

THESIS

“IT’S JUST A CROSS, DON’T SHOOT”:  
WHITE SUPREMACY AND CRISTONORMATIVITY  
IN A SMALL MIDWESTERN TOWN

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

“IT’S JUST A CROSS, DON’T SHOOT”:  
WHITE SUPREMACY AND CHRISTONORMATIVITY  
IN A SMALL MIDWESTERN TOWN

This paper, guided by poststructuralist and feminist theories, examines public discourse that emerged in response to a controversy over whether a large cross should be removed from public property in a highly visible location in Grand Haven, Michigan. Situating the controversy within the context of the election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump, this thesis seeks to answer the inquiry: How do the events and discourse surrounding the controversy over a cross on public property in a small, Midwestern city shed light on the Trump phenomenon? A qualitative study using document data was conducted, using grounded theory method to analyze 152 documents obtained from publically accessible sites on the internet. Three conceptual frameworks, Whiteness, Christian hegemony, and spatiality were utilized in evaluating the data. Findings reveal a community that sits at the intersection of White and Christian privileges. So interconnected are these privileges that they create a system of “codominance,” in which they cannot be conceptually separated from one another, and together constitute the necessary criteria for full inclusion in the community. This qualitative study paints a compelling picture of the ways in which racial and religious privilege affect the underlying belief systems of many members of an overwhelmingly White, Christian community. Results provide valuable insight into the mindset of a Trump supporting community in the period immediately preceding the 2016 election.

*Keywords:* Trump, Trumpism, poststructuralism, Christianity, Christian Nationalism, Christonormativity, spatiality, Whiteness, White supremacy, hate crime.

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## CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

The legacy of White Christian supremacy that has been the foundational ideology of the U. S. continues to function as a dominating discourse and framework for rights and well-being. Once we see this in history, we might be more attentive to it in our contemporary landscape, which continues to confer rights on some and to withhold them from others (Fletcher, 2016, p. 72).

### **The Birth of a “Tradition”**

In 1923, members of a newly organized chapter of the Ku Klux Klan burned a series of crosses on Dewey Hill in my hometown of Grand Haven, Michigan (Enders, 1993). In 1962, the community raised a 20-foot-high cross on the hill, which is the highest geographic point in town, overlooking the downtown waterfront area and the busy boating lane where the Grand River meets Lake Michigan (Havinga, 2014). The Klan had a short run in Grand Haven, never becoming an official chapter (Enders, 1993). Eastern Michigan University historian JoEllen Vinyard attributes this not to anti-racist sentiments, but rather to fact that the Klan officials had come into Grand Haven from elsewhere. In Grand Haven in the 1920s, “Dutch residents regarded even longtime residents who were not from Dutch families as outsiders in their midst” (Vinyard, 2011, p. 61).

Although it has not been stated in any sources I have found, I think it obvious that the people who erected the Dewey Hill Cross in 1964 knew very well that there had been cross burnings in that location a mere 40 years earlier. That is a short time in the memory of a small town. I cannot but imagine that their motivation was at least partly to reinforce the Klan’s ideology that, “America is a white man’s country, and should be governed by whitemen (sic)” (Sargent, 1995, p. 143). The population of Grand Haven is comprised of mostly White, Christian people who do not like or trust outsiders, who feel that their religion mandates the insertion of religious values into governmental affairs, who have a militaristic orientation, and who have a

history of racial exclusion and hate. This history, while not remarkable, sheds light on a recent conflict over how public space should be used, and whether the cross would remain in its traditional place atop Dewey Hill.

### **A Disrupting Event**

It is evident from this research that the community of Grand Haven is steeped in an ethos of White and Christian privilege and racial and religious oppression in which most residents believe that the majority is entitled to trample over the rights of the minority. This is a situation seen worldwide as groups lay ingroup claims to geographic spaces, and territorial claims sometimes erupt into violence. Through this study, I aim to contribute to academic understanding of how the “we” is defined, how this leads to a perception of privileged status that includes claims to both rhetorical and geographic space, and, through application of the Alan Hunt’s theories on anxiety, how this type of belief system can bring about the eruption of violence.

Many residents of the city of Grand Haven experienced the possible removal of the Dewey Hill Cross from its position atop the highest hill in town as a devastating event. This is evident in the amount of news coverage and the number of people involved in making public comments about the issue. This researcher asserts that this event emerged unexpectedly, “erupting out of the everyday” (Brown, 1997) and, in a manner similar to a natural disaster like Hurricane Katrina, created a “rupture in the prevailing discourse” (Ishiwata, 2010) of the community in a way that is consistent with the concept of *disruption* as an opportunity for “theorizing the conditions and possibilities of political life in a particular time” (Brown, 1997). The purpose of this study is to interpret and understand the underlying beliefs and emotions that were laid bare in the aftermath of this disruptive event.

According to Wendy Brown, “Understanding what the conditions of certain events mean for political possibilities may entail precisely decentering the event . . . working around it, treating it as contingency or symptom (Brown, 1997). In my study, this will be accomplished by placing minimal emphasis upon consideration of the legal and political status of the cross and focusing instead upon the discourses produced by those who wished the cross to remain in its place on Dewey Hill. By examining the ways in which residents of Grand Haven entered into public discourse about the situation, this researcher seeks to uncover the underlying emotions and beliefs expressed by these individuals. Through careful analysis of these emotions and beliefs, an abstraction of the processes at work in maintaining White Christian hegemony in this small Midwestern town is theorized. The resulting theory provides new language and a new lens for understanding events of this nature when they occur in similar localities.

### **Overview of the Issue**

The controversy over the Dewey Hill Cross, a powerful symbol of Christian faith and the religious orientation of the city, is a fascinating topic in itself. In the current political climate of intolerance for non-Christian religions (Fletcher, 2016), rising White supremacy (Robinson, 2017) and populism (Judis, 2017), however, the controversy has larger ramifications. The social and political nature of the city of Grand Haven, a small, conservative community of mostly White Christians, suggest that the discourse that arose out of the Cross dispute may shed light on the Trump phenomenon. In a broader sense, this dispute and its accompanying discourse can be regarded as a microcosm of racially segregated White Christian America. Examination of this microcosm reveals the high levels of intersectional privilege enjoyed by such communities. It can also be elucidative of how such doubly privileged individuals regard the world, both within their communities and without.

In an interview with anti-racism author and educator Tim Wise, Chauncey DeVega describes the election of President Trump as a White backlash to the Obama Presidency, stating “For a certain strain of white conservatives, his very personhood seemed to embody an America where white people would, in the not too distant future, no longer be the majority group” (DeVega, 2017). DeVega describes how White conservatives have embraced identity politics as a way of addressing their fears and anxieties about our changing world. He also discusses the very real danger that this mindset poses to the nation as a whole, and especially to individuals and communities that do not fit within the White conservative idea of legitimate Americans. He writes, “Trump’s promise to ‘Make America great again’ was more than an empty catchphrase. It was a potent threat against the civil rights and freedoms of people of color, women, gays and lesbians, Muslims and members of any other group that Trump and the Republican Party view as somewhat less than ‘real Americans’” (DeVega, 2017). Wise, who has written extensively on the topics of racism and White Supremacy, strongly rejects Trump’s political platform, addressing the president’s xenophobic rhetoric and narrow view of what constitutes a true American and how, as president of the United States, Trump has chosen to favor the interests of White conservatives over the interests of the all others. Wise writes, “The will of *his* people is the will of *the* people, and his will is theirs” (Wise, 2017). In addition to this blatant favoritism of Whites, Trump’s doomsday rhetoric and apocalyptic vision of America is designed to incite fear and violent reactions among *his* people: “To Trump, America is merely a place of hopelessness, violence and decay, where all the jobs are gone, where Muslim terrorists lurk around every corner and where gangs and drugs ravage the cities,” (Wise, 2017).

In an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, Princeton University emeritus professor Nell Irvin Painter writes, “the election of 2016 marked a turning point in white identity,” in which the

votes of Trump supporters “enacted a visceral ‘No!’ to multicultural America” (Painter, 2016). In his article entitled “Trump is Leading Because White People are Scared,” journalist Jeff Nesbit characterizes White America’s support of Trump as a reaction to an underlying fear of change and loss of social position (Nesbit, 2016). In light of this current political ethos, and particularly in the wake of the violent and horrific display of White rage and Neo-Nazism that left many injured and one dead in Charlottesville, Virginia in August of 2017, it is vital that we develop a clear understanding of how we got to this place. Acts of explicit racism, which have been considered socially inappropriate for decades, have reemerged onto the cultural and political scene in the form of angry White people who appear convinced that their world is ending and they must “take it back.”

### **Statement of Problem**

The explosion of White Nationalist rhetoric and accompanying increase in hate organizations (Struyk, 2017) and near 20% increase in incidents of hate crime (Farivar, 2017) since the 2016 election of Donald Trump demonstrate a crisis of White Supremacy. Putting a new face on an old evil, White Nationalism is currently being expressed in an iteration sometimes labeled “Alt-Right,” and sometimes “Trumpism,” which Collins English Dictionary defines as “the policies advocated by Donald Trump, especially those involving a rejection of the current political establishment and the vigorous pursuit of American national interests” (“Definition of ‘Trumpism’”, 2016). Writing in *The New York Times*, Ioan Grillo defines Trumpism as “talking tough, playing on prejudice, but not suggesting a clear policy change. In short, playing to emotion rather than logic” (Grillo, 2016).

Numerous sources suggest links between Trumpism and the rise in Nationalist and anti-minority sentiment and action in the United States (Cohen, 2017; Waldman, 2017; Stracqualursi,

2017). According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit organization that tracks hate crime and hate organizations, “President Trump’s incendiary rhetoric has energized the white supremacist movement” (Cohen, 2017). This is clearly an emergent situation, as human lives and the future of the nation and world are at stake. Developing a thorough understanding of this phenomenon is imperative, and will require multidisciplinary analysis of cultural, historic, political and religious factors.

### **Purpose of Study**

The Dewey Hill Cross controversy is complex and has roots in the history and religion of White people, and the emotions and beliefs that arise from these factors and inform the behavior of Whites. The proliferation of public discourse around the Dewey Hill Cross controversy, and the city of Grand Haven itself as a microcosm of small-town, Conservative, White Christian America, provide a unique window into just these factors. Therefore, the twofold purpose of this study is to understand how the city of Grand Haven perceives the nature of its community and what it means to be a member of this community who holds ingroup status, and to consider what the implications of this are to members of outgroups. In this study, I make use of the cross controversy as a source of disruption in the prevailing public discourse.

Decentering the issue of the cross controversy and instead evaluating the discourse and attitudes that emerge as a result of the conflict provides a unique opportunity to examine something that is usually kept hidden: the underlying belief system of a small, conservative community. This method of study allows this researcher to gain insight into the emotions and beliefs that inform political decision-making in Grand Haven, and to explore connections between the mindset of community residents and the eruption of Trumpism.

### **Significance of Study.**

The current sociopolitical climate in the U.S. is one of rampant and often lethal White Supremacy in the forms of both incidents (hate speech/crime) and systemic racism enacted through the adoption and application of discriminatory laws, policies, and practices by institutions and individuals. Developing a better understanding of the people and communities that engage in and support these practices helps efforts to counter them. In addition, this study incorporates literature from diverse areas of inquiry in a novel synthesis that provides a unique lens for evaluating and understanding communities of privilege.

### **Historical and Political Context**

#### **History of the Dewey Hill Cross.**

In 1964, a group of community volunteers (one of whom served on the city council and later became mayor of Grand Haven) erected a “permanent” cross structure on Dewey Hill. The cross stood 48 feet high and 23 feet wide, and was fitted onto a hydraulic lift so that it could be raised on holidays and on Sundays during the summer months (Havinga, 2014). Figure 1 shows a typical summer Sunday when cross was in place. Note the American flag flying close to the cross in a display that symbolically intertwines images of Christian religion and American nationality. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1: Dewey Hill on a Sunday in the Summer (Photo Credit: WoodTV)

Across the river from Dewey Hill, The First Reformed Church of Grand Haven rents the Waterfront Stadium on these Sunday evenings and holds outdoor services there. Dewey Hill is also the location of the “Musical Fountain,” a popular tourist attraction that has displayed nightly programs of light, water, and music since 1963 (Havinga, 2014). In the first week of August, during the United States Coast Guard Festival, a local celebration, the cross was fitted with a façade that made it appear to be an anchor. (See figure 2)

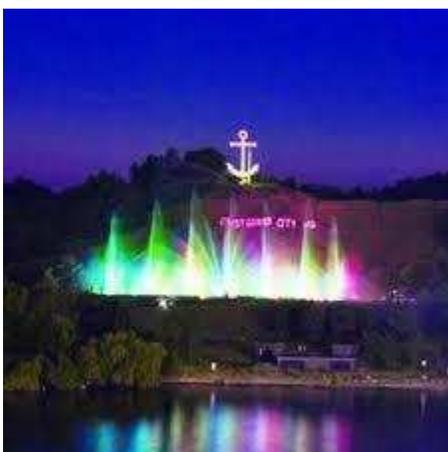


Figure 2: Grand Haven Musical Fountain during Coast Guard Festival (Photo Credit: *Grand Haven Tribune*)

During the winter holiday season, the cross was costumed to resemble a star, and a Christian nativity scene, complete with lighting effects and narration of the “Nativity Story” played on loudspeaker was added to the display. (See Figure 3)



Figure 3: Grand Haven Nativity Scene (Photo Credit: *Grand Haven Tribune*)

The city of Grand Haven, which proudly boasts of being “Coast Guard City, U.S.A.,” and which was recently voted “America’s Happiest Seaside Town” of 2017 by Coastal Living Magazine (Minkin, 2017), is proud of its lovely waterfront and the traditions of patriotism, Christianity, and community prosperity that are associated with the area. Since the cross was on city-owned property, there had been challenges to its constitutionality since 1992 (Havinga, 2014). In response to these challenges, the city had adopted a “content neutral” policy regarding displays on Dewey Hill in 2013 (Havinga, 2014). This policy existed in name only until September of 2014, when Mitch Kahle and Holly Huber sent a letter through the organization Americans United for Separation of Church and State (hereafter referred to as Americans United or AU), a civil rights organization. According to the group’s website, Americans United is “dedicated to the constitutional principal of church-state separation as the only way to ensure religious freedom for all Americans” (“Our mission,” 2015). In the letter, drafted by attorneys for AU, Kahle and Huber request that, in keeping with the city’s official “content neutral policy,” they be permitted to display banners on Dewey Hill promoting a variety of subjects including

atheism, pro-choice, gay rights, and the winter solstice (Havinga, 2014). This was regarded as deliberately antagonistic to the residents of Grand Haven (Havinga, 2014), a community that lies in a politically and religiously conservative area known as the “Dutch Belt” (Vinyard, 2011, p. 60). These residents are overwhelmingly politically conservative, with 71.55% registered as Republicans. Racially, the community is overwhelmingly White. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Whites comprised 95.5% of the population, Hispanics/Latinos made up 2.7%, Native Americans, 0.7%, Asian Americans, 0.9% (“American FactFinder”, 2010). African Americans made up just 0.4% of the population (“American FactFinder”, 2010).

Religiously, the majority of the community is Christian, with the Dutch Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches, both Calvinist denominations, being the most common. The Calvinist tradition has a history of political activism, using civil laws to “both restrain evil and comprehensively transform culture according to God’s will” (Marsden, 1980, p. 86). In his book, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, George Marsden explains that the Reformed tradition in particular “saw the consecration of all culture to the service of God as both a religious obligation and a long-range practical necessity” (Marsden, 1989, p. 138). Also of note in relation to the community’s Dutch heritage is that in 1978, historian James Bratt commented upon the common use of military imagery among the Dutch-American subculture (Bratt, 1978, p. 414-17), stating that the particular orientation of the Calvinist religious tradition makes its followers more militaristic in their thinking and symbolism than are most people (Bratt, 1978). This orientation is apparent in Grand Haven, where much of the public discourse surrounding the Dewey Hill Cross employs metaphors of fighting and battle. The Calvinist Reformed tradition also makes its practitioners more likely to feel it is appropriate and indeed, religiously mandated, to insert

religious rhetoric into civil discourse, and to attempt to shape the laws and practices of their community to suit their personal religious preferences (Bratt, 1978).

In November of 2014, the Anti-Defamation League, an international organization promoting civil rights for Jewish people, sent a letter at the request of area resident Kathy Plescher, who stated, “the symbol of the cross is to us about fear, death and torture” (Havinga, 2014, November 24). The letter stated, “In addition to the constitutional issues it raises, a government entity’s display of a large, stand-alone cross on public property sends a clear message of exclusion to those members of its city who adhere to other religions, or no religion” (“Letter to the Grand Haven City Council,” 2014).

