Introduction

Racism is not a problem anymore. . . . Racism was a problem when all those slaves were around and that, like, bus thing and the water fountain. I mean, everything was crazy back in the olden days. . . . But now, I mean, since Martin Luther King and, like, Eleanor Roosevelt, and how she went on the bus. And she was African American and sat on the white part. . . . After the 1920s and all that, things changed.
— Natalie (11, Sheridan)

I think [racism] is a way bigger problem than people realize. It’s nowhere near what it used to be. . . . It’s just different, and white people don’t realize it. . . . I think it’s still there. It’s just not as present, and people want to hide it. Because they are scared to talk about it.
— Conor (11, Evergreen)

I think that the white kids, since they have more power in general in society, . . . disciplinary actions aren’t brought down as hard upon them. But when it’s, you know, a black kid getting in trouble with the police, . . . I think people are going to be tougher with them, because, you know, [black kids] can’t really fight back as well.
— Chris (11, Wheaton Hills)

Natalie, Conor, and Chris are all growing up in the same midwestern metropolitan area.¹ They are 11-years-old and in middle school. They all participate in a variety of sports and extracurricular activities, and they have busy social lives with their friends. These kids often travel with their families across the country, sometimes even across the globe. All three attend expensive summer camps and enrichment programs, most play instruments and take private music lessons, and many of them have attended private school or have received private tutoring, at least once in their lives. Like most kids, they are interested in popular culture, though
their favorite celebrities vary, especially with respect to Justin Bieber. Every single one loves animals.

Overall, the children in this book are growing up with upper-middle-class privilege in a society where private wealth shapes the experiences, opportunities, and outcomes that follow such childhoods of privilege. These kids have parents with some of the highest levels of educational attainment possible, being alumni of world-class law schools, medical schools, graduate schools, and business schools. These children’s parents work in highly prestigious and influential professions and earn lucrative incomes. These parents also all experience heterosexual privilege. While a small number of the mothers in this study do not work outside the home, these women are heavily involved in their children’s schools, their local churches and synagogues, and charitable and volunteer organizations. They all have college educations, the majority holding advanced degrees. The fathers all work outside the home, and some are highly involved in the daily lives of their children and coach sports teams or lead clubs. These children are growing up in valuable, well-maintained single-family homes that their parents own, and some families even have vacation homes in different parts of the country.

But these children are not only privileged in that they benefit from the wealth of their parents: these kids are also growing up white and with racial privilege—or as founding figure of American sociology W. E. B. Du Bois wrote, with a “public and psychological wage”: the wages of whiteness. Although many Americans may not believe that race shapes experiences, opportunities, and outcomes in the United States, social science research indicates otherwise. The United States is a racialized society, or a society that “allocates differential economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines; lines that are socially constructed.” This means that though the racial categories that we have today are meaningful to us, at their core, they are categories crafted by human beings.

Evidence that we live in a society in which race shapes the lived experiences, opportunities, and outcomes of people can be seen across a range of institutions. When it comes to children specifically, race structures the education they receive and experiences they have both inside and between schools, race structures youth exposure to and treatment with law enforcement and within the juvenile (in)justice system,
race structures the bonds children have (or do not have) with family members as a result of racialized mass incarceration and the War on Drugs. Race structures kids’ experiences in foster care and the child welfare system. Race structures children’s access to health care and even pain medication, and race structures the knowledge children receive through sex education about their own body and sexuality. Race structures where kids live and play, the availability of welfare benefits, and, as mentioned, family private wealth holdings that offer children profoundly different lived experiences and opportunities. The list goes on and on. To put it in simple terms, then, all children growing up in the United States have lives that are structured by race—and this includes the affluent, white kids in this book.

As the epigraphs to this chapter make clear, however, not all white kids think about race in the same way. Despite the similarities in structural privileges that these children have, despite the fact that sociologists often tend to assume these kids think alike, despite these kids’ shared interests, and despite the fact that they all live within one metropolitan area, these white, affluent kids have different understandings of race and racism in America today.

