

Remembering Obama in the Era of Trump

By Dante Miller

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Sociology

July 20, 2018

*“I’d say this sounds really kind of terrible, at being a white guy, but I’m thinking if now all of a sudden everybody’s equal and whatever else, is this going to impact me in some way?”*  
(Cameron, gen X, Obama supporter).

Cameron, like other generation Xers, looked back on the election of Obama as a turning point in US race relations. Up until then, race was not something he thought much about. The election of Obama, however, cemented for him that the US was now ideologically post-racial. After all, whites helped elect the first black president in an historic victory. Cameron also hoped that Obama would be able to fix what he viewed as endemic social problems: poverty, climate change, and lack of health care. But Cameron also worried about what the election of Obama would mean for him, as a white man. Are my health premiums going to rise if we provide healthcare for more people? Will people view my successes as the result of my whiteness rather than my hard work? Is Obama going to be assassinated because white people will react violently to having a black president? Cameron’s perspective shifted further after the election of Donald Trump, whose rhetoric he found particularly problematic. Cameron thought the idea of Donald Trump promoting that Mexicans are rapist, drug lords, and job stealers on live television and social media invited racism back into America and would undo everything Obama was trying to fix.

The process of viewing America as post racial does not start with the past but begins with how individuals think about race in the present. Post racial ideals happen through social groups creating narratives about how past events similar to the civil rights movement change race relations. The process in which groups create narratives is collective memory or the distribution of knowledge throughout society about the past (Conway 2010). Dominant social groups use specific moments within events to tell the story of post-racial America. For instance, the narrative of post racialness is taught through only focusing on the effective parts of the civil rights movement that support the notion that America is moving forward. Individuals justify

engaging in color neutral racism or finding other ways to talk about minorities without using direct racial terminology (Bonilla- Silva 2017:3). Post-racial believers say phrases similar to “if I did it so can they” or “I do not understand why they (referring to non-whites) need special privileges to get a job.” This rhetoric fuels the narrative of post racial America, because people begin to have a historically inaccurate view of the past that informs their racial perspectives in the present. As a result, there is a phenomenon where individuals have a problematic attachment to post racial ideals and will not recognize race related problems until they are directly in front of them. In this study, I examine how Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials remember Obama in a time a heightened racial awareness following the election of Donald Trump. I use eight in-depth interviews to answer the questions: How do white Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials talk about race in a time of heightened racial awareness? How does remembering Obama in the era of Trump change the narrative of post racial America? I begin with presenting the literature on collective memory and racism without racist.

## **Literature Review**

The process of racialization gets told through memories people hold. The collective has a narrative they want to tell to keep the status quo in place. Currently the United States is attempting to tell the story racial progress through the lens of color-neutrality. Specifically, where history says that race is not a factor in predicting black people’s chances of achieving social mobility. Social groups talk about racial atrocities as if they are a thing of the past which creates the phenomenon of racism without racist.

### *Collective Memory*

Conway (2010:443) defines collective memory as “the distribution throughout society of beliefs, feelings, moral judgements, and knowledge about the past.” Understanding collective

memory through this definition allows sociologists to understand societal-wide phenomenon as collective created rather than the property of individuals (Conway 2010), meaning collective memory is a process that social groups engage in to frame the past, rather than something that is static (Olick 2007). The process does not objectively tell stories about the past, but rather interprets people and group feelings about experiences of past events. Conway (2010) explains that social groups pick and choose what parts of events are important and worth preserving to create a narrative that fuels their ideas. For example, after the election of President Barack Obama, individuals began to think that Martin Luther King Jr. was president of the United States (Morgan 2013) because Obama engaged politics in a way America has not seen since the 1960s. Additionally, the two individuals mirrored actions and were frequently pictured together on mnemonic devices such as t-shirts, the public's memory became distorted by inaccurate historical representation (Morgan 2013). Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama defied the stereotypes of black men in the political world and because Obama was reaching for the highest power in the country, it was assumed that Martin Luther King Jr. did too (Morgan 2013). Obama's reframing of the civil rights movement using vivid imagery of "black freedom struggle" saw the movement as being effective and moved Americans past the conversation of race (Hill 2017). The process of reframing engages with collective forgetting, to preserve the power structures of the status quo, which makes it difficult to process that past (Grau 2014).