After lengthy debate, the Grand Haven City Council voted to remove the cross rather than face the expense and difficulty of a lawsuit. Mayor Geri McCaleb is quoted in the local newspaper saying, “it’s sad to see a 50-year-tradition laid to rest” (Doty, 2015). Mayor McCaleb is certainly in agreement with the majority. According to an online poll by the *Grand Haven Tribune* newspaper, 80% of residents expressed a desire to leave the cross in place (“Online poll results: What do you think should be done with the cross on Dewey Hill?”, 2014). This indicates overwhelming support for privileging the values of the Christian majority over any concerns regarding the rights of religious minorities in the city. My research suggests that this privilege of the majority extends across categories to include racial and ethnic privilege along with religious privilege.

When I was a child in Grand Haven during the 1970s, I gave zero thought to a significant fact: nearly everyone I knew was White like me. Like most of my friends, I had been born in Grand Haven and lived there my whole life. It just seemed to me that my home was where mostly White people lived. I had two friends who were Black, but their parents were White and I

was not sure if that meant that they were the same as I was or different. In elementary school, and particularly around Thanksgiving, we used to dress up as “Indians,” sing “Indian” songs and eat “Indian” foods. We kids all loved this time of year, and the fun of “learning about Indians.” From what I recall, we were taught about Native Americans as if they had lived in Grand Haven once, a long time ago. They had been smart and resourceful, had helped the settlers (whom I pictured as Pilgrims) and then just left or disappeared at some point in the past, leaving the space to the “regular” people who lived there now. Nothing I was taught led me to interrogate this assumption. There was no mention of violence against indigenous people, no hint that anyone was responsible for this violence. Indigenous people were just gone, faded into the past leaving only colorful remnants of their culture such as feathers, multicolored corn, or multisyllabic words that I would say over to myself: Saginaw, Ishpeming, Pottawatomie.

In the 1980s, I sometimes heard Grand Haven jokingly referred to as a “White island,” meaning that cities to the north, east, and south had large populations of African Americans and “Hispanics,” while Grand Haven, as the result of Dutch and German settlement during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was almost completely White (Enders, 1993). Holland, a city to the south of Grand Haven, was also settled by primarily Dutch immigrants. However, Holland currently has a population that is comprised of 76.3% White and 23.4% Hispanic or Latino individuals (“American FactFinder”, 2010).<sup>1</sup> In 2010, Grand Rapids, a city to the east, had a population of 64.6% White, 20.9% African American, and 15.6% Hispanic or Latino individuals (“American FactFinder”, 2010). The city of Muskegon, to the north, had a population that was 57% White, 8.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 34.5% African American according to the 2010 census (“American FactFinder”, 2010). This appearance of racial diversity in Muskegon is deceptive, however.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures do not add to 100% due to the way the census reports individuals of biracial heritage.

Greater Muskegon is actually the 19<sup>th</sup> most racially segregated city in the U.S., (Jacobs, 2013) with the majority of African American residents residing in the impoverished city of Muskegon Heights, where the median household income is just over \$20,000 ("Living in Muskegon Heights", 2016). When I was a teenager, Muskegon had a mall that was advertised on television with a catchy jingle. Although I do not remember the original words of the jingle, I do remember this corrupted version, which was sung in the halls of my Junior High in the early 1980s: *Muskegon Mall, we've got it all, and we're right next door to you. We're a place downtown with the n&^(\*%s all around and they're known for mugging you.* This kind of casual and ubiquitous racism was not uncommon, and existed as a backdrop for our racially segregated lives.

One anti-cross commenter on a Grand Haven Tribune internet forum stated, "in Grand Haven, we don't take kindly to minorities . . . someone had to say it." These attitudes of exclusivity, privilege and racism have real consequences. In 2013, two mixed-race female students at Grand Haven High School were the victims of threats and racial slurs by a group of students wearing "Ku Klux Klan-type masks and hats" (Wagner, 2013) which were donned on the school campus on at least two occasions. The incidents included a "racial, sexually explicit rant" (Moore, 2013) directed at a 14-year-old female by a group of senior-class males. There is a gendered aspect to this incident that demands interpretation through an intersectional understanding of the particular history of the sexualization, rape, and dehumanization of Black women and girls by White men (Crenshaw, 2000). This represents an especially heinous manifestation of White, heteropatriarchal privilege.

Another Grand Haven Tribune commenter made the following statement that exposes more of the unseen life experienced by those in the borderlands of the community:

I typically feel pretty safe at night in Grand Haven. But I think you're forgetting Grand Haven is not such a nice town for many people. If you're a straight, White Christian, this

place is utopia for you. Straight out of the 1950s. But for others this community can be really nasty. Heck, just last year a KKK group was formed at the High School. Where else in Michigan is that going to happen? I understand kids do stupid things, but the scary thing about the story was no one at the school seemed to act like it was a big deal even. I have actually been harassed and had my property vandalized for my religious views and choosing to be in a biracial relationship more often in Grand Haven than when I lived in Detroit.

In the face of comments like the above, in which members of the community describe instances of intimidation and a general unwelcoming atmosphere, many Grand Haven residents express opinions that seem to show indifference, hostility and hatred toward racial, ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities and descriptions of their lived experiences of inequality and intimidation. The following letter to the editor of the *Grand Haven Tribune* clearly portrays the prevailing attitude of community residents who favor keeping the Dewey Hill Cross in place:

To the Editor: I would like to offer my comments and observations regarding the controversy over the cross on Dewey Hill. I may be wrong, but I think that I might be speaking for the great majority of citizens of Grand Haven who would like to see the cross remain in its place. This is a tradition in our Christian community. A very small minority (two outspoken couples) is telling us that they are offended every time they look up and see the cross. In this era of political correctness, heaven forbid we should offend any minority. Instead, we let them bully the rest of us by threats of legal action. It is time we stand up to bullies. It is interesting that the word offend has become some form of protection for minorities. How about the vast majority of Grand Havenites who are offended by the actions of these bullies? I am aware that if this goes to court, liberal justices often tend to side with the minority, but hopefully, *we will remember that decision on Election Day*. It is time that we, the majority, develop a backbone and stand up to these bullies. I suggest if they cannot tolerate the wishes of the majority, they leave and find another community that doesn't offend them (emphasis mine).

### **Current Political Climate.**

While the state of Michigan has traditionally voted Democratic in national elections, it, along with other key states in the "Rust Belt" (Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Illinois and Pennsylvania-all of which had been won by Obama in 2008) opted for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election. In Michigan, this was a significant shift from 2008, when President Obama

won the state with 57% of the vote. In 2017, Ottawa County, of which Grand Haven is the county seat, went for Trump by a whopping 61.5% ("Ottawa County Election Results", 2016). Within the city of Grand Haven, Trump won only two of four precincts. However, Trump defeated Hillary Clinton soundly in Grand Haven Township, a more rural area. There, he won all five precincts by margins that range from 49.7% to 57.6%. ("Ottawa County Election Results", 2016). For comparison, the state of Michigan elected Trump by a margin of 47.6 % ("2016 Election Results: President Live Map by State, Real-Time Voting Updates", 2016). In the U.S. as a whole, Trump lost the popular vote, with 46.1% of voters supporting Donald Trump and 48.2% supporting Clinton ("2016 Election Results: President Live Map by State, Real-Time Voting Updates", 2016).

### **Far Right-Wing Politics.**

*The Tea Party.* The Ottawa County Patriots, a division of the Tea Party, was popular in Grand Haven at the time of the Dewey Hill Cross controversy. Some of the commenters in my document data study specifically mentioned this organization. The Tea Party, though portrayed as a new philosophy designed to unite Americans on economic issues and, as Sarah Palin is famously quoted, to “lift American spirits” (“Tea Party Hypocrisy,” 2010), is viewed by some as a reactionary movement, a new incarnation of old rhetoric of “jingoism, militarism and a cult of victimhood at the hands of sundry nefarious betrayers” (“Tea Party Hypocrisy,” 2010). The Ottawa Patriots’ website emphasizes that their core principles are about fiscal responsibility, adherence to the Constitution, and the free market (“Racism and the Tea Party,” 2015). However, their literature belies that these are their only concerns. Even in their attempt to deflect charges of racism, they have published a document that expresses a racist belief system. This document asserts that racism does not actually exist, and that “the use of racism accusations are an effort to

divide this country” (“Racism and the Tea Party,” 2015). This same document then goes on to deny the existence of White privilege, and denigrate the efforts of a local Black minister to discuss the issue of White privilege and the difficulties faced by Black individuals who are “surviving in a dominant Dutch culture” (“Racism and the Tea Party,” 2015).

In The Daily Kos, a website self-described as “the largest progressive community site in the United States,” blogger GlendenbFollow writes about how Tea Partiers experience a feeling of oppression, stating that for these individuals, “The loss of social dominance is unbearable, terrifying, disorienting. . . . The tea partiers, conservative Christian evangelicals, and other cultural conservatives perceive themselves as being on the losing end of a cultural and political war” (GlendenbFollow, 2013). This emphasizes the defensive, threatened position that these people take when they are confronted with cultural change, particularly when it means that they will lose a privilege that they took as a naturally occurring phenomenon such as White supremacy or Christian dominance.

In their book, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*, Skocpol and Williamson note that Tea Partiers display a “sense of dread about where America could be headed,” (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 46). They express vivid and difficult emotions, strong ingroup preference and distrust of others, saying, “We want our representatives in government to speak for ‘us,’ not cater to inappropriately to ‘them’” (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 47). When the Tea Party Movement started, these individuals experienced a “jolt of optimism and energy” (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 46) which propelled the movement forward.

In 2013 when the Dewey Hill Cross controversy was at its height, the Ottawa Patriots organization was influential in shaping the belief systems and opinions of Grand Haven residents. Its ideology of racism contributed to an atmosphere that is hostile to non-White

individuals. Its popularity locally and nationally reified the legitimacy of discourses about White victimhood, “reverse racism,” and attacks on Christianity and traditional American cultural values. Even back in 2012, Skocpol and Williamson noted that the label “Tea Party” was “Losing its lustre, as the media and many conservative elites move(d) on” (Skocpol & Williamson, 2012, p. 205). Now that the Tea Party has effectively morphed into Trumpism (Hochschild, 2016), its rhetoric continues to support an atmosphere of exclusivity, an attitude of militarism and a closed-minded refusal to consider other points of view.

*The Michigan Militia.* The Militia Movement’s popularity in Michigan, is the direct result of the “manifestation of anti-government sentiment” (Vinyard, 2011, p. 274), springing from economic changes in the state that led to loss of jobs due to “outsourcing and globalization” (Vinyard, 2011, p. 274), competition for existing jobs coming from a new immigrant population, and a perception that the government is misusing its power and taking away individual freedoms (Vinyard, 2011). There is an area unit of the Michigan Militia near Grand Haven, but I was unable to obtain information about its membership.

In public discourse about the Dewey Hill Cross, many individuals in Grand Haven expressed feelings of victimization and loss, which were then used to legitimize the assertion of group dominance and privilege. The militia movement is in many ways a reaction to these sorts of losses. According to Carolyn Gallaher, militias became active in the 1980s in response to interest rate increases initiated by the Federal Reserve that cut deeply into farmers’ livelihoods (Gallaher, 2004). This developed into an ideology of defense against encroaching globalization and the “new world order,” and provided an outlet for many angry White people who felt victimized by the changing economy and threatened by the changing cultural landscape of the United States (Gallaher, 2004).

The Michigan Militia provides an ideological home for White men who feel a keen sense of loss and threat from globalization and cultural change. Ann Burlein describes this sense of loss as “a politics of grief” (Burlein, 2002). In her book, *Lift High the Cross: Where White Supremacy and the Christian Right Converge*, Burlein writes “grief is . . . at the heart of right-wing conspiracy theories, whose appeal has much to do with managing loss, enabling people to acknowledge, and to refuse loss at one and the same time” (Burlein, 2002, p. xiv). These feelings are legitimized by the shared experiences of the group, and common enemies are blamed for the hardships suffered by Militia members. Actions can then be taken towards defending valued traditions and previously unquestioned privileges, and also towards regaining what has been lost. Militias are more likely to defend what is threatened on the local scale than the national (Gallaher, 2004).

GlendenbFollow writes, “The common ground between the militias and the tea parties is a shared sense of loss, a style of patriotism that melds faith, race, economic class, and nationality into a single, rarely coherent whole. This conservative version of American identity is Christian, 1950s middle-class family structure and values, and white” (GlendenbFollow, 2015). The threat of losing the privileged position of Christian dominance in Grand Haven has spurred a great deal of militaristic thinking and discourse about fighting back, regaining what is lost, and being under attack. This rhetoric could possibly result in acts of violence. The cultural theory of domestic terrorism states that “states experiencing greater cultural diversity and female empowerment along with increasing paramilitarism are likely to develop greater levels of domestic terror activity” (Borgeson & Valeri, 2009, p. 41). This shows the direct link between loss of cultural dominance and the outbreak of violence. According to Gallaher, border securing/policing, essentialist ideas of belonging, and an emphasis on local sovereignty (Gallaher, 2004) are

ideologies that are shared by the militia movement and White supremacist groups. Thus, the presence of the Ottawa Patriots and the Michigan Militia impacts the debate over the Dewey Hill Cross by encouraging and legitimizing feelings of White, Christian superiority, loss of “deserved” privilege and “reverse racism,” and by providing organizational support and weapons training for those who may choose to take violent action.

### **Constitutional and Legal Issues.**

The question of whether the placement of the cross on Dewey Hill was constitutional is still a contentious subject in Grand Haven. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution has two provisions regarding religion: The Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause. These read, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (“The Bill of Rights: A Transcription”). The debate over whether the cross is constitutional sits inside a larger debate about whether or not religion should be “singled out for special treatment” (Schwartzman, 2014, p. 1321) at all. Some believe that by not specifically granting a provision of privileges to religion, that non-religious belief systems (such as secular humanism or scientific materialism) are being valued above religious belief systems, even though all belief systems can be used by individuals to guide moral and ethical decision-making (Schwartzman, 2014). The vagueness of these provisions has left them open to varying interpretations. Because the definition of the word “establishment” is not clear (“First Amendment and religion”), ambiguity exists which allows for wildly varying interpretations of the Establishment Clause. While some people interpret this as providing freedom *of* religion, others interpret it as providing freedom *from* religion. The vagueness of this clause leaves individual issues to be worked out through various test cases in local, state, Federal, and U.S. Supreme Court.

***The Lemon Test.*** In 1971, The U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of Lemon v. Kurtzman established a precedent that is relevant to the Dewey Hill issue. In this case, the court establish the “Lemon Test” which “involves three criteria for judging whether laws or governmental actions are allowable under the establishment clause” (“Tests used by the Supreme Court in Establishment Clause cases,” 2015). The second of these criteria is, “does the primary effect of the law or action neither advance nor inhibit religion? In other words, is it neutral?” (“Tests used by the Supreme Court in Establishment Clause cases,” 2015). The Dewey Hill Cross stood in the most prominent place in Grand Haven, where it was visible for several miles. Due to its prominence on city owned property, it could be regarded as a *de facto* symbol of the community. The display of the cross in this manner may be regarded as an act by the city government that advances religion, and is not neutral. Thus, this researcher believes that it fails the “Lemon Test,” and is not constitutional.

***The Endorsement Test.*** In 1984, the U.S. Supreme Court case of Lynch v. Donnelly established another precedent for Establishment clause cases. In this case, Justice O’Connor proposed the “Endorsement Test,” which considers whether the law or action being challenged appears to the community to be endorsing or disapproving of religion. O’Connor wrote,

Endorsement sends a message to non-adherents that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community. . . . What is crucial is that the government practices not have the effect of communicating a message of government endorsement or disapproval of religion (“Tests used by the Supreme Court in Establishment Clause cases,” 2015).

The placement of the cross and its support by city government officials, including Mayor Geri McCaleb, clearly communicated the endorsement of Christian religion to members of the community. The support of city officials and the city government clearly created a perception among community members that Christianity was endorsed by the government. This

communicated to the community precisely what Justice O'Connor described, a sense of some community members being insiders, and other being outsiders.

***Was the Cross Constitutional?*** The placement of the Dewey Hill Cross on city-owned property appears to be in violation of the Establishment Clause. The fact that its placement failed both the Lemon Test and the Endorsement Test is likely the reason that the city council voted to take the cross down rather than go to court on the issue. They were quite likely to lose, and they knew it. What is reprehensible is the behavior of the city council, and especially the mayor, who spoke of how sad she was to see the cross be taken down. She was clearly committed to elevating the majority's viewpoint while marginalizing the viewpoint of the minority. Apparently, there was no concern over creating an exclusive community where Christianity was favored and members of other religions and the non-religious were excluded and made to feel like outsiders. Fortunately, in January of 2015, "Mayor Pro-tem Michael Fritz called Grand Haven a 'diverse community' with many different religions and said that it's time City Council took that into consideration" ("Grand Haven cross that drew criticism to become an anchor," 2015). This statement, printed in *The New York Times*, represents a dramatic change in the official discourse on the cross issue, and is indicative of the possibility of a better future for non-Christians in Grand Haven.

