Day 1979: Straight Students Respond to a Perceived Attack. At Denim Day 1979, students followed prior administrative strategic rhetorics by constructing an "us" versus "them" scenario, which was first rhetorical (indicated through student writing in the *Collegiate Times*) and then physical (indicated through low student participation in

Denim Day and a culture of abuse towards queer students that worsened after some outed themselves through the event). I argue that this is part of "stranger-making," which Ahmed (2012) defined as "how some and not others become strangers; how emotions of fear and hatred stick to certain bodies; how some bodies become understood as the rightful occupants of certain spaces" (p. 54). Strategies employed by VT administration primed the campus with sticky emotions of fear, hatred, and possessiveness over university spaces. Many of the responses to Denim Day recorded in the *Collegiate Times* expressed these emotions to remind queer students they did not fit in and were not welcome.

Letters written before Denim Day appeared in the January 12, 1979, *Collegiate Times* under the headline "Gay 'Denim Day' Draws Flak." The headline itself framed these letters as a defensive response to gay attacks. Many students accused the GSA of "co-opting" denim, a territorial claim: *they* cannot make *our* denim into something else. Junior Tony Pirrone, for example, claimed the Gay Student Alliance knew that denim was "almost the Tech uniform" and accused them of choosing denim for their demonstration to "claim those who were possibly uninformed of this 'stunt' and accidentally wore denim supporters of gay rights" (1979). He forwarded White, heteronormative claims to campus space in addition to condemning what he viewed as sly behavior by the GSA as they attempted to "claim" straight student bodies. As his subsequent complaint about needing "to wear corduroy pants (preferably not blue, just in case)" (1979) indicated, even the *implication* of supporting gay rights was a radical intrusion on (straight) campus norms. Pirrone, prompted only by his sense of ownership

over the “Tech uniform,” made it quite clear that he did not consider homosexual students a part of the Tech community even if they were already on campus.

Two other letters framed the borders of campus space, using White heteronormativity to maintain power when White heteronormative bodies felt threatened (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994). These letters refused to recognize Denim Day, a move towards ignoring events that made presumed-normal students uncomfortable. Earle McMichael, Kevin Squires, Walter Nelson, and Sue Betterly argued, “It is not fair to play on people’s preference to wear denim” (1979), centering the needs and desires of straight students over the events of Gay Awareness Week. Further, they wrote, “We, the undersigned, and most other *normal people*, do not support G.S.A., and therefore will continue to wear our jeans” (1979, emphasis mine). McMichael, Squires, Nelson, and Betterly chose not to define “normal people,” which indicates they felt no need to do so; they relied on heteronormativity to guide their audience’s interpretations. Eric Harder, Dan Chase, David Fadeley, and Jeff Feamster also suggested that straight students ignore Denim Day. They advised, “All straight students [should] carry a toothbrush with them all day Wednesday” in order to “keep those students from being afflicted with the social embarrassment of association with the gay community” (Harder, Chase, Fadeley, and Feamster, 1979). In other words, even “association with the gay community” meant “being afflicted”; with these words, they cast queer students not only as outsiders but as contaminants. These letters show the fear and anger involved in stranger-making processes as argue about who should be *allowed to be seen*.

Many letters blamed gay students for the harassment they suffered, arguing that had those students stayed in the closet, there would never have been a problem. One

letter, signed by twenty-two students, made open threats. The letter suggested an "alternative lifestyle dorm" which would be "painted pink, making it easily recognizable and avoided by those of the 'normal lifestyle'" (Bray, Hauschildt, Gogol, Kemmerly et. al, 1979). Like prior letters, this letter created a sense of normal and abnormal and placed all queer students firmly outside the norm. They went further to argue, "Maybe a better solution is for the gays to just stay in the closet and *consider themselves lucky*" (Bray, Hauschildt, Gogol, Kemmerly, et. al, 1979, emphasis mine). Writers demanded that homosexual students perform heteronormativity *or else*; again, though the writers do not explain why gays should "consider themselves lucky," they leave the matter up to their audience, presuming that heteronormative (and homophobic) culture provides answers to fill in the blanks. Tim Chase's editorial in the *Collegiate Times* echoed student complaints about the "unfairness" of Denim Day and called the event "disturbing." Further, Chase argued that "[i]f the GSA had kept to itself, rather than drawing attention to itself in the manner it has, this whole issue would never have come up" (1979). Queer people, in other words, are perfectly fine as long as they do not disturb heteronormative norms by being *visibly* queer. Chase accused the GSA of "forcing the issue on other people" (1979) and ultimately argued that any harassment was their own fault. If gay students wanted to be out, they should be shamed and set apart from other students. Straight students asserted their rights through stranger-making; they portrayed heteronormative students as a majority under attack and denied fair treatment by homosexuals, dangerous outsiders exterior to the campus community.

Welcoming Queerness

Given the history of Denim Day at Virginia Tech, it is easy to understand the appeal of a "do-over," since the term conveys a certain viewpoint about responsibility towards the past. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest use of the term do-over was in 1890. The term originated from the food processing industry and described "a defectively sealed tin… often reprocessed and sold at a discount" (OED, 2014). Though this definition fell out of use, it is instructive: one does a do-over because of a "defect" in the first attempt. Another term for such cans was "seconds," a name that emphasizes that items sealed correctly the first time are more valuable. By 1912, the term entered colloquial speech to describe "[an] instance or chance of doing something for a second or further time, after an unsuccessful or unsatisfactory first attempt" (OED, 2014). This definition suggests that Virginia Tech might remedy its past mistakes by admitting that the first Denim Day was "unsuccessful" or "unsatisfactory." However, to whom was Denim Day 1979 unsuccessful and unsatisfactory? GSA members considered the event successful (Noll, 1979, 2018; Benoit, 1979; Kelly, 2019). Further, what motivated Virginia Tech to repeat the past? An early (1912) example of the term implied that an actor enacts a do-over to "cover" a mistake (OED, 2014). More recent (1992) usage compared the term to "Mulligan" and "freebie"—acts that involve "pretending the first flub never happened" (OED, 2014). Covering mistakes and pretending the first flub never happened are actions incompatible with accountability. A third definition of do-over is "An act of refurbishing or improving the appearance of something; a renovation or makeover" (OED, 2014). Though renovation has a positive connotation, I am concerned about the temptation to stop at "improving the *appearance* of something"—the difference

between what Ahmed called “symbolic” and “material” (Ahmed, 2007) justice work. In other words, merely wearing denim on a designated day (regardless of how many times VT repeats the action) is not enough; without also “refurbishing,” the do-over is incomplete.

By calling the commemoration a do-over, Virginia Tech centered its own failures rather than the needs of queer people (past, present, and future) who occupy university space. At the same time, the institution provided cover for itself by altering the outward appearance of queer acceptance at Virginia Tech. Denim Day Do-Over suggested that the solution to a lack of hospitality is explicitly welcoming the queer community to campus. I argue this is true only if the institution carefully considers and admits its faults. Virginia Tech repeatedly rejected homosexual students from campus spaces (to say nothing of other people who fall under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, whose stories disappeared completely at Denim Day Do-Over). Further, VT offered homosexual students no protection from straight students inclined to turn institutional rejections into violence. Students had no recourse; as Nancy Kelly (2019) recalled, using resources like the VT administration, police, or formal grievance procedures often resulted in further harassment by the officials designated to help. In order to welcome queer people to campus in a meaningful way, Virginia Tech must release its desire to rehabilitate its image. Instead, VT must listen to the queer community’s needs in addition to affording them university space and protection from harm.

Denim Day Do-Over and Institutional Sponsorship. University sponsorship was an obvious indication of welcome: Virginia Tech utilized extensive institutional resources to promote the event in ways that were unthinkable in 1979. Digital

communication, for example, played a primary role in Denim Day Do-Over, as the university used social media accounts, internal listservs, VT's alumni site, and even our Canvas Learning Management System (LMS) to advertise the Do-Over before the event. Virginia Tech also created an accessible hashtag for the event, #VTDenimDayDoOver, which now serves as an archive of digital commentary. Initially, I learned of the event from the VT LGBT Caucus listserv. On March 10, 2019, then-director of the VT LGBTQ+ Resource Center Luis Garay forwarded promotional materials sent to alumni by Virginia Tech Alumni Relations, which dubbed the event a "commemoration" and explained it thusly:

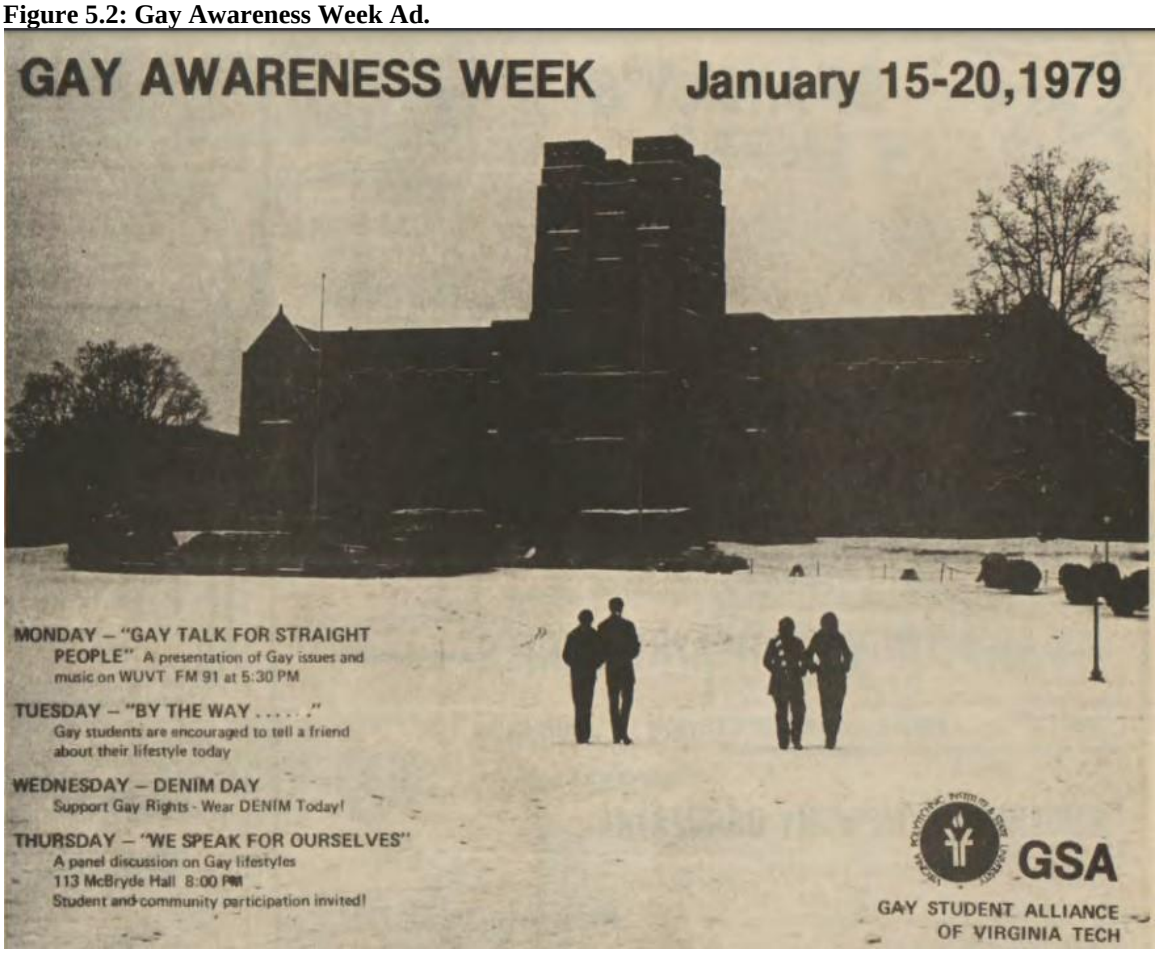
> "Forty years ago, the Virginia Tech Gay Student Alliance held the first Gay Awareness Week. It included Denim Day, which encouraged the university community to support gay rights by wearing denim — only about 20 people did. Four decades later we've come a long way. It's time for a Denim Day do-over!"

The narrative presented was simple: forty years ago, "only about 20" people showed their support for gay rights on the original Denim Day. Denim Day Do-Over provided an opportunity to change the narrative by increasing the number of participants, thereby rewriting institutional expulsion with hospitality and support. Alumni were invited to "join members of the Gay Student Alliance in Blacksburg during Virginia Tech Pride Week… to commemorate the anniversary and celebrate LGBTQ+ progress with our entire campus" (Garay, FW: Denim Day…, 2019). The overall tone of these materials is celebratory since, as they noted, "we've come a long way" (Garay, FW: Denim Day…, 2019). Here, a queer individual speaks as a representative of the university; using *we* is significant, considering the efforts the university community once took, as detailed above, to ensure that queer people knew they were not welcome at VT in the 1970s.

