Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to request funding from Russell Sage Foundation for my study, “Whiteness in Crisis.” Broadly, “Whiteness in Crisis” centers the economic, political, and social transformations of the new century, the relationship these transformations have to whites’ ongoing racial formation, and the relationship between whites’ racial formation and place. My study proposes using in-depth qualitative interviews with approximately 200 white southerners across two locations – Memphis, Tennessee and Oxford, Mississippi – to answer the following questions: **(1)** How, in an era where whites’ dominant status is increasingly scrutinized, are these white southerners making sense of their dominant racial group status? And, **(2)** what are the contexts and experiences that white southerners draw upon when making sense of their dominant group status? Because my proposed study centers whites’ ongoing racial formation within the neoliberal restructuring of the late twentieth century, I believe it is a strong fit within the foundation’s newest program on *Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration.*

**Problem Statement**

In *The History of White People* (2011), historian Nell Painter remarks, “Being white these days is not what it used to be.” Painter’s observation is rooted in the neoliberal restructuring of the late twentieth century that has fundamentally solidified Whites’ material advantages, yet has coincided with increased scrutiny toward **whiteness**, defined as the historical and political system upon which the material, psychological, and social advantages conferred to people socially defined as white is built (Du Bois 1999; Lipsitz 2018; Roediger 2007). Whites who have transitioned to adulthood amidst this restructuring continue to enjoy the material advantages conferred upon them because of their place within the American racial hierarchy. At the same time, this restructuring has led to increasing scrutiny of whiteness’s underlying ideology, so much so that an entire book industry built upon ‘interrogating whiteness’ has emerged and now dominates the best-seller lists (e.g. DiAngelo 2018; Kendi 2019; Oluo 2018). Yet, the critique issued by these popular works often replicates whiteness’s power by obfuscating or ignoring whiteness’s engagement with and reliance upon capital, and the control of labor (Phruksachart 2020). This moment, then, is ripe for sociological examination of how white people think about and make sense of the American racial hierarchy and their place within it.

To date, we know very little about how whites make sense of this apparent contradiction between their enduring material advantages, and the increased scrutiny toward whiteness. Many scholarly works offer insights into whites’ attitudes toward other racial and ethnic groups (Lewis 2004), and some more recent research examines what whites think about their own group’s status (Jardina 2019). Yet the bulk of this scholarship says little about the contexts and processes affecting how whites make sense of whiteness today. We also know very little about how whites who have come of age amidst the backdrop of the new century – whites between the ages of 18 and 35 – root their understanding of whiteness within the contexts through which they matured into adulthood. This age cohort includes those who experienced the tragic events of September 11, 2001 as high-school teenagers, and those who have never known a world before 9/11. It includes those who entered the workforce during a previous economic collapse, and those whose employment prospects are increasingly shaped by the ongoing global pandemic.

Finally, there is a two-fold need to empirically examine how whites make sense of their whiteness within the shifting contexts of the contemporary United States (McDermott and Samson 2005), and to account for how whites ground their racial sense-making in the places they inhabit (Hartigan, Jr. 2005; Hoelscher 2003). This proposed research centers the role of place by examining how white southerners, specifically, understand what it means to be white today against the backdrop of the events and shifts that have marked the new century. The American South, more so than any other region, has shaped our collective understandings of America’s color-line: from its origins in chattel slavery and Indian removal, to the state-sanctioned violence and terror of Jim Crow, to its resistance to integration during and following the legislative gains of the Civil Rights movement, and now in the ongoing drama over Confederate iconography in public, southern spaces (Hoelscher 2003; Lechner 2018; MacKethan 1999). Because the American South’s color-line has been drawn so brightly, and because its racial dramas have played out in such graphic form, the region holds special significance for illuminating the relationship between whiteness and place currently missing within whiteness studies, and the sociology of race (Bonnett 1997; 2016). By bringing into sharp focus the contexts and experiences white southerners draw upon when making sense of whiteness, this studyoffers an important, necessary, and to-date missing contribution to our understanding of the continued significance of the color-line in the new century.

**Research Design**

My proposed study aims to put flesh-to-bone to **‘whiteness-in-crisis’** as a specific racial project of the new century. Through in-depth, qualitative interviews with young white southerners between 18 and 35 years old residing across two distinct southern locales, this study attempts to answer the following research questions: **(1)** How, in an era where whites’ dominant status is increasingly scrutinized, are these white southerners making sense of their dominant racial group status? And, **(2)** what are the contexts and experiences that white southerners draw upon when making sense of their dominant group status?