## **Conclusion**

When I began this study in the spring of 2015, Donald Trump had not yet declared his intention to run as a candidate for President of the United States. My original goal was simply to evaluate the controversy over the Dewey Hill Cross in order to better understand how supporters of the cross felt about the issue, and what that revealed about the community. When results yielded a trove of data revealing deeply troubled emotions and unspoken assumptions of

Christian privilege, I wondered where this situation might lead. In retrospect, it has been possible to draw connections between the emotions and beliefs expressed in this preliminary study and the tide of White disappointment, anger, and resentment that Donald Trump turned to his advantage in 2016. It is both appropriate and saddening to situate my hometown and its story within this bigger picture of surging White Nationalism and Christian hegemony.

Chapter two of this thesis provides a review of scholarly literature relevant to the Dewey Hill Cross controversy. In this literature review, the concepts of Whiteness, Christian hegemony and spatiality are explored. Chapter Three discusses the methodological approach, the method of data collection, analysis, and the research design for the study. Chapter Four presents findings of the document data study, arranged into seven themes. In Chapter Five, the concepts from the literature review are applied to the results in order to explicate their meanings, and a theory is proposed. Chapter Six situates the study within the context of the election of President Trump and, based upon the implications of the study, offers recommendations for teaching about Whiteness and for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

This thesis addresses a multifaceted issue with roots in history, ethnicity, law, and religious heritage. Addressing the inherent complexity of the Dewey Hill Cross controversy requires analysis through multiple conceptual frameworks. As an interdisciplinary field of inquiry, Ethnic Studies provides the flexibility needed to tackle this untidy project. In this chapter, I conduct a review of academic literature that is relevant to the Dewey Hill Cross controversy. The literature review process led me to concentrate my study within the themes of Whiteness, Christian hegemony and spatiality in order to break down the ways in which each of these themes function to reify, naturalize and render invisible the ingroup privilege, which White Christian citizens of Grand Haven possess. With the understanding that ethnic studies utilizes an interdisciplinary paradigm, I incorporate literature from disparate areas of inquiry including psychology, geography, political science, women's studies, history, theology, and sociology, as well as ethnic studies proper. Since the ultimate topic of this study is the thoughts, feelings and behavior of human beings, all fields of inquiry are relevant and may clarify and sharpen our understanding of how human beliefs and emotions are shaped by our environments, identities and relationships with others.

### **Towards Denaturalizing Power and Privilege**

When power and privilege are naturalized, they appear invisible to those who experience them, and the benefits they confer appear to be naturally occurring phenomena that are unrelated to categories such as race, religion, gender, ethnicity or sexuality. In order to effectively challenge the fairness of these unearned benefits, the benefits must first be recognized and named. Thus, to denaturalize power and privilege is to render them visible so that their true

nature may become evident. This is a necessary step towards creating a just society. In the following section, the concepts Whiteness, Christian hegemony, and Spatiality are examined in order to elucidate the ways they serve to naturalize White, Christian privilege and its claim to preferred geographic spaces in the United States.

### **Whiteness.**

The majority of White people in the United States experience their Whiteness not as a racial identity, but as the absence of race (Frankenberg, 2001). In the minds of these individuals, race is not a relevant issue because it does not involve them, but is only about racial “others” (Frankenburg, 2001). This kind of thinking only affects Whites themselves; those of non-White identity have no difficulty conceiving of Whiteness as a racial category. In her essay, “Representing whiteness in the black imagination,” bell hooks wrote that Black people, who are quite accustomed to the “white gaze” upon them, have a “special” knowledge of White people, acquired through a long history of observing them from an outsider position that grants them a perspective unavailable to Whites themselves (hooks, 1997). According to hooks, White people seem to believe that they are invisible to Black people unless they choose to be seen, and “white students respond with naïve amazement that black people critically assess white people from a standpoint where ‘whiteness’ is the privileged signifier” (hooks, 1997). Other researchers concur, noting that most Whites see themselves as simply “normal” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012) or, as Mills puts it, “the somatic norm” (Mills, 1997, p. 53). In his essay, “An African-Centered Perspective on White Supremacy,” Mark Christian writes, “there is little critical dialogue relating to the continued manipulation of minds for the ultimate benefit of White privilege and European culture hegemony” (Christian, 2002, p. 186). This lack of dialogue is both the result of the delusion of unmarked Whiteness and a necessary factor for its continuation.

According to Kathleen M. Blee (2004), “Scholars in the new field of White studies find that Whiteness is defined by its boundaries” (Blee, 2004, p. 52), meaning that Whites only understand themselves as what they are not. In their conception of race, people of color exist at the boundaries, while they, Whites, occupy the unmarked center. In this way, White “selves emerge through the process of refusing the Other” (Dwyer & Jones, 2000, p. 211). Ruth Frankenberg writes that White people throughout history have named themselves “in order to say ‘I am not that Other’...Whiteness is marked in terms of its ‘not-Otherness’” (Frankenberg, 2001, p. 75).

This understanding of White identity does not hold up under scrutiny, of course. When considered carefully, the concept of Whiteness “as unmarked norm is revealed to be a mirage or indeed, to put it even more strongly, a white delusion” (Frankenberg, 2001, p. 73). However, White individuals seldom undertake the task of understanding “whiteness masquerading as universal” (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 3). In this manner, Whiteness remains masked, naturalized by this mass delusion. One consequence of this delusion is that the White dominance and privilege are naturalized (Frankenberg, 1997). The higher rate of “success” in life that Whites display relative to other races is attributed to superior character, work habits, and cultural factors, while structural benefits to Whites caused by institutionalized racism are denied. According to Mab Segrest, those who promote the concepts of color-blindness and post-raciality in the United States are selling a huge lie (Segrest, 2001). Specifically, that “the ‘playing field’ of five hundred years is supposedly evened by two civil rights laws; U.S. culture is now ‘color-blind,’ and the primary form of discrimination is ‘reverse discrimination’ experienced by White men” (Segrest, 2001, p. 51).

As Whiteness is tied to concepts of both success and not-Otherness, there is considerable pressure upon Whites to live up to the expectations that their identity carries (Hughey & Bird, 2013). According to Hughey & Bird, “more often than not, performing a correct *and* competent White racial identity (appearing moral, logical, rational, objective, etc.) means aligning oneself with racist, reactionary, paternalistic and privileged symbolic and material practices” (Hughey & Bird, 2013, p. 978). Hughey later elaborates on the formation of White Identity, describing the ways in which White hegemony pathologizes both non-Whites and White people who do not “view people of color as pathological or those individual whites who embody dysfunctions of their own” (Hughey, 2016, p. 227). In this manner, hegemonic Whiteness marginalizes those Whites who fail to “exemplify the differences that mark ‘ideal’ Whiteness” (Hughey, 2016, p. 227). Complicity with a system of oppression and domination causes White people harm. It is not of the same type or magnitude as the harm it causes those who are victims of White oppression, but it is a kind of violence to the spirit nonetheless. As Segrest puts it, “in acquiring hatred, Whites lost feelings as practices of love” (Segrest, 2001, p. 46). She goes on to list several costs of racism to the “Souls of White Folk” including intimacy, their “affective lives,” their authenticity, their “sense of connection to other humans and the natural world,” and their “spiritual selves” (Segrest, 2001, p. 65).

As stated above, in the ethos of post-raciality, it is not uncommon for Whites to claim victim status. This appears to be a response to a perceived loss of privilege, where Whites experience incremental movement towards equality by non-Whites as a loss of status. When they think in this way, Whites conceive of life as a zero-sum game in which there is only so much status to go around, and one’s own worth is evaluated relative to how many others are “below” him or her. Thus, when the life outcomes of non-Whites appear to improve, Whites perceive that

they now have *fewer* rights and privileges than non-Whites. Justin Gest describes perceived loss of status in terms of “social deprivation,” also known as “relative deprivation,” in which individuals compare their status with the status to which they believe they are entitled. In his book, *The New Minority: White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*, Gest notes that the larger the gap between a person’s actual status and the status to which they believe they are entitled, the more inclined that person will be to participate in “anti-system political behavior that use(s) undemocratic tactics to express political preferences” (Gest, 2016, p. 169). When they move to far-right political positions, “White people appear to respond to a cultural threat. The re-ordering of social hierarchies and associated losses of political power” (Gest, 2016, p. 277). Gest ties this to an experienced loss of racial identity, in which Whiteness is characterized “at worst—by a cultural nihilism” that deprives it of any particular meaning or connection to community (Gest, 2016, p. 142). This loss is important, because in many cases, the sense of racial identity was all that poor, uneducated Whites had that gave them a sense of value and worthiness.

Nancy Isenberg discusses this loss in *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. “American democracy has never accorded all the people a meaningful voice,” she writes. “The masses have been given symbols instead, and they are often empty symbols” (Isenberg, 2016, pp. 310-311). The symbols act to manipulate the wounded egos of impoverished White people who have long been marginalized and treated as expendable (Isenberg, 2016). The symbols may be all they had to uphold their sense of their own value and place in society, and when they are lost, Whites experience deep grief and resentment. The losses may also be perceived as “reverse discrimination” or “reverse racism.” I must stress that these perceptions spring not from reality, but from emotions, false assumptions, distorted cognitions and

misinterpretations. They are strongly linked to experiences of rapid social change (Hochschild, 2016; Skocpol & Williamson, 2012).

In addition to believing that they are victims of reverse discrimination, Whites may also perceive that society only portrays Whiteness in terms of a privilege that they do not believe exists (Lobel, 2011; Taylor, n.d.), denying any positive facets of being White. Members of hate groups are more likely to articulate these beliefs directly. For members of hate groups, Whiteness is not invisible; for them it is quite salient because they see it “as a marker of racial victimization rather than racial dominance” (Blee, 2004, p. 51). The following are two examples of the thinking process of self-identified White supremacists as quoted by Blee:

The masses of White folks have been stripped of their culture, heritage, history and pride. That is why we do the things we do—to educate, to instill a sense of pride in these people, to offset the effect of the regular mainstream media which is blatantly anti-White. Whites are the true endangered species. We are less than 9 percent of the world’s population. We are the ones in danger of dying out in one or two generations (Blee, 2004, p. 49).

“White Christian people are persecuted for being White, persecuted for believing that God created them different, created them superior” (Blee, 2004, p. 49). This type of cognitive formation is especially relevant to this study of the current situation in Grand Haven. The kinds of beliefs expressed above are unlikely to be so directly stated, as “overt acts of racism are no longer deemed acceptable in the public domain” (Ishiwata, 2011, p. 25). However, similar sentiments may be expressed in language that avoids direct expression of a belief in White racial superiority.

At its very core, Whiteness appears to be about a deep need to be superior to other people and to hold a privileged position, from which Whites receive emotional and physical sustenance. Without non-Whites, Whiteness has no meaning. Without a privileged position, Whites seem to have no sense of their own purpose or worth. Whites are a category of people who rely upon

hierarchy in order to feel that their lives have meaning. In much of the literature discussed above, Whites are presented as objects of pity, deserving of empathy and compassion, and that may be true to some extent. When reading recent scholarship that describes losses and feelings of threat and powerlessness, it is easy to get caught up in a kind of thinking that excuses all but the most overt and heinous acts of White supremacy and racial intimidation and violence. This is a dangerous line of thinking, however. White supremacy is sociopathic, and the sociopath cultivates and thrives on pity (Stout, 2005). Whiteness must be held account for the enormous damage it has done and continues to do. In *White Rage*, a careful and comprehensive history of White supremacy and systemic discrimination against African Americans in the United States, Emory University Professor Carol Anderson writes, “The trigger for white rage, invariably, is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship” (Anderson, 2016). Anderson’s book is a gut-wrenching counting of the cost, in possibilities, dreams and blood, of the fragility of the White ego and the ruthlessness of those who strove to protect and maintain it.

The United States has always been home to overt and explicit racism, which has come in and out of style depending upon how threatened White people have felt. As Anderson points out above, every time African Americans have sought equality, Whiteness has arrived on the scene to assert dominance through a variety of tactics. In certain times and locations, the KKK and other terrorist organizations have emerged from the shadows to commit atrocities. The odious rhetoric that motivates and “justifies” their actions is proudly and blatantly racist. It also bears an undeniable resemblance to more socially acceptable rhetoric used to justify non-lethal means of subjugation and discrimination. Two prominent White Supremacist leaders were George Lincoln

Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party, and William L. Pierce, author of *The Turner Diaries*, a fictional work of racist propaganda about a race war in which all non-Whites in the United States are exterminated. The Federal Bureau of Investigation referred to this novel as “the bible of the racist right” (“The Turner Diaries, Other Racist Novels, Inspire Extremist Violence”, 2004). In his *Collected Works*, Rockwell warns of imminent threat to the very existence of the “White Race” and the “Western world” (Rockwell, n.d., p. 6). He also expresses disgust for people of mixed race and for the mixing of races socially (Rockwell, n.d., p. 17), and in a 1966 interview for *Playboy Magazine*, bluntly declares that “white, Christian people should dominate” (Rockwell, n.d., p. 82). William Pierce, in his work, *Who We Are*, tells a perverted history of the world with the White Man as hero who, post WWII, faces “The Race’s Gravest Crisis” (Pierce, 2012, p. 322): the mixing of races, increased non-White populations, and the imminent elimination of the White race (Pierce, 2012). Both Rockwell and Pierce discuss the murder of non-Whites as a necessary act to preserve the “White Race.” While most racists, even those who are overt in their racial hatred, stop short of advocating murder, the ideology behind everyday acts of discrimination such as racist jokes or slurs as well as structural biases which result in the mass incarceration Black men, rests upon the same principles espoused by Rockwell and Pierce. By creating an atmosphere of imminent threat, all individuals and institutions that operate under White supremacist belief systems have the effect of legitimizing extreme acts and encouraging violence and segregation. The common beliefs that animate all White extremism are that Whites are superior, and that their continued existence is both necessary and at risk. Because of this ideological consistency, it is insufficient and dangerous to label Rockwell, Pierce and their ilk as lunatic fringe when the difference between them and more “mainstream” White separatists, apologists and alarmists is one of degree and not of kind.

Whiteness must be held accountable for this appalling rhetoric and for the nearly invisible, everyday racism that permeates our social interactions and systems. Academics and the institutions they work for play a crucial role in this process. In her introduction to *Displacing Whiteness*, Ruth Frankenberg explains the importance of studying Whiteness. “To leave whiteness unexamined,” she writes, “is to perpetuate a kind of asymmetry that has marred even many critical analyses of racial formation and cultural practice” (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 1). Since critical White studies is a new discipline, there is still much work to be done. Plaut (2010) explains that although much is understood about the ways in which White people enact prejudice, little is understood about “what Whiteness is in the first place, and how it plays an important role in shaping intergroup relations and sustaining inequalities” (Plaut, 2010, p. 90). This researcher hopes to contribute to the literature by exploring how Whiteness functions in Grand Haven, particularly as it is expressed in a system of shared dominance with Christianity.

### **Christian Hegemony.**

The story of Christian hegemony in the United States is really the story of a specific expression of Christianity. In *The End of White Christian America*, Robert P. Jones points out that in the twentieth century, “White mainline and evangelical Protestants were the beneficiaries of White Christian America, an inheritance they each simultaneously contested and strongly guarded” (Jones, 2016, p. 37). Other denominations, including Catholicism, were considered peripheral, at best (Jones 2016). Jones writes that “White Protestants claimed an identity that was integral to the national narrative from its beginning” and that “White Christian America was big enough, cohesive enough, and influential enough to pull off the illusion that it was the cultural pivot around which the country turned” (Jones, 2016, p 39). With their numbers and influence dwindling, and in the wake of an African American presidency, White Protestants are

experiencing anxiety (Jones, 2016) and a “sense of dislocation” (Jones, 2016, p. 41). As with the anxiety over Whiteness, Protestant anxiety is driven by fear of change (Jones, 2016).

In his book, *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony*, Paul Kivel defines Christian hegemony as “the everyday, systematic set of Christian values, individuals and institutions that dominate all aspects of U.S. society” (Kivel, 2013, p. 3). In this book, Kivel describes the ways in which Christian ideology informs the structures of our society from the micro level of our thoughts to the macro level of our public policies. As Whiteness is largely unnoticed by Whites, Christian hegemony is largely unnoticed by Christians. As Kivel writes, “Christian dominance has become so invisible that its manifestations even appear to be secular” (Kivel, 2013, p. 5).