However, centering “coming a long way” as the reason for celebration risked centering progress narratives at the expense of ongoing relationships between the institution and its queer constituents.

The main event planned for Denim Day Do-Over was a group photograph of participants to be taken on Virginia Tech’s iconic Drillfield. It is such a well-known location that the 1979 Gay Awareness Week ad featured students walking across the Drillfield in the snow (Figure 5.2). Although it is not a building, the Drillfield has its own

Figure 5.2: Gay Awareness Week Ad.



page on the University Buildings website (Virginia Tech, “Drillfield”). The page explained how the Drillfield is a place for community: “Thousands of people come into contact with the Drillfield each day, students and faculty rushing to class crossing paths with visitors strolling around the central campus” (Virginia Tech). According to the

university, all campus community members "know that the Drillfield is an integral part of the Virginia Tech experience" ("Drillfield"). The Drillfield is a location tied to the rhetorical construction of community at Virginia Tech, and taking a drone photo there for Denim Day Do-Over is a way to reconstruct the norms of that community by opening space to queer bodies. Further, it is important to note the way a photograph serves as a record of campus hospitality, one that, in this case, intended to overwrite the university's prior mistakes.

Virginia Tech Student Affairs created a Canvas advertisement that ran for two weeks prior to April 19, 2019. This ad centers on a drone photo of the Drillfield featuring hundreds of students standing in the shape of a giant VT logo (Figure 5.3). However, the

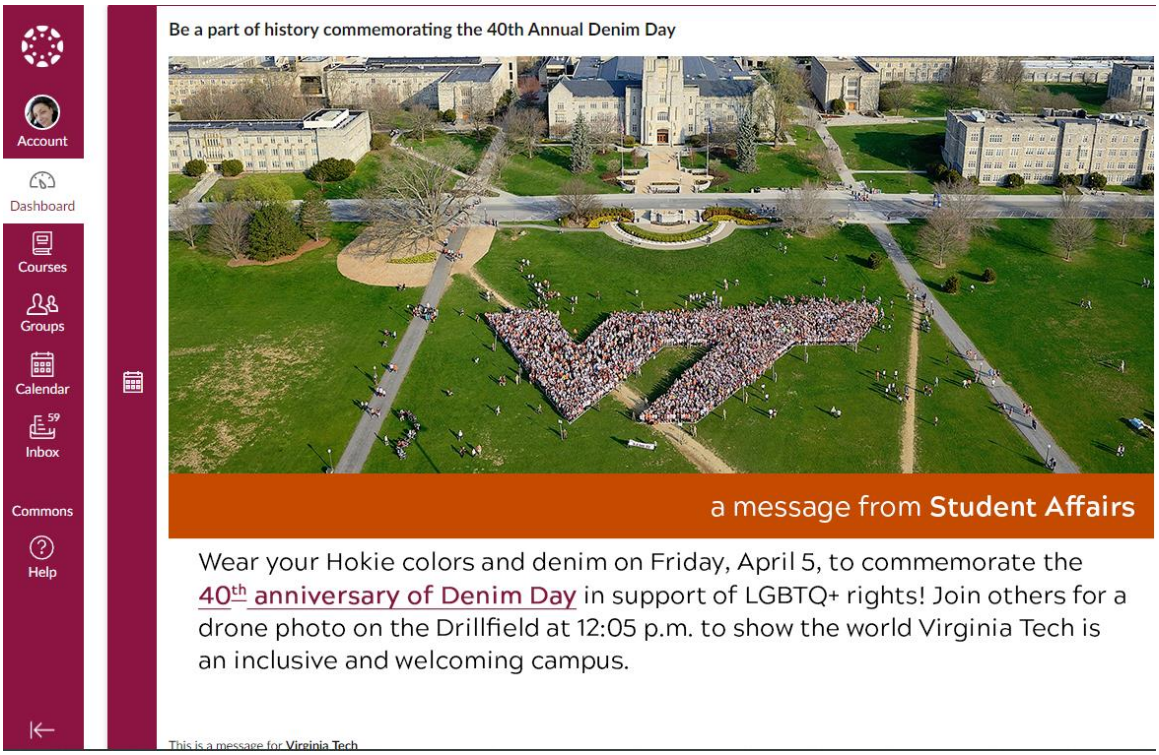


Figure 5.3: Student Affairs Canvas Ad for Denim Day Do-Over.

ad is misleading. The headline, for example, exhorted students to "be a part of history commemorating the 40th *Annual* Denim Day" (Student Affairs, 2019, emphasis mine). As the Timeline of LGBTQ+ History notes, the Gay Student Alliance tried to sponsor a

second Denim Day in 1980, and Dean James W. Dean responded that "he would fight the Alliance's efforts" because "I received 25,000 pieces of mail opposing Denim Day and it took me five or six weeks to answer all of it. I will not go through that again even if it costs me my job" (qtd. in Reed, 1980). Denim Day was never an annual celebration prior to Denim Day Do-Over in 2019; it did not become an annual celebration at Virginia Tech until after the lifting of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on large gatherings. Using the words "annual" and "anniversary" juxtaposed with a Drillfield drone photo of unknown provenance allows Student Affairs to imply that Denim Day is an annual, well-attended celebration of queerness on campus. It was, and is, nothing of the sort.

The Student Affairs Canvas ad and other promotional materials focused on university hospitality towards queer people at the expense of telling honest stories about the reason homosexual students felt the need for Denim Day in the first place. The Student Affairs ad did so explicitly when it instructed students to "wear your Hokie colors and denim" (2019). This text emphasized Hokie colors first, in effect co-opting denim from protest garb to an institutionalized symbol of loyalty and belonging. The ad recruited audience members, asking them to "join others" at the Drillfield "to show the world Virginia Tech is an inclusive and welcoming campus" (Student Affairs, 2019). "Showing the world" how Virginia Tech welcomes marginalized populations is the apparent goal of the Do-Over, and the focus is drawing as many attendees as possible for this purpose. To increase the number of participants, the university emphasized the ease of participating in Denim Day Do-Over. Luis Garay, for example, indicated other options for participation, writing, "Folks have asked what they should do if they cannot wear denim on that day but still want to support. I have set aside some Denim Day 40th

Anniversary Commemorative Pins for these individuals" ("2nd Annual…", 2019). University sponsorship paid for objects (commemorative pins) to be used *in place of* denim such that wearing denim was no longer the most critical component of the Do-Over. However, as numerous GSA members indicated in 1979 (Noll; Benoit; Kelly), the purpose of Denim Day was "not a head count" (Noll, 1979). The purpose of Denim Day 1979 was not the ease with which supporters could show their support. Rather, Denim Day centered *unease* in the notion that being gay was something as natural to queer people as slipping on a pair of jeans in the morning.

Decompressing the Archives: Straight Students Supporting Denim Day 1979. University promotional materials for Denim Day Do-Over created a very simple narrative structure. In the past, no one supported Denim Day, and queer students were "ridiculed and abused." To solve the problem, Denim Day Do-Over must have as many participants as possible. However, I discovered when I attended carefully to the archives that it was not true to say no straight students supported Denim Day. In fact, the 1979 issues of the *Collegiate Times* referencing the event hosted a variety of multifaceted opinions on the issue, reminding me, as Houdek (2016) did, that we must be careful about the expectations and prewritten stories we bring to the archive with us. The responses of these allies complicated the picture painted by the university's coverage of Denim Day in 2019.

Sherry Wood, Editor-in-Chief of the *Collegiate Times* in 1979, wrote a pro-Denim Day editorial arguing against Tim Chase's interpretation of the event (see above). Rather than soliciting support, Wood wrote, "The GSA is trying for a more profound point" (1979). In fact, Wood argued that the GSA was "trying to make students get a taste

of repression" (1979). In this piece, Wood not only stood up for the GSA but also argued they had every right to give VT students "a taste of repression." Rather than be offended, Wood asked straight students to consider that "most of us are undeniably repressing Gay persons' right to express (even nominally) their sexuality" (1979). Wood chastised VT students for valuing their own freedoms while seeking to curtail the freedoms of others. The Editor-in-Chief of the *Collegiate Times* asked straight students to attend carefully to the GSA's message rather than take immediate offense and thereby miss the point. Mark Erickson called prior letters to the editor "degrading" towards queer students and admonished their writers for "an extremely effective display of ignorance" (1979). He argued that the writers ultimately missed the point, which was "to broaden the closed minds of individuals like yourself" (Erickson, 1979). In saying so, he directly challenged what he viewed as the close-mindedness and ignorance of straight students. Both Wood and Erickson pointed students toward investigating what Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) called the 3Ps: Positionality, Privilege, and Power. They refused to engage in stranger-making (Ahmed, 2012) towards queer students and, in doing so, questioned the homophobic responses they witnessed from other students.

Other letters went further in their support; one, for example, focused on the role of humor in planning and executing an event like Denim Day. Carol Hall, who identified herself as a fellow activist, wrote that "a little humor lightened up any movement" (1979). Denim Day, Hall said, was a "beautiful idea" (1979), and she congratulated the GSA on their work enacting it. This response indicates that not all straight students needed to be told the reason for an event like Denim Day; in fact, some of them saw quite clearly past the idea of wearing denim "to support gay rights" and understood Denim Day

for the radical role shift between oppressor and oppressed that it was intended to be. Further, she wrote that she "got even more of a chuckle out of the letters of outrage in Friday's *CT*" (1979) than about Denim Day itself. Detractors "feel so threatened that they miss the humor" (Hall, 1979). Hall recognized the subversive nature of the Denim Day protest more than most writers in the *Collegiate Times* and concluded by writing that "[t]here is nothing more healthy than to be confronted with something that makes us draw a sharp breath before we burst out laughing at ourselves" (1979). Hall understood the subversion of an event asking college students in the 1970s to wear denim in support of gay rights. Unlike other students who claimed they were attacked or forced to dress in a certain way, she also understood why confrontation was an appropriate activist tactic and how discomfort challenges us to grow.

Denim Day Do-Over framed Denim Day 1979 in rather simple terms as a matter of visible support for marginalized queer students. However, even in 1979, students did not see it this way. Lu Anne Fischman's coverage of Denim Day asserted that the event "was a success—*because* very few people wore denim" (1979, emphasis mine). This flies in the face of a "do-over." If the event was successful for the GSA, why must it be reenacted? Who is the reenactment for, and who benefits? Fischman also interviewed GSA member Steve Noll who confirmed that the purpose of Denim Day was "not a head count" (1979). Instead, GSA members claimed in this interview and other *CT* publications that Denim Day was "an exercise in oppression" (Noll, 1979; Benoit, 1979). Denim Day was intended as a forcible shift in perspective, asking not for empathy but for straight students to feel *in their bodies* the discomfort gay students felt thinking about existing in a White, heteronormative campus world. The phrase "exercise in oppression"

appeared in pro-Denim Day letters almost as often as “co-opt” and “antagonize” appeared in anti-Denim Day letters. Denim Day Do-Over may have offered queer people a new type of welcome at Virginia Tech, but in doing so, the institution forgot what those queer people had been searching for in the first place.

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In sum, Denim Day Do-Over was less a discussion about a new relationship with the university’s queer constituents than it was a story to close an ugly chapter from the “painful past” (Dougherty, 2016). In 2019, campus responses were less impassioned; there was no uproar about changing out of denim and no rush on corduroy pants and suits at local boutiques. In part, this shift was cultural: 40 years later, wearing denim to “support gay rights” did not sound radical. When we finally took the Denim Day Do-Over photo in the Moss Arts Center, more than a hundred bodies gathered indoors on the steps. This is a marked improvement from 1979 when only twenty people participated, but on a campus of 40,000, the crowd at Moss felt like a droplet in an ocean. Denim Day Do-Over was presented as an event that gave closure, but recent events like the vandalism of queer-friendly churches with White supremacist symbols (Virginia Tech, 2021) call this narrative into question. That is to say, Denim Day was not an ending, and “progress” cannot be taken for granted as permanent.

Hiding Whitening in Plain Sight

I have touched only tangentially on Whiteness in my discussion of institutional norming. In some sense, this is because the Denim Day materials focused almost entirely on queerness as the central concern. But invitations into institutional space require assimilating an institutional perspective (Ahmed, 2012; Kennedy, Middleton, and

Ratcliffe, 2017; Ore, 2017). In a White institution (such as a land-grant university in the American South), assimilation requires becoming White without announcing that one is doing so. In the case of Denim Day Do-Over, I identified strategies of politeness and rhetorical whitening (Ore, 2017) at work. Focusing on politeness meant deemphasizing the need for queer protest in both the past and the present. Rhetorical whitening, on the other hand, appeared most often in attempts to oversimplify and flatten the intersectional experiences of marginalized people. Such strategies recruit outsiders into the institution while insisting that it is impolite to talk about the rules. Processes of whitening operate in the open because they are framed as neutral or commonsense: they are the background on which dark marks appear.