In-depth qualitative interviews an ideal method for this proposed study, in that they can identify the range and diversity of understandings young white southerners have toward their dominant group status. In-depth interviews allow for respondents to elaborate on their experiences, and identify those experiences that are most important in how they make sense of their whiteness. Moreover, in-depth interviews can help illuminate the cultural and ideological structures that condition, constrain, and define respondents’ ideologies and world views (Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll 2009; Stinchcombe 1986).

*Sampling Procedures*

This study proposes a purposive, non-probability sampling design that aims to maximize the diversity and range of young whites’ contexts and experiences that shape how they understand their racial status. To begin, I will construct a sampling frame of 2,000 randomly selected households from two southern places – Memphis, Tennessee and Oxford, Mississippi. Each household will receive a mailed invitation to complete an online pre-screener about an unspecified “social issue.” To increase participation, the invitation will include a $2 cash incentive. This short online pre-screener will gather key demographic information, including respondents’ year of birth, gender, race, marital status, education, religious affiliation, political orientation, and political ideology. The pre-screener will also ask respondents to identify their geographic place of origin, and length of residency in their current location. This will allow me to construct a sample of whites born, raised, and living in the American South, rather than just whites who happen to currently reside in the American South.

Responses to the pre-screener will be used to build a sample approximating the distribution of whites across those pre-screened characteristics (see Bruce 2020). To encourage continued participation, those invited to participate in interviews will receive $25 in compensation for their time. While the total number of interview respondents will not be known until the sampling strategy is complete, I anticipate a large interview study (N > 200) in order to capture the full range and diversity of the contexts and experiences that shape young white southerners’ sense of whiteness and their relationship to it.

*Site Selections: Memphis, Tennessee and Oxford, Mississippi*

Participants for this study will reside in one of two locales: Memphis, Tennessee and Oxford, Mississippi. These two sites were selected based upon their convenience, their distinct socio-demographic contrasts and recent anti-racist mobilization around their respective Confederate iconography. Memphis is a majority-Black urban city in the southwestern corner of Tennessee. Oxford is a majority-White southern college town in northwest Mississippi, approximately 70 miles southwest of Memphis.

Both Memphis and Oxford played outsized roles in the modern civil rights movement, and in the white racial backlash that has defined the post-civil rights era (Anderson 2016; Dittmer 1995; Eagles 2014). Most recently, multiracial coalitions involving a significant number of young white adults have mobilized in both Memphis and Oxford against the continued presence of Confederate iconography in public spaces. While the city of Memphis recently decided to remove their Confederate monuments from public spaces, Oxford’s elected leaders chose to leave theirs in place.

Attending to how white southerners ground their whiteness within these complicated, even contradictory, placed-based contexts can reveal important insights into the contours and range of diversity often missing in the sociology of race, and in whiteness studies. Moreover, examining intra-regional variation in how white southerners ground their sense of their dominant racial status can provide a to-date missing analysis within RFT of the dynamic relationship between race and place.

*Data Collection*

This project aims to collect data over the course of two years. Each fall semester the PI teaches an Honors-level, advanced undergraduate course entitled “The Color Line in the Twenty-First Century” through the University of Mississippi’s Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC). This course will serve as the basis for teaching and training undergraduate students in social scientific research design, data collection, and data analysis. Students enrolled in the honors-level seminar will be paired in teams of two at the start of the semester. Following roughly four weeks of intensive training in research design and interview methods, each team will then be assigned a sub-section of the sample of interview respondents. Teams will spend approximately 6 to 10 hours per week interviewing respondents. The PI, postdoctoral research associate, and four graduate students will assist undergraduate teams in their interviews. The PI anticipates that each spring semester will yield a minimum of eight (10) teams, that each team will complete at least one interview per week for the remaining ten weeks of the semester, and that by the end of the semester each team will have completed at least ten (10) interviews. At this pace, each cohort of undergraduate students should yield a total of approximately 100 completed interviews. The PI, postdoctoral research associate, and four graduate students will interview participants throughout the year.

The interview schedule will include five sections. The first section consists of questions concerning respondents’ sense of their southern identity: the extent to which they think of themselves as Southern, what that identity means to them, and how they think about it in relationship to other identities they may have, including their racial identity. The second section consists of questions aimed at probing respondents’ memories and experiences of significant events over the past two decades, including but not limited to: September 11th, the Wars on Terror and Drugs, Hurricane Katrina, the Obama presidency, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

The third section will consist of questions about the respondents’ ‘life history’ with the race concept: the extent to which they talked about race while growing up, in school, or with friends; and what they can recall about these conversations. Many of these questions will center on localizing respondents’ life history with the race concept, asking them to talk about the extent to which these discussions were rooted in particular understandings of place (see Bevan 2014).