People attach meaning to memories no matter what story they tell (Grau 2014). Part of this phenomenon is because social groups remember half-truths to liberate the present from the past grips (Schwartz 1991). Social groups establish a narrative they want to tell about the past and attempt to reshape stories to fit into this "new" understanding of the past in relation to the present (Schwartz 1991). In turn, memories that do not fit into the new narrative of the past are

not credible (Schwartz 1991). The past adds a nostalgia that people want to cling on to and there is a longing for simplicity that encourages blissful ignorance (Grau 2014). Narratives are in a constant state of evolution and change in unpredictable ways but always prioritize ways of knowing that create inequality (Hill 2017). Prioritizing remembering or forgetting in a manner that pushes societies to prematurely move forward that does not reflect the present is a common practice used by politicians to reshape marginalized groups understanding of the past (Conway 2010, Verovsek 2016). Politicians make the present not only seem like a better place, but also further an agenda that keeps the status quo forms of inequality present (Verovsek 2016). The public unconsciously absorbs interpretations of the past and individual memories that attempt to challenge the reframing are pushed to the side in favor of the dominant narrative (Conway 2010; Grau 2014; Verovsek 2016).

### *Generations and Collective Memory*

Griffin (2004) explains that challenging the public memory of events does not always happen because generational gaps exist in education and having individuals who live through events change what they say. Historical events are not meaningful at the time of occurrence, because they do not encompass what life is like at that time (Griffin 2004). Memories and recalling events are important later in life because it takes personal identity and knowledge of social realities into account (Schuman and Scott 1989; Griffin 2004). Each generation has an imprint of social and political events that shape how they remember events and their understanding of politics today through political framing and experienced events (Schuman and Scott 1989; Verovsek 2016). Political attitudes and behaviors can be traced to a past event or past telling of an event which each generation interprets differently, meaning each generations memory of the event is different, because to some cohorts of people there are “key happenings”

that shape their political views, and other cohorts do not see them as a big deal, because they do not coincide with what is happening in the present (Griffin 2004; Schuman and Scott 1989).

How generations remember events is based on the long-term changes that it made in peoples lives and if there is an emotional attachment to events (Griffin 2004; Grau 2014). For example, different cohorts of people remember Easter Sunday 1939 differently (Sandage 1993). A group of black people gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to hold a concert in the name of civil rights, because Lincoln stood for freedom for them. However, white people during that time hated Lincoln, because he was remembered as someone who committed crimes against the south by freeing the slaves (Sandage 1993).

Sandage (1993) used this example to show the difference between how people understood the gathering of people, similar to Hill (2017) argument where Obama and younger generations have a different relationship to the civil rights movement, because there is a different emotional attachment. Older generations saw Obama's retelling and refocusing for the civil rights movement as a way to engage in collective forgetting, but to younger generations it was seen as a way to explain how far black freedom struggles have come (Hill 2017). Schwartz (1991) indicates that this reshaping worked, because it fit with the current narrative of progress and hope. While the latter may be true, engaging in collective forgetting is still a form of power that controls memory and how it functions in the larger realm of politics (Verovsek 2016; Grau 2014). Memory manipulation is used to give the illusion that progress is happening to make it seem like the status quo is better than the past and is associated with status and how systems are set up to maintain the socioeconomic power dynamic between politicians and members of society (Mitchell 2003, Verovsek 2016).

*Racialization of Collective Memory*

Collective memory shapes how social groups think about race. Post racial ideals cause white people to make decisions without thinking about history, policies, or even race in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2017, Grau 2014). After the civil rights movement, most older generation white adults (Baby Boomer and generation X) stopped being absorbed in racial ideology. Older white adults have a frame of reference for what life was like for black people in the '60s so life is better for them now than it was before (Hill 2017). When talking about policies or even the need to factor in race no longer exist, the dominant group (white people) can uphold memories that suit their needs and beliefs without feeling guilty (Verovsek 2016). This can hinder one's ability to pinpoint problems in the status quo. If individuals assume the world is great, then there is not a need to fix it.

Bonilla-Silva (2017:56) calls the process of overlooking race racism without racist. He breaks the theory into four frames: abstract liberalism which is, using ideas from political and economic liberalism to discuss policy in an irrational manner; naturalization which is, explaining the division between black and white people as natural; cultural racism, or using culture based arguments to explain why racial minorities are not making social progress; and minimization which is, denying race as the central factor to black people making progress in the United States. Abstract liberalism, minimization, naturalization, and cultural racism, explain race as a phenomenon to be done, over, and should be forgotten in favor of a color-neutral way of thinking.