This dominance is a legacy of the influence of Christianity, and particularly of Protestantism, on the national character of the United States because “ideas originally derived from Protestantism could be at least partly detached from their origins and function as a kind of civil religion or common American faith that minority faiths might turn to their own uses” (Moorhead, 1998, p. 35). However, this universalism was limited by rhetoric that conflated Protestantism with Anglo-Saxon racial superiority (Moorhead, 1998; Blumenfeld, 2000). Thus, for an ethnic or racial minority, to align oneself with the “universal” values of Protestantism was to “accept the preeminence of White Protestants and acknowledge one’s status as a second-class citizen” (Moorhead, 1998, p. 337). As in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, living as a non-Christian in the United States continues to require complex negotiation for those of other faiths, and those of no faith.

Christian hegemony is the root of bias against minority faiths and the non-religious. Atheists are among the most affected by Christian hegemony. Recent studies in the field of

sociology have revealed the extent of this bias (Gervais, Norenzayan, & Shariff, 2011; Edgell & Gerteis & Hartmann, 2006). Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (2011), report that “atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2011, p. 230). In a 2011 study, Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan identify distrust as the central factor in anti-atheist bias, with atheists being regarded as less trustworthy than members of other generally distrusted groups such as other religions, feminists, homosexuals, and even rapists. The authors state that “the relationship between belief in God and atheist distrust was fully mediated by the belief that people behave better if they feel that God is watching them” (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011, p. 1189). This indicates that for most religious faithful, atheists can never be regarded as trustworthy because they are likely to think they can get away with anything and not expect to experience any consequences. These biases have real-life impacts for nonbelievers. According to Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, and Nielsen (2012), atheists experience discrimination socially, in family relationships, in the workplace, and in the classroom.

In “Christian Privilege: Breaking a Sacred Taboo,” Lewis Schlosser composes “A Beginning List of Christian Privileges” which include many things that Christians take for granted in the U.S. (Schlosser, 2000). Notably, several of these items involve not having to worry about being a victim of a crime due to religious beliefs. As with race, only those who have never been targeted would have trouble seeing this lack of worry as a privilege. In his writing, Dr. Warren J. Blumenfeld offers an expansive exploration of Christian privilege. Using a framework of oppression and privilege, he discusses how Christianity operates to create powerlessness, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence (Blumenfeld,

2000). In a similar vein, Adams and Joshi (2000), take on two “core myths” of religion in the United States: “freedom of religion for all,” and “separation of church and state” (Adams & Joshi, 2000, pp. 228-229) stating, “deconstructing these myths is essential to understanding the historical role of Christian privilege as well as the religious oppression of non-Christian faith traditions” (Adams & Joshi, 2000, p. 227).

Political theorist Wendy Brown writes of the dangerous effects religious rhetoric can have on American politics, warning that “within the United States, an increasingly overt mixing of Christianity into political discourse and debate” is a concern to democracy, “especially given the anti-democratic characteristics of contemporary Christian fundamentalism in the United States” (Brown, 2006). These concerns are legitimate, and apply at the local level as well as the national (Brown, 2006). Adams and Joshi concur, stating, “contemporary manifestations of Christian hegemony interacting with cultural and political ideology can be seen in divisive instances of ‘religionized’ U.S. politics” (Adams & Joshi, 2000, p. 232). Christian nationalists, who believe that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, are thriving in the current political climate (Fea, 2011). They “are serious about their faith in God and country. They have an earnest and commendable desire to influence the nation for Christ and celebrate the freedoms we enjoy as citizens” (Fea, 2011, p. 57). However, intending to do good and doing harm are not mutually exclusive categories.

In her essay “The Culture of Privilege: Color-blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity,” Abby Ferber presents a compelling argument for using the concept of intersectionality to support the inclusion of Christonormativity, defined as “the normalization and privileging of Christianity as the dominant religious and spiritual culture in the United States” (Ferber, 2012, p. 70) into frameworks that evaluate privilege and marginalization. Ferber

groups Christonormativity, along with color-blindness and postfeminism, under an umbrella term she labels “oppression blindness.” Oppression blindness (an unfortunately ableist term), is a state of being in which aspects of an individual’s identity are so normalized by the culture that any advantages gained from them appear to be simply natural or normal, not the results of systemic factors that favor some people over others (Ferber, 2012). Thus, a White Christian man would likely deny that color-blindness, postfeminism, or Christonormativity exist because he would not experience himself as being advantaged by his identity in any way. To this hypothetical man, things just naturally are the way they are. Ferber notes that Christonormativity allows for Christianity to become so normalized that it is “reframed in universal terms, depicted as good fun that everyone can be a part of. . . . Christian values are naturalized as simply human values that are inherent in all people” (Ferber, 2012, p. 73). Again drawing on the concept of structural intersectionality, Ferber states that we need to consider the ways in which systems interact and reinforce each other (Ferber, 2012). In support of her thesis, and as a call for further study, Ferber states that there is a dearth of research “examining systems of privilege intersectionality” (Ferber, 2012, p. 64).

Another concept useful for understanding the interplay of identity and privilege is that of “half-blindness” (another ableist term), coined by Pratto and Stewart (2012). According to this concept, individuals are able to perceive of groups as being *disadvantaged* without awareness of the privilege that the normative group enjoys. Pratto and Stewart define this half-blindness as, “the acknowledgement of social inequality with the implicit assumption that dominance is normal” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 29) and state, “by taking dominance as normal, superior social positions and greater power do not seem to be privileges” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 29). Using norm theory and social dominance theory, the authors present a study that confirms what

many race theorists are saying, that members of subordinated groups experience higher salience of their group membership, that members of dominant groups are largely unaware of their group identity, and that these processes render dominance invisible. Further, “dominants’ cultural ideologies are told as if they pertain to all” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 31). The authors provide the example of the Protestant Work Ethic as one such ideology. They point out that such dominant group ideologies are reified through institutional practice and inscribed into law through the establishment of social policy, a process they describe as “the institutionalization of hierarchy-enhancing discrimination” (Pratto & Stewart, 2012, p. 32).

As with Whiteness, Christianity considers its dominance to be normal. Any challenge to that dominance is experienced as a threat. In his *New York Times* bestselling memoir, *Hillbilly Elogy*, J.D. Vance writes of his impoverished, White Christian upbringing in the Rust Belt of Ohio and in Jackson, Kentucky. “I had an acute sense that the walls were closing in on ‘real’ Christians. There was talk about the ‘war on Christmas’—which, as far as I could, consisted mainly of ACLU activists suing small towns for nativity displays” (Vance, 2016, p. 97). He also recalls reading about how Christians were the objects of discrimination, and admits to feeling like a “persecuted minority” (Vance, 2016, p. 97). In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Hochschild quotes one of her Tea Party supporting research participants as saying, “there are fewer and fewer white Christians like us” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 221), and notes that this woman and her community had “begun to feel like a besieged minority” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 221). These moments perfectly illustrate the perception that Christians are under attack and that a lack of special treatment is tantamount to persecution.

Religion is a powerful force in culture. Adams and Joshi emphasize the importance of taking religion into account when we consider issues of social justice:

We need to understand how religious motives and justifications can inflame cultural ethnic, racial, and class antagonisms. . . . Religion interacts in important ways with ethnicity, class, gender and nationalism, and these interacting dimensions of social identity need to be understood in their complex interrelations instead of as either/or forced choices that misinterpret one at the expense of the other” (Adams & Joshi, 2000, p. 232).

Christianity has played a role in providing ideological grounding for historical aggressions; however, it has also been influential in fighting oppression, in the abolition and civil rights movements, in social justice movements such as Liberation Theology (Adams & Joshi, 2000), and in aiding those in need through the provision of basic necessities and other types of assistance. In general, all religions are potential sources of strength and community empowerment. Still, we are far from living in a “religiously pluralistic democracy” (Adams & Joshi, 2000, p. 233). This means that we need to remain aware of the potential of religion to do harm, even as it works towards good.

### **Spatiality.**

Spatiality is a concept that elucidates the ways in which a geographic space interacts with the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups (Pumain, n.d.). Through this interactive process, groups develop perceptions of ownership over geographical locations, and those locations can become conceptually racialized. In the United States, “notions of race are closely linked to ideas about legitimate ‘ownership’ of the nation” (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 6). In her paper, “Spaces of Encounters: Immigration, Race, Class, and the Politics of Belonging in Small-Town America, geographer Helga Leitner writes about what she describes as “a politics of belonging:”

. . . negotiations and power struggles over boundaries that define who belongs to a particular local and national community and who does not. This politics of belonging is simultaneously a politics about cultural and racial boundaries, boundaries of place, and entitlements to economic and political resources. All these elements contribute to

defining the boundaries between the “we” and the “them” and are at stake in these struggles (Leitner, 2012, p. 830).

Thus, when striving to understand the nature of group conflict in the U.S., we must consider spatiality a vital concept. Different types of geographies will create different forms of racial identity (Frankenberg, 1997). For example, Frankenberg notes, “the presumption that White and American mean the same thing may be taken for granted in a small town but contested in a large city” (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 5). In a similar vein, Flint asserts that “everyone is a geographer” (Flint, 2004, p. 2), with their own vision of who should and should not inhabit their particular space. The defining qualities for inclusion and exclusion are often racial. As Charles Mills phrases it: “The norming of space is often done in terms of the *racing* of space, the depiction of space as dominated by individuals . . . of a certain race” (Mills, 1997, p. 41). Indeed, as Elyes Hanafi writes, “Ghettos, barrios and reservations confirm critical geographers claim that, in the United States, places get racialized and people get spatialized mainly on the basis of racial hierarchy” (Hanafi, 2016, p. 378). Hanafi asserts that the primary factor that determines one’s options for residence is race: specifically, whether White people reside there (Hanafi, 2016). Certain geographies are permitted for people of color, while others are claimed for Whiteness in a “race-based pattern that systematically privileges whites to the detriment of people of color” (Hanafi, 2016, p. 362). Through a process called categorical naturalization, “both White and Other subjects reify social space, locating social subjects and attributing characteristics to places” (Dwyer & Jones, 2000, p. 210). This type of thinking, coupled with notions of ownership and entitlement, can lead to racial conflicts.

One thing that members of racist hate groups have in common is a belief in the spatial and social separation of races (Blee, 2004, p. 50). So, what are the necessary conditions for racial biases to erupt into incidents of violence? Flint (2004) does not believe that the social and spatial

can be separated when considering the mobilization of hate. Emotions play an important role in this process. Gallaher (2004) notes that, particularly for rural citizens, the belief that their communal way of life is being threatened may impel them to defend their traditions with physical force. Emotions of “belonging, communal support, and the security of collectivity within a broader environment of rejection” (Welliver, 2004, p. 248) are used by hate group recruiters to entice potential members. Most individuals who commit hate crimes are what is known as “reactive offenders” who perpetrate “in response to a perceived threat to some self-supposed entitlement, right, privilege, or way of life that does not extend to the victim” (Welliver, 2004, p. 249). Welliver further notes that these entitlements are often connected to physical locations which the reactive offenders perceive as being owned by their group, and which now must be shared, creating emotions of insecurity and fear. Thus, “among cultural insiders, the fear of loss of a perceived entitlement to spaces of homogeneity can elicit brutal and criminal reactions” (Welliver, 2004, p. 250).

The concepts of border policing and ingroup/outgroup status serve to elucidate the ways that humans demarcate space, both physically and rhetorically. Territoriality is defined as a “behavior pattern in humans consisting of the tendency to defend a particular domain or sphere of influence or interest” (“territoriality”), and it is, to some extent, a natural and universal human phenomenon. The territories that we defend tend to be the ones we to which we are most intimately connected—our localities rather than our nations, which are connected through looser bonds—bonds which are almost imagined rather than experienced (Appadurai, 1993).

In the U.S., nearly all minorities have been subjected to exclusion, domination, and forced assimilation (Karst, 1997). The message of this history is clear: “Those who are different cannot belong as full members of the community” (Karst, 1997, p. 407). Who is included and

who is excluded is dependent upon local notions of “what Whiteness both *is* and *should be*, which is policed through implicit and explicit social and cultural markers of authentic belonging” (Hughey & Byrd, 2013, p. 976). Border securing/policing, essentialist ideas of belonging, and an emphasis on local sovereignty (Gallaher, 2004) are ideological components that the militia movement shares with White supremacist organizations. Belonging and not belonging are the key notions here. A border can be physical or metaphorical, but its function will always be to separate those who are presumed to belong from those who are not. As Colin Flint wrote in his introduction to *Spaces of Hate: Geographies of Discrimination and Intolerance in the U.S.A.*:

Hate groups are active in creating social groups defined by race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality. . . . The nature of belonging and intrusion has geographic implications as they explicitly reference a geographic space that is the “home” of a particular group being changed by the arrival of a relatively new one. Contemporary debates regarding immigration policies coupled with rhetoric regarding America as a White and Christian nation illustrate the mutual construction of cultural and physical borders (Flint, 2004, p. 9).

Flint identifies a significant gap in the literature on the geography of hate. Specifically, he writes that the local scale, especially when conceptualized as place, is of distinct interest to geographers because of its connection with collective identity.

### **Why Study Grand Haven, Michigan?**

What is special about this time and place that makes Grand Haven, Michigan a meaningful setting for a study in 2017? Timeliness certainly plays a role. The way the Dewey Hill Controversy precedes the election of Trump and its accompanying outburst of extremist rhetoric is certainly fortuitous for me as a researcher. Plus, the sheer volume of document data that became accessible on the internet is a gift of sorts. It provides a window into the heart of Midwestern small-town America at a most opportune moment. The information gleaned through this study is valuable particularly for its unremarkable quality. These are everyday people with

typical emotions and beliefs. The averageness of their lives makes this study especially useful for understanding how easily people can develop belief systems that might nurture exclusionary and extremist ideologies.

### **Addressing Gaps in Literature.**

Through my evaluation of the literature of several fields, I have identified gaps in this literature that this study may begin to address. As noted by Colin Flint, one such gap is that there is an incomplete understanding of how ingroup/outgroup formation occurs on the local scale in the field of Geography. Another gap, identified by Plaut, occurs in the development of a theoretical understanding of what Whiteness actually *is* (as opposed to what it is not) in the field of Ethnic Studies. Abby Ferber identifies a third gap, which lies in the incomplete theoretical understanding of how intersections of privilege operate, which is also a concern in the field of Ethnic Studies, as well as in Women's Studies and Sociology. Jeannine Hill Fletcher echoes Ferber's call for more work on intersections of privilege, particularly of the intersection of race and religion. Fletcher writes that "discussions of religious pluralism have yet to consider how theologies of superiority might be linked with racist ideologies" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 54), and notes that "the discourse of race as it intersects with religion has been fundamentally ignored in the narrative telling of interfaith progress in America" (Fletcher, 2016, p. 54). In the discussion chapter, I address each of these gaps with the goal of contributing what I can to the development of knowledge in these fields.

### **Identifying Need for Study.**

The election of Donald Trump has been labelled the "Trump Phenomenon" by several publications including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The New Yorker* (Porter, 2016; Mudde, 2015; Remnick, 2016). Journalists use this term not merely as a label for the

Trump's presidential victory, but also as a means of situating the U.S. election within a set of global events that have given rise to significant shifts in ideology. In *The New Yorker*, David Remnick writes, "Trump can be viewed as part of a deadly serious wave of authoritarians and xenophobes who have come to power in Russia, Poland, and Hungary, and who lead such movements as the National Front, in France, and the Independence Party, in the United Kingdom" (Remnick, 2016). *New York Times* columnist Eduardo Porter links the "Trump Phenomenon" to a nationalist, xenophobic backlash against globalization (Porter, 2016). Porter argues that wage stagnation and increasing wealth disparities have fueled this phenomenon and notes, "protectionism is on the rise around the world" (Porter, 2016). Janelle Bouie, chief political correspondent for *Slate.com*, delineates the racial aspects of the phenomenon, asserting that the success of Trump's "nativist demagoguery" is primarily the result of a racist backlash against the Obama presidency (Bouie, 2016).

In his book, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, Journalist John B. Judis addresses these ideologies. Judis writes that Trump "had become the voice of middle American radicalism and more broadly of the white Americans who felt left behind by globalism and the shift to a post-industrial economy" (Judis, 2016, p. 75). This global movement is certainly of greater significance than the election of one U.S. president, and is not likely to end when Donald Trump leaves office. Understanding how and why these changes are taking place will require careful analysis from multiple disciplines. Since the unrest in Grand Haven provides an opportunity to see behind the façade of White Christian, small town America, this study may provide analysis that is instrumental to understanding the mindset behind these global changes.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### **Methodology**

This is a qualitative study guided by poststructuralist and feminist theories. It employs grounded theory method to evaluate document data produced as public discourse around the issue of the Dewey Hill Cross. “Grounded theory methods provide a frame for qualitative inquiry and guidelines for conducting it,” which according to Charmaz involves using a constellation of methods (Charmaz, 2014, p. 14).

