Howard Journal of Communications

ISSN: 1064-6175 (Print) 1096-4649 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uhjc20

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To cite this article: Maegan Parker Brooks (2017) Countering White Conceit Through the Commemoration of Keyes, Howard Journal of Communications, 28:2, 186-198, DOI: 10.1080/10646175.2017.1283263

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2017.1283263

Published online: 08 Mar 2017.

HOWARD JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATIONS
2017, VOL. 28, NO. 2, 186–198
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2017.1283263

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Countering White Conceit Through the Commemoration of *Keyes*

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ABSTRACT

To mark the 20-year anniversary of the end of federal court-ordered desegregation in Denver Public Schools (DPS), the Front Porch newspaper gathered leaders in Denver's educational community for a roundtable discussion. In her role as a journalist, the author facilitated this conversation and wrote a newspaper article about the event. In her role as a scholar of rhetoric and race, she recognized that the memories warranted further analysis. Through a theoretical framework constructed from scholarship in collective memory, public deliberation, and critical Whiteness studies, she more fully engaged the educational leaders' discussion about both the desegregation era in DPS as well as the contemporary implications of their prevailing public memory. Pairing her analysis of the educational leaders' reflections about the desegregation era with a consideration of contemporary public discourse regarding the resegregation of DPS suggests how collective memory about the Supreme Court ruling Keyes v. School District No 1 continues to cloud public deliberation and overshadow policymaking within DPS. Beyond the specific example of DPS, the author's analysis builds upon the concept of "White conceit" to provide a useful theoretical framework for not only recognizing the ways in which Whiteness eclipses public deliberation, but also for potentially countering its overshadowing influence.

KEYTERMS

African American studies; White/Caucasian studies; rhetoric; collective memory; public school deliberation

Denver, Colorado was the site of the 1973 *Keyes v. School District No 1* landmark United States Supreme Court public school desegregation ruling. The *Keyes* (1973) decision was the first Supreme Court-ordered desegregation ruling outside the southern states; it was also the first decision dealing explicitly with "tri-ethnic" segregation, as the high court deemed unconstitutional the district's policies of separating Anglo students from African American and Latinx pupils (*Keyes v. School District No 1*). As such, Thomas J. Sugrue (2008) recognized that *Keyes* "had potentially far-reaching consequences for northern school desegregation efforts" (p. 480). Forty years later, as the district with the "fastest-growing enrollment of urban public schools in the country," Denver Public Schools (DPS) remains a relevant case for thinking through not only the consequences of northern school desegregation

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efforts, but also for analyzing the complex dynamics of race, collective memory, and public deliberation ("Denver Has Fastest-growing Enrollment," 2012).

To commemorate the 20th anniversary marking the end of court-ordered desegregation, the *Front Porch* newspaper of Northeast Denver invited leaders in Denver's educational community to gather for a roundtable discussion about the city's desegregation era. As a journalist, I facilitated the discussion and wrote a newspaper article about the event (Brooks, 2015). Recognizing the richness of the educational leaders' reflections about DPS's desegregation era, as well as their keen insight regarding present challenges facing the district, I was moved to more thoroughly examine how prevailing public memory of the desegregation era functioned within Denver's contemporary educational policy deliberation. To accomplish this, I constructed a theoretical framework from scholarship regarding educational policy deliberation (Asen 2015; Brooks, 2016; Theoharis, 2003), collective memory (Bodnar, 1992; Gronbeck, 1998; Hoerl, 2012; Phillips, 2004, 2010) and critical Whiteness studies (Gunn & McPhail, 2015; Seshadri-Crooks, 1998). I used this theoretical framework to analyze the educational leaders' discussion. I extended my analysis of their discussion into a consideration of contemporary district-sponsored public deliberation and policy proposals related to the resegregation of DPS. My theoretically informed rhetorical analysis of these texts suggests particular ways in which public memory surrounding the *Keyes* decision eclipses contemporary educational deliberation and overshadows policymaking within DPS. These findings are based upon a consideration of how the various recollections about Denver's desegregation history contribute to contemporary conceptions of the district's identity, paying careful attention to what is forgotten about the desegregation era and accounting for how the process of commemoration establishes core features that constitute prevailing public memory.