Making Protest Polite

A "do-over" tries to correct a failure; thus, Denim Day Do-Over provided an opportunity for Virginia Tech to be accountable for its past queerphobia. Prior to holding Denim Day Do-Over, then, the institution needed to analyze both the context in which Denim Day occurred and the purpose of the event, which its organizers made clear. Using Denim Day Do-Over to "show how far we've come" (Garay, 2019) risked transforming a protest into a progress narrative (*we used to be homophobic here, but now we're not*). This discounts the complexity of student activism, which Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch (2018) argued is "a complex mix of bodies, technologies, discourses, and even histories that need to be considered collectively" (2018, p. 4). We cannot understand why there needed to be a Denim Day without understanding this event as a purposeful protest and the Gay Student Alliance as student activists using tactical rhetoric against a White, heteronormative institution. Simplifying Denim Day into a problem that can be solved

with a polite welcome to institutional space denies a long history (and ongoing present) of queer protest in the American South. Denim Day was not a polite request for a show of hands.

Disruptive Tactics on Campus. Student organizers knew they would receive a negative response to Denim Day, which is to say that they knew Denim Day would disrupt campus, even if they could not predict how. In interviews for the Denim Day Oral History Archive, GSA members (Nancy Kelly; George Alvarez; Steve Noll; Scott Beadle, all 2018-2019) described planning Denim Day for "months" (Kelly, 2019). Student government approved Gay Awareness Week in early January 1979 (*Collegiate Times*), and VT administrators made no move to keep the event from happening in the intervening ten days. They did not expect support; as Nancy Kelly put it, "We knew they hated us, but we did it anyway" (2019). The GSA used tactical rhetorics that are what Alexander, Welch, and Jarratt (2018) called "unruly." That is to say, such rhetorics reside in and emanate from "histories of deeply felt and embodied desires to disrupt the status quo" (p. 7). Although Gay Student Alliance members borrowed the idea of Denim Day from large, urban universities in the Northeast (Rutgers, Yale, Carnegie Mellon, and Princeton) and West (Sacramento State), they understood that rural southwest Virginia presented quite a different context. Gay Student Alliance organizers at VT knew that Denim Day was a protest, not an opportunity to count their supporters.

According to the Gay Student Alliance, Denim Day was a protest event that attempted to shift the burdens of oppression onto the heteronormative majority, if only for a day. GSA members were unafraid to state this purpose clearly and did so through both interviews and letters to the editor of the *Collegiate Times*. Letters from Steve Noll

and sophomore GSA member Beth Benoit clarified the purpose of Denim Day and argued that although heteronormative students misunderstood the purpose, they received the message. At Denim Day Do-Over, Steve Noll said that "much has been misunderstood in the staging of Denim Day," and Beth Benoit wrote, "very few people have gotten the point" amid their "hysteria" (Noll, 2019; Benoit, 1979). Benoit made plain the GSA's strategy: the objective of Denim Day was "to make people think… about not being able to do something as natural to them as putting on a pair of jeans in the morning" (1979). Disrupting what is "natural" (or "normal" as heteronormative students put it), Benoit argued, forced heteronormative students to understand the queer struggle, which "goes on 365 days of the year over a simple, basic concept: the right to love another human being" (1979). Key to this strategy was provoking bodily discomfort as a way of forcing perspective change. In her letter, Benoit centered the GSA's message and refused to acknowledge straight students' arguments about "unfairness" and "antagonism." It was, in fact, the aim of the protest to force straight students to understand how unfair it felt to be antagonized for walking out the door of one's residence in a queer body.

In his own letter to the editor, Steve Noll not only agreed with Benoit's assessment but also offered a rebuttal to common arguments against Denim Day. He was particularly uninterested in those who told the GSA to "keep our sexual preferences to ourselves" (examined in the previous section) (Noll, 1979). Noll stated pointedly that such arguments were "another way to make us feel ashamed" and chastised straight students for their "participation in the persecution of people who might very well one day turn out to be their brother, sister, or own best friend" (Noll, 1979). Noll, like Benoit,

centered disruption, creating a tactic that disturbed heterosexual comfort in order to force a change in perspective. Further, Noll linked anti-Denim Day arguments to White, heteronormative culture at Virginia Tech, writing that "straight, white males, as a rule, and their acquiescing female counterparts don't like it when their dominance is challenged by [the] reality around them" (1979). Denim Day, succinctly put, was a challenge to straight, White dominance. GSA members, writing to the *Collegiate Times,* refused to accept gaslighting arguments that queer students were responsible for their own abuse and indicated their own understanding of intersectional oppression. Both Noll and Benoit argued that queer bodies had as much of a place on campus as any other. Although detractors often characterized Denim Day using ableist language ("ignorant" and "stupid" were the most commonly used words), these letters show how much forethought went into planning Denim Day as a protest action, not to mention the GSA's sophisticated understanding of intersectional oppression.

Making Protests Comfortable. In 1979, White, heteronormative resistance was obvious; Denim Day Do-Over, on the other hand, centered comfort for everyone, heteronormative and queer alike. By focusing on a progress narrative of improved treatment leading to LGBTQ+ parity, the university centered the idea that, while queer communities may have needed a protest like Denim Day in 1979, protests are outdated now. In fact, some interview footage played at "Jeans Noticeably Absent," a film and theatre performance on the night of Friday, April 5, 2019, one former GSA member suggested that "everybody's gay now" (Kelly, 2019) because of the "easiness" of being queer in the 21st century. Though I doubt Kelly would make the same statement in 2023, this statement highlights an important point: while the LGBTQ+ community may be out

of the closet, they are by no means always safe in the world. The ease of being out does not measure the ease of being queer. Framing queer rights as a smooth progress narrative denies the still-bumpy road we are traveling towards equality, sometimes forward, sometimes backward, and sometimes stalling along the way. Though the circumstances of current unruly rhetorics are different than in 1979, queer activism still occurs at Virginia Tech and queer students still protest a system that continues to deny their humanity[10].

Denim Day Do-Over often highlighted the gratitude of former-GSA members towards the university. Most praised VT for being willing to tell the story of Denim Day, but unlike speakers at 1872 Forward, they asked no more of their alma mater. There was no opportunity to discuss what the institution still needs to do in order to remain accountable to its queer constituents. Denim Day Do-Over lacked a sense of *ongoingness*, which transformed the story into a progress narrative. However, a recent university climate report suggested VT had "substantial room… to provide a more equitable learning environment for queer students" (Williams, 2019). In particular, the report recommended the institution pay more attention to "students who identify as transgender, non-binary, gender nonconforming… [and] LGBTQ+ students of color" (Williams, 2019). The institution did not create an opportunity to engage with these populations, and, in fact, many Denim Day Do-Over stories specifically left out people of color, in addition to transgender and gender nonconforming people. Connecting a prior protest (Denim Day) to the current context required that Virginia Tech connect the bodies, technologies, discourses, and histories that link queerness in 1979 to queerness in the

[10] One example is Virginia Tech's computerized student identification system that still forces students to choose binary pronouns.

present. The institution's events focused on "fixing" queerphobia by doing Denim Day again as a way to absolve the institution's faults. In doing so, it also prevented further negative feelings about the university by ignoring the complexity of queer existence, both in 1979 and 2019.

Rhetorical Whitening

Denim Day Do-Over focused on polite acceptance as a way to overwrite the ridicule and abuse suffered by Gay Student Alliance members in 1979. Politeness suppresses negative emotions, after which it is easier for what Ore (2017) called "rhetorical whitening" to take effect. Whiteness, Ore argued, is "an ideological code that haunts discursive spaces" (p. 208), by which she means that performing Whiteness is an always already preexisting condition for speaking and being heard in most discursive spaces. Needing to become white is "a burden of operating in a space racialized white" (Ore, p. 209). Without rhetorical whitening, non-White people often do not have the proximity to power that allows them to speak and be heard. According to Ore, this results in a need to "calibrate" rhetoric "for the ways in which space carries the residue of race" (p. 209), a calibration that is vital to non-White people and invisible to those who easily pass the test. At Denim Day Do-Over, rhetorical whitening involved both eliding Latino/a identities and explicitly disidentifying with Black and trans identities. Denim Day Do-Over flattened queerness into Whiteness, and, in doing so, omitted stories that could not conform adequately to expectations of Whiteness.

Flattening Latino/a Queerness. All of the Latino/a interviewees for Denim Day Do-Over mentioned racial heritage as a factor that affected their experience of queerness. Olga Acosta, for example, recalled being outed to her father, a Latino police officer

whom she called “authoritarian” (2018). When he discovered his daughter was gay, he forced her to break up with her girlfriend and got her class schedule changed, an instance in which a non-White person colluded with the White institution to prevent Olga Acosta’s free expression of her queerness. Siblings Lisa and Mark Barroso connected their Cuban heritage to Lisa’s experience of lesbianism. Like Acosta’s father, Lisa’s coming out angered her father. The siblings explained in their interview that “[Lisa] he was Cuban… a lot of Spaniards, that kind of… [Mark] Don’t like gay people” (2019). They connected Lisa’s experience of homophobia directly to their Cuban heritage and generalized Cuban attitudes towards homosexuality. Andrew “George” Alvarez also explained his difficult circumstances as a young gay man: “I was raised by a military family. My father was a lifer. He was a Marine and Catholic and Cuban, and I was the first-born son. So I had a lot of baggage that I had to throw off” (2019). Like the Barrosos and Olga Acosta, he identified his Cuban ancestry and having a father in a military career as primary factors influencing his experience of queerness. Further, he identified how Catholicism played a role in exacerbating his struggles, tying together multiple facets of “Latino-ness” that combined to give Alvarez the “baggage” he needed “to throw off.” Alvarez was quite aware of the ways intersectional identities affected his queerness and vice versa; the same can be said for both Olga Acosta and Lisa and Mark Barroso.

Although Latino/a students expressed quite clearly the way that race affected their experiences of being queer, being outed, and “not fitting” into their respective cultures, no interviewers followed up with questions related to race. Interviewers may have had a list of questions from which they could not deviate, or they may have been unaware of the opportunity to follow up and allow Latino/a alumni to explain their specific life

experiences in more depth. Though it is important to focus on queer stories, they are multifaceted; that is to say, queerness cannot become a factor isolated from the other intersectional identities a person occupies. This is how institutions can often flatten identity even in efforts to improve diversity (Ahmed, 2012). In this case, Virginia Tech whitened Latino/a students by ignoring their non-Whiteness in the story of Denim Day 1979. The conspicuous absence of discussions about race folded Latino/a students into Whiteness and thus flattened the complexity of their experiences. This is why public histories must strive to be more complex than progress narratives. Though they may make us feel like we've done a "good thing," good feelings are not equivalent to equity. Stories that insist we have arrived at equity are stories often incomplete because equity is an ongoing conversation.

Ignoring Black and Trans Experiences. Black and trans people were featured briefly at Denim Day Do-Over, but the details of their lives were omitted from the narrative since, according to official histories, none of these people attended Denim Day 1979. Former GSA members were aware of the problems presented by these gaps. Nancy Kelly (2019) remarked that "we [the GSA] [were] primarily white, so people of color had a whole different experience which was much more difficult, and that really needs to be acknowledged… we were ostracized, but we were white, and we were privileged." First, Kelly indicated through this statement that she understood there were non-White people in GSA whose experiences were different from her own. Further, Kelly displayed a deep, intersectional understanding of positionality: one can be both "ostracized" and "privileged" at the same time, depending on one's proximity to Whiteness. Beyond that, Kelly did not offer further explanation of the ways queerness and Whiteness intersected

for her. Aside from Kelly's comment, no other interviewee mentioned Blackness at Denim Day. Likewise, there was no opportunity to discuss institutional futures, and no mention of the work VT still must do to be in an accountable relationship with its QTPOC community.

Trans people were omitted from Denim Day Do-Over for similar reasons. This foreclosed the possibility of understanding transness (in any form) as an intersectional identity at work on Denim Day. Nancy Kelly argued, "[t]rans was not really a medical option, and so trans have a whole separate timeline" (2019). This statement shows a narrow definition of trans, one which rests solely on an understanding of a "medical option," which ostensibly provides hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and gender-affirming surgeries. Kelly's statement is factually incorrect; "medical options" for trans people have existed for over a century. Further, this is only a small subset of trans experience; many trans people seek neither HRT nor surgeries. The statement also negates the idea of trans as an "umbrella" that covers many identities and includes nonbinary, agender, and gender nonconforming (GNC) people, as well as other gender identities besides those. Kelly emphasized that she did not want to speak for people whose experiences she did not understand, but in foreclosing transness to those who seek "medical options" and, presumably, transition in a bi-gendered way (from one binary gender to another), Kelly narrowed the range of possible trans experiences to be considered. Transness was flattened into a "homonormative" queerness that silenced the possibility for surprising stories to emerge from the archives at this public history event. The institution took Nancy Kelly, described as the "prime instigator" of Denim Day (Noll, 2019; Acosta, 2019), at her word. Denim Day Do-Over did not question the

institution's relationship to transness. Precluding a discussion of trans identities made it easier for the university to accept "polite" homonormative queer alumni into the predominantly White institution.