The events in Grand Haven preceded the Trump election. I argue that the election of President Trump could be related to these events since the community of Grand Haven is representative of predominantly White, small Midwestern communities and because these types of communities were instrumental in Trump’s victory.

This qualitative study using document data seeks to investigate two research questions. These research questions are: RQ 1) “What emotions are expressed by commenters who wish to keep the Dewey Hill Cross in place? RQ 2: What beliefs are expressed by commenters who wish to keep the Dewey Hill Cross in place?”

A preliminary study of document data was completed in the spring of 2015, and it has since become the bedrock of this inquiry. The results of the 2015 study informed the creation of this larger thesis project, allowing this researcher to formulate the “big picture” question with certainty that the events and discourse around the Dewey Hill Cross controversy do indeed shed light on the Trump phenomenon.

This chapter discusses two theoretical frameworks, poststructuralism and feminist theory. These theories guide the evaluation and interpretation of data. I then address my own

positionality as a researcher toward the goal of transparency. As an admittedly biased human being addressing an issue of personal concern, I declare my personal beliefs so that the reader will be free to judge for herself whether they have negatively affected my interpretation of the data.

### **Poststructuralism.**

This is a qualitative study guided primarily by poststructuralist theory. Poststructuralism emerged into the tumultuous philosophical landscape of Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century. It is both an outgrowth and a critique of the structuralist movement's claims about "arriving at secure knowledge" (Williams, 2005, p. 1), and the existence of "universal structures underlying culture" (Belsey, 2002, p. 114). Poststructuralists deny that such universal and absolute knowledge and structures exist, and regard knowledge as unstable and structures as forever changing. By contesting the fixed nature of reality, they hope to discover the transformative possibilities inherent in the open-ended pursuit of truth (Belsey, 2002). A notable quality of poststructuralism is "its power to resist and work against settled truths and oppositions" (Williams, 2005, p.4). This power makes it an excellent schema for understanding social conflict and working towards justice and equality. Key figures in the establishment of poststructuralism, namely Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Kristeva, used the power of this theoretical framework as they "took stands on key injustices and conflicts" (Williams, 2005, p. 5). In addition, poststructuralism denies essentialism, explaining human difference as socially constructed through the process of discourse (Frost & Elichhoff, 2014). As mentioned in the introduction, poststructuralist theories allow for disruption to be regarded in a positive manner as a result of its capacity to create a space where transformation can occur.

### **Feminist Theory.**

Like poststructuralist theory, feminist theory denies essentialism based upon race, gender, class, or sexuality. Feminist theory also takes a stand against social injustice, and emphasizes the constructed nature of social life, particularly in the conception of gender roles. Feminist poststructuralist theory uses the tenets of poststructuralism to challenge the systems of colonial heteropatriarchy that create a gendered reality for women and imperil both the natural and social environments of our world.

Since the Enlightenment, Western inquiry has been based upon positivist epistemology, characterized by the belief in an objective and knowable reality and an impartial and distanced observer/researcher who discovers or uncovers this reality. Emotions, ethics, and values are removed from the process of knowledge production, and disagreements regarding the knowledge are resolved through the process of argument (Hill Collins, 2014). The knowledge created in this manner is presumed to be unbiased and universal, produced by a person in possession of the necessary rationality and objectivity to complete this process. Such a person (usually a European male) is conferred with epistemic authority (the assumption of being positioned to see the world from an unbiased vantage point) and epistemic privilege (the opportunity to be known as an authority) (Naples & Gurr, 2014).

### **Feminist Standpoint Epistemology.**

Feminist standpoint theory emerged as a response to both positivist epistemology and its claims to the existence of absolute truth and impartial observers, and White heteropatriarchy that grants “epistemic privilege” to the presumed rational and objective White male observer. Contrarily to these positions, feminist standpoint theory values the personal experiences (Hill Collins, 2014) and the emotions (Jagger, 2014) of the researcher as integral to the production of

knowledge. The researcher's personal experience, relation to the subject matter, and subjectivity are also valued. Rather than discrediting the resultant knowledge, this valuing actually improves the credibility because rather than denying the subjectivity of the researcher (regarded by standpoint theorists as a fictional construct anyway, as all humans are equally enmeshed within their subjective realities, and those who deny this are merely unable to recognize their subjectivities because the ideologies they ascribe to are so ubiquitous as to appear to be the "true" and "natural" objective state of the world), they make this subjectivity transparent as an integral part of the process of knowledge production. Further, according to standpoint theory, those who hold marginalized identities in society are considered to hold greater epistemic authority than those belonging to dominant groups because "they are able to attain a more global perspective that not only begins in their own experiences but also includes consideration of the dominant ideologies to which they are subjugated" (Naples & Gurr, 2014).

### **Researcher Positionality.**

Consistent with the philosophy of feminist standpoint theory, I will articulate my positionality as a researcher in relation to this study. I was born in the city of Grand Haven and lived there until I left for college in 1988. I am both an insider and an outsider to this community. I am an insider in that I am a White person who was born and raised there, travel there often, and maintain relationships with friends and family in the community; but I never did return there to live after I left, and I have been exposed to many different places and experiences since that time. I have the advantage of being a graduate student at a research institution, a position that carries power and some degree of presumed authority.

As an atheist, I must declare that I am in no way neutral about this issue. I am absolutely opposed to the display of the cross on city owned property and in a position where it is visible

for several miles in the treasured downtown and waterfront area. I believe its display is in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Additionally, I feel that it is inappropriate for one group to have the privileged position of displaying *its* symbol as a *de facto* symbol of the community. In this context, the outsider status/marginalized identity of “atheist” provides me the type of epistemic privilege that allows for a particular and more complete level of insight into the situation.

In the interest of the full disclosure of potential conflicts of interest, I have friends whom I care about on both sides of this controversy. I personally know a few of the individuals whose comments provide the data for this study. I seek, therefore, not to judge or condemn, but rather, to understand. I work toward the goals of growth, healing, and justice for all residents of Grand Haven.

## **Overview**

This qualitative study, guided by poststructuralist and feminist theories, seeks to investigate how the Dewey Hill controversy might shed light on the Trump phenomenon. My analysis of document data that were produced as part of the public discourse around the Dewey Hill Cross controversy provides insights.

## **Research Design**

### **Data Gathering.**

Extant document data were gathered through internet research. Data were obtained from four domains: quotes in newspaper articles, comments on public forums of the *Grand Haven Tribune* Newspaper website, Letters to the Editor of the *Grand Haven Tribune*, and comments made on the public Facebook page of the group “Save the Grand Haven Cross,” renamed “The Dewey Hill Foundation.” Each document within the domains represents the opinion of an

individual. Data range in length from three words to two single-spaced pages. Data were produced between September of 2014 and March of 2015, and downloaded from the internet between February and March of 2015. The researcher had no effect upon the data.

### **Research Questions.**

This qualitative study of document data seeks to answer two research questions: RQ 1: What emotions are expressed by commenters who wish to keep the Dewey Hill Cross in place? RQ 2: What beliefs are expressed by commenters who wish to keep the Dewey Hill Cross in place?

### **Setting.**

The research setting was the internet, which has become a common site for obtaining research data and is no longer considered a “new” setting for research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Sample Selection.**

Maximum variation purposive sampling was used to obtain sample data that were representative of the array of views presented by individuals who favored keeping the Dewey Hill Cross in place. Since not everyone is an internet user, a Facebook user, or a public figure, letters to the editor were obtained to include members of the community who are not comfortable with the internet yet still choose to participate in public discourse. It is hoped that this contributed to the age diversity of the commenters. While there are thousands of available data on this topic, this researcher believes that for the purpose of identifying themes emerging from all the data, a saturation point was reached.

### **Breakdown of Sample.**

152 documents were examined. A breakdown of their domains is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Breakdown of Sample

Source of Data	Number of Documents
Quotes from newspaper articles	18
Comments on public forums of the <i>Grand Haven Tribune</i>	54
Letters to the Editor/Editorial Columns in the <i>Grand Haven Tribune</i>	12
Comments on the Save the Grand Haven Cross/Dewey Hill Foundation Facebook page	70

### **Breakdown of Individuals.**

The opinions of approximately 125 individuals were considered. This number is approximate because it is possible the some of the individuals may be using different names in different domains. For example, a public figure quoted by name in a newspaper story, or a Facebook user who is using their own name could also be posting newspaper forum comments under a user name/pseudonym. Of named individuals, based upon an analysis that assumes gender-typical names and gender binary sexual categories, this research can approximate that 60 are female, 38 are male. The gender of the remaining 27 individuals is unknown.

### **Use of Data.**

Internet based research is a relatively new practice, and ethical frameworks are evolving in an effort to keep up with the changing landscape of the internet (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Merriam and Tisdell point to several ethical challenges to internet research. Among these are questions about what is public and what is private, ensuring confidentiality, use of the term “participants,” and the ways in

which the nature of the medium tends to break down walls of privacy and encourage the sharing of intimate details of one's life (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Regarding issues of privacy and confidentiality, since the data were posted publically for the purpose of advocating for a particular point of view, this researcher believes that the individuals had no expectation or *desire* that their comments be private or confidential. This researcher believes that these comments were produced for the express purpose of being read and considered as part of the public conversation of this matter. In addition, none of the comments touches on intimate or highly personal spheres of life. Therefore, this researcher concludes that all the comments can ethically be used as data for this research. Further, this researcher contends that individuals who used their real names in newspaper forums, news stories, editorials, and letters to the editor did so with the intention that their opinions would publicly be attributed to them. However, since they did not anticipate that their comments would be included in a research study, the real names of commenters are not used. In addition, no identifying information is provided. I make an exception for public officials who are quoted in newspaper articles, as they consented to have their identities and opinions made available for public debate. In the interest of creating a document of historical value, I provide real names for these individuals.

Merriam and Tisdell state that the term "participants" has "connotations of inclusion and willing cooperation," and recommend reconsidering the nature of the study if this is not the case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 188). However, this researcher asserts that it is not always unethical to include data obtained without consent, particularly when said data are obtained from public realms of the internet and are produced by individuals engaging in public discourse. This is quite different from material obtained from a personal blog or Facebook post, and ought to be

treated differently. In consideration of the fact that none of the commenters provided consent to participate in this study, and further, that they are not aware that their public comments are included in this study, I have chosen to refer to them as *commenters* rather than *participants*.

Consultation with the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Colorado State University led to the issuance of a “Not Human Subjects” memo, indicating that this study does not meet the criteria for “Human Subjects” research and thus does not require IRB approval. Accordingly, there is no risk to human subjects in this study since it is not consider human subjects research.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using the method of constructivist grounded theory as presented by Kathy Charmaz (2010). Grounded theory is recognized as a methodology that promotes the construction of theory by using a variety of strategies (Charmaz, 2014, p. 15). Charmaz’s methodology for grounded theory involves coding data in a two-phase process. First, the researcher used a line by line process called open coding. I began by conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously using an iterative process. Inserting gerunds in the open coding process, I introduced action and focused the analysis on processes and actions. During this process, I used the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2010), studying the data as it emerged and comparing data with data. This open coding led to the creation of numerous categories of data. During the second phase coding process, known as focused coding, I developed fewer, more abstract categories that subsumed the original categories and provided a more nuanced way to consider the data and develop properties for each of the categories. An iterative process of comparing data with data helped to create initial categories that were then developed into more abstract categories with further refinement (Charmaz, 2014). Using constant comparative methods to compare data with data, I used narratives and descriptions to develop

new conceptual categories. I then attempted to develop inductive abstract categories through data analysis. Instead of merely producing description from the data analysis, I emphasized theory development. Engaging a memo writing process, I was able to explore theoretical ways to analyze the data and consider a particular set of experiences about the world upon the data, thereby constructing an initial theoretical framework.

Theoretical sampling was used such that when I gathered data, I began the coding process, which allowed me to further consider whether my initial theorizing of categories provided an explanation of the phenomena that did not simply replicate applications of current theories (Charmaz, 2014, p. 15). Theoretical sampling was used to seek out data relevant to my emerging theory on codominance. “The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting” theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 193). Sampling occurred to elaborate and refine theoretical categories that helped develop and delineate properties of the category relating to the conceptual and theoretical development of codominance. Here I also make use of diagramming and theorizing that expands the properties of the categories from the micro to the structural and societal or macro levels (Charmaz, 2010). Throughout the theoretical sampling process, I wrote a number of memos to deconstruct aspects of my early categories and emerging ideas that eventually led to a more focused conceptual direction in my theorizing of codominance. In this manner, I was able to identify gaps in my analysis and new directions to explore (Charmaz, 2016, p. 199).

### **Limitations.**

A potential limitation of grounded theory is that induction is problematic because there is no way of knowing whether an identified phenomenon is an isolated incident or a universal pattern (Charmaz, 2010). Grounded theorists respond that they use different types of reasoning,

including also deduction and abduction (Charmaz, 2010). Another potential limitation is that grounded theory begins with individuals and has been criticized for being limited in its scope, but Charmaz (2010) points out that grounded theory does not preclude moving theories from the individual to the structural and societal levels. A third potential limitation is that theories will be made “prematurely” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 243). A rigorous study in which the researcher follows the process of “seeing possibilities, establishing connections, and asking questions” (Charmaz, 2010, p. 244) will mitigate the possibility of hasty and unsupported conclusions.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor (Internal Validity)**

In order to increase the trustworthiness and rigor, three of the four criteria of trustworthiness are achieved in this study. Credibility, transferability and dependability are each examined to achieve methodological and analytical soundness (Lynham, 2011). Credibility, the first criterion of trustworthiness, involves four separate components. First, the researcher engaged in persistent observation of extensive document data, taking care to review and update each category of extant document data. Second, this two-year study was initiated in 2015 and continued into 2017. Third, the researcher engages a prolonged examination of the phenomena under study, taking care to include a plethora of documents, as well as monitoring Facebook posts. And lastly, triangulation of data (multiple document data sources) and triangulation of researchers (peer and professor coding) was achieved, thus fulfilling the criteria of credibility. The second criterion of trustworthiness is transferability, which was achieved by the researcher’s reflexive journaling and crystallization of the data. The third criterion of trustworthiness, dependability, was achieved in this study through reflexive journaling and an audit trail for data (Lynham, 2011).

Still, as stated in the findings section, these results and their interpretation are primarily the products of my theorizing. As such, they make no claim to be definitively and objectively true. A revisiting of poststructuralist theory reminds us that, rather than attempting to describe some objective reality, poststructuralist theory seeks to create knowledge reflective of our understanding that we live in “an antifoundational era characterized by the loss of certainties and absolute frames of reference” (Lather, 1993, p. 673). In a poststructuralist study, questions of trustworthiness must be considered through a poststructuralist theoretical lens. Patti Lather addresses the question of “validity after poststructuralism,” and presents four possible approaches to achieving what she calls, “transgressive validity” (Lather, 1993, p. 676). One of these approaches, “validity as simulacra/ironic validity” (Lather, 1993, p. 677), validates my interpretation of the data. A simulacrum is a copy that does not have an original (Lather, 1993). In order to understand this, we consider that:

The poststructuralist move is to foreground the difficulties involved in representing the social rather than repressing them in pursuit of an unrealized ideal. Enacting in language a supplementary simulacrum, poststructuralism ‘breaks all adequation between copy and model, appearance and essence, event and idea.’ This disruptive move foregrounds the production of meaning-effects (Lather, 1993, p. 677).

A simulacrum, when employed, can “resist the hold of the real and foreground radical unknowability” (Lather, 1993, p. 677). In other words, by emphasizing the constructed nature of my findings, I present not an attempt at an empirically valid analysis of the situation, but rather, a possible version of the truth, which may convey within in it something comprehensible that may be discovered by the reader.

In a qualitative study, the issues of trustworthiness and rigor are paramount. These are addressed by attending to certain aspects of the research process that affect what is commonly referred to as “internal validity.” The failure to attend to these process compromises the

trustworthiness and rigor of the study. One such potential threat is that the data will not represent the full extent of a phenomenon. While poststructuralist theory does not support the concept that there is some sort of externally existing “full story” be presented, the consideration of multiple sources of data contributes to the “crystallization” of said data, a process which is dependent upon our “angle of response,” (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). By illuminating my angle of response through the transparent presentation of my positionality, I present my findings not as some empirical truth that exists outside the words which describe it, but as a discourse—a conversation between me, the researcher, and you, the reader, through which some understanding about the nature of the situation is co-created.