Ultimately, I argue that the prevailing public memory characterizing Denver's desegregation era as a failure disempowers poor families and families of color while concomitantly emboldening an attitude of what Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (1998) labeled "white conceit" (p. 355). In her definition of this critical concept, Seshadri-Crooks played upon two interrelated definitions of the word *conceit*. Whiteness, in her explanation, is a "conceit" in the sense of a "deception" or, as Joshua Gunn and Mark Lawrence McPhail (2015) elaborated, Whiteness is a conceit because it is an "ideological tradition that resists its own visibility" (Seshadri-Crooks, 1998, p. 355; Gunn & McPhail, p. 15). Seshadri-Crooks also enlisted the understanding of conceit as "arrogance," building from the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *conceit* as "an overweening opinion of oneself; overestimation of one's own qualities, personal vanity or pride; conceitedness" (1998, p. 355). I argue that White conceit, used here in both senses, is emboldened in Denver's contemporary educational policy deliberation through public memory that characterizes desegregation as a failure because this characterization also casts the rescission of *Keyes* as a golden opportunity for White families to return and save the failing district. Within this prevailing public memory, and because core aspects of the activist struggle culminating in *Keyes* are selectively forgotten, poor students and students of color are represented passively

as acted upon and in need of White assistance. These characterizations, I argue, overdetermine the script in public deliberations about DPS policy. To counter Whiteness's overshadowing influence, I suggest that leaders in Denver's educational community could do more to highlight the decades-long activist struggle culminating in the *Keyes* decision and to expose the particular ways in which White conceit has historically and continues to eclipse public deliberation. In so doing, I build upon the concept of White conceit to suggest a useful theoretical framework for not only recognizing Whiteness's overshadowing presence in public school deliberation, but also for potentially countering this influence.

Remembering desegregation

Collective memory scholars such as John Bodnar (1992), Pierre Nora (1994), and Kendall R. Phillips (2004) suggested that analyzing how societies understand and interpret their reality provides a starting point for imagining how those conceptions function ideologically and how they might be re-envisioned toward more equitable ends. Considering the ways in which educational stakeholders, in particular, remember their shared past, describe their present communal identity, and deliberate regarding future public policy is especially significant given the central roles educational institutions play within communities (Asen, 2015; Brooks, 2016; Theoharis, 2003). In the case of Denver, the dominant public memory casts the decades-long struggle to integrate DPS as a failure. Sue Edwards, former school board president, DPS alumna and parent remembers the aftermath of *Keyes*, specifically foregrounding the "dark veil" Edwards says it draped "over the district … 'Who would want their kids to be in Denver Public Schools?'" Edwards recalled members of the community asking her when she ran for the school board in the 90s (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 11, 2015). Referring to *Keyes* as a "punishment," Edwards suggested that the court order's "consequences almost killed the district as you watched the enrollment drop, as you watched people flee to the suburbs" (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 11, 2015).

Edwards and Laura Lefkowits, also a former Denver School Board President and DPS parent of White children, chose to stay within the district because they believed in the value of desegregation and they wanted their children to attend integrated schools. Nevertheless, Lefkowits clearly remembered the surrounding White flight from the district and characterizes this population shift as "the abandonment by the middle class of Denver Public Schools." A leading researcher of Denver's desegregation history, Lefkowits noted with precision:

> We lost 30,000 kids in the first decade as a result of busing and they were almost all White or middle class kids. … In 1969, before the first Noel resolution and the first busing that happened in Park Hill, the district was about 70 percent White. And in '95 it was about 22 percent White. (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015)

Although desegregation activism in the Denver community has been traced to the 1950s (Brown-Bailey, 1998; Pearson & Pearson, 1978; Taylor, 1990), Lefkowitz marked the controversial Resolution 1490, which called for a comprehensive public

school integration plan, as a key starting point. Resolution 1490 was introduced by Rachel B. Noel, the first African American to serve on the board and the first African American woman to hold public office in the state of Colorado, and became known as the "Noel Resolution."