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Unlike "Contested Spaces" in 2022, Denim Day Do-Over provided no opportunity to reflect on the future or have difficult discussions. A progress narrative does not admit questions, particularly those that complicate the idea that things are "better" in the here and now. References to race and gender identity were largely absent at Denim Day Do-Over, which was especially disappointing given the theme of Pride Week 2019: "We Are Rising and Getting Stronger." According to Luis Garay (2019), this theme was intended to "[honor] the legacy of trans women of color who were part of the Stonewall Uprising like Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy" ("Pride Week 2019…"). Although Denim Day Do-Over was a key element of Pride Week 2019 celebrations, it stood apart from the theme for its outright insistence that there were no Black and trans stories to tell. Latino/a GSA alumni did their best to highlight intersectional issues, but institutional representatives did not open that line of conversation. This highlights a problem: Denim Day Do-Over assumed a "single issue" diversity perspective; it was an event centered on rewriting the past rather than reckoning with the past and moving forward in accountable relationships. The university opened space to queers in close enough proximity to Whiteness; for other populations, the question of acceptance was much more complicated.

Delineating Space through Threats/Hospitality

White memory, like all types of Whiteness, occupies space and recruits (Ahmed, 2007) new bodies. In fact, recruitment and space link intimately; as Nakayama and Krizek (1994) argued, White strategic rhetorics have a "location" from which to operate. This location enables White strategic rhetorics to manage relationships with various visitors on the borders of institutional space. The primary means through which Virginia Tech managed these relationships varied depending on cultural context. That is to say, at Denim Day 1979, Virginia Tech managed the relationship between homosexuality and Whiteness through threats, made by both individuals affiliated with the institution (students, alumni) and the institutions themselves (Virginia Tech administration, Governor John Dalton's office). Opponents of Denim Day treated the event as an unacceptable invasion of heteronormative, White spaces. In turn, they responded by making certain the GSA understood they were not welcome in university spaces. In 2019, Denim Day Do-Over managed university space through hospitality. This narrative attempted to change both the perceptions and feelings of queer alumni, and the university courted this audience through explicit statements of welcome and implicit support from university affiliation.

Making Threats to Close Spaces

As an "exercise in oppression" (Noll, 1979; Benoit, 1979), Denim Day was inherently threatening to White, heteronormative spaces. GSA members were not shy about the purpose of their protest or their aim to produce discomfort. Nancy Kelly summed it up thusly: "We knew they hated us, we just did it anyway" (2019). Even without GSA's explanations, straight students treated Denim Day 1979 as a threat and

responded in kind. Some student letters to the editor, in fact, served as strategic White rhetoric (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994), particularly the type that openly asserts normative power. This is especially evident in the repeated use of the term "normal" to label straightness (Harder, Chase, Fadeley, and Feamster, 1979; McMichael, Squires, Nelson, and Betterly, 1979), requests for pink "alternative lifestyle" dorms (Bray, Hauschildt, Gogol, Kemmerly, et. al, 1979), and veiled threats about showing queerness openly on campus (Bray, Hauschildt, Gogol, Kemmerly, et. al, 1979). Materials in the *Collegiate Times* gave a strong indication that queerness would be dealt with harshly wherever it was found at VT.

Unfortunately, straight students did not make empty threats; participating in Denim Day outed GSA members, and they suffered the consequences. Scott Beadle described his life as one in which queer people "had to consciously think about what we said, how we moved, our hand gestures, what we wore because if we didn't calculate that correctly, people were gonna brand as us gay, as homosexuals, as faggots, as queers" (2019). Like other GSA members, Beadle understood the purpose of Denim Day quite clearly; the GSA meant to "[subject straight students] to what we had been subjected to all our whole lives" (2019). After Denim Day, many of these behaviors only intensified, compounding the fear and uncertainty with which queer community members already lived their lives. Scott Beadle described repeated defacing of his dorm room: "I came home one time [and] someone's taken shaving cream and sprayed faggot over the door. They Vaselined my doorknob so I couldn't grip it… they shoved newspapers under my door and lit them, so they set my dorm room on fire. That was probably the most terrifying" (2019). The behavior escalated; when Beadle came to the shower, "they would

run out… They'd shout faggot. They'd shout things like 'Don't drop the soap'" (2019). Ultimately, they tried to get Beadle in trouble with his dorm's RA, who told him, "We've gotten complaints that you've altered your shower schedule" (2019). Beadle countered by asking "What he thought I was going to do in the shower? I was five foot nine 110 pounds. What am I gonna do to some guy in the shower?" (2019). But his heteronormative dormmates claimed to experience his mere presence as a threat. According to Beadle, "I had a revolving door when it came to roommates. My roommate my freshman year slowly moved out when I was away at classes" (2019). By preemptively claiming that an openly homosexual body was a threat, heteronormative students gave themselves a reason to bully and abuse Beadle for the remainder of his time at Virginia Tech. That Beadle called the events "terrifying" indicates he felt he was in danger at the time; threats to use heteronormative power to enforce straightness did not chase Scott Beadle back in the closet, but they certainly affected his life at Virginia Tech and his desire to return to his alma mater.

Like Scott Beadle, Nancy Kelly noted that from the moment she was outed, she was harassed. Being out was "dangerous" and "hard," and according to Kelly, "living in the dorms was brutal" (2018). When Kelly came out, "a woman that I knew screamed it on my hallway, that I was a lesbian, and, so, immediately… I was outed" (2019). Like Beadle, Kelly's dormmates broadcasted her queerness such that her life at Virginia Tech changed. Like Beadle, Kelly described how "if I would go into the bathroom everyone would leave" (2019), which reflects how heteronormative women experienced Kelly's lesbianism as a threat. This threat gave her dormmates lease (according to them) to bully and ridicule Kelly and, at one point, attempt to "fix" her. Kelly recounted an incident in

which she finished work at Owens Dining Hall early and started back to the dorm at West Eggleston. According to her, “One of my friends said, no don’t go, don’t go, and I was like, why? They’re having a big prayer meeting for you” (2019). These White, heteronormative students, and their allies, felt comfortable using religion (which is not exclusive to heterosexual communities) as a weapon against Kelly’s queerness; further, they did so in her absence, indicating they felt her enough of a threat to exclude her from the conversation. Like Beadle, Kelly once experienced physical threats in her dorm: “I heard all this commotion, and I didn’t know what it was, and I smelled smoke” (2019). She explained, “Somebody had lit my door on fire, and then I opened the door, and it’s flames, and there’s people running down the hallway laughing” (2019). Like Scott Beadle, Nancy Kelly experienced real physical threats in addition to bullying and religious abuse as predominantly White heteronormative students used Denim Day as an opportunity to “shore up identity” (Sanchez, 2021). To do so, these students were willing to threaten, bully, and attempt to cause mental and physical harm. In fact, these actions were normalized such that they could have a large prayer meeting in Nancy Kelly’s absence, light her door on fire, and make her feel excluded during normal, everyday events like using the restroom or taking a shower without repercussions.

However, Kelly experienced much more than this, and in her interview, she recounted one incident that went further than pranks and small annoyances. As Kelly recalled, “I was walking on the Drillfield in front of my dorm, and… there was a car came up, and I heard that’s her, and I didn’t know what it was, and then all of a [sudden] something came out of the window” (2019). Uncertain about what happened, Kelly “went over, and it was a brick,” and “the car sped off” (2019). Before she had time to fully

comprehend what happened, the car "stopped, and then it backed up, and then the doors opened, and the guys came out, and I ran" (Kelly, 2019). Feeling "terrified" and "hunted," Kelly "ran into a little alcove… and I went in, and I jumped in a bush… and they ran past me, and I heard stuff, but then I just sat there, and I sat there for hours" (2019). Kelly remembered "sitting behind this bush, like curled up and paralyzed" and not understanding "what that feeling is of just hatred… they were gonna beat me up *at the least*" (2019, emphasis mine). Kelly experienced this terror on campus and presumably in view of other students, yet she described this event as one in which she had only herself on which to rely to avoid homophobic violence. That she used the phrase "at the least" indicates that she knew, at the time, that a group of heterosexual men might well sexually assault her, too. Kelly described experiencing the dissonance of "being somebody of privilege, being white, being somebody who thought they were heterosexual for a long time" and finally understanding what it meant to be marginalized (2019). If not for Kelly's quick thinking and her able-bodied ability to run from her attackers, the situation could have been worse. Yet, even years later, Kelly recalled, "the guys had way worse… much more violence" (2019). Whether GSA members chose to revisit these stories in their interviews, Kelly indicated that campus activism did not produce any acts of welcoming from the White, heteronormative majority and that, in fact, threats were far more common to queer student experiences in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Key in Kelly's recollections was a feeling of helplessness. She knew that some avenues of support or protection would be unavailable to her simply because of her queerness. "At that time," Kelly said, "there was no one to tell. No forms to fill out. You

wouldn't go to the police. You wouldn't go to anybody because then you would be subject to more stuff" (2019). Kelly clearly described a situation in which institutions (the university, police) closed their doors to queer bodies, no longer allowing entry even to those who could sufficiently perform Whiteness. Without a concurrent play-acted heteronormativity, Whiteness was not enough for queer students to enter institutions and utilize their resources. Virginia Tech administration made it clear that, until they were legally required to do so, they would not respect the autonomy and self-expression of queer community members. As Nancy Kelly recalled, in 1980, Dean James Dean told GSA representatives, "You all have embarrassed your group in this university and you have embarrassed our university throughout the state, and we've heard from the governor's office, and I want to be very clear, you are never going to do this again" (Kelly, 2019). Because of the "embarrassment" involved in Denim Day, Dean told queer students directly that their forms of activism (and their outness) were not welcome at Virginia Tech. The mere existence of the GSA did not make Nancy Kelly or its other members safer in any way. In fact, the university administration turned its head away from harassment and (attempted) assault. With its lack of action, the university made its position on the value of queer bodies clear. Gay Awareness Week, intended to promote queer visibility on campus, had done just that. However, the GSA could not have anticipated some effects of queer visibility: the campus perceived Denim Day as a radical, physical assertion of queer rights and responded in kind to quell the threat.

Offering Institutional Hospitality

The explicit aim of Denim Day Do-Over was to make the campus more welcoming for queer alumni. Latanya Walker, Director of Alumni Relations for Diversity

and Inclusion, called the event "the type… that provides critical opportunities to acknowledge the university's past and validate the experiences of alumni from diverse backgrounds" (Williams, 2019). Specifically, Walker saw Denim Day Do-Over as "an opportunity to show how much *we've* changed" (Williams, 2019, emphasis mine). Speaking as a representative of the institution, Walker indicated primary participants: the "we" who had not initially accepted the GSA. The aim of such an event is to "show" how much that "we" has changed since Denim Day 1979. However, the terms are unclear. "We" does not indicate specific actors, nor the specific actions they must take to "acknowledge" and "validate" queer alumni. Further, although the university called the event a "do-over," the purpose was not the same; Denim Day 1979 meant to disrupt heteronormativity on campus, not count the number of supporters. Denim Day Do-Over, on the other hand, served as a head count for proving institutional change. Walker gave Denim Day Do-Over significant weight in terms of its ability to mend VT's relationship with queer alumni. With such events, "*we* show alumni that *we* mean what *we* say about diversity, and *we* are committed to building a community of inclusion and belonging" (Williams, 2019, emphasis mine). A problem of ownership becomes evident through this repeated use of "we": in 1979, the GSA "owned" Denim Day. In 2019, the university positioned itself as the owner of Denim Day Do-Over and the distributor of hospitality.