I spent two years studying these white children and their families and can show that these kids talk about and interpret race differently. Their subtle behaviors reflect that they think about race and class inequality differently, and the experiences they have with their families and in their day-to-day interactions are substantively different from one another. For example, while some of the 36 children in this study believe racism is present in today’s society, some do not. While some of these children believe that the police racially profile and abuse black and Latinx youth, some believe that black and Latinx youth are “bad kids” because their parents “do not care about them.” Some of these children are close friends with children of color, and some of these children rarely even see a person of color. Similarly, while some think that all schools in the United States provide kids with the same education, others speak passionately about how unequal schools in the United States are “a big problem.” Some children believe that the impact of slavery on the black community with regard to wealth holdings can still be seen today, yet other children believe that slavery and the civil rights movement era were one and the same. Some of these kids believe that talking about race “makes you racist,” while
other children think white people need to talk and think carefully about race much more often. Some children think that black people have “extra muscles” that make them jump higher, while other children think this is absurd. While some of these children believe people get rich because they work hard, some have other ideas about the causes of social stratification. And while some of the children in this study thought the shooting of Trayvon Martin was a grave violation of human rights and evidence of continued racial violence and racism in the United States, other children did not even know Trayvon’s name.

How can this be? How can these white, affluent children have so much in common yet think about race in the United States in such different ways? And how do these kids form these different ideas in the first place? How do white kids learn race? What role do parents play in shaping children’s racial views? How do kids growing up in families that do not talk openly about race or acknowledge its impact learn about race? And what about children growing up in families with parents who consider themselves to be “antiracist”? What lessons are these children learning about race, and what is the outcome? Finally, how can children’s agency and their own participation in their production of ideas be accounted for within this broader process of racial socialization or racial learning? Do kids simply parrot the ideas of their parents, or is there a more complex process under way? In what ways do kids challenge their parents’ perspectives on race, perhaps even influencing parents’ views in the process? Answering these questions will allow us to understand the role white kids and their families play in the reproduction, reworking, or maybe challenging of existing forms of racism.

Before providing answers to these questions, I think it is important to address a few key considerations about both what I have written and what I have not. First, this book is not about centering whiteness in a way that detracts from the critical scholarship on race as did much family-based ethnographic research of the past.16 Traditionally, family research and early developmental psychology assumed white families and children to be “the norm” to which families and children of color were compared and often found to be inferior. Rather than putting white families back at the center of family research, this book seeks to examine white families with the intention of addressing critically the role that white families play in the production and reproduction of white racial power.17
Second, I have *not* written a book about middle-class or working-class white families. I believe that class plays a role in the process of racial learning—that what is at stake for working-class families when it comes to interpretations of race in the United States may be very different than it is for those with both race and class privilege. For families where economic struggles are not a concern, where power and privilege and security are well-rooted features of everyday life, and where parents and children do not feel any sort of real threat to their status and well-being, the messages about race sent to children may not be the same as those messages received by children growing up in families that are struggling to get by. Research shows that some working-class whites exhibit resentment toward people of color because of a perceived threat to their whiteness, white privilege, and economic interests.¹⁸ As the sociologist Maria Kefalas writes, “While the true victims of race in America were, of course, African Americans, working-class whites could legitimately claim that upper-class whites could more easily avoid the costs of racial change.”¹⁹ Other studies challenge this view and find evidence that working-class whites, particularly young white women, are more likely to be racially progressive.²⁰ While this debate continues, it is certainly the case that very little research critically examines racial socialization processes in affluent white families. As such, I chose to study comprehensive racial learning in these kinds of families deliberately. The parents in this book have access to nearly unlimited resources that allow them to make almost any decision they desire for their children—choices that are accessible only to those with economic privilege, such as tuition costs for private schools or vacations to China or Mozambique or the capability to remove a child from a situation (e.g., switching to a new school) at a moment’s notice if deemed necessary. As such, I can show how ideas about race inform the decisions parents make since their choices are less about availability of resources, or what they can afford, and more about what parents truly think is important or “best” for their child. As I will demonstrate, these views about what is important or “best” are shaped in part by racial ideologies and, in turn, send powerful messages to kids about race, privilege, and power. This is true whether parents realize this is the case or not and regardless of what parents actually say out loud to their children about race.
This book is also not about early childhood racial socialization processes, though that decision is not because I think early childhood is irrelevant to this discussion: certainly, it is, as the sociologists Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin document in their research on how children as young as three years old learn race and racism at a day-care center. Rather, I made the deliberate choice to explore children as they make their way through *middle childhood*. Middle childhood is a developmental stage during which children begin thinking in ideological terms, looking at patterns around them, and considering the experiences of others in new ways. This is also often when children spend increasing amounts of time outside the home and have more daily interactions with more people.