The abandonment of the middle class, especially the White middle class, in response to the Noel Resolution and the eventual Supreme Court decree, is a common explanation provided for why desegregation failed (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, May 11, 2015 and April 30, 2015; Brooke, 1995; Brooks, 2015). A more nuanced explanation is the failure of DPS's leadership to effectively implement the court order. Lefkowits reasoned that DPS leaders further inflamed divisions within the city by fighting the court order (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015). The fighting in Denver was at times physically destructive, as arsonists destroyed one third of the district's school buses. A pipe bomb exploded on the front porch of Wilfred Keyes, a DPS parent and husband of district teacher Lylaus Keyes, who joined with seven other families in filing a legal injunction against the district (Brown-Bailey, 1998). A pipe bomb also exploded in the district office near Dr. Evie Dennis's desk (E. Dennis, personal communication, April 30, 2015). The ongoing legal battle took an economic toll on the city as well, costing the district four million dollars in legal expenses, estimates Dr. Sharon Brown-Bailey (1998, p. 155).

Nevertheless, nearly all of the Denver residents I spoke with during my three years as a journalist on the education beat agreed: One positive outcome of *Keyes* was that public resources are now more equitably divided among the city's schools (Brooks, 2014; S. Edwards, personal communication, May 11, 2015; A. Gray, personal communication, May 6, 2015; personal communication, April 30, 2015[1]). For many White DPS alumni, whose families stayed within the district during this time, the experience of attending integrated schools remains highly revered (Brooks, 2014). For DPS alumni of color like Happy Haynes, a current Denver School Board member and former member of the Denver City Council who has gone on to achieve great success in life, memories of the experience are generally positive, though not as glowing as the White students' recollections (Brooks, 2014). A woman of color, Haynes admitted that "on a personal level" she experienced the benefits of desegregation, but that her experience "was not true across the board" (H. Haynes, personal communication, April 30, 2015). The powerful stories of individual successes are often countered with tragic stories wherein, in Haynes's words, "the kids over here aren't doing any better than they were. In fact, they are [doing] worse" (H. Haynes, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

As the decades wore on, the desegregation order became unpopular among even those communities it was initially intended to benefit. Reverend Aaron Gray, former Denver School Board Member and former member of the DPS Community Relations team, explains his eventual opposition to the desegregation order. "It was not as much anti-busing," he recalls, "as more that communities needed to be restored and communities needed to be built up … one of the things that gives a community pride is that it can identify our schools" (A. Gray, personal communication, May 6,

2015). As both Gray's and Haynes's memories suggested, even the positive individual memories about Denver's desegregation era tend to sink back into the overarching characterization of the program's failure.

Forgetting activism

Such absorption is consonant with power dynamics manifest in DPS's contemporary public school deliberation and its policymaking. Advancing the critical notion of "selective amnesia," Kristen Hoerl (2012) distinguished between "absence that is inevitable in any commemoration of the past," and selective amnesia, which is an "absence that negates our deep histories of social injustice" (p. 196). Attending to that which is strategically forgotten alongside what is constructively created in the ongoing process of collective memorializing is a valuable critical endeavor, posited Hoerl, because: "consistent patterns of discourse that ignore significant events in the history of social and political struggle create an impoverished discursive landscape by depleting rhetorical resources for shared reasoning about public policy, national identity, and social justice" (2012, p. 181).

In the case of DPS, the dominant failure characterization advanced within the community regarding desegregation often overlooks the decades-long activist struggle that culminated in a landmark Supreme Court ruling. This selective amnesia is disempowering in several respects. Perhaps most problematically, forgetting the contributions of activists while foregrounding the failure of desegregation consolidates the roles impoverished families and families of color played to passive characterizations—White and middle class families fled the city, leaving poor families of color behind to fail along with the district's desegregation mandate.