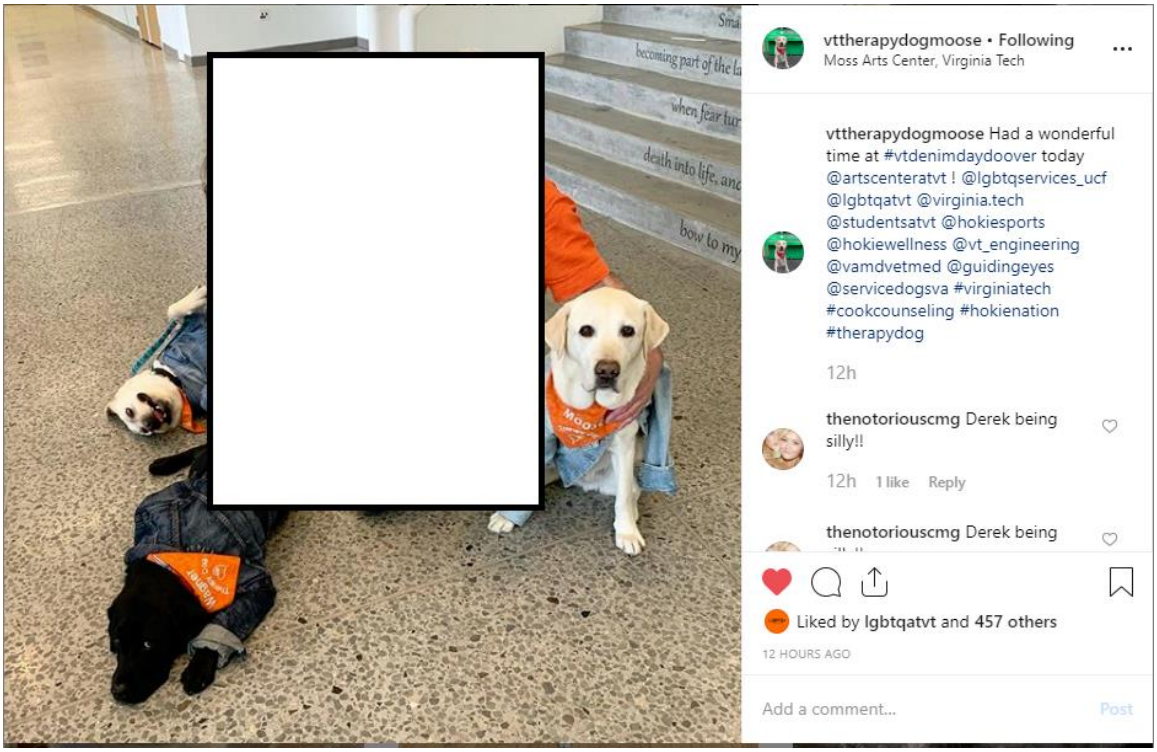
The university showed hospitality by offering affiliation, a technique Ahmed (2007) called "recruitment." Identifying with a new, improved university community would fix the unjust exclusion suffered by GSA alumni in 1979. Virginia Tech was particularly attentive to symbolic, iconic images (O'Brien and Sanchez, 2021) of the campus community, which the institution utilized to promote feelings of acceptance

among GSA alumni. A prominent example is how Virginia Tech planners used the Drillfield. As previously mentioned, the Drillfield is such a well-known location on campus that the GSA used it in their 1979 ad for Gay Awareness Week. As noted, Virginia Tech promotional materials frame the Drillfield as a place of relationship and exchange that "thousands of people" encounter each day (Virginia Tech). The university called the Drillfield "an integral part of the Virginia Tech Experience" (Virginia Tech), and Denim Day 2019 allowed Virginia Tech to offer a piece of the "Virginia Tech Experience" denied to them in 1979. Luis Garay (2019, "2nd Annual…") reminded the university community that "Friday (4/5/19) would be a good day to wear denim as that is when the Denim Day Do-Over photo is (at 12:05 pm on the Drillfield." This promotion indicates how important to the university it was to offer this space and have a good turnout at the Do-Over photo. Coupled with the Canvas ad that, as discussed above, presented a large Drillfield photo *as though* it were a photo of a past Denim Day, it is obvious how much Virginia Tech valued the imagery of associating the Do-Over with the Drillfield. On April 5, a characteristic Virginia spring rainstorm changed the location to the Cube in the Moss Arts Center, which, while not as symbolic as the Drillfield, is also a well-known campus landmark. It is clear that, in 2019, planners at Virginia Tech were well aware that location is symbolic. Further, they carefully considered what it would mean (and how it would appear to the public) to open spaces "integral to the Virginia Tech experience" to bodies that were previously unwelcome.

VT-affiliated social media accounts offered further hospitality by highlighting participation in Denim Day Do-Over. A prominent example is the VT Therapy Dogs Instagram account. Showing a picture of both the handlers and dogs dressed in denim

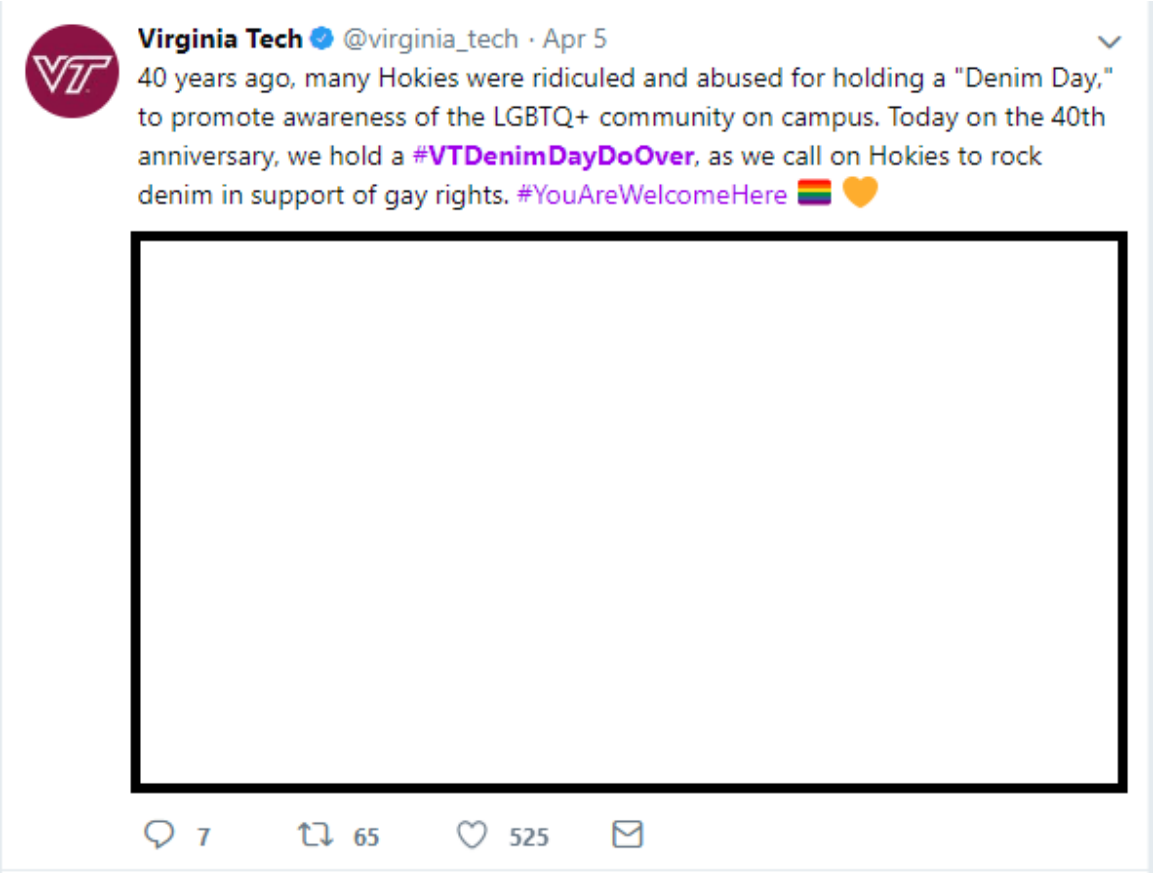
(Figure 5.4), the Therapy Dogs account centered positive feelings by posting about having a “wonderful time” (2019) at the Do-Over. The dogs are another well known,

Figure 5.4: VT Therapy Dogs Instagram Post About Denim Day Do-Over.



hypervisible part of campus culture; the dogs and their handlers often attend school events, and it is common to see them walking across campus or working therapy hours at Cook Counseling Center. Positive responses to the Denim Day Do-Over post indicated that the Therapy Dogs account is also popular with off-campus Hokies. Virginia Tech invited queer alumni into campus hospitality by having the Therapy Dogs attend Denim Day Do-Over, and communicating this hospitality via Instagram extended the reach of the message. Official university accounts also utilized digital materials to promote queer inclusion to a wide audience. The official Virginia Tech Twitter account (@virginia_tech, Figure 5.5), for example, admitted that, during the first Denim Day, “many Hokies were ridiculed and abused” (2019). It is critical that the passive verb phrase used does not

Figure 5.5: @virginia_tech Official Tweet about Denim Day Do-Over.



indicate *who* did the ridicule of abuse. However, the Tweet continued by "calling on Hokies to rock denim in support of gay rights" (2019), framing individual actions as the primary means of redress even though the institution participated in suppressing homosexuality in 1979.

The university included a short video of Denim Day Do-Over supporters standing on the stairs at the Moss Arts Center. This video promoted ideas of VT as an inclusive campus, and many other accounts redistributed it. Most social media posts using #VTDenimDayDoOver were retweets of the post containing the video, ensuring that "good feelings" (Ahmed, 2012) within and about the institution permeated the media narrative surrounding the Do-Over. Many of those retweeting were current or former students, faculty, and staff. However, Denim Day Do-Over reached beyond the confines

of Virginia Tech. At the time, Chris Hurst was the Virginia House of Delegates representative for the 12th district, covering Giles County, parts of Montgomery and Pulaski Counties, and the City of Radford. Hurst retweeted Virginia Tech's official Denim Day Do-Over post (Figure 5.6) and proudly proclaimed, "These are our values!"

Figure 5.6: Delegate Christ Hurst Tweets about Denim Day Do-Over.

(2019). In 2019, Hurst could say so; Virginia, under the governorship of Ralph Northam, was seen by many as a haven for progressive politics in the South. Hurst, like Virginia Tech, referred to an undefined "we," though presumably, he spoke for the 12th District and its people. This response from a state politician was quite different than the call VT (and Dean James Dean in particular) received from Governor John Dalton about Denim Day in 1979. Thus did the university publicly claim affiliation with queer alumni, even offering them access to symbolic elements used to build the strategic White rhetorics of the institution. Additional tweets from state delegates created a "full circle" narrative in which local politicians made up for the pressure exerted by Governor Dalton's office in the wake of Denim Day 1979. However, as recent elections in Virginia show, progress towards equality is cyclical rather than linear, a process of gaining rights, then having those gains chipped away until a new surge of activism demands rights, and the cycle

begins anew. That is to say, presenting Denim Day Do-Over as an ending of any sort is misleading at best.

*

University promotional materials sought to recruit and assimilate queer bodies into the institution (Ahmed, 2012). Such symbolism was baked into the event: the Canvas ad asked students to "be a part of history" by "[wearing] your Hokie colors and denim" (Student Affairs, 2019). This ad even places Hokie colors *first*, deemphasizing the presumable reason for the event in the first place. This emphasis on affiliation and hospitality diluted the protest and complaint in which the GSA conceived Denim Day 1979. In 2019, queer bodies were welcome to enter institutional space, but only if they adopted the symbols (Hokie colors) and affects (politeness) of the campus community. This progress narrative flattened real experiences and smoothed the edges of queer protest and complaint (Ahmed, 2019) to create positive feelings about the institution. Although it is crucial to celebrate successes in activist movements, as Ahmed (2012, 2019) argued, focusing solely on creating good feelings can prevent further progress. If everyone is "happy," there is no further need to consider institutional inequity and no further need for activism. That is to say, although Denim Day Do-Over celebrated important wins and large shifts in the perception and acceptance of queer people at Virginia Tech and in Southwest Virginia more generally, the 2019 event came close to arguing there was no more work for queer activists at Virginia Tech. The Do-Over, separated as it was from the overall QTPOC theme of Pride Week 2019, flattened intersectional identities into Whiteness and did not meaningfully consider intersections of race, gender identity, sex, class, and able-bodiedness with queerness. Denim Day Do-

Over stood separate from the other events of Pride Week 2019 because it foregrounded institutional absolution for the past and did not extend toward the lives and needs of queer people in the present and future.

Conclusion

Denim Day 1979 was a queer protest event seeking to bring recognition to the difficulties of being queer on campus. On Wednesday, January 17, 1979, jeans were "noticeably absent" (1979), according to the *Collegiate Times*, and those who wore denim outed themselves to receive further harassment from straight students (Kelly, 2019; Noll, 2019; Beadle, 2019). Gay Student Alliance members challenged the overwhelmingly White heteronormative campus not only to understand queer perspectives but also to recognize the wrongs perpetrated by a White heteronormative society. Responses from both administration and students let the GSA know that they were not performing White heteronormativity sufficiently. Institutional responses were not only homophobic but also intentionally cruel, threatening, and shaming. Straight students angered by the GSA's audacity did not hesitate to remind queer students they were not important at Virginia Tech. Denim Day was an incident of tactical rhetoric against the White memory of the institution, which sought at every step to deny them representation on campus and force queerness back into the closet at Virginia Tech.