### **Possibility of Bias**

This study is certainly biased. It, like every other study, was conducted by a primary investigator who conceived of the project, designed the methodology, conducted a review of literature, collected and interpreted data, and composed a paper about it. At every stage in the process, I made choices about what to research, which theoretical and conceptual lenses to employ as I considered the data, and how to present the data. Bias, both implicit and explicit, is inherent to this process. Therefore, I choose to emphasize my bias so that readers might be informed of it and thereby be equipped to determine for themselves the extent and meaning of this bias. As a native to the city of Grand Haven who is also an atheist who does not support the Trump presidency, my personal history, identity and beliefs are intricately bound to the issues this study addresses. The knowledge here produced is the result of this interplay, and cannot be separated from who I am as a researcher. I assert that this paper benefits from the personal experience and passion that I brought to the project.

## **Generalizability and Transferability**

A standard limitation to any qualitative study is the fact that the results are not generalizable to the larger population (Merriam, 2009). Fortunately, the value of this type of study does not hinge upon generalizability. Transferability is a way of applying the particular knowledge from one study to an entirely different situation. This knowledge, while not a perfect match, may still illuminate certain aspects of the new situation. Merriam (2009) stresses that the burden is on the investigator of the original study to provide needed information to make the study useful in this manner. One reason we seek knowledge of particular events and people is that “what we learn in a particular situation we can transfer or generalize to similar situations subsequently encountered” (Merriam, 2009). This is described by Merriam as “the general lies in the particular” (Merriam, 2009).

## **Ethics**

While all researchers must attend to ethical issues, feminist researchers have particular reasons for being especially vigilant that they do not cross any ethical boundaries in the practice of their research. As Linda Bell asserts, “ethical issues are embedded with feminist ways of doing research; they cannot be easily separated from issues of research methodology or epistemology” (Bell, 2014). This is because feminist research does not imagine itself to be value-neutral, and its practices emerge out of its values, particularly those connected with the use of power and its potential to cause intended or unintended harm (Bell, 2014). After reviewing the eight key aspects of feminist research practice as articulated by Bell, I have determined that I need to pay particular attention to the position of power I hold as a researcher and not allow myself to theorize about or characterize the commenters in my research in any ways that show disrespect for their “human dignity” or “self-determination” (Bell, 2014). Since I do not agree

with their political position in this matter, I must be especially attentive to the complex interplay between the right to self-determination as exercised through the right to hold and voice opinions that are contrary to what I consider the advancement of a just society, and the opportunity for moral growth of individuals and communities that may come from the presentation of challenges to long-held beliefs. I believe the best way to walk that line is by employing what is known in feminist methodology as the “ethics of care” model, which “emphasizes responsibility and caring relationships” (Bell, 2014, p. 80) rather than a one-size-fits-all approach that decontextualizes the ethical issues from the situations and people involved. I choose this knowing that the use of the word “care” will call feminine practices to mind in a way that will tend to deintellectualize and delegitimize the research. I do this consciously as a statement in defiance of the perennial undervaluing of the work and concerns that have been associated with the feminine sphere of social life.

## **Conclusion**

This study, informed by poststructuralist and feminist theories, is a qualitative examination of extant document data obtained from the internet. In this chapter, ethical issues were considered, and researcher positionality was revealed in order to provide transparency and allow the reader to make their own determination regarding possible bias. The grounded theory method and the open coding process used to evaluate data were described. As a result of this process, the data were sorted into seven major themes and several subthemes. The following chapter describes these themes, providing numerous examples gleaned from the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### **Overview of Findings**

The goal of this research has been to understand the emotions and beliefs of the commenters, with the hope of making some valid inferences about the controversy over the Dewey Hill Cross. Conducting the research and reviewing the data yielded a growing awareness about the particularity of the situation. The people and culture of Grand Haven are the products of a unique history of ethnic, religious, and geographic factors, and they display a high level of exceptionalism, nativist sentiment and xenophobia.

In broad strokes, across all data, my findings present a picture of a proud and thriving community deeply steeped in privilege and a profound sense of entitlement, which is a typical feature of settler colonial communities (Hixson, 2013) such as Grand Haven. Their reaction to the perceived threat of the removal of their cross fully illustrates the concepts found in the literature on Whiteness, Christian hegemony and spatiality.

### **Findings of Document Data**

The situation in Grand Haven is complex, and it has yielded abundant data. This data has been organized into seven themes: Expressing Emotions, Claiming Victim Status, Resisting Change, Universalizing Beliefs, Establishing “Our” Territory, Policing the Boundaries and The Rhetoric of Fear.

#### **Theme One: Expressing Emotions.**

This analysis begins with the theme *expressing emotions*. Commenters expressed emotions both directly and indirectly. Directly expressed emotions include disappointment, anger, disgust, sadness and shock. Indirectly expressed emotions include grief, insecurity and contempt. The difficult and painful emotions experienced by community residents display the

magnitude of the event to this community. To those outside the community, these emotions may seem to be extreme reactions to the removal of a religious symbol from a public space. To the commenters, however, these emotions are genuine, and not incommensurate with the situation. These painful emotions signal deeply rooted vulnerability and fear. They also expose a vast subterranean reservoir of unrecognized and unexamined privilege.

Table 2: Expressing Emotions

Statements of Emotion	Researcher's Interpretation of Emotions
"Getting tired of political correctness."	Exasperation and frustration
"They are the bottom feeders of the world."	Contempt and anger
"Where is common sense any more!! (sic)"	Frustration and incredulity
"Can't even stand to read about this anymore."	Frustration, exasperation and disgust
"How droll."	Contempt
"What shall we call ourselves when we fall prey to group immorality?"	Insecurity masked by condescension and superiority
"I laugh at atheists because they are so foolish."	Insecurity masked by condescension and superiority
"They will realize how sorry they should be."	Insecurity masked by condescension and superiority
"It's sad to see a 50-year tradition laid to rest."	Grief
"We're had to give up too much already."	Grief
"Why can't we sue them for causing the town mental anguish and such?"	Anguish
"We all need to set aside those negative feelings of frustration, hate, despair, anger...and focus on WWJD."	Speaker is expressing his perception of the feelings of the community: frustration, hate, despair, anger
"Frustration, disappointment and anger abound."	Frustration, disappointment, anger
"It is very shocking and disappointing."	Shock, disappointment

## **Theme Two: Claiming Victim Status.**

Lying between and mediating the emotions identified above and the beliefs which will be addressed below is the community members' perception that they being victimized. The title of this study is taken from the following *in vivo* comment from a forum of the *Grand Haven Tribune*:

“It’s just a cross, don’t shoot.  
It’s just a cross, don’t shoot.  
It’s just a cross, don’t shoot.”

This comment is clearly a reference to the outcry of protestors in the wake of the rash of police killings of Black men. After Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, “Hands up, don’t shoot” became a rallying cry for justice and for an end to the targeting and shooting of Black men by law enforcement. By appropriating the African American community’s raw and wounded cry for justice, this commenter attempts two rhetorical tasks. First, this commenter equates the effort of non-Christians to bring about the removal of Christian symbols from public space as an equal offense to the killing of unarmed black men with impunity. Second, this commenter trivializes and mocks the original phrase, and the rage and grief of the protestors and also appropriates their grief and then “twists it” in a move typical of colonizing peoples and societies (C. Souza, personal communication, 2017).

Table 3 displays quotes from commenters expressing their perception of being attacked and persecuted.

Table 3: Perception of persecution

“I think it’s because the current secular agenda and its misplaced prioritization reflects something deeper-something akin to spiritual warfare. It seems the faithful are being attacked on all sides.”
“We were a peaceful town that was attacked.”
“The war on Christianity has begun!”
“I’m appalled by the fact that our great little community has been attacked by outsiders.”
“We as Christians have done nothing wrong just because we believe in God we were attacked.”
“ . . . their attempts to persecute us.”
“This latest round of attacks on our civil liberties will prove no more successful than those of the past.”
“If we stop defending the cross and the other things under attack by this little group, it won’t stop there.”

The perception of persecution is also expressed by characterizing the individuals who are trying to have the cross removed as bullies who are pushing the community around. The words “bully” and “demand” appears numerous times throughout the data. Table 4 contains quotes that utilize this language.

Table 4: Perception of being “bullied”

“Outsiders who only want to bully are typically turned away.”
“This good town is being bullied by people who couldn’t care less about everyone’s rights.”
“All we’ve had are demands.”
“Grand Haven won’t be bullied by extremists who moved here from out of state to push their agenda on our town.”

“You can’t bully and guilt the majority opinion into your warped vision of what is right.”

“Bullies suck big time and they bring out the very worst in me.”

“People come into other people’s towns and demand that they remove something.”

“We are talking about a few people, lower than rat sheet (sic), that have come to our fair community and want to tell us what to do.”

### **Theme Three: Resisting Change.**

The theme of *resisting change* is about the commenters trying to keep things the way they are rather than accepting the uncertainty of the future. This future is projected as one that will be worse than the past and the present. When conceiving of the future, the commenters appear to be focused on what they will lose, namely, their privileged position in the community. *Invoking tradition* and *longing for the past* are two subthemes of the theme *resisting change*.

***Invoking Tradition.*** Many commenters invoke tradition as a “common sense” reason for keeping the cross in its place. The belief expressed by this invocation of tradition seems to be that if something has been a certain way for a long time, then it should just stay that way forever. It is this self-evident quality that is noteworthy. This type of reasoning completely avoids engaging in any debate over whether it is right or wrong, instead simply citing tradition, which becomes a sort of “trump card.” Table 5 displays examples of the invocation of tradition.

Table 5: Invoking Tradition

“My dad and uncle were firemen and they helped put the cross and nativity up back in the 50s and 60s. The Christmas parade and toys for tots were tradition then and I hope still are.”

“The cross has been a part of our city and our heritage.”

“We feel the cross on Dewey Hill is a part of Grand Haven. It took so many community volunteers to put it up there in 1963.”

“It’s part of our history-our heritage. Even an atheist should be able to grasp that point. Even someone who thinks religion is a bad influence ought to defend the preservation of history even if only as a reminder of what they may perceive as one of our mistakes.”

“They value this tradition and they also don’t like a bully.”

“The cross has been up for years. So, take it down and put something else up? No, logic would suggest you leave the cross where it is and find a spot for what you need to display.”

“ . . . if the cross has been up for SOOOO long it apparently is not a big deal . . . ”

*Longing for the Past.* *Longing for the past*, or nostalgia, is demonstrated by several commenters. Comments that call upon nostalgia include, “Unbelievable and sad times we are living in. Definitely not how it used to be years ago. Can we go back in time?”; “It is the days and times we are living in. Good is called evil & evil good”; “All of the churches here have all lived together peacefully for all of these years”; “I wish Grand Haven would grow no larger.” The supposed ‘good old days’ stand in sharp contrast to these trying times, which they now must endure.

#### **Theme Four: Universalizing Beliefs.**

A number of commenters expressed the opinion that the cross should not be regarded as a symbol of Christianity, but as a symbol of something universal that should be appreciated and embraced by all. Table 6 displays examples of comments that attempt to universalize the cross. The first commenter appears to be unaware that there are other religions to be considered, not just other denominations of Christianity.

Table 6: Universalizing Beliefs

“I really don’t know what the big deal is here, the cross is a symbol of many denominations.”

“The cross has become a recognizable symbol for ‘safe haven’ for travelers and people in need of help. It is one of the most recognizable symbols in the world and so it became commonplace

to display it in order to evoke a sense of safety, peace, and kindness within a community. If the cross is not carrying a displayed message, then you don't have to imply that there is one there, nor do you have to look at the cross as something religious- unless you have some other underlying personal agenda."

"We're veterans and many of us are combat veterans. The cross means so much more than just a religion or Christianity. The cross originally was meant to give hope to the people of Grand Haven that their sons and husbands weren't dying in vain."

"The bottom line is that cross is Grand Haven. That cross has been there for so long. Thinking of the cross on Dewey Hill as only a symbol of Christianity is the definition of a non-free-thinker. It represents a lot of things to many different people."

"For myself, the cross does not so much represent a particular faith as it does a belief in friendship and love of our fellow man."

"It's a landmark and represents our Coast Guard for past generations."

"I don't have a problem with the cross. It represents So much here in Grand Haven!"

"The cross to me means the same as the American flag."

#### **Theme Five: Establishing "Our" Territory.**

The theme *establishing "our" territory* encompasses all the ways in which the commenters establish the right to claim the physical space of the city of Grand Haven as belonging to the White Christian people. *Establishing our territory* is divided into four subthemes: *might makes right*, *defining the community*, *shoring up the faithful* and *claiming Christian geography*.

***Might Makes Right.*** The first justification for the right to claim space is made through the assertion of the power of superior numbers. This is described by the subtheme *might makes right*. Table 7 displays statements about the rights of the majority being more important, coupled with statements expressing the belief that the minority is pushing them around. These statements appear to show a general lack of concern for the rights of those who hold minority opinions.

Table 7: Might makes Right

“Thought this country was majority rule. Where is the majority? . . . Do what the majority wants.”
“I think the few people that object to the displays on the hill should consider the wishes of the greater droves of people who enjoy the presentations and drive for miles to view them.”
“You seem to think that even though you are in the minority opinion, the entire country should bow to your wishes and ideals concerning what is right for all of us.”
“Harm none, do as ye will. THIS is harming many, and for THAT, they should be ashamed.”
“The citizens of Grand Haven, the MANY citizens . . . Don’t Deprive Us Of Our Rights.”
“Here’s another example of MINORITY rule. It has always been my understand that the MAJORITY rules.”
“So disappointed that the majority means nothing and 2 people can control GH.”
“We have to stop caving in to the few.”

*Defining the Community.* A second subtheme of *establishing “our” territory* is *defining the community*. This is shown in statements that display an effort to obtain legitimacy and power by offering claims to membership in the community. It appears that these commenters consider it obvious that having lived in the community for a long time, or particularly having a long family history there, should give them an elevated status in the debate. By constructing their identities as insiders, they confirmed they were the “we” as opposed to the “them,” which who are portrayed as a dangerous threat. Membership is claimed in several ways. Table 8 depicts each of the ways in which membership claims are made, along with one quote for each type of claim.

Table 8: Defining the Community

Type of Membership Claim	Example Quotation from Data
Membership is claimed through genealogy	“My family has been here over a hundred years and I am sick of all the comments about having a religion forced on people.”
Membership is claimed through birthright	“I’ve lived in Grand Haven from the day I was born.”
Membership is claimed through longevity	“I’ve been a Grand Haven resident since 1977 and a constant visitor since ’72.”
Membership is claimed through faith affiliation by defining the town as “A Christian Community.” Appeals to the history and founding of the town are made to support this claim.	“Only the Christian cross representing Jesus Christ should be allowed, because Christianity is the reason that we are all living lives of freedom, prosperity, and protection. . . . A Christian group founded the Grand Haven area, and blessed it.”
Membership is claimed through agreement with majority.	“I’m not a Christian, but I support this community.”
Membership is claimed through geography by the claim that outsiders have no say in the town’s business.	“Why does anyone care what this guy says or does, he doesn’t even live in Grand Haven.”

Those who do not have claims to membership are labeled as “outsiders” or “newcomers” in a way that appears intended to delegitimize their opinions or question their right to participate in debates about the cross. In general, commenters seem to begrudge the fact that Grand Haven is part of a larger nation, and that national laws might defeat local sentiment. The following quotes identify people who have come from outside the community as the problem: “If the people in Grand Haven want it and it’s taken down because the people from outside don’t want it, that’s very, very sad.”; “It’s very surprising that one guy can come from out of state and start all this.”; “If Mitch doesn’t like it let him go back to Hawaii. Same to the others.”

This final quote is especially interesting: “That guy and his supporters should all go back to where they came from. And the ones supporting this that were born in this community . . . shame on you. You’re welcome to leave and push your agenda elsewhere.” In this statement, the commenter first rejects outsiders, then acknowledges the privileged status of birthright, but withdraws it from those who do not also agree with the Christian majority. This indicates that full membership requires agreement with the majority. No insider status claim is strong enough to allow both dissent *and* membership in the community.

***Shoring up the Faithful.*** The third subtheme of *establishing “our” territory* is *shoring up the faithful*. This is a method of claiming agreement/aligning oneself with the majority through the shorthand method of expressing religious faith. It is taken for granted that the expression of this faith indicates agreement with the majority and is meant to be supportive of their political cause. These are brief, simple statements of general faith that carry implied political affiliation: “Jesus loves us.”; “All glory to God.”; “God will prevail”; “Let God’s will be done. All glory to God!!”

***Claiming Christian Geography.*** The fourth subtheme of *establishing “our” territory*, *claiming Christian geography*, shows the ways in which the physical geography of Grand Haven and of the United States is repeatedly claimed as a Christian place. These claims are sometimes justified by the speakers’ understandings of the community and nation as being founded by Christian people and based upon Christian principles. The commenters appear to take for granted that being a Christian in a Christian community or nation confers a special and privileged status, which includes claims upon public spaces.