Ignoring the decades-long activist struggle also emboldens a sense of White entitlement at the expense of empowering DPS's majority student of color population. Despite the pivotal roles Noel played in desegregating the district, for example, she is rarely discussed in contemporary remembrances of the era. For instance, in the nearly 28,000 transcribed words from the *Front Porch* discussion and the follow up phone conversations explicitly related to remembering the DPS desegregation era, Noel's name is mentioned twice, and only by Lefkowits—both times in reference to the Noel Resolution (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 11, 2015; A. Gray, personal communication, May 6, 2015; personal communication, April 30, 2015[1]). The word "Keyes" is also mentioned just twice in the over eighty single-spaced transcribed pages; and both times the word is mentioned in reference to the "*Keyes* case" (S. Edwards, personal communication, May 11, 2015; A. Gray, personal communication, May 6, 2015; personal communication, April 30, 2015[1]). Wilfred Keyes, who bravely lent his name to the collective of parents filing the landmark suit, is occasionally explicitly mentioned in media coverage of the case. Representations of Keyes like the *New York Times*'s mention that: "Arsonists … exploded a pipe bomb on the front porch of Wilfred Keyes, the lead plaintiff in the desegregation case" and Colorado Public Radio's comment, "A pipe bomb exploded in the Keyes family's front porch" are commonplace (Brooke, 1995; Brundin, 2013). The violence brought upon

the Keyes family by "arsonists"—never White supremacists—routinely becomes the story, though, which normalizes those observations representing the struggle passively, like Colorado Public Radio's comment that: "[t]he case wound up in the Supreme Court" (Brundin, 2013).

Failing to recognize decades of community activism and forgetting the contributions of brave torchbearers like Noel and Keyes is consonant with the dominant failure characterization of this pivotal period. This form of selective amnesia enables the Supreme Court decision to be rendered not as a victory, but rather as a punishment that came from the outside and toward which resistance would seem a fitting response. Moreover, casting the Keyes family as acted upon, rather than active in the struggle, is consistent with the larger representation of poor students and students of color within prevailing public memory of desegregation. Common are explanations like Lefkowits's claim that, "We lost 30,000 kids in the first decade as a result of busing and they were almost all White or middle class kids. They were families that had options" (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015). Families without options, as memories like these imply, were left to wither within the failing district.

The widespread perception that only those with no other choice stayed within the district during the desegregation era contributes to a savior characterization for White and middle-class families. Haynes knew this part of Denver's public memory well: "'All the people will come back and make it better,'" she sarcastically recalled the sentiment following the 1995 court ruling (H. Haynes, personal communication, April 30, 2015). This dominant strand of public memory—that DPS failed in the absence of White and middle-class families and that the rescission of the court order would bring them back into the district to save DPS from the destruction desegregation wrought—is permitted and perpetuated by the selective amnesia that overlooks activist contributions and represents those families who stayed within the district passively, as families acted upon.

Eclipsing deliberation, overshadowing policymaking

Characterizing middle-class families who fled the district as those with the power to return and save the district emboldens the already all-pervasive cultural logic of White privilege and entitlement. Traces of this savior characterization, for instance, can be found in contemporary DPS public meetings during which White parents from affluent neighborhoods have threatened to "move to the suburbs" or "transfer to private schools" if the district did not uphold such "promises" as exclusive International Baccalaureate programs or innovation schools to which their children could walk or ride their bikes (as cited in Brooks, 2016). For example, one White mother of a DPS student explicitly embodied the savior trope when she spoke at a 2013 school board meeting in opposition to a proposal that would create a shared boundary for a middle school between her predominantly White and affluent neighborhood and a more impoverished and racially diverse neighborhood. This mother enumerated how much money she raised for her child's school and suggested that

rather than seeking to expand opportunities for all students, what "DPS really wants is the fundraising might of the Stapleton neighborhood to prop up other parts of the district" (as cited in Brooks, 2016).

Public comments espousing White entitlement not only overshadowed recent middle-school boundary deliberations, this spirit continues to cloud the Denver School Board's policymaking processes. Consider the controversy surrounding the Denver Plan 2020, a 5-year strategic initiative that "will guide the district's decision-making, including where to focus and how to best allocate people, time and money" (DPS, 2015). The plan enumerates five specific goals as a "path" to achieving DPS's motto of, "Every Child Succeeds;" the fifth goal is to "Close the Opportunity Gap" within the district (DPS, 2015). The Denver School Board explains, "[t]his means raising the bar for all students while acknowledging that there is a persistent gap between the performance of our white students and our African American and Latino students" (DPS, 2015). During the *Front Porch* discussion, Lefkowits lauded the current board for this particular goal, even as she questioned why the Denver Plan 2020 is the first plan in 20 years to "actually spell out what the big problem is even in just that one goal by calling out African American and Latinos?" (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