Denim Day 1979 was a protest and an "exercise in oppression" (Benoit, Noll, 1979). The school framed Denim Day Do-Over as a school spirit event and even in its name centered on the institution's need to fix and "cover" the past. Promotional materials and commemorative events did not clearly specify the nature and purpose of Denim Day 1979, which made it impossible for audiences to understand why a Do-Over was

necessary. Archival materials from the Timeline of LGBTQ+ History at Virginia Tech allowed me to "read along the grain," as Gopinath (2018) suggested. I aimed to reopen narratives compressed by institutional memorialization. Decompressing Denim Day 1979 and Denim Day Do-Over encourages a fuller understanding of their relationship, as well as the relationship between institutional commemoration and White memory. Denim Day Do-Over obscured the meaning of Denim Day 1979 in favor of an activity that was easy for participants. Centering commemorative events in "ease" displaced Denim Day's original purpose and stripped meaning from the reenactment.

That is to say, in the case of Denim Day, who needed a do-over, and why? The event honored GSA alumni, but its enactment focused on absolving the heteronormative community of its guilt. That is not to say there were no good actors involved in Denim Day Do-Over. In fact, this event brought together departments across the university with administration, alumni, students, faculty, staff, and local politicians. It was no doubt a well-intentioned, earnest attempt to right a wrong. Though these goals are laudable, they did not go far enough to call Denim Day 2019 a "Do-Over" in the literal sense. An institution cannot right a wrong by covering its most painful and contentious elements. Further, the institution should not use such events to rewrite history with White memory, to flatten intersectional identities, or to blunt protest and complaint in favor of promoting "happy talk" (Ahmed, 2012). White memory is not an instrument of justice or reparation, particularly where large, White, heteronormative institutions are concerned. Denim Day Do-Over focused on the university's goals: VT needed to acknowledge its past and document change to absolve itself of institutional queerphobia. One definition of do-over highlights the problem of this approach: "[a]n act of refurbishing or improving the

appearance of something; a renovation or makeover" (OED, 2014). Actions undertaken for the "appearance" of "renovation or makeover" do not always indicate genuine change or a commitment to future action.

Instead, as Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) argued, we must approach reparative work through coalitional action. What would Denim Day Do-Over look like if it centered on intergenerational queer connections? What would it look like if it focused on intersectional queer identities? Denim Day Do-Over was a public history event with a narrow focus; constituents were limited to university representatives and alumni, although the institution recruited much broader public participation. Utilizing strategic rhetorics of White memory, Virginia Tech retold the story of the past in order to end the discussion of institutional queerphobia. This precludes further discussion about the queer future at Virginia Tech. The sources I constellated here to provide counterstories decompressed the terse, simple progress narrative here indicated in order to expose protest, disruption, and conflict. I argue, in fact, that the tension between the institution and its (potential) constituents *is the story*. Without this tension, audiences cannot understand the need for Denim Day Do-Over or the deep meaning of its continuance.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic prevented on-campus celebrations, subsequent institutional actions paid close attention to *ongoingness*. As of spring semester 2023, Denim Day is one of many institutional Pride Week traditions; since 2019, Denim Day occurred at least twice, and there is no indication that LGBTQ+ organizations on campus plan to stop holding the event. In this way, Denim Day is *becoming* integrated as part of the fabric of Virginia Tech. However, the institution must take care to be honest as it considers the continuing significance of Denim Day. Stripped of its protest history,

Denim Day becomes uncontroversial and inert. This runs contrary to the spirit of the original event, which emerged from the needs of the queer community and designed activism with those needs in mind. Left solely to institutional planning, an event like Denim Day risks becoming one where bodies “go through the motions”—something that provides a visual spectacle without any supporting foundation. If the work of bodies in motion is to rewrite institutional grooves of queerphobia and heteronormativity, that work must be careful and meaningful.

And They Lived Accountably Ever After: Tools for Telling Stories

As my case studies of 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over show, White memory is a strategic rhetoric (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994) that allows White institutions to "move through and around challenges to [their] space[s]" (p. 302). When used to tell the story of a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) like Virginia Tech, White memory creates diversity stories that are progress narratives. These stories allow an institution to focus on rehabilitating its reputation rather than facing historical realities and ongoing systemic discrimination. That is to say, the progress narratives created by Virginia Tech using the strategies of White memory focus on the institution's desires rather than those of Black and Monacan people (in the case of 1872 Forward) or LGBTQ+ people (in the case of Denim Day Do-Over). The progress narratives of 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over covered the bad feelings of the past by telling new stories that enlarged the group of constituents considered "interior" to the university. However, to change the "interiority" and "exteriority" of a place (Nakayama and Krizek, 1994), institutions must do more than tell stories, and stories must include meaningful and ongoing material commitments. The stories institutions tell must attend to the needs of the diverse constituencies institutions wish to include.

Institutional histories are particularly important at PWIs like Virginia Tech because memory ties to place and, thereby, to power. Narratives about which people belong in which places offer crucial rhetorical information about an institution, but any attempts at analysis must also consider *how people achieve institutional belonging*. As

Lamp (2011) argued, we can find this information by attending to the "visual and spatial element[s]" (p. 180) of constructed environments. I examined the "spaces, images, words, and symbols" of institutional histories and places at Virginia Tech; through repeated exposure, these rhetorical tools "impress themselves" in memory (p. 183). That is to say, the manner of institutional storytelling has a great deal to do with *where* people tell stories and the power to which those places afford access. Virginia Tech uses the lands it occupies to manage "relationships of exteriority" with "targets [of recruitment] or threats [to institutional desires]" (Nakayama and Krizek, p. 295). Denim Day Do-Over and 1872 Forward often presented materials from an institutional perspective, one in which Virginia Tech did not consider its culpability in homophobia or racism, respectively. Further, institutional public history events flattened the experiences of marginalized constituents into single-issue diversity stories that addressed (in this instance) either race *or* homosexuality and thus deemphasized intersectional analysis. Institutional progress narratives set conditions for access to rhetorical power; when the institution in question is a large PWI in the American South, those requirements ask constituents to conform to White notions of neutrality and politeness. In this case, Virginia Tech was willing to host difficult conversations but not willing to participate.

Although Virginia Tech often controlled the available means of persuasion (and the place from which rhetors exercised those means), the institution could not seal its rhetorical power away. That is, borders are messy. Though they present as clean lines dividing interior from exterior, "us" from "them," borders, as mestiza scholar Gloria Anzaldua wrote (1987), are spaces where mixing occurs. The results of such mixtures is often unpredictable. That is to say, the "targets" and "threats" outside the university's

borders often accessed institutional rhetorical tools (student organizations, the *Collegiate Times*, football games) to spread protest messages. Using unruly tactical rhetorics, they turned those tools toward the university as a way to force Virginia Tech to address discrimination, bullying, racism, and homophobia on campus. Their rhetorical efforts had unpredictable results. In 1970-71, for example, student protests succeeded in removing the Confederate battle flag from Highty Tighties instruments and logos and banning the song "Dixie" from all university events. However, in 1979, the Gay Student Alliance caused such disruption on campus with Denim Day that the university would not allow them to host the event in 1980. Students approached neither the administration nor the student organizations (CSA) that sanctioned such events in subsequent years, and stories about Denim Day disappeared until an alumna pitched the idea of the Do-Over. In 1997, Virginia Tech chose not to act on student complaints about the names of Lee and Barringer Halls, citing a lack of evidence. By 2020, due to the "national conversation on race" (Gendreau, 2020), Virginia Tech changed its stance on student protests and petitions and renamed Lee and Barringer Halls to Hoge and Whitehurst Halls. Even if they did not achieve their aims, student tactics forced the institution to respond. Virginia Tech was never in a position to ignore these demands because students used tactical rhetoric in disruptive ways.

These narratives push against and complicate the White memory-based progress narratives Virginia Tech attempted to tell at 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over. Ultimately, both case studies show how White memory works as "rhetorical whitening" (Ore, 2017), in which stories and discourses must be sufficiently polite before entering circulation at the institution. Event planners *misremembered* events from the past in a

way that continues to set Whiteness as a neutral institutional norm; this is how the institution can, at the same time, welcome constituents who were previously restricted from Virginia Tech's institutional space while also refusing to examine deeply its own Whiteness. White memory (and other White strategic rhetorics) operate in complex ways. As Nakayama and Krizek (1994) suggested, some White strategic rhetoric may use simple or straightforward techniques, but their accretion over time (Dougherty, 2016; Ore, 2017; Houdek, 2017) solidifies hegemonic storytelling and worldmaking. Although an invitation into the institution may shield one from the management applied to "relationships of exteriority" (Nakayama and Krizek, p. 296), there is no guarantee that the institution will change through inclusion alone. This is particularly true if the diversity stories a PWI tells focus on smoothing over and waving away complexity, thus flattening non-White stories into institutional Whiteness. However, this flattening is not inevitable. With care, all institutions can tell more responsible, complex stories that emphasize not the institution's desires but the experiences and needs of marginalized constituents.

In this final chapter, I examine how scholars can tell more just, accountable institutional histories using White memory as a tool. I am also interested in the theoretical and methodological insights that can be derived from my application of the concepts in Chapters 2 and 3 to the case studies in Chapters 4 and 5. In the first section, "White Memory: A Tool for Praxis," I examine how recognizing White memory in institutional histories can allow us to go far beyond goals such as "acknowledging" and "validating" the stories of marginalized constituents. Here, I explore three themes: ongoingness, accountability, and relationship. Through these principles, institutions may create more

just public histories, narratives that take into account marginalized constituents' stories and needs.

In the second section, "Implications," I think through what White memory contributes to cultural rhetorics, and to the field of rhetoric more generally. First, I explore how my project attends to and converses with scholars in the field of cultural rhetorics, and the use cases for White memory as a tool for understanding public institutional histories. Then, I consider how this project addresses the field in a broader sense, with attention towards how cultural rhetorics tools may help us to understand the discipline in which we work and the institutions we hope to transform.

I close with an argument against conclusions. I reveal the ragged edges of the project: what I would have done with more time; stories left untold; and possibilities for further work. I close with a brief account of my project's goals, and some questions about (and for) the future.

White Memory: A Tool for Praxis

White memory may seem monolithic because it emanates from power and, unless carefully questioned, it overwrites histories an institution may consider too complicated or uncomfortable. However, in this project, marginalized peoples' stories exceeded (Houdek, 2016) institutional narratives. As my case studies indicated, tactical rhetorics are everywhere evident in Virginia Tech history; they appeared in Denim Day Do-Over, "off-script" remarks about justice work, and student activism seeking to rename dormitories. These stories complicate notions of progress and the narratives supporting the idea that America has reached equality and no more work is necessary. Further,

understanding the complex, disruptive history of tactical rhetoric at Virginia Tech shows current and future activists how to make space for actions that allow marginalized populations to speak *around* and *through* institutional restrictions. This work is piecemeal, and the results can be unpredictable (as when the university banned Denim Day in 1980). Ahmed (2012) argued that this is normal because "[t]he struggle for diversity to become an institutional thought requires certain people to 'fight their way'" (p. 25). Those who fight their way must be aware of the "necessary relation" between persistence and resistance: "The more you persist, the more the signs of resistance. The more resistance, the more persistence required" (Ahmed, p. 26). The relationship between institutions and the constituents they desire to recruit is necessarily complex because of the dynamic between resistance and persistence, exemplified in these case studies by the resistance of institutional strategies and the persistence of student tactics.

If White institutions like Virginia Tech and their constituents seek change, they must attend (Shimabukuro, 2015) to the stories of people they have marginalized. This work requires careful, genuine institutional openness to critique, complaint, anger, pain, and other negative emotions and material situations exacerbated by systemic rejection from White institutions. Without such transparency and introspection, Ahmed (2012) argued, "an equality regime *can be* an inequality regime given [a] new form, a set of processes that maintain what is supposedly being redressed" (p. 8). Such processes work to "[change] *perceptions* of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations" (Ahmed, p. 34, emphasis mine). Through subtle perceptual shifts, "an institution can reproduce whiteness as that which exists but is no longer perceived" (p. 34). That is to say, inequity cannot be redressed meaningfully without suspending the

processes through which Whiteness is re-normalized so that it may sink once more into obscurity. Telling progress narratives allows Virginia Tech and its constituents to praise themselves for a job not yet completed. Such White memory stories center ease and good feelings over the complex, thorny narratives that ask an institution to confront its support of White supremacist and neocolonial ideologies. Telling complex stories is uncomfortable, but discomfort and disruption are necessary to understand that White institutional perspectives offer only one possible vision of the world.