The fourth section will consist of questions about the respondents’ present experience with the race concept: recent experiences and conversations they have had about race, or where race played a major role; what happened, who was involved, and what they can remember about how race was talked about. Again, emphasis will be put toward the localness of these present experiences, including recent local events where race takes center stage, including but not limited to debates about the removal of Confederate iconography from public spaces.

The final section of the interview schedule will focus on respondents’ reflections on the significance of race in their life today, including what if any significance they give toward their group’s dominant racial status, and the extent to which the significance they give toward their group’s dominant racial status aligns with how they think about what it means to be southern.

*Data Analysis*

Analysis of interview data will involve NVivo QDA software, and use a ‘flexible coding’ strategy (Deterding and Waters 2018). Flexible coding entails three types of code - attributes, index codes, and analytic codes. The first step is to set up the database within NVivo that will house the interview transcripts, and connect each transcript to our list of attributes. Once the interview transcripts are complete and the formal NVivo attribute database is set up, the students and I will collectively read the transcripts for the ‘main stories’ in the data. We will begin coding by applying index codes to the text. We will write respondent memos and cross-case conceptual memos. We will also begin to discuss and develop ideas about the transcripts. Indexing and memo-writing in this stage will generate a list of concepts and relationships between them help to describe multiple cases, and the contours of conceptual relationships. We will begin to develop hypotheses about the relationships between our white respondents’ attributes, and the contexts and experiences they draw upon when making sense of whiteness and their place within the American racial hierarchy.

Initial thematic memos will then serve as the basis for analytic codes that are applied across the full-data set. From the initial index, analytic codes will be applied to the dataset for analysis. The index code will display relevant sections of the transcripts, allowing for the research team to apply analytic codes one or two at a time. This will help maximize the purchase of each analytic concept across the dataset. We will use the query functions in NVivo to identify what if any typologies can help further organize and reduce the data. Creating typologies will help us to generalize from concrete cases by constructing a common core within a set of cases (Weiss 1995). Once hunches about the stories are built into the data (indexing), and once analytic codes are applied across the body of the data, the final stage of analysis involves examining just how deeply the stories are grounded in the data. NVivo facilitates this final stage of ‘flexible coding’ by helping to identify trends across cases, investigate alternative explanations, and also locate disconfirming cases and evidence that help refine the theoretical explanation (Deterding and Waters 2018, 24).

Flexible coding is ideal for this proposed study for several reasons. Flexible coding helps to construct an account of the data that meets the threshold for theoretical validity (Deterding and Waters 2018, 23). Respondent-level and cross-case memos in the first stage of analysis generate hunches about what we, the investigators, see as the important stories in the data. After applying analytic codes across the entire body of interview data, we will be able to use NVivo to examine how grounded the stories are in the dataset. We will be able to query trends across cases, systematically consider alternative explanations, and systematically locate disconfirming evidence. Flexible coding, then, provides a more complete way of accounting for spectacular events without overly stressing them; and ensuring we do not out of hand discount data that diverges from the patterns (Lamont and White 2008). Finally, flexible coding also facilitates data transparency, and provides ample opportunity for secondary analysis.

**Fit with the *Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration* Program**

My proposed study is well aligned with the stated aims of the Russell Sage Foundation’s newest program. My proposed research centers the ongoing racial formation of whites against the backdrop of the events and shifts that have marked the new century. At the same time, my proposed research aims to fill a significant gap in our knowledge and understanding of contemporary racial formations by attending to how whites ground their racial sense-making in the places they inhabit (Hartigan, Jr. 2005; Hoelscher 2003). Local understandings of whiteness vary, and reflect the “racial ecology of a community or region” (McDermott and Samson 2005, 247). By bringing into sharp focus the contexts and experiences white southerners draw upon when making sense of the American racial hierarchy and their place within it, my study can shed new light on how the social, economic and political shifts of the past several decades affect how whites are ‘doing race’ today (see Lewis 2004).

**Budget Categories**

The major budget categories are year-round funding for a graduate student research assistant, summer salary for the PI, NVivo software subscriptions for all undergraduate and graduate student researchers, human subject remuneration, transcription services, conference travel funds for graduate students and the PI, and costs associated with manuscript preparation and publication.

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