Overestimating racial progress creates cruel optimism, or "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant 2006:21). Because memory is constantly being reshaped to fit into an understanding that makes racial problems seem great, individuals have a hard time grasping the concept of something being wrong with racial problems in their social

world (Berlant 2006, Grau 2014). Killian (1971) adds by saying people are optimistic because the existing social system is functioning just fine, and only small fixes need to be made to correct minor injustices. Even if public memory does not get distorted, there is still a collective conditioning of social groups that causes policies to fail, leading to systems that are failing staying in place even if they marginalize groups of people (Killian 1971, Grau 2014). If the world is getting better and people are equal, then there is not a need to think about what policies you as an individual endorse.

While being optimistic makes people feel good, it does not assist in making meaningful racial progress (Bonilla-Silva 2017, Berlant 2006, Grau 2014). Throughout this paper I argue the election of Obama ushered in a new era of cruel optimism that led to a heightened racialized violence and causes white individuals to engage in color-neutral racism to tell the story of progress in present day America.

## **Methods**

### *Data Collection and Participants*

For this study I utilized in person interviews, because it provides an avenue to describe the processes subjects use to reach conclusions about the election of Obama and President Trump, namely how the two events produced cruel optimism in American society (Weiss 1994). Interviews are the most accurate way to develop a holistic description of systems and institutions (Weiss 1994), in this case how racism without racist lead to Donald Trump becoming the president of the United States. Each interview was roughly an hour and consisted of open ended questions about the subjects first political memory, the 2008 election, and the 2016 election. I chose to interview self-identified white people across Generation X, defined by the Pew Research Center (2018) as someone born between 1965-1980 and Millennials, defined by Pew

Research Center (2018) as someone born between 1981-1996. There was also one Baby Boomer, defined by Pew Research Center (2018) as an individual born between 1946-1964, interviewed. Of the eight participants 62.5% of them are men while 37.5% are women. Nearly all their work is in higher education, ranging from student to upper level professionals. Of the eight participants 50% are Millennials, 37.5% Generation X, and 12.5% Baby Boomers. Nearly all of them have a college degree and are working on/ already have a masters or PhD in various areas.

### *Analysis*

To find subjects for this study I sent a call to political groups on the Lower Southeast University (LSU) campus, as well as pulling from my own personal network of people. I specifically picked white people in these generation, because white people have the most division among their voters. They also have more variation in political affiliation than any other group of people in the United States because they hold the most political power. I specifically chose Generation X, Baby Boomers and Millennials, because the largest voting block is shifting from Baby Boomers to Millennials in terms of numbers, but not in terms of political engagement.

For analysis I am using thematic coding or, identifying passages of text that are linked by themes to shape analysis (Esterberg 2002:157). This method is one of the best ways to analyze qualitative data, because it provides a clear evidence to answer the research question at hand. I used 198 codes divided into eight categories: Changing perspectives, creating group differences, first exposure, in vivo, politicizing, priding, questions, and racializing. With these codes, I took excerpts from the interviews and attached them to multiple codes. After the initial coding process was complete, I compressed the codes into two categories to highlight the excerpts that talked about racialization. I also wrote memos about how each passage related to one another and how

they relate to sociological concepts. All names and places are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the subjects. (See Table 1 For results)

Table 1

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Generation</b>	<b>Job</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2016</b>
Randy	Man	X	Higher Ed Pro	Obama	Clinton
Jacob	Man	M	Student	N/A	Clinton
Jessica	Woman	X	Student	McCain?	Clinton
Cameron	Man	X	Higher Ed Pro	Obama	Clinton
Lisa	Woman	X	Business owner/ Student	McCain	Trump
Tyson	Man	M	Student	N/A	Clinton
Miranda	Woman	M	Student	Obama?	Clinton
Jason	Man	X	Higher Ed Pro	Obama	Clinton

## **FINDINGS**

People use color-neutral racism to justify racialized politics that continue to marginalize black people in the United States today. Throughout the following section I will show that that color-neutral racism is alive and well post the election of president Obama. It permeates discussions about policy, leads to abstractions about race in the most incoherent ways, and attempts to erase the past through the understanding of the present.

### *Racetalk Through Policy*

Racetalk or finding ways to talk about race without using explicit racial language (Bonilla-Silva 2017), happens in a variety of ways. It includes specific rhetoric people use to justify their views on racial matters such as: “some of my best friends are black”, “I’m not racist, but”, and “I am not black, so I do not know” (Bonilla-Silva 2017). Color-neutral racism is

commonly expressed when discussing explicit racial policies similar to affirmative action, but also occurs in a deracialized form. Throughout this section I will demonstrate how color-neutral racism permeates discussions of deracialized policies and social policy.