In this project, I identified White institutional memory and, through decompressing the archival sources used to construct progress narratives, I created counterstories to contextualize struggles for equality at Virginia Tech. I did so as a conscious effort to move towards enacting *all* of Walton, Moore, and Jones' (2019) four R's: recognize, reveal, reject, and replace. Though these actions are not chronological, the process often begins by "recognizing injustices, systems of oppression, and our own complicities in them" (p. 133). Recognition, then, requires an institution to "[center] the experiences of multiply marginalized individuals" so we can "[recognize] how our daily, mundane practices contribute to the marginalization, exploitation, and powerlessness of others" (p. 139). According to Walton, Moore, and Jones, this preparatory "helps us see that the systems, organizations, and institutions where we work prioritize particular experiences and groups of people" (p. 139). However, recognition is not enough because it is not meaningful action. To redress inequity, institutions must also work on "revealing… injustices, systemic oppressions, and complicities to others as a call-to-action and (organizational/social/political) change" (p. 133). Revelatory work is complicated and dangerous, depending on one's context and positionality. After

recognizing oppression, Walton, Moore, and Jones recommended that we ask, "What can I, given my positionality in this moment, organization, or institution, do to address this problem?" (p. 140). Revelatory work "is a call to action" that "invites the listener to strategize for change together rather than alone" (p. 140). As we strive for justice, we must also "[reject] injustices, systemic oppressions, and opportunities to perpetuate them" (p. 133). This allows us to "refuse to support the behaviors and structures that oppress groups of people and leave them at the margins" (p. 141). Rejecting such practices also involves personal risk depending on a person's positionality within an institution.

For this reason, Walton, Moore, and Jones argued that "individuals can rarely reject, let alone replace, unjust practices alone" (p. 142). The last practice asks us to work towards "replacing unjust and oppressive practices with intersectional, coalition-led practices" (p. 133). Although individual action is a critical component of replacement, stopping at the individual level is rarely sufficient. Replacement often requires "shoring up additional resources, challenging power relations or meaningful personal relationships, and restructuring organizations through new policies and procedures" (p. 142). Ultimately, replacement is a "building and re-building" activity that "requires the consultation of others" and "the humbling of one's own idea about what should happen and how a problem should be addressed" (p. 143). As this robust framework suggests, changing inequitable and unjust practices takes time. Below, I consider how ongoingness, accountability, and relationship (three themes I identified through my case studies) allow us to attend to the four R's.

Ongoingness

At Contested Spaces: A Triracial Conversation (2022), Dr. Kerri Moseley-Hobbs summed up the philosophy of ongoingness when she said, "If you are serious about giving us something we can use, let's talk tomorrow." Dr. Moseley-Hobbs framed the conditions under which equity work must happen through this statement. That is, equity work must be ongoing to be both responsible and effective. Equity work cannot (and does not) end when an event like 1872 Forward ends. Moseley-Hobbs' statement emphasized that the university must continue this work beyond special events designed to show this work to the public. Institutional work must continue when the spotlight turns off, and institutional histories must avoid progress narratives that claim or imply that this work has a neat, clear ending, a point at which the institution achieves diversity and no further consideration is necessary.

Sara Ahmed's (2012) *On Being Included*, which examines institutional diversity work (and workers), clarifies how ongoingness might work and why it is necessary. Ahmed warned that diversity work is never simple, nor does it always produce predictable results. To understand "what diversity does, we need to follow diversity around" (p. 12). Following diversity around takes time and careful attendance and asks us to "follow the documents that give diversity a physical and institutional form" (p. 12). Ahmed's study examined such documents in a literal sense because she followed diversity workers around the university to examine how diversity statements attempt to create a "physical and institutional form" that absolves a university of further work. The work in my case studies *begins* to follow diversity around, but it does not (and cannot) make conclusions about whether Virginia Tech has done "enough." Though I took time

to do slow scholarship, several months (or even several years, in the case of Denim Day) is not enough time to fix institutional inequality, especially in a large, Southern land grant PWI. Ahmed wrote that "to recognize diversity requires that time, energy, and labor be given to diversity" (p. 29). Further, in a White institution, "[t]here is labor in attending to what recedes from view" (p. 14). To recognize diversity, we must also acknowledge Whiteness; skipping this step risks reinscribing Whiteness as an institutional norm. Further, because recognition is "material as well as symbolic" (p. 29), Virginia Tech must go beyond the symbolic recognition of events like 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over. Chief Kenneth Branham of the Monacan Nation said as much (Honoring the Native American Lands, 2022) when he argued that although Virginia Tech lived up to its institutional responsibility in telling the Monacan story, VT owes Monacan people increased access to the institution in turn. Telling new stories is not enough, nor is talking about the past.

Representatives of the Fraction family and the More than a Fraction Foundation solicited promises of ongoingness from the institution when they asked Virginia Tech to "talk tomorrow" if they were "serious about giving us something we can use" (2022). Though Contested Spaces offered the opportunity for White, Black, and Monacan people to talk about complex issues, the university chose not to have representatives on the panel, thus distancing Virginia Tech from the idea of institutionalized Whiteness. Though Historic Smithfield may have a great deal to answer for, representatives of the plantation offered ongoing public relationships and even believed that "Smithfield should fail" (Contested Spaces, 2022) without careful considering and acknowledging its connections to chattel slavery. Although Virginia Tech's Land and Labor Acknowledgement

(Virginia Tech) centers both the theft of Monacan lands and the importance of enslaved people's labor to the early institution, no one stood up to represent Virginia Tech at Contested Spaces. No one accounted for the institution's prior practices or talked about its commitments and desires for the future. This choice provided an unsatisfactory conclusion to 1872 Forward; institutional silence can be read as a lack of consideration for non-White bodies at best, and, at worst, complete denial that the institution itself is centered on Whiteness.

However, interactions between the More than a Fraction Foundation and Virginia Tech continue; since 1872 Forward, the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors voted to memorialize a three-room structure at Solitude, the oldest building on campus, as the Fraction Family House (Williams, 2022). In 2022, Virginia Tech dedicated a large public art display at the location. Denim Day is celebrated every Pride Week on campus, and a new Digital Special Collections exhibit foregrounds the story of Denim Day 1979. In other words, the stories continue. Locally and nationally, however, "progress" remains uneven. Incidents of homophobia (Castronuovo, 2021) and antisemitism (Cockerham, 2023) continue in Blacksburg, though the institution condemns such acts (Virginia Tech, "A University Statement…"). In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned affirmative action and ruled that businesses may discriminate against queer people. The long-term effects of these rulings are unclear and will remain so for some time. Still, there is little doubt that the cultural backlash against so-called "liberal values" will continue to make telling diversity stories difficult. Legislation like Florida's "Don't say Gay" law and history textbooks that argue Black people learned "valuable skills" through slavery hide negative stories and name certain topics as uncomfortable and, thereby,

taboo. In this cultural moment, it can be dangerous (more for non-White, non-normative bodies than others) to tell the truth about the past, much less insist that the story is not over and that we must continue justice work. As I leave Virginia Tech, I question whether creating counterstories is enough; below, I formulate questions to extend ongoingness in longer-term projects so that we might "follow diversity around" (Ahmed, 2012) to understand the effects of our justice work.

Extending Ongoingness against White Memory

- How often, when, and where do institutions listen and attend to marginalized people? Who represents the institution during these gatherings?
- What plan does the institution offer to marginalized people for continuing justice work? Who is responsible for continuing the work?
- How does the institution offer ongoing access to its resources? How does the institution intend to marshal resources toward relationships with marginalized people in the future?

Accountability

Marginalized people at both 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over made calls for institutional accountability. At Denim Day Do-Over, Nancy Kelly, the "instigator" of Denim Day 1979, clearly articulated that neither queer people of color nor trans people had their stories told. Kelly stated, "People of color had a whole different experience which was much more difficult, and that really needs to be acknowledged" (2018). Although the Gay Student Alliance had no Black, queer members, it did have Latino/a members (Olga Acosta, Lisa Barroso, and George Alvarez) who testified to the

importance of race in their queer experience. However, as Chapter 5 indicated VT interviewers did not follow up with further questions about the Latinidad queer experience, nor did they differentiate those experiences in any way from White GSA members. Further, Kelly claimed, “trans have a whole separate timeline” (2018), so no one attempted to tell trans stories at Denim Day Do-Over. Here, the institution relied on one person’s (medicalized) definition of trans experience to avoid accounting for transness on campus. Because medicalized transness was not visible on campus, no one at Denim Day Do-Over mentioned trans people beyond excluding them from the narrative. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, these omissions disappointed me, given the QTPOC focus of Pride Week 2019 at Virginia Tech. Denim Day Do-Over events were a notable exception to this theme and by omitting Black and trans perspectives the university refused accountability. Nancy Kelly’s language did not specify *who* should acknowledge these differing experiences, but given the institution’s place of power and access to resources, such responsibility inevitably belongs to Virginia Tech.

As Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) contended, “Stories are sites of knowledge making, theory building, and relational work” (p. xxi), so storytelling is a powerful way to practice institutional accountability towards marginalized populations. Accountable stories ask us to “listen carefully to each other and to call each other into more respectful ways of being” (p. xxii). By nature, progress narratives do not listen carefully; instead of calling one another into more respectful ways of being, progress narratives encourage us to believe the work is done and our problems are solved. However, accountability, which must involve *accounting for*, is an ongoing practice. Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) wrote, “The work of accounting for racism (or any other form of oppression, we would

add) allows a path forward towards transformation and requires a new understanding and account of the world" (p. 17). Accounting for institutional oppression means that an institution must do work. An institution must *show* its new understanding *through* new accounts of the world. This process allows an institution to account for itself so that it may seek transformation. However, Walton, Moore, and Jones to note that accounting for is not itself transformation; instead, accounting for something reveals "a path forward *towards* transformation" (p. 17, emphasis mine). An institution cannot do accountable diversity work without coalitions. That is to say, an institution like Virginia Tech must acknowledge that "each of us… is attuned to varied concepts of difference and intersecting, interlocking marginalizations" (p. xxiv) and that no one person can be "fully representative" (p. xxiv) of either a White institution or a marginalized group. Intersectional coalitions enable accountability, but they must also "expect missteps and a limited view" (p. xxiv). Accountable justice work of the kind that 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over sought to do, then, is complicated. Accountable justice work does not create or distribute progress narratives because those stories falsely claim to be fully representative of an institution and its many constituents.

The case studies I created for this project represent my particular and individual positionality within the intersectional identities I inhabit. As a queer scholar, I seek dissonance, conflicts, and contradictions, believing that we may learn something profound about our institutions when we hold their many narratives together in tension. As a White scholar, I considered myself responsible for bringing Whiteness to the forefront, particularly when it tried to become invisible. However, as Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) suggested, this does not mean I have anything approaching a complete

picture of strategic White institutional rhetoric at Virginia Tech. Nor do I claim a full account of the tactical rhetoric protestors used to manipulate the university's rhetorical network in their attempts to access institutional resources and acknowledgment. Though I understand that the counterstories in my case studies are necessarily incomplete, I attempted to tell them in accountable ways. I kept in mind Ahmed's assertion that "[w]hen description gets hard, we need description" (p. 10). That is to say, the complexity of a story does not allow us to forego its telling. Progress narratives may be easier to tell, but if we focus on telling a smooth, attractive, satisfying narrative at the expense of silencing some voices, we no longer practice accountable institutional storytelling.

The ongoing nature of all justice work means I cannot completely judge the effects of Virginia Tech's accountability practices towards the Monacan, Black, and queer constituents it addressed at Denim Day Do-Over and 1872 Forward. Marginalized constituents had different responses to institutional recruitment. Nancy Kelly noted that non-White queer students at Virginia Tech had different experiences from White queer students, and those differences "should be acknowledged" (2018). But whose responsibility is it to acknowledge, seek out, and distribute these stories? Kelly stopped short of placing accountability for telling these stories on Virginia Tech's broad institutional shoulders. Conversely, Chief Kenneth Branham (2022) of the Monacan Nation did not hesitate to say that although Virginia Tech "should" tell the story of colonization and pushing the Monacan people off their ancestral lands, the university's real work with the community was to "increase access" to the institution in the future. Dr. Moseley-Hobbs of the More than a Fraction Foundation also held the institution

responsible for its poor relationship with Black constituents. She reminded the audience that she, and other Fraction family representatives, attended 1872 Forward to honor their ancestors and tell their story. Virginia Tech, on the other hand, "[felt] like a graveyard" (2022). Fraction family requests to "talk tomorrow" (2022) demand that the institution participates in ongoing justice work, but they also demand institutional accountability. Non-White constituents clearly named accountability the responsibility of the university, although, as I have already noted, the university's responses were (and remain) uncertain. Below, I consider how identifying White memory in our institutional narratives might allow us to do more accountable diversity work.

Being Accountable for White Memory

- Whose voices do we center in institutional narratives? How does the institution provide access to the resources needed to tell stories?
- How can the institution use narratives to promote more profound, complex understandings of institutional history?
- How does the institution account for itself and its narratives? Does the institution go beyond telling stories? Does it plan to do so in coalition with marginalized people?