Table 9: Claiming Grand Haven as a Christian Community

“We are so blessed to live in a beautiful Christian community.”
“This is a tradition in our Christian community.”
“Living in this area, you must know that Christianity is practiced all around you.”
“Grand Haven has been doing fine for 170 years being founded by Christians.”
“It’s freedom OF religion – not freedom FROM religion. The city (not to be confused with Congress) is not establishing a religion, just expressing the views of A MAJORITY of its inhabitants.”
“Don’t worry, this has been a Christian town since it was founded. A few outsiders is (sic) not going to change anything.”

Table 10 displays claims to the United States as a Christian nation.

Table 10: Claiming a Christian Nation

“This alleged Division of Church and state is a Myth at best...this country was FOUNDED on Christian values. . . . STAND TALL AND STRONG.”
“People here seem to have forgotten that this country could not have been established without the obvious help of God. . . . America seems to have forgotten that this country was founded not upon the name of Allah, or Mohamed, or Buddha—but on the name of Jesus Christ.”
“When our country was founded by Christians it wasn’t done in order to establish a new church in America, rather it was done to be free to practice their own religion. Now these anti-religious folk have taken it to mean no religion is allowed.”
“Tis still America God is still in control!!!!!!”
“Our country was built on Christianity and has survived as one of the best nations in the world because of our strong Christian history of faith and principles put in our constitution.”

**Theme Six: Policing the Boundaries.**

In this community, dissent from the majority opinion is not tolerated. The theme *policing the boundaries* describes the ways in which those who disagree are rhetorically and physically ejected from the claimed spaces. Communities police their boundaries in ways that are both overt and covert. The theme *policing the boundaries* has been divided into three subthemes: “*If you don’t like it, leave,*” *praying for you sinners,* and *playground politics.*

**“If You Don’t Like It, Leave!”** In an overt manner, those who disagree with the Christian majority are repeatedly told to leave, in old fashioned, “America, love it or leave it” style, or, more gently, to just “not look at” the cross.

Table 11: “If you don’t like it, leave!”

“IF YOU DON’T LIKE IT HERE LEAVE! DON’T COME INTO OUR HOUSE AND TELL US WHAT TO DO.”
“Those that don’t like it . . . don’t look at it.”
“If those people don’t like it they can just keep walking.”
“If you don’t like it, why did you come here in the first place? Take your handful of friends and move back to California.”
“If you’re walking down our boardwalk and the cross offends you, walk in the other direction.”
“The message is plain and simple: If you don’t like the Dewey Hill displays, then for the sake of us all, get the heck out of Grand Haven. . . . Either love our town the way it is or get the heck out. It’s that simple.”
“If you don’t like it, get out of America. America is one nation under God.”

**Praying for You Sinners.** Covert policing is enacted through more subtle mechanisms. I have labeled the first of these *praying for you sinners*. This method appears to be employed to assert power through moral rectitude and the presumed moral superiority of the “saved” over the “damned.” Table 12 displays examples of *praying for you sinners*. These statements may be cloaked in the language of love and egalitarianism, but they carry messages of judgement and condescension.

Table 12: Praying For You Sinners

“In my opinion they are the bottom feeders of the world and bring nothing to the table that will truly have a positive effect on this earth. I feel sad for them, but I forgive them and pray for them daily.”
“The devil will try to interfere any time he gets the chance. Our awesome God knows this and directs us to pray. I pray for the salvation of all.”
“I pray for Mitch that he may have a ‘road to Damascus’ experience and know of your powerful, life changing love.”
“I have been praying for those who do not like the cross.”
“If they don’t like it they need to go downtown and look at the hill.”
“Shut your pie holes oh and may god have mercy on your heathen souls.”
“ . . . and give in to the out of town atheists who are ‘offended’ by a cross, a cross that is there to save their souls while there is still the opportunity.”

**Playground Politics.** The third subtheme is another form of covert policing which I have labeled: *Playground Politics*. This is the use of the Ad Hominem attack, defined as a form of rhetoric in which “an argument is rejected, or advanced, based on a personal characteristic of an individual rather than on reasons for or against the claim itself. Putting the focus on the arguer or

person being discussed can distract us from the issues that matter” (Raley, 2008). When engaging in this form of rhetoric, rather than consider the opponent’s argument, one employs strategies of name-calling, or focuses on the opponent’s individual life history or character. Ad hominem attacks against individuals who brought the issue of the cross to the city serve to enforce their banishment from the community and create distance between community members and the “Others” through the process of dehumanization. Names that these individuals have been called include: “misfits,” “minions,” “interlopers,” “you old tart,” “socialist invaders,” “the gang of four,” “idiots,” and “the world ruling King, Emperor, GOD etc. named KATHY! DUH!!!”

**Theme Seven: The Rhetoric of Fear.**

The theme *the rhetoric of fear* presents examples of ways in which the underlying fear of losing traditions and privileges seems to be expressed through calls to action and attempts to demonize and place blame upon anyone who lies outside the White, Christian community. There are three subthemes to *the rhetoric of fear*: *preparing for a holy war*, *expression of imminent threat* and *right wing paranoia*.

***Preparing For a Holy War.*** The first subtheme, *preparing for a holy war*, is one in which those who most fervently desire to hold the line against change in their community express their determination in militaristic language, employing militaristic phrases and metaphors of battle.

Table 13: Preparing for a Holy War

“Let’s stand together and defend our right to display our cross and our flag.”
“Like most of the country and church-goers we have had our head in the sand for too long. . . . the battle started a long time ago and now has reached the outskirts of Grand Haven.”
“We’ve all been to war. We’ll fight for our rights. Having the cross is one of our rights.”

“Mess with the cross, you mess with us.”

“Taking down the cross is saying, ‘We don’t need you, Jesus. We’re burying your cross because we’re afraid to fight for you, even though you died for us.’”

“The fight is years in coming.”

“Our sons and daughters have fought for this on the warfront. Let’s fight for it at home.”

**Warning of Imminent Threat.** The second subtheme of *the rhetoric of fear* is warning of *imminent threat*. During the debate over the future of cross, Grand Haven experienced an elevated state of alert—probably between yellow and orange on the Department of Homeland Security scale. At that time, there was a heightened awareness of risks of all kinds, and a general perception of threat. Table 14 shows comments that display a perception of looming threats to the community. The general feeling of threat manifests in various fears and predictions of doom, from the town changing in a negative way to a culture of atheism taking over to a loss of liberties and freedoms. Commenters use various types of discourse to convince the community of the serious nature of the mostly nameless threat that faces them all. Due to the variety of groups and individuals that are identified as the cause of the threat, it is fair to state that the threat is a generalized fear of change, and particularly of change associated with what they believe to be the liberal agenda of forcing multiculturalism upon the community of “normal,” White Christian people. The xenophobic attitudes of the commenters break through in occasional bursts, which seem to claim, “I am not that Other” (Frankenberg, 2001, p. 75). Take this statement, for example: “For 5 times a day the Hamtramck neighborhood hears the call to prayer being blasted over loud speakers including the message of: Allah is the Greatest.” This refers to a neighborhood populated largely by Muslim immigrants near the city of Detroit, which is on the

other side of Michigan, but still too close for comfort. Table 14 displays examples of *warning of imminent threat*.

Table 14: Warning of imminent threat

“We had better take a stand because our rights are being taken away from us.”
“I think we may be looking at the city of Grand Haven establishing a culture of atheism with what they did.”
“When Grand Haven is not the same and the comfortable reason you chose to live here is gone . . . ?”
“Now we are faced with the rise of what the Wall Street Journal has dubbed ‘militant atheism.’ Through deliberate targeting, their means are what the Wehrmacht theorists would say with satisfaction is the <i>schwerpunkt</i> the place where force is applied, and what lies beyond is a doctrinal system of their beliefs to which disagreement becomes heresy and decent (sic) is not tolerated . . . They wish to emasculate a symbol of the First Amendment in their quest to remove all vestiges of religious symbols that are contrary to theirs. If successful, they will have taken another step to making us all subjects to the thought police.”
“Soon they will be demanding us to tear down our churches and make displaying nativity scenes on our front lawns illegal along with any cross symbols on our property, clothes, cars, etc. We will be forced to cover up Christian tattoos on our bodies or lose our jobs because we are ‘offending people of other religions.’ I may sound paranoid but it’s only a matter of time.”
“We don’t think professional agitators coming from other states should be able to come in and threaten communities that they have no connections with.”
“Do nothing and you will lose all of your religious rights and freedoms. Do nothing and you will lose your right to bear arms and freedom of speech. Do nothing and you will lose everything.”

***Right Wing Paranoia.*** The third subtheme of *the rhetoric of fear* is *right wing paranoia*.

This includes the use of extreme conservative political rhetoric of various types: Calling upon the Tea Party for help (“We need to keep on supporting groups like the Ottawa County Patriots and other groups that align with your views”), disparaging “minorities” in general, (“In this era of political correctness, heaven forbid should we offend any minority.”), labeling a member of a minority group in a dehumanizing way (“the jew (sic) guy”), belittling equality efforts of an

oppressed minority groups (“their crappy gay pride sign”), and equating atheist groups with terrorists (“What the Taliban, ISIS/ISIL, Boko Haram, Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda and Communists do to eliminate Christianity in their nations, Mitch Kahle and other atheists are working for in our nation. They are the real hate groups. Those groups have murdered more people by far than any so called Crusades!”)

There is general criticism of liberal politics and of then President Obama: “intolerant squawking liberals”; “This is to be a peaceful but serious show of support, and to let all those that would impose their liberal demands on ‘we the people’ that we have had enough”; “Send 4000 marines with 4 hours of training to combat Ebola in West Africa? Good job, President Ebola. Let them come back to wipe us all out. Maybe President Ebola is the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam.” This last one refers to conspiracy theories about President Obama being a covert Muslim.

There is fearmongering in the form of warnings that the future they face will be like Nazi rule: “Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out- Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me-and there was no one left to speak for me.” This commenter quoted from a work by Martin Niemoller, a protestant pastor who was held in a Nazi concentration camp. By quoting this famous passage, the commenter seems to imply that the situation in Grand Haven and the U.S. in general, is commensurate with the situation in Nazi Germany, with equal threat to freedoms. Another example of a reference to Nazis: “If the church had not steered clear of the government activities back in Nazi Germany, perhaps the government would not have been able to so brutally persecute and attempt to destroy an entire people.” This researcher interprets this as a call for the increased involvement of the Christian religion in government affairs, deemed necessary in order to prevent another Holocaust, perhaps one in which Christians are the persecuted.

## **Conclusion**

The totality of the data presents a picture of a community that is insular and unfriendly, proud of its heritage, and unwilling to share or make room for “outsiders,” whether from without or within. This is a community that considers itself the victim of malevolent forces that seek its destruction. This community feels deeply entitled to control the physical space it occupies and to defend it against perceived threats. Untroubled by the harms this may cause, this community defends its traditions and proclaims a God-given right to impose them on all who disagree. It is a community that is rigid, combative, and profoundly fearful of change. To explain these phenomena, this researcher employed grounded theory methodology to produce a mid-level theory that is beyond the themes discussed above. This grounded theory of codominance is presented in detail in the findings chapter below.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, findings of the study are evaluated using the theoretical and academic concepts presented in the Literature Review. When considered in light of the literature review, the data describe a community that is fully demarcated and bound in an intersection of White and Christian privilege. The emotions and beliefs expressed by the commenters in favor of keeping the cross in its place on Dewey Hill paint a picture that is profoundly demonstrative of the concepts discussed in the literature review: Whiteness, Christian hegemony and spatiality.

### **Considering Whiteness**

Whiteness functions as the unmarked norm in Grand Haven. The 95% White majority of residents consider Whiteness to be the normal, natural state, never mentioning it in any of their comments. They do sometimes refer to “minorities,” however. In this way, they are enacting the way that Whiteness is “defined by its boundaries” (Blee, 2004, p. 52), rhetorically stating “I am not that ‘Other’” (Frankenberg, 2001, p. 75). Like most White people, they do not have the language or understanding of race theory to discuss Whiteness in any other way. The pervasive neoliberal belief system, which insists that the United States exists in a state of post-racial equality, allows these residents to believe that they are not receiving any special advantages, that people of all races have equal chances at success, and that they are being unfairly targeted by members of minority groups who want to claim things to which they are not entitled.

The angry reactions discussed under the section *the rhetoric of fear* are perfect examples of individuals “performing a correct *and* competent White racial identity” by “aligning [themselves] with racist, reactionary, paternalistic, and privileged symbolic and material practices” (Hughey & Byrd, 2013, p. 978). Statements that display a perception of being

persecuted suggest a communal sense of Whiteness as a “marker of victimization rather than racial dominance” (Blee, 2004, p. 51) consistent with philosophies of White Supremacy. If this inference is true, then the current discourse about the Dewey Hill Cross controversy is potentially dangerous in that it is shaping the perceptions of the entire community in a way that inclines them towards hate.

In Grand Haven, the category of Whiteness is unmarked, appearing as simply normal to residents. This conceptualization renders non-Whites abnormal by definition. Because they are marked as abnormal, non-Whites are automatically considered outsiders to the community, even when they are residents. By conferring outsider status to non-Whites, community members strengthen their ideas of ingroup status and ideologically police the borders of their community.

The fact that Whiteness is only salient when it confers victim status explains why hate groups tend to organize around experiences of being threatened, feeling that their privileges are at risk, or believing that they are paying the price for changes caused by globalization and the liberal agenda of multiculturalism (Adams, 2013). In his self-published rant, *Murdering Multiculturalism*, Joseph Adams, a White supremacist, blames both the forces he believes are attempting to rob Whites of what is theirs and the masses of White people who do not stand up to this perceived injustice. He writes, “The reason that the destroyers have been able to get away with their mission to destroy Western civilization and eradicate the White population of America is because there is no organized White community serving as a counter current to their program (Adams, 2013, p. 48).

Whites experience pressure to live up to the standards of Whiteness by achieving a certain level of material success and embodying a specific type of identity (Hughey & Bird, 2013). Hughey & Bird write, “more often than not, performing a correct *and* competent white

racial identity (appearing moral, logical, rational, objective, etc.) means aligning oneself with racist, reactionary, paternalistic and privileged symbolic and material practices” (Hughey & Bird, 2013, p. 978). We see this at work in Grand Haven, where Whiteness results in either unexamined privilege or a sense of victimization. The impetus to align with racist, reactionary ideology is evident. Recall that in 2013, there were several incidents of the racial and sexual intimidation of two mixed-race 14-year-old girls at Grand Haven High School. This is boundary policing in a particularly ugly manifestation of misogyny and racial hatred.

### **Considering Christian Hegemony**

The theme of *universalizing the cross* is one of the more striking aspects of the findings of this study. Universalizing Christianity, treating it as a common American belief system that is accepted and enjoyed by all people, is a phenomenon that Ferber characterizes as “the minimization of discrimination and the concomitant attempt to preserve the culture of privilege” (Ferber, 2012, p. 72). This is one of the key ways in which Christonormativity is enacted, erasing “from view Christian privilege, reinscribing Christianity as normative” (Ferber, 2012, p. 73). Ferber cites examples of Christians explaining that Christmas is not a religious holiday but an equal opportunity sort of celebration for everyone. While it could be argued that there are some aspects of Christmas that might be considered somewhat secular, one would think that the cross itself, *the* universally understood symbol of Christianity, could not be presented as non-Christian. However, in their insistence that the Dewey Hill Cross is not a religious symbol, the commenters in this study present a baffling set of quotations that portray a level of Christian privilege that is, to quote Abby Ferber, quite “oppression blind” (Ferber, 2012). Thus, one of the most notable findings of this study is that many of the commenters found ways to “universalize” the cross, denying that it represented Christianity. To them it meant many good and wonderful things that

were accessible to everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike. This was a perfect example of Kivel's discussion of Christian hegemony creating a system of dominance that makes Christianity appear secular, and of Ferber's concept of Christonormativity causing the cross to be "reframed in universal terms."

According to Moorhead, Christians have historically sought to press their ideology upon non-Christians so that "ideas originally derived from Protestantism could be at least partly detached from their origins and function as a kind of civil religion or common American faith that minority faiths might turn to their own uses" (Moorhead, 1998, p. 35). But along with the Protestant belief system came an ideological concept of White racial superiority (Moorhead, 1998; Blumenfeld, 2000). Because of this conflation of racial and religious ideologies, the so-called "universal" values of Protestantism forced racial minorities who accepted them to "accept the preeminence of white Protestants and acknowledge [their own] status as a second-class citizen" (Moorhead, 1998, p. 337).

Black writers have also criticized the racism that they believe is inherent in the Christian church as it exists in the United States. Tait and Gorder write, "Sadly, we see the story of American Christianity is inexorably linked to the story of American racism" (Tait & van Gorder, 2002, p. 175). In their book, *Three-Fifths Theology*, they make a plea for American Christians to end their indifference to the suffering and racial inequality of U.S. society, and the "theological aberration of three-fifths theology . . . that has taught that Africans are three-fifths of a person" (Tait & van Gorder, 2002, p. 176).