### *Deracializing Racial Policy*

Abstract liberalism involves using ideas from political liberalism to explain racial manners. By framing policies in terms of abstract liberalism, white people can appear rational and moral without thinking about practical approaches to political problems that produce racial inequality. There are attempts to appear anti-racist before, during, and after they make their point. Bonilla-Silva (2017:56) explains abstract liberalism in terms of equal opportunity over affirmative action where white individuals explain how they would rather have everyone be given the same opportunity, over black people getting “special privileges” to move throughout society. However, Bonilla-Silva uses abstract liberalism to discuss views on explicit race-based policies but does not talk about them in a non-race-based way. I present an alternative framing that puts deracialized racial policies at the forefront, including terrorist policies and social welfare reform. An example of deracialized racial policy framing through terrorist policies comes from Jessica (Generation X, did not vote, liked McCain). I asked her about the biggest accomplishments of Trump:

“Depends on what you mean by accomplishment because accomplishment has a positive valence to it, and I don’t see him as having really done anything positive. If there is a way to strengthen immigration policy, so that we can screen out terrorists better that doesn’t become a racist policy and you know it doesn’t. I don’t wanna keep out Syrians, but I do think if there are some things we can do to screen out legit terrorists that would be good. So, I hesitate to say I like what he has done on immigration because it just kept out too many people who really needed our help. That’s not right. I don’t know what else has he done.”

Jessica sets the stage for being an anti-racist by saying that she does not think President Trump, whom she frames as racist, has done anything positive. This creates distance between the

racist and the non-racist, but implying “I am not like them,” or what Bonilla-Silva (2017:87) calls “projection.” Now that distance is created and there is not an explicit question regarding racialized policies Jessica has the opportunity to justify policies that are inherently racialized. She uses the designation of terrorist and explains how they need to be kept out of the United States specifically citing Syria. She then goes on to explain that she does not want to keep all Syrian refugees out, but does not articulate a way to legitimately “screen out” terrorists and thus leading to a minimal defending of the policies that ban individuals from muslim-majority, Middle Eastern countries. Jessica also explains that she does not want a terrorist policy to become a racialized policy but ignores that the designation of Terrorist comes from western ideas that “Muslims” or brown people from the Middle East are out to destroy the western way of life by any means necessary. The example from Jessica has racial undertones, but she never mentions a specific race because this would require her to point out specific racial characteristics to adequately point out what a terrorist is.

### *Social policy*

Race talk also happens through the specific policies that white people think politicians will advocate for. Because politics are inherently racialized, white people in this study began to think that race relations in the United States would start to change due to the election of Obama. Obama running for president caused all of the white people in this study, regardless of whom they supported, to think he was only going to advocate for policies that benefited black people. Even though white people claimed to want a form equal opportunity they worried opportunities for blacks in particular would come at white people’s expense. Uncertainty about the future led to irrational thoughts about how “unfair” the policies Obama advocates for would be. An

example racetalk through social policy comes from Cameron, (generation X, Obama supporter) in response to a question about his fears excerpted at the start of this paper. Cameron continued:

“Is that [worry about negative effects for me] a fair thing to think? Not really, but I I've had plenty of opportunities and things like that, but I mean that was one thing I thought of course was I was thinking, okay, so how far will he go and doing these things and does that end up impacting me in some way? And is that good or bad? I don't even know what it would be because we'd never been down that road, this I mean even the healthcare thing. t's just going to raise my healthcare [costs]? Lower it? Because I've always had healthcare. Would it work? it's good to be able to get healthcare [for]all these other people. What does that mean? I'm gonna have to pay more. And what does that mean? And is that okay? And you know, it's just that unknown where you say, okay, we're going to do some of these things that we'll talk about for awhile, but they've always been sort of these pipe dreams that no one ever did anything about. And you don't want the real logistics or what the real specifics that are going to be and how it's gonna work out. So, I mean, I wasn't afraid. I mean I was happy with the direction he was going to. That I felt was going to go. I guess I would say there's a lot of unknowns that I didn't know how they're going to play out.”

Cameron is expressing his concern about new social policies that could get passed by the Obama administration. He tries to couch it in uncertainty about the future where he explains, since America has not been down the “equality road” yet then we do not know what that looks like so there cannot be a determination of it will be good or bad so why try it. Cameron assumes because Obama is black that the only thing he will focus on is social policy for black people, even though his policies are race neutral (Bonilla-Silva 2017). Underlying his initial interpretation is the assumption that black people serve only black people and Obama was secretly pawn to take the white man down. Second, he is expressing a form of fear that recognizes that he has been afforded privilege, but he does not want to give it up. He seems to want black progress--as long as it does not come at his or other white people’s personal expense.