Haynes explained that the absence of clear language around race in previous iterations of the strategic plans was the result of "being hamstrung by not being able to use language in your plans around race, ethnicity at all, you have to constantly look for proxies." But with this current plan, the board had "a big debate and we finally, we bit the bullet and … I can't tell you how much pushback we got from everybody in the community," remarked Haynes. Nevertheless, she insisted, "we got to a point where we finally just said … We need to call it now," explained Haynes, "these are the kids that are on the other side of our opportunity gap. They haven't had the same opportunities and they are the ones that we need to focus on and we can't apologize for that." The marked absence of language regarding race in the school board's previous strategic plans, the pressure and controversy surrounding the board's decision to mention race at all in its present plan—not unlike the example of the middle school boundary deliberations—provide glimpses into the ways in which Whiteness eclipses public deliberation and overshadows policymaking in Denver (H. Haynes & L. Taylor, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

Reframing public memory

Remembering the activist struggle that culminated in the landmark *Keyes* ruling is one way contemporary advocates for equity in DPS can, as Kendall R. Phillips (2010) explained the process, "disrupt the dominant enthymematic logic and dispute taken-for-granted assumptions about the past" (p. 219). But even the recovery of those often overlooked activist struggles risks absorption into the dominant failure characterization. This absorption is characteristic of "public recollection," according to Phillips (2010), who described the process as "a site in which public memories are disciplined in relation to the frameworks of public remembrance" (p. 219). Although

dominant memories of the past tend to serve dominant interests in the present, the circle is not necessarily unbreakable. Beyond recovering the activist struggle, which is a significant first step in constituting a more thorough and more empowering collective memory of DPS's desegregation history, educational leaders and community members alike could also interrogate the "established enthymemes of recollection," disrupting the "dominant enthymematic logic," and the "taken-for-granted assumptions about the past" (Phillips, 2010, p. 219).

The enthymeme derives its persuasive force from its unstated premise, which is supplied by listeners and thus engages the community in the process of shared reasoning. To uncover the enthymematic logic supporting the construction of the desegregation-as-failure characterization, then, it is useful to return to Hoerl's (2012) consideration of what is forgotten. Hoerl directed the critic to read the silences and notice how disruptions to the dominant public memory are disciplined. "[S]ilence may be the most effective rhetoric in the maintenance of existing power relations," explained Hoerl (2012), "as those who would seek to challenge prevailing hierarches may face recriminations for doing so" (p. 182). In the case of DPS, Haynes spoke about the repercussions the board faced for calling out the district's achievement and opportunity gaps and for vowing to address them in the Denver Plan 2020. Although Haynes was candid about her dedication to exposing these disparities and elucidating the reality of African American and Latinx student experiences within the district, a layer of invisibility shrouded the other side of the gap. Specifically, the side threatening to flee, the side touting their "fundraising might," the side concerned about what increased opportunities for students of color might mean for their children's DPS experience, remains conspicuously unnamed. This conspicuous absence suggests the presence of unstated premises that function enthymematically among those within the DPS community.

"Unlike African-Americans or other 'people of color,' who often represent their racialization as a conscious, historical discovery," explained Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (1998), "access to whiteness is never available to anamnesis. This alerts us to the deep relation between whiteness and the unconscious" (p. 358). To uncover Whiteness and its psychoanalytic connection to subject formation, therefore, Seshadri-Crooks studied moments of excess—moments where a joke or mention of the uncanny might reveal a piece of the unconscious identification puzzle. She described these moments as points of disclosure wherein the "unspeakable joke"—through the allusion to missing premises in the dominant enthymematic logic—"threatens to expose whiteness as a 'ruse,'" an unstable performed presence (Seshadri-Crooks, 1998, p. 371). I posit that Seshadri-Crooks's (1998) explanation of Whiteness as an unconscious or preconscious signifier of difference, her suggestion that Whiteness becomes visible in moments of excess, and her description of Whiteness's instability are useful when examining not only Whiteness's connection to individual subject formation, but also when studying the connections between Whiteness, collective memory, and the continual reconstitution of communal identity.