This book is also not about gender socialization or how children learn about sexuality but not because I think these learning processes are unimportant. I absolutely believe that these processes are entwined with racial learning processes, and more intersectional and critical race research needs to be conducted in this area. However, it is beyond the scope of this book to explore fully these complexities, though I do periodically draw attention to moments when kids articulate ideas about gender and sexuality alongside race.

Finally, studying *young people* rather than exclusively adults is also a deliberate choice. Kids growing up in affluent families are likely to experience the world through a lens of interrelated race and class privilege. Listening to kids and understanding how affluent, white children think about, make sense of, justify, and perhaps even challenge existing notions about race in the United States is important for at least three reasons—each tied to inequality and injustice in the country.

First, sociologists know very little about how the ideas that support racial inequality are actually reproduced from one generation to the next. Scholars have offered theories about how this process works, but very little empirical evidence has been gathered to support or challenge these theories. As the leading sociologist and race scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues, racial ideologies are “mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of racial privilege in a society.” Thus, uncovering patterns in how ideologies that uphold racial inequality (i.e., racism) are produced and reproduced by white kids is key to understanding the role that white childhood plays in the perpetuation of the racial status quo.
A second reason to study these kids is because through the intergenerational transfer of wealth and as a consequence of the wages of whiteness, these children will likely grow up to hold powerful positions within US society themselves. As such, this work can enhance our understanding of the future of race relations in the United States and how the ideas of future powerful people take hold during childhood.

The third and perhaps more pressing reason to study this particular group of young people has to do with race and class in the United States right now, in the present moment, in an applied sense. American children are growing up in a world with ongoing public debates about race—a world that has seen two completed terms of the first black president of the United States, fervid political and racialized arguments about immigration and criminal justice system reform, recent acts of overt white nationalism and violence such as that in Charlottesville, Virginia, unprecedented youth access to other people through social media, and growing youth activism and protest, such as the emergence of #BlackLivesMatter and many other groups working for racial justice across the country (many with youth leaders and participants). These are children growing up in a world that has seen white peers chanting “Trump” and “Build the Wall!” at basketball games against predominantly Latinx schools, kids who attend schools that have teachers reporting increased bullying along racial lines in classrooms, increased media coverage of the racial disproportionality in who is subjected to violence and torture at the hands of the police, and seemingly heightened discourse about inequality in the United States at large.

In addition to the current events that are marking this contemporary moment as significant in the long history of racism in the United States, social science research shows that white children receive the wages of whiteness from very early ages and well into young adulthood. For instance, one of the driving forces behind increased residential segregation involves patterned decisions made by parents concerning where their white kids will go to school. Research also finds that white kids are more likely to be considered “innocent” in comparison to black and brown peers in the juvenile injustice context or in the context of school discipline.25 When white young adults commit crimes—as in 2015, when a 21-year-old white man murdered nine black parishioners in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, or
when in 2014 when a 22-year-old white man shot a BB gun at police officers in Concord, New Hampshire—their lives remained intact. Young black people are murdered in seconds by the police even when they are simply suspected of criminal behavior, such as 12-year-old Tamir Rice playing with a toy gun in a public park or 14-year-old Cameron Tillman, who entered an abandoned house with a BB gun. Research shows that even though white youth are more likely to use illegal drugs, arrest rates do not reflect this reality. Studies also show that teachers are more likely to designate white children as “gifted and talented” and perceive them as smarter and more capable than peers of color. When doctors think black children need less pain medication, they demonstrate their belief that white children need more, suggesting white children are more fragile, more innocent, and more important to protect from physical pain. These are the privileges of whiteness.

I believe that it is important to examine empirically how white children, such as those in this book, not only are going to have power in their futures as white adults but also already have power and influence in the present moment, as young white people, in their families and communities. Pushing back against the notion that children lack agency or free will or power to shape adults around them, this book explores the power of white kids in their families, their schools, their peer groups, their extracurricular spaces, and public discourse about who is “innocent” and who is not, who is “special” and who is not, and who is “deserving” and who is not. White childhood is a place where power and privilege take on not only ideological significance but also material significance for white youth, which is why it ought to be studied.

Of course, the children in this book are not at personal fault for their unearned advantages—certainly, their power is tied directly to the social structure of the society into which they are born and to their position within the structural hierarchies that they neither asked for nor can control. I am not interested in demonizing these kids or their parents, and I am not suggesting that they are individually at fault for racial inequality in the United States. However, I am interested in confronting honestly what is going on beneath the surface within affluent, white families and communities that serves to perpetuate racism and racial inequality in the United States.