Cameron also expressed uncertainty about the racial dynamics of the country, fearing upheaval and violence like in the ‘60s. He continued:

“Another fear I would say is, how long is he going to be an office? ... Assassinate him or whatever. Kidnap him. Kidnap his family. Do something some way to kind of make

things hard for them or do something to him.... I just assumed that somebody in the south will be like no fricking way and they'd figure out a way to get to him or to him or do something. Yeah, I'm hurt.”

After expressing fear about the potential assassination of Obama by southerners, presumably in part because he was black, Cameron quickly shifted to race-neutral language. His language connected Obama and the potential for social strife to the 1960s and President Kennedy, but this time by labeling them both “change agents”:

“Is he going to be in here long enough to get, to make progress? Is it going to be like Kennedy? Kennedy's the same thing. It doesn't matter about color. Kennedy was another change agent. He didn't last very long because people didn't like where he was going. No. So, you just think, well, when you have somebody who's a vibrant politician who's going to do some new things, people don't like change the idea of change and hope for some people is like, wait, what's wrong with it now? No, don't do that.”

Lastly, Cameron expresses that he thinks Obama would be assassinated because he is going to change the dynamic of the country and southern white people would be angry about that just like they were in the '60s. However, Cameron's version of color-neutral racism is grossly incoherent. Cameron acknowledges that social change centers around the racialization of political subjects and being white assist him with social mobility but uses language that suggest that white Southerners just do not like change and his thoughts have nothing to do with the fact that Obama is black. He uses Kennedy to justify this language but does not acknowledge that Kennedy was assassinated for attempting to change race relations in the US. Cameron also uses the age-old story of the south is racist and the north has nothing to do with it.

### *Abstractions About Race*

Discussions about race can be daunting, especially when explicit racial questions are asked. A way around that is not mention it at all or express your love of racial minorities. Throughout this section I examine the justifications for non-racial cultural language, the new ways to say black, and religious culture.

### *Non-racial cultural language*

People think the division between black and white people is natural through cultural differences, Bonilla- Silva (2017) calls this frame cultural racism, where individual use stereotypical cultural aspects of minorities to justify why they are not experiencing social mobility. Including use of rhetorical language similar to “they just don't have what it takes” or “that's not something they really focus on.” While Bonilla-Silva calls the rhetoric an explicit form of cultural racism, sometimes it is framed as “love” for a specific black person. Subjects exclaim that it is not about race, but all about culture and which individuals they want to be around. It is talked about with very specific characteristics that seem to be about things other than race but are racialized. In order to avoid seeming racists, they talk about the specific traits instead. For example, they talk about liking people who love opera, a white-identified cultural conceit that they identify with. Traits can make someone a “good person” and these traits exist outside of race (above and beyond). An example comes from Tyson (Millennial, 2016 Clinton Supporter). I asked him what he thought about Obama as a candidate:

“Honestly, I loved them. I don't know, I thought he was really cool. One thing though I didn't really see him as black or white. It really, I just saw him as a good person. I know that was a huge thing for people but when I look back to how I viewed him I can't really see it as it was a milestone but in my opinion, it wasn't really the huge issue of why you liked him. It was just because he was a good guy.”

Tyson explains that he does not see Obama as black or white, but just a good person and that is why he loves him. Tyson is trying to seem not racist by exclaiming he does not see color which allows him to ignore the plight that black people face in the United States. If Tyson can point to a black person who is doing well, then it must be individual black peoples fault they experience discrimination. This framing flips the onus of responsibility onto black people to figure out their own way out of poverty and discrimination. In addition, he is expressing that if someone is a “good person” they do not have to worry about race, which implies that people who

are black are the “bad” ones and experience racialization. Tysons form of color-neutral racism is dangerous, because it perpetuates the ideology that black people are culturally deficient and cannot fit into white society due to a lack of civility.

*New Ways to Say Black*

Abstractions also include non-racial language to describe inherently racial subjects, where individuals hint at what they want to say without directly saying it. White people in the study use words and phrases similar to “Urban” or “low-income” to describe black people. Bonilla- Silva (2017:86) describes the phenomenon as “anything but race” to talk about how white people explain away racial fractures in their color neutral story. Bonilla- Silva uses the example of people explaining why they did not have black or minority friends while growing up. Subjects would exclaim “it just did not happen” or “they were not a part of my clique” to justify the lack of a diverse friend group. I examined the process through not mentioning race as a factor at all and leaving it to be implied by the audience. This way white people do not risk seeming racist and therefore avoid the topic all together. An example comes from (Jacob, millennial, 2016 Clinton Supporter). I asked him about important issues during the 2000 election:

“I don’t know. All’s I really remember was at my school that, I mean Gore won pretty notably, but I was in an urban school so it kinda makes sense.