Relationships

Ongoingness and accountability cannot occur without a relationship involving genuine interest in and long-term care for marginalized people. Chief Branham said as much when he reminded Virginia Tech that institutional responsibilities extend beyond storytelling. President Sands and Mayor Hager-Smith indicated their willingness to tell new stories about Virginia Tech and Blacksburg at Honoring the Native American Lands,

but storytelling is only the beginning. As Chief Branham argued, Virginia Tech has a "responsibility" (2022) to ensure that Monacan people have affordable access to the institution and its resources. Dr. Kerri Moseley-Hobbs said much the same when she asked whether Virginia Tech was "serious about giving us something we can use" and told the institution that they should "talk tomorrow" about furthering relationships between VT and the Fraction family descendants (2022). Moseley-Hobbs differentiated between the "symbolic" value of events like 1872 Forward and the "material" value (Ahmed, 2012) of having "something we can use." In fact, she clearly stated that symbolic gestures do not provide material value, nor do they guarantee an ongoing relationship.

Representatives of non-White communities, particularly those from the Monacan Nation and the Fraction family, critiqued explicitly those institutional events that stop at telling new stories because new stories alone do not reduce material harm. In other words, Virginia Tech must not tell new stories without engaging in new relationships. The institution must take a meaningful account of its history, and, when Virginia Tech tells new institutional stories, it must do so in coalition with marginalized people. While Virginia Tech "feels like a graveyard" (Moseley-Hobbs, 2022) to some people, no genuine relationships are possible. Accounting for the institution's past is only the first step. Accounts at 1872 Forward tended only to recognize and reveal inequity, leaving rejecting and replacing those inequities for an unspecified time. Relationships between White institutions (Virginia Tech, the town of Blacksburg, Historic Smithfield, and others) and non-White people (the Monacan Nation, More than a Fraction Foundation, and the Wake Forest community) continue. However, it is unclear whether structures to

facilitate these relationships exist, as representatives of the Monacan Nation and the Fraction family, Chief Branham and Dr. Moseley-Hobbs made specific requests related to the material commitments that would facilitate ongoing, accountable relationships between Virginia Tech and marginalized populations. In each instance, the university did not answer immediately. President Sands, university representative at "Honoring the Native American Lands," did not answer Chief Branham beyond thanking him for this "heartfelt stories" (2022). At Contested Spaces, no one sat on the panel to represent Virginia Tech, so Dr. Moseley-Hobbs' request went unanswered. In the face of such requests, institutional silence is unacceptable.

As I noted at the end of Chapter 5, even though the COVID-19 pandemic prevented its observance in 2020 and 2021, Denim Day celebrations at Virginia Tech continue. Though I critiqued a narrative of Denim Day as a "do-over," making Denim Day an annual event at Virginia Tech may offer an opportunity to carve new institutional grooves (Ahmed, 2007), which is one way to change the shape of an institution, and, thereby its constituency. Denim Day Do-Over recognized and revealed the injustice suffered by the Gay Student Alliance. However, because the institution portrayed the event as a progress narrative, it also claimed to reject and replace homophobic behavior with one Denim Day event in 2019. This claim was dubious because it did not attempt to establish ongoing, accountable relationships with queer communities on and off campus. Repeating this event, however, may offer a genuine opportunity to reject and replace homophobia on campus provided the institution uses these events to work in coalition with queer people. However, even though repetition carves new institutional grooves and may create new habits, Virginia Tech must take care to consider both "symbolic" and

“material” justice work, as Ahmed (2012) described. Though Denim Day is a powerful symbol for queer equity at Virginia Tech, without material interventions, improvements are partial at best. This, too, is a danger of progress narratives. Though they are powerful symbols, they foreclose further discussion in favor of closure; where an institution believes it has achieved closure, there is no need for additional work, and if there is no need for other work, the institution is not motivated to seek ongoing, accountable relationships with queer people.

From my position as an individual White, queer graduate student researcher, I experienced very few relationships between Virginia Tech and its marginalized constituents aside from my own, and those of the people close to me. Further, as one individual interacting with Virginia Tech for a limited period (2018-2023), my analysis of and contribution to those relationships is necessarily limited to the time in which my life intertwined with the institutional life of the university. My interactions with Virginia Tech often felt impersonal because of the way my own intersectional identities affected my relationship with the institution. Although I am White, being a working-class, queer, disabled caretaker means that the institution is generally not set up to meet my needs. This is why, as Ahmed (2012) suggested, “We need space that is not designated as institutional space to be able to talk about the problems with and in institutions” (p. 10). Without doing so, we cannot “have conversations with each other from our specific locations" (Ahmed, p. 16). Without these conversations, the institution cannot establish honest relationships with marginalized people. Problems with this approach are evident at Virginia Tech. Virginia Tech provided institutional space for diversity conversations and admitted some past institutional wrongs. Marginalized people often thanked VT for the

space and time to have difficult conversations. Still, the institution hosted diversity events to opt out of participating in discussions beyond "institutional happy talk" (Ahmed, p. 10). Below, I offer questions intended to move beyond happy talk because to do so is to create a path towards relationships that enable accountability.

Relationships Against White Memory

- Who is responsible for continuing conversations about the "painful past?" Who provides the space to do so, and in which networks of power is that space enmeshed?
- Who speaks first, and who listens? Whose solutions are centered? Whose feelings and cultural narratives are centered?
- How does the institution enact and support coalitions with marginalized people?

Implications

White memory is a concept steeped in cultural rhetorics concepts, but especially that of story as theory and method. As a tool for rhetorical analysis, White memory is useful beyond the subfield, since *all* rhetorics are cultural productions. Rhetoric, in a more general sense, benefits from cultural rhetorics principles that ask scholars to reconsider the narratives that surround us, especially those we consider neutral, objective, or foundational to the field. Below, I explore the implications of my project for the field in both a specific and general sense, paying particular attention to the ways my work can extend and expand earlier scholarship.

Cultural Rhetorics

For the subfield of cultural rhetorics, my project provides a locally situated understanding of White rhetoric at work. As I have stated elsewhere, *White Memory and the (Counter)Stories We Might Tell* responds to Tim Dougherty's (2016) assertion that it is important for White rhetoricians to "know (y)our own story" (pg. 1). In emphasizing my particular experience, I am able to explore the stories of Whiteness told to me throughout my life, even if none of the storytellers labeled them as such. Through constellation, I juxtapose these stories with scholarship explaining storytelling as knowledge production, deriving the theoretical and methodological frameworks explained in chapters 2 and 3. Through these frameworks, I derived an understanding of White memory narratives, as told by representatives of Virginia Tech at 1872 Forward and Denim Day Do-Over. At the same time, this framework explores how to do responsible cultural rhetorics work as a multiply marginalized scholar with White privilege. As this project suggests, the work is complex, takes time, and requires much recursive scholarship. Though I do not consider my work complete by any means, I think of this project as a starting point for telling more stories and, particularly, revealing White rhetorics that hide behind notions of neutrality and objectivity.

I hope that my understanding of White memory invites other scholars to consider how Whiteness appears and disappears in institutional histories of all kinds. That is, as I have asserted multiple times throughout this project, White memory is not an isolated phenomenon. White memory is not particular to Virginia Tech, nor to universities more generally; rather, it is ubiquitous, a feature of so many histories in the United States that it is sometimes difficult to notice White memory at work. Given the particularity of my

project, I believe other scholars will have useful insights on how to expand the concept, and I hope that this work serves as an invitation to White scholars in the field to do so. Multiple understandings of White memory and storytelling would offer a more robust understanding of how the phenomenon affects institution building in particular and White cultural storytelling more generally. Cultivating a deeper understanding of White memory offers cultural rhetorics a tool with which to peel back the layers of concealment that cover over and protect Whiteness from view.

The Broader Field

As Malea Powell (1999) argued, situating Greek and Roman rhetoric in the center of our field offers a particular origin story, which is not often recognized as such. The field in general has portrayed Greek and Roman rhetoric as "just rhetoric"; that is, by naming Greek and Roman rhetoric "classical," we construct a narrow, particular understanding of our field's origin story. This, too, is White memory at work. When we prefer an understanding of Western antiquity as the discipline's origin story, we refuse to see other cultural practices that are quite clearly rhetorical. White memory shakes the foundations of the discipline by asking, simply, who created this narrative, and why? In asking these questions, I argue that cultural rhetorics tools must be turned inwards towards the discipline. To do so may offer a more complete picture of how we got here: how we arrived at a particular understanding of the term "rhetoric," how we make decisions about what to include and exclude from the term, and how adopting disciplinary origin stories changes the trajectory of rhetorical work.

Further, White memory is a tool to unearth the overlooked. Identifying White memory in our disciplinary stories and working past the assumptions it engenders allows

rhetoricians to open the field to a wider understanding of its identity. I imagine such work might look like Monberg, Yoon, and Sano-Franchini's edited collection, *Building a Community, Having a Home: A History of the College Conference on Composition and Communication Asian/Asian American Caucus*. What would it look like, for example, to create a project that focuses on *White* disciplinary history? What would such a project reveal about our field? This is cultural rhetorics work extended towards the disciplinary "center." Further, it is work that can reveal how creating that center was a centuries-long project of accretion and sedimentation into what we might call "Big R Rhetoric." Our discipline as a whole would benefit from a culturally situated understanding of where we came from and the assumptions on which we base our work.

This project also has broad implications for the types of work we do in the field. As writing teachers, for example, we might use White memory as a tool to think through the standards that we teach our students. White memory is an opportunity to question stories we have been told about rhetoric and writing, especially since we often transmit those stories to our students. Such transmissions may not be conscious; how often, for example, do we stop to rethink the received wisdom passed down to us about where to place commas, how to start an essay, or what a conclusion should do? Whose standards are they, and do they always help us achieve our goals as teachers? For Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), White memory offers a tool to understand programmatic histories, especially those programs operating out of Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Most programs preserve documents that can be read as a program's history, and the narratives those documents create sets a foundation for the work we currently do. That is, all writing programs are products of accretion and sedimentation, in which seemingly small actions

add up over time to produce a program's culture. This cultural framework is often hidden from view, but with careful, recursive attention, the historical documents our programs preserve can shed light on the narratives underlying knowledge production at each of our institutions.

Against Conclusions

Though my time at Virginia Tech is over, I wished to do more with this project—that is why I find it difficult to write a "conclusion" in any traditional sense. As I have argued above, this work is ongoing and, in truth, it may be difficult to pinpoint a finish line of any sort. Though I attempted to answer my questions about White memory at Virginia Tech, questions remain. For example, with more time, I would explore the long-term ramifications of the commemorative events in chapters 4 and 5. What, for example, does it mean that Denim Day has become a yearly event at Virginia Tech? What has the university done, and what does it plan to do, in ongoing relationship with the Black, queer, and Monacan constituents it courted at these events? Further, what draws a large institution into coalition with marginalized people, and how can those coalitions be sustained in productive ways? That I closed with more questions is also a reflection of the sheer volume of materials I reviewed for the project. Many examples of White memory at Virginia Tech didn't make the final draft because of space and time constraints. These stories, though untold in this project, deepen any understanding of Whiteness and its construction as the unspoken center of Virginia Tech's institutional identity.

Since I still have questions about its workings, I hope to continue my research on White memory. Regardless of whether that research occurs at Virginia Tech, I believe it will provide further insight on the U.S. cultural narratives that we presume to be

"neutral." As this project indicates, such narratives sit at the center of many large institutions and continue to reproduce Whiteness, even if they do so without calling it by that name. As I have worked on this project, calling Whiteness by name has become a fraught activity in some places in the United States. Textbooks that promote slavery as an institution that taught slaves skills, for example, may not mention Whiteness specifically, but in such narratives lie assertions of White paternalism—"it was for your own good." Critical Race Theory, now a bugaboo of right wing politicians and commentators, is ever more necessary as we attempt, once again, to instill revisionist histories of our nation as the "official" one, taught to our children in perpetuity. White memory, in other words, is still at work in large and small ways, and one project that offers an understanding of White memory in one instance is not enough to shift the tides.

Further, I resist easy conclusions to my project because ongoingness, accountability, and relationship entwine and they take time. White memory is neither monolithic nor easy to root out; such rhetorical strategies are most dangerous when they lurk, unnamed and unnamable, below the surface of conversations. To name White memory (and other White strategic rhetorics) is to move towards responsibility and to open a path for ongoing, accountable relationships between institutions and marginalized people. Yet, as Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) argued, recognizing and revealing these practices is not enough and, though my counterstories attempt to reject and replace White memory, one person cannot do this work alone. Any institution undertaking diversity work must understand the critical function of coalitions in such work. However, coalitions are not "easy" and, as Tuck and Yang (2012) wrote, coalitions do not end; they are ongoing work. One symbolic event (such as 1872 Forward) or even repeating a

symbolic event (Denim Day) is not sufficient; rather, Virginia Tech must attend carefully to what marginalized people say about their ongoing needs. This work cannot be accomplished in an institution-centered, top-down manner, but must emerge from the specific conditions on the ground in Blacksburg and the specific people involved in the work. Only by working in coalition can VT (and other White institutions) open a path towards equity. This work is challenging because it requires ongoing, accountable relationships, but if VT considers justice work an opportunity rather than a burden, coalitional work can change the shape of power relations on campus for the better.

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