The stability of Whiteness as a racial category was questioned and the ruse of Whiteness's constructed nature became a source of humor during the *Front Porch*

roundtable discussion. Former Denver School Board member, DPS alumna, parent, and Chicana activist, Rita Montero remembers "the Latinos were White," when she attended DPS in the years leading up to *Keyes*:

> Back then they referred to … us as 'Caucasian' … and they would tell us well, "it's because of an anthropological thing that measures from your wrist to your shoulder or your elbow or something and that's what determines whether you are White or not White and Caucasian" and so we always got referred to as White. (R. Montero, personal communication, April 30, 2015)

Montero could not help but laugh as she explained this classification system in which district officials determined the racial identity of their pupils with a measuring stick. Montero's anecdote elicited eye rolls and laughter from those seated around the table at the *Front Porch* office. This anecdote, in fact, was woven throughout the conversation that evening—used to illustrate the absurdity of the system of racial classification twice more in our group discussion of Denver's desegregation era.

The implicit premise in the enthymematic logic that makes Montero's memory a "joke" is that the distinctions upon which students were divided within the district, and the classifications that engender real consequences for students, are unstable and fashioned from the district's design. The absurdity of these classification systems, moreover, reveals Whiteness as a ruse. Although Seshadri-Crooks (1998) tethered Whiteness to the moment of subject formation and, therefore, suggests that Whiteness is largely a preconscious and invisible phenomenon, the ruse—Whiteness's fundamentally constructed yet exclusionary nature—may be revealed in these very moments of excess involving jokes and the uncanny.

Just as Montero's use of humor gestured toward the absurdity of Whiteness's construction, the real implications of these constructions were also alluded to through jokes. For instance, Dr. Evie Dennis, former DPS teacher, Deputy Superintendent, and Superintendent of DPS, highlighted her close connection to Denver's desegregation processes through a humorous anecdote:

> I'll tell you a joke—it's not a joke, it actually occurred. I'm sitting on the stand for hours, just hours being lambasted by the opposition's lawyer. Judge Matsch finally said to me, "Dr. Dennis, what she is trying to say to you, have you done nothing to change the attitude of a honkey like me?" I thought, "oh my gosh!" … How do you deal with that? So I took a deep breath and I said, "Your honor. I always thought God was Black and I kind of thought she would be a woman, but I didn't think anybody thought it was me." He laughed and so I got the reputation of being the only person who made Judge Matsch laugh. (E. Dennis, personal communication, April 30, 2015)

Dennis's memory, featuring the federal circuit court judge who ruled on the legality of the district's desegregation plans, elicited boisterous laughter from the group. The unstated premise in this joke, immediately understood by those leaders in Denver's educational community, was that it would have taken an act of God to convince White "honkeys" in Denver of public school integration's value.

Seshadri-Crooks (1998) referred to the attitude that undergirds "whiteness per se and whiteness in principle" as "elaborate conceits" (p. 355). In so doing, she played upon two interrelated definitions of the word *conceit*. Whiteness, in

Seshadri-Crooks's explanation, is a "conceit" in both the sense of "deception" as well as of "arrogance" (p. 355). Both senses of White conceit infuse public memory of DPS's desegregation era. As Montero's recollection of DPS's absurd racial classification system intimates: Whiteness is a ruse, a deception. And as Dennis's anecdote about Judge Matsch illustrates further, this deception of difference carries with it a strong sense of entitlement.

During the roundtable discussion, Lefkowits extended Dennis's humorous line of enthymematic reasoning by suggesting that perhaps it would not have taken an act of God, but that altering the attitudes of reticent Whites would have at least required "consistent positive leadership that would call people out on their racism." White racist attitudes, recalled Lefkowits, were readily apparent in "all this argument in disguise about 'neighborhood schools.' If you ask me," Lefkowits suggested, "'neighborhood schools' was being used … it still is being used as a proxy for 'I don't want to go to a school with Black kids.'" Haynes nodded her head emphatically and added sarcastically, "'A few of them are alright, if you could send them over, please.'" The group erupted in laughter at Haynes's statement and the shared reality it conveys. "Exactly, right exactly. 'They can come to our school. We're not going to their school,'" Lefkowits remembers parents insisting (all quotations in this paragraph, L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015).