**Interviewer-** So you went to an Urban school?

**Jacob-** Yeah at that point in my life

**Interviewer-** what was the area like around you?

**Jacob-** hmmm I don’t know like I mean what exactly do you want like it was.

**Interviewer-** So we will do this kinda of you said you went to an urban school what was the people around you like since Gore overwhelmingly won

**Jacob-** Yeah, I mean contrasted to like my high school and where I ended up like going to high school and spending most of my primary education it was very diverse. I think it was like only 60% white people, which is notably less than the rest of my primary education uh and it was in a densely populated area.”

Through the language Jacob is using, the racial makeup of the area he attended school can only be implied, as he does not use explicit racial language. The first way he engages in

avoiding race talk is by explaining how Gore won pretty notably (referencing Al Gore during the 2000 presidential election). Race is implied here through political affiliation. Minorities are more likely to vote democrat so one can assume there is a diverse racial makeup in the area. Second, Jacob uses his location to describe race. This is where he uses “Urban” express that the area has non-white people. When asked to explain further what he meant by “Urban” he defaults to only talking about white people by explaining that only 60% white people were around. This leaves the other 40% to be implied and completely avoids the topic of race.

### *Religious Culture*

The final way abstraction is shown is through projection. Bonilla-Silva (2017) talks about projection through how white people put the onus of responsibility onto minority people. Projection frames black people as the racist ones, by asserting that they choose not to integrate. The theory works when talking about subjects similar to interracial marriage or affirmative action policies but does not pinpoint how people necessarily use projection as a tool to change what race means. Individuals use concepts like religion to justify reasons race as a non-factor in what happens in the of broader context of inequality in the United States. An example of this comes from Lisa (generation Xer, McCain Supporter). I asked her about how equality became important to her:

“I've always had trouble with people being mistreated, whether it's race or gender. I grew up in southern California and now that I've moved to Iowa, I can really appreciate my southern California background, because there's so many of us from other countries and many of us are in interracial that you don't think about it. You're just, Oh, you're from that country. Oh, that's nice. Yeah. What do you eat? How do you dress? It's not like you're other and you're different. It just, it's normal. Everybody's different. So, we all pretty well and get along.”

Lisa starts by talking about the culture of where she grew up, citing Southern California, where she has an understanding that people embrace every culture that is around. Lisa explains

how she does not think about race and thinks more about certain cultural aspects that people have. Lisa is conflating the difference between overt and covert racism. No one specifically said racial slurs so everything must be fine. While she engages in color-neutral racism, minorities are still experiencing institutional racism through housing discrimination, war on drugs, and health inequalities. She continues:

“So, when I see on TV that people will take others in and just terribly mistreat them always bothered me. Whether it's from another country or even our own country. The whole idea that you would look at somebody less than a human always bothered me because I was always raised in a Christian environment that you love one another. That is the message Jesus gave to give you. That's the message that God wants us to treat others because we all bleed red underneath. And that's how my dad raised me. My parents were born in 1920 and 1923 so for him to have the views that he had was pretty special and he always raised me to treat others well and he would talk about the segregation even in Chicago. Any sibling, just always remember people bleed red underneath. We're all the same. We're all God's children. You treat everybody with respect and not see me any differently. So that's how I was raised. So, it was always hard to see on tv that not everybody believes that. That bothered me.”

Lisa takes a moment to talk about how everyone is human and that everyone should be treated with respect and kindness by bringing religion into the picture. Lisa uses religion as a way to say because we all bleed red underneath there is not a need to talk about race because God does not use racial language. Lisa using color neutral language allows her to look past the racial history of the US and focus on how people are the same, while racialized violence continues happening and white people using excuses like “well maybe they should not be so loud” to justify the police killing black people and getting away with it.

### *The Past is the Past*

It is true that black people are better off today than they ever have been in history, but it is also true that black people are behind in many important areas in life and the chances of them catching up is really slim (Bonilla-Silva 2017:70). When people say race is not the central factor in why black people experience slower social mobility, health problems, and lower incomes they

are minimizing the effects of race. Bonilla-Silva (2017:57) explains this as the minimization of racism. Which is utilized by white people to justify racial atrocities similar to the murder of Rodney King; Michael Brown; and Eric Gardner, without rectifying them. Race is used as a secondary factor to make racism disappear. When race is brought into the equation then it is being used as an excuse to be lazy or get votes. When racial atrocities (like the ones mentioned above) do occur, black people are the one to blame for them because they brought race into it. An example comes from Lisa (generation X, McCain supporter). I asked her what she thought about Obama's message of hope and change:

“I didn't really think we had we had a racial problem. I honestly felt at the time that he [Obama] undid everything Martin Luther King Jr did. Just tore all these years apart and like less than a 50-year period, just undid everything. Yeah, I thought we were getting along. I thought there was being more done in the media to represent more people of color and ethnicity to get into Hollywood. I never really felt that. Even since I've been here, I feel like people are much more open to that. I have children now. My daughter, her boyfriend is African Americans and wonderful guy. We love him. My grandchildren [will be] African American, quarter, euro and a quarter Samoan. Apparently, we haven't gotten past some things and a lot of times people just assume I'm middle class white and I know that I can work and that's it. I have never been raised in racism at all. I find I have to fight that now.”

Lisa thinks racism is a thing of the past because her daughter is dating a black man, there are more people of color in the media, and she was not raised with racism. Lisa is trying to make it seem like Obama sparked racial tensions in the US, because he ran on the fact that change needs to happen, and people seemed to be getting along before he ran for president. She papers over the fact racial awareness is heightened during Obama's run, because of the sheer amount of people that disliked him solely because he is black. Lisa the quickly shifted to her love for an individual black person to make sure she does not seem racist, the same language and framing as Tyson in the section above. At the end Lisa acknowledges that racism probably exist in some capacity in the US but qualified it with how she also experiences racism. Lisa minimizes the

experience of racial violence that black people experience by exclaiming that as a white appearing woman she also experiences it too.

*Racism seems new to millennials*

Millennials have a different process for remembering race and racism because they grew up in the era of Obama. Because black history gets told through the lens of progress, hope, and change racism seems like something of the past. Especially since Millennials have mostly seen racial prosperity in the US. The proliferation of racism and anti-blackness in the 2016 election seemed new to millennials in this study. Jacob, (Millennial, 2016 Clinton Supporter). I asked him what he feared about the election of Donald Trump:

“There a fear of this new Trump brand of republicanism spark[ing] racial tension and spark fights that we previously didn’t see. It breeds hatred and intolerance and that was definitely some of the fear that was being felt. There’s also just a general fear of nuking someone out of nowhere and getting into a nuclear war uh but that is minimized by the constant fear of the violence from his supporters.”

Jacob is describing Donald Trump becoming president as this phenomenon that has only sparked racial tension in recent years, meaning Jacob is remembering race as something that happened before, America moved past it with the election of Obama, and came back with Trump. Racialized politics is not something that is new but rather something that constantly changes form, so people are not able to easily recognize it in the larger scheme of politics. Color-neutral politics created the narrative that America is beyond race and we can all get along. Jacob sees the rhetoric Donald Trump uses during the 2016 election and during his presidency, so it seems to be new. When the narrative of color-neutrality is taught because America elected a black man as president then it changes all of the sudden, millennials in this study have a difficult time understanding why racial violence is occurring. Jacob is also using projection (see racetalk

through policy) only paint Donald Trump supporters as violent racist and distance himself from them.

*We are better than that*

The final moment in the past in the past looks a little different than the previous two. Because this time the onus of responsibility is flipped onto white people, where you think of racism as something that was popular back then and is out of style and outdated now. Especially since America was on the verge of electing a black man as president. An example of this comes from Jessica (Generation X, did not vote, liked McCain). I asked her about her hopes for the country in 2008:

“The economy to get better was number one. I hoped we’d make more strides in terms of civil rights, not just legal rights but some racial healing. Not just in terms of what’s legal but maybe we could all move forward a little bit, and by all I mean white people. I hoped that white people ...having a black president would normalize having black people be part of the national conversation at the highest levels and that would say to people, “Wait a minute we have this person here doing a good job so why couldn’t that be any given black person?” I was just naïve.”

Jessica hoped that white people would move forward for the sake of the economy. She thought having a black president would move white people forward, because he would do a good job, putting the responsibility of racial healing onto one black person and acts as the stepping stool to a color-neutral America. I asked Jessica to clarify what she meant by white people moving forward. She continues:

“Not being so bigoted. Not being so isolationist or us vs them or this weird idea that you know being a valuing traditional values means the 1950s. You know ideas of where we were in terms of civil rights, feminism, and like a traditional ideas means that were pretty much segregated and women should stay home and work. That’s what I think that when people say traditional values. I also felt like I felt like Obama was in a really hard place because he’s the first black president and then you know his while message is about hope so we expect him to do something about civil rights, but then you have this other part of the country saying he’s not my president and just looking at everything he did as look he’s playing partisan. In order to [not freak out white people] or you know have any chance to work with them he had to not be civil rights be his main thing otherwise white people would say look I knew he was just here to elevate his race. I feel like in some was he realistically couldn’t do as much as he and a lot of us liked for him to be able to do

like you can't put the burden of fixing race on a single black person you know and I feel like that's what a lot of us did like oh we have a black president now things are gonna get better we're gonna be not so awful."