Montero's memory about the absurdity of racial classification, Dennis's "honkey" joke, and the knowing laughter surrounding Lefkowits's and Haynes's discussion of the neighborhood school-as-"argument in disguise" work together to elucidate the two unspoken premises in the enthymematic logic undergirding the failure characterization of DPS's desegregation era. First implicit premise: Whiteness is a ruse, a conceit, an absurd construction recognized as such by those living outside the purview of its privilege. Second implicit premise: this deception is built by and helps perpetuate a sense of privilege and entitlement.

The story's moral

The present problems facing DPS, most notably achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, and the resegregation of the district's pupils, evoke memories from the desegregation era and elicit hope that community members might find solutions in past approaches. Lefkowits put it plainly, "I am hoping that we can use the 20th anniversary as a time to get the community talking about this issue again and remember what it started out as and what it was all supposed to be for and kind of getting conversation back to some of those things" (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015). Aptly illustrating collective memory's pragmatic force—"the moral of the story is its *raison d'etre*," posited Bruce E. Gronbeck (1998)—Lefkowits's statement also suggests a pathway out of the morass wrought by White conceit (p. 56).

Remembering the activist struggle for equitable education in Denver is an important step in reframing public memory about the city's desegregation era. I share Lefkowits's hope that the 20th anniversary of the end of court-ordered desegregation and the instances of commemoration that anniversary prompted—a Rocky

Mountain PBS (2015) documentary, a Denver Public Library archive, and public presentations that stakeholders like Lefkowits delivered across the city, for instance—will help recover the activist struggle. I worry, however, that even these reclamation projects risk being absorbed by the dominant failure characterization and thus will not counter the pervasive ways in which White conceit eclipses public deliberation and overshadows district policymaking. To accomplish this feat, educational leaders within Denver must succeed where Lefkowits identified past administrations have failed—in "calling people out on their racism" (L. Lefkowits, personal communication, April 30, 2015). Put another way, change within DPS's culture requires, in the words of Seshadri-Crooks, "disinterring the 'white conceit,'" as a means of renewing "our analysis and understanding of the hegemony of color as it prevails in the visual field" (1998, p. 375).

I suggest that the process of collective memorialization, with its strong connection to the construction and maintenance of communal identity, provides one opportunity to recognize White conceit and to re-envision a more equitable culture. This recognition is a more nuanced way to call out White racism, as it makes explicit the unstated enthymematic premises undergirding dominant memories that define the district's identity. Rather than branding community members with a label like racism, which often forecloses substantive dialogue, reconstructing the problematic logic that implicitly reinforces the premises they advance holds the potential to more productively reframe public deliberation and, perhaps, to redirect policymaking.

Disinterring White conceit would also mean making visible the ways in which the shadows that Whiteness casts in the realms of public deliberation and policymaking contribute to a culture of low expectations for poor students and students of color within the district. Between the dual objectives of revealing how White conceit overshadows dominant public memory/contemporary public deliberation and naming the problems that African American and Latinx students face, lies the task of acknowledging how the two sides of the opportunity gap are connected. This might entail highlighting the ways in which White conceit informs race-based tracking practices within schools, which, in turn, limits possibilities for integrated inclusive learning environments. Such critical exposure, made possible by first explicating the unspoken premises in communities' shared forms of reasoning about present dilemmas through the memorialization of the past, demonstrates the utility of such a theoretical approach even as it points to the potential for ongoing civil rights activism within school boards.

Note

1. The discussion occurred at the office of the *Front Porch* on April 30, 2015. Panelists included Dr. Evie Dennis; Allegra "Happy" Haynes; Laura Lefkowits; Chris Martinez, Director of Small Business Opportunity for the City of Denver, DPS grandparent, parent, and alumnus; Rita Montero; Mary Seawall, former Denver School Board President and Member, DPS parent, and Senior Vice President for Education at the Gates Family Foundation; Landri Taylor, then current Denver School Board Member and former President and CEO of the

Urban League of Metropolitan Denver. I followed up with two leaders unable to attend: Reverend Aaron Gray and Sue Edwards by phone on May 6, 2015 and May 11, 2015, respectively. Biographical information not listed here is mentioned within the text of the article.

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