Jessica sees race as a burden to Obama. She does not think Obama can reasonably get anything done, because white people will not let it happen. Jessica is saying that white people not being so bigoted is what will move the country forward. It is an interpretation that sees race as the top factor for the lack of mobility that black people face. However, Jessica does have some limitations to her analysis. She explains that white people should only stop being bigoted when a black person is doing a good job at the highest level, meaning white people should only stop being racist when a black person is leading the conversation and not on their own. This places the burden of fixing race on black people even if white people are the central focus.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Abstractions about race, abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and cruel optimism work together to create the story of color-neutral America. They start with talks about policy; white people pick and choose different ways to seem non-racist, through advocating for policies that cannot reasonably happen, because they are always racially-charged and do not affect white people in the same way as people of color. When abstract liberalism framing does not work then individuals jump to more abstract ways to talk about race, where they do not use direct racial language but pick individual black people that they really like and use language that justifies color-neutrality through culture or religion. When abstractions do not work because of the inconsistencies of advocating for racist policies while expressing love for black people, white people move to minimization. This is trying to make race like an old fad that has gone away. But none of these frames can explain why black people are still lagging behind in almost every area that is important to life in the United States.

Non-racial framing is used because there is a desire for a color-neutral America that fits into the narrative that the US is trying to tell itself. The narrative tries to get people to understand that the civil rights movement did everything that is required to fix slavery in the injustices that happen in the United States, which stop forms of meaningful progress, because it cannot grapple with what has happened in the past and how that has implications for black peoples ability to gain social mobility. The way to fully get a color neutral America is to unlearn the processes of racialization.

Moving forward, discussions about race and color-neutral racism are far from over. In a time where more people of color and right-wing candidates are running for political office, there is a clash of ideologies. There needs to be an understanding of how two different framings tell the complex racial story of America and how that fundamentally shifts the narrative about race.

Throughout the paper there have been examples of people framing Obama using racialized language while simultaneously trying to deracialize him. White Americans are cruelly optimistic and in the era of trump it is only getting worse. Change does not start with a black man being elected president, but critical in-depth reflexive thinking that understands the past.

## References

- Berlant, Lauren. 2006. "Differences." *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17(5) 21-36.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2017. *Racism without Racists Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America Fifth Edition.* Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Conway, Brian. 2010. "New Directions in the Sociology of Collective Memory and Commemoration." *Sociology Compass* 4(7)442-453.
- Esterberg, Kristin G. 2002. *Qualitative Methods in Social Research.* Massachusetts: McGraw-Hill.
- Grau, Brenda. 2014. "Beyond Performance: Rhetoric, Collective Memory, and the Motive of Imprinting Identity." Graduate Theses and Dissertations. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5028>.
- Griffin, Larry. 2004. "Generations and Collective Memory" Revisited: Race, Region, and Memory of Civil Rights." *American Sociological Review* 69(4) 544-557.
- Hill, Theon. 2017. "Sanitizing the Struggle: Barack Obama, Selma, and Civil Rights Memory." *Communication Quarterly* 65(3) 354-376.
- Killian, Lewis. 1971. "Optimism and Pessimism in Sociological Analysis." *The American Sociologist* 6(4) 281-286.
- Mitchell, Katharyne. 2003. "Monuments, Memorials, and the Politics of Memory." *Urban Geography* 24(5) 442-459.
- Morgan, P.T. 2013. "Recalling Martin Luther King: Obama's Effect on Memory." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 170(2) 226-227.
- Olick, Jeffrey. 2007. "Collective Memory and Nonpublic Opinion: A Historical Note on a Methodological Controversy About a Political Problem." *Symbolic Interaction* 30(1) 41-55.
- Pew Research Center. 2018. "The Generations Defined." Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center
- Sandage, Scott. 1993. "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963." *The Journal of American History* 80(1) 135-167.
- Schuman, Howard and Scott, Jacqueline. 1989. "Generations and Collective Memories." *American Sociological Review* 54(3) 359-381.
- Schwartz, Barry. 1991. "Social Change and Collective Memory: The Democratization of George Washington." *American Sociological Review* 56(2) 221-236.

Verovsek, Peter. 2016. "*Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm.*" *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 4(3) 529-543.

Weiss, Robert. 1994. "*Learning from Strangers.*" New York: Free Press.