Other writers agree with this assessment, particularly when considering the right wing conception of Christianity. Salon.com writer Brittney Cooper writes, "This white, blond-haired, blue-eyed, gun-toting, Bible-quoting Jesus of the religious right is a god of their own making. I

call this god, the god of white supremacy and patriarchy. There is nothing about their god that speaks to me as a Black woman of working-class background” (Cooper, 2015).

Khyati Joshi describes the phenomenon of the racialization of religion, stating

Christianity has also been “racialized,” in this case as White, with non-Christian religions and non-believers constructed in opposition to Christianity—to Whiteness . . . The racialization of religion is a process that exacerbates the ‘Othering’ of a religious group, which also involves the unconstitutional elevation of Christianity to a position of privilege in American society (Blumenfeld, Joshi, & Fairchild, 2009, p. 37).

In Grand Haven, century-old notions conflating White supremacy and American Protestantism continue to feed the Nativist and elitist mentality that allows White Protestant members of the community to feel entitled to special privileges. The discourse around the Dewey Hill Cross also reveals that the exclusive ingroup claims ownership of the community, and the exclusive right to determine its symbolic identity by displaying *their* religious symbol as the de facto symbol of the town in a way that also serves to marginalize and intimidate racial and religious minorities.

### **Considering Spatiality**

Leitner’s concept of the “politics of belonging” refers to “struggles over boundaries that define who belongs to a particular local and national community and who does not” (Leitner, 2012, p. 830). This concept serves as a way to frame the discussion of how spatiality interacts with the data. This concept includes judgements about who belongs culturally and racially, where the geographical boundaries are drawn, and how resources are allocated (Leitner, 2012). The data in this study can be read as a spontaneous attempt by the community of Grand Haven to answer these precise questions. That the community seems to feel an imperative to answer them implies that they are in some sense *being asked*. That is, the disruption created by the cross

controversy created *uncertainty* and *doubt* where there had previously been *security* and *knowledge*.

The emotional reaction to this uncertainty and doubt is evident when commenters directly express emotions such as sorrow, loss, anger, disappointment, frustration, and contempt, and indirectly express grief, insecurity and fear. These are the emotions that recruiters for hate groups play upon, and soothe with a sense of belonging, support and security (Welliver, 2004). In Grand Haven, a space that is claimed as White and Christian, threats to ingroup entitlement to this geography could lead to the creation of reactive offenders who commit crimes in an attempt to police the boundaries of the community and ensure the homogeneity of the privileged space.

In his introduction to *Spaces of Hate: Geographies of Discrimination and Intolerance in the U.S.A*, Colin Flint writes:

Hate groups are active in creating social groups defined by race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality . . . the nature of belonging and intrusion has geographic implications as they explicitly reference a geographic space that is the “home” of a particular group being changed by the arrival of a relatively new one. Contemporary debates regarding immigration policies coupled with rhetoric regarding America as a white and Christian nation illustrate the mutual construction of cultural and physical borders (Flint, 2004, p.9).

In the United States, all minorities, whether racial, ethnic, or religious, have experienced domination, exclusion and forced assimilation (Karst, 1997). This history sends a clear message: “Those who are different cannot belong as full members of the community” (Karst, 1997, p. 407). Notions about who should be included or excluded are based upon space dependent beliefs about “what whiteness both *is* and *should be*, which is policed through implicit and explicit social and cultural markers of authentic belonging” (Hughey & Byrd, 2013, p. 976). Borders can be geographic or conceptual, but they always exist to separate the insiders from the outsiders.

The borders of Grand Haven are being policed both metaphorically and physically, with exclusive practices and actions that make it clear to minorities that they are not welcome there.

### **My Grounded Theory of Codominance**

The events in Grand Haven and the public discourse about them demonstrate the real-life enactment of the concepts of Whiteness, Christian hegemony, and spatiality discussed in the literature review. These findings seem to indicate that for those who support the Dewey Hill Cross, their experiences of being White and being Christian are completely interwoven in a fabric of privilege, and that the “oppression blindness” resulting from this intersection of privilege renders invisible the struggles and full humanity of members of both religious and racial minority groups. Further, the findings suggest that for these community members, the city of Grand Haven is defined spatially as a White, Christian place to which they have a special claim. This claim privileges their values and desires above all others, and allows them to determine who does and does not belong in the community.

In her groundbreaking 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” Kimberle Crenshaw reveals her theory of intersectionality. This theory was constructed in response to the routine marginalization of Black women through systems that recognize discrimination they face as Black people and as women, but not specifically as *Black women* (Crenshaw, 1989). This omission allowed them to be continually subjected to discriminatory treatment without legal recourse (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw’s work was developed specifically to address the particular types of marginalization that occur at intersections of race and gender. This theory has since been expanded and used as a tool for analysis of other categories of difference including class and sexuality. The next move for my work could have been to label

the phenomenon of White, Christian privilege observed in Grand Haven as privilege intersectionality. However, I do not think it acceptable to appropriate Crenshaw's theory, designed to make visible the particular and insidious forms of marginalization she describes, in order to describe extreme privilege. Privilege is an entirely different phenomenon from oppression, and as such, requires its own language and theoretical framework. In addition, it is simply insulting to equate marginalization with domination, even in a purely theoretical context.

Therefore, to describe this system of the dual privileging of Whiteness and Christianity, I introduce the term "codominance." Codominance, a word borrowed from the fields of biology and genetics, indicates the simultaneous expression of two equally dominant genes in an individual organism so that the resulting phenotype is a blend of the two. A classic example of biological codominance is found when a red flower and a white flower produce an offspring that is pink. My use of the term codominance indicates that the systemic privilege created by the intersection of Whiteness and Christianity is something with unique qualities that cannot be separated into White privilege and Christian privilege any more than the color pink can be separated into the colors red and white.

**My grounded theory of codominance states:** 1) In certain spatial locations, intersections of two types of systemic privilege intertwine to create systems of codominance; 2) In codominant systems, the interpenetration of these two types of privilege is so absolute that the two cannot be separated from one another, and instead exist as a single type of privilege. (In Grand Haven, the codominant privilege may be labelled "White-Christian"); 3) Codominant systems can create perceptions of power and privilege that are so completely normalized that they are unperceivable to those who experience them; 4) Within codominant systems, holding the status of cultural insider requires membership in **both** of the defined groups; I further suggest

that, 5) When community members use the term “we,” they are unknowingly using the codominant attributes as boundaries of full membership in the community; 6) White community members, when directly questioned, will deny that Whiteness is a criteria for community membership and may be shocked that anyone would even think such a thing.

This study of Grand Haven provides a clear illustration of my theory. It is a spatially bound geographic area where White and Christian exist together in a system of privileged status. In Grand Haven, an individual must possess both attributes (White and Christian) to hold insider status and be considered a full member of the community. While there may be additional attributes that confer higher levels of status (e.g. male, typically abled, wealthy, highly educated, etc.), these attributes are not required to achieve full membership in the community. Other categories of conformity such as cisgendered or heterosexual were not adequately studied in this project, therefore I will not comment on their necessity for communal belonging.

In a study guided by poststructuralism, it is imperative that I spotlight the constructed nature of this theory. Codominance may be a useful way to conceive of the phenomenon created at the intersection of two privileged identities, but it is merely one possible way to understand this phenomenon. Its strength comes from its usefulness as metaphor and the visual images it evokes; these things make it comprehensible and memorable. It is not *the* truth, but it may be *a* truth. Or it may not.

## **Conclusion**

The data in this study present a compelling picture of a town with a history of homogeneity of race and religion. Through the use of overt and covert boundary policing, dominant members of this community create an unwelcoming, non-democratic, and exclusive atmosphere, and are a potential danger to minority community members and visitors.

In the spatial location of Grand Haven, racial and religious privilege intersect to create a system of codominance, in which White and Christian privileges intertwine to create a web of invisible privilege that elevates those that hold these identities and bars those who don't from achieving full inclusion in the community.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

### **Introduction**

The struggles of the community of Grand Haven may be regarded as emblematic of the struggles of small-town America. In this struggle, a rural community's conception of the priority of the local scale and its belief that Whites may claim legitimate ownership of a racially homogenous spatial location clash with the demands of a changing culture (with its ideals of religious pluralism and equality for all genders, sexualities, races and nationalities) and the global economy (which brings "outsiders" from around the globe into their midst) (Leitner, 2012). For this reason, the events and discourses that surround the Dewey Hill Cross controversy are highly relevant to the field of Ethnic Studies, particularly as they illuminate the conflation of Christianity and Whiteness to create a system of codominance. For those who enjoy the privileges of this system, its benefits are invisible, naturalized, and legitimized by their belief that god himself endorses their mission to fight for the prominent display of the cross upon Dewey Hill.

This researcher believes it unlikely that change will take place in Grand Haven. In order for this to happen, the ingroup privilege that has been naturalized and rendered invisible would have to be denaturalized and made visible to the city's residents. They would have to be willing to hear and consider their privilege, and *to determine that it is not good for the community*. I added emphasis to that last requirement to highlight how unlikely it is that this will occur. Humans have a long history of putting the well-being of their own group above all other considerations. If there is to be a chance for change, Rita Kaur Dhamoon posits that a "politics of disruption" can serve this purpose: "Disruption encompasses a persistent and intentional questioning of the forces of power that produce, reproduce, and stabilize calcified meanings and

structures of difference” (Dhamoon, 2013, p. 24). While few would thrive in an environment of constant upheavals, the occasional disruptive event serves to remind us of the realities beyond our comfortable little worlds. The controversy over the Dewey Hill Cross has done thus that, and has thus “exposed the tenuous nature of us” (E. Ishiwata, personal communication, February 2015). In the wake of this disruption, rhetorical and discursive space was made available for questioning the nature and validity of this construction of White-Christian privilege and entitlement. However, the election of Trump has complicated this significantly.

In an editorial for *The Boston Globe*, sociologist Arlie Russel Hochschild writes that Trump “has tapped into the fear and hope underlying the Rapture, I think, by standing as a powerful judge who decides who is saved and damned” (Hochschild, "Trump, ‘The Apprentice,’ and secular rapture - *The Boston Globe*", 2016). Trump’s elevation to Commander-in-chief is perceived as a great victory to the right, a confirmation of their worthiness and rectitude, and of their special claim to the American dream. Hochschild believes that many conservative Christians experienced the election of Donald Trump as “a kind of secular rapture,” that places them in what they consider their rightful place, at the top of the American hierarchy, at least in a conceptual sense (Hochschild, "Trump, ‘The Apprentice,’ and secular rapture - *The Boston Globe*", 2016). This position will not be relinquished willingly.

## **Discussion**

Here again, is what I am calling the “big picture” research question: How do the events and discourse surrounding the controversy over a cross on public property in a small, Midwestern city shed light on the Trump phenomenon? I believe that the events and discourse in Grand Haven provide a snapshot of a community that was fully primed to embrace a candidate like Donald Trump. When he began his campaign of fearmongering, intimidation and false

promises of a return to a simpler, happier (and Whiter, more Christian) time, Grand Haven residents were already deeply concerned about the racial and religious future of their community and country. Hochschild writes that Trump was “the identity candidate for White men” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 230) because he gave them a chance to feel like legitimate victims, too. To believe that it was not their fault that things were going crazy in their community or their country—for it had been taken over by the Left and overrun with outsiders and minorities who wanted to change America into a place they no longer recognized. In the midst of this perceived turmoil and chaos, Trump vowed to build a wall. He pledged to ban Muslims, bring back lost factory jobs and conjure economic prosperity. And he made a “macabre promise: ‘Don’t worry, we’ll take our country back’” (Anderson, 2016, p. 161).

In 2016, Hochschild attended a Trump rally in Louisiana where she was conducting research for her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. She describes Trump’s campaign rhetoric as “wildly, omnipotently, magically free of all PC constraint” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 227).

He generalized about all Muslims, all women . . . imitated a disabled journalist . . . all deeply derogatory actions in the eyes of Trump’s detractors but liberating to those who had felt constrained to pretend sympathy. Trump allowed them both to feel like a good moral American and to feel superior to those they considered ‘other’ or beneath them (Hochschild, 2016, p. 228).

The people of Grand Haven experienced distrust of “outsiders,” resentment about having to deal with “one more minority,” the perception of being under attack, fear of losing their traditions, and a sense of imminent threat from outside the U.S. and within. All these feelings and beliefs made them hungry for Trump’s promises of a return to a former golden time of prosperity and strength, of the re-inscription of their way of life as the best way, the standard and genuinely American way of life that they had felt slipping from their grasp.

A more general way to phrase the “big picture” research question is this: What can the emotions, beliefs and experiences of one small community explain about global events? How do these individual experiences and beliefs align and multiply to become forces of massive social change? And conversely, what does this teach us about the role of history and culture in the formation of the individual? From what I have gleaned from the data and literature, human beings are extremely malleable creatures that tend to conform to their social surroundings. We respond predictably to certain types of situations and upbringings, becoming adults that, for the most part, think about things in ways that are similar to those around us. There will always be mavericks and oddballs, but these are the exception. The sheep-like qualities of the masses of humanity give authoritarian leaders and demagogues like Donald Trump tremendous power to influence human history. Our credulous natures make us easy targets for both propagandists and religious zealots. Our desires to be important and powerful, coupled with ingroup bias, lead us to support the “we” and exclude, or even murder the “them.” Because these thought processes and behaviors are part of our natures, their terrible consequences will probably always be with us.

When I apply this thinking to the microcosm of Grand Haven and to the current global instability, I perceive a pervasive mentality of ethnic cleansing, which seeks to eject unwanted groups from claimed locations in order to maintain a supposed ethnic (racial, cultural and/or religious) “purity” (“Ethnic cleansing,” 2015). This is a familiar human activity; we have seen this violence on a massive scale in Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s, in Cambodia in the 1970s, in Germany in the 1940s, and in other locations throughout history.

Thus, I believe that what transpired in Grand Haven was the result of the interactions of an underlying set of universal human drives towards desiring to belong, defining community, ejecting those who do not belong, and policing the physical territory that is possessed by the

ingroup so as to protect land and resources from the threat of potential invaders. These drives appear to be primordial in nature, emerging from our evolutionary history as a kind of social atavism, the civilizational equivalent of the vestigial tail. The possible biological nature of these formations does not in any way excuse them, however. And it does not mean we as a species should not strive to overcome our most fearful and instinctive pack-creature natures and create inclusive communities where diversity and difference are valued as strengths.

### **Researcher Recommendations**

The results of this study present a strong case for the consideration of the role of Christonormativity in the formation and maintenance of both racial and religious privilege, the ways in which spatiality and privilege interact to create policed and bounded “White” spaces, and the process that can turn the existence of threat into an ethos of hate.

#### **For the Field of Ethnic Studies.**

In regard to the field of Ethnic Studies, it appears that religion is underappreciated as a potential force of oppression and privilege. In general, religion seems to be largely omitted from the framework for understanding injustice; however, the discipline of ethnic studies should not overlook how religious ideology can create systems of oppressive codominance with White racial identity (as in Grand Haven) or be used to motivate and justify atrocities such as ethnic cleansing, acts of terrorism, or hate crimes. I recommend that along with and equal to race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality and ability, the field of Ethnic Studies consider the religion/worldview of an individual as a crucial dimension of identity, which confers power and privilege to some and removes them from others. Religion can have both positive and negative impacts on individuals, communities and nations. Religions can be systems of domination and oppression and/or systems that promote justice and dignity. It is the both/and aspect of religion

that people struggle to recognize. The field of Ethnic Studies must interrogate religion and hold it accountable for the harms it does, as it would any system of dominance and oppression. Religion should not get any free passes. The challenge to religious hegemony currently taking place in Grand Haven exposes Christian privilege for the system of dominance that it truly is and sheds light on its inherent potential to cause harm to others even as it serves as a source of comfort to its adherents.

### **For Educators in Social Justice.**

I recommend that when educating White students about issues of Whiteness, particularly White Privilege and the unintended effects of White people's behavior on people of color, that care be taken. In 2011, writer and scholar Robin DiAngelo coined the term "White Fragility" to describe a particular phenomenon. Noting that in North America, White people are generally insulated from the discomfort they feel when discussing issues of race, DiAngelo theorizes that this insulation "builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). This results in "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54).

Because of this fragility, discussions about race and privilege may have the opposite effect from what is intended, creating the perception of victimhood and thereby moving the student towards an extremist understanding of Whiteness as a source of victimization, which can foster a proclivity towards violence. While I do not recommend coddling resistant students, I do think that there are strategies that will improve the outcomes of such discussions.

My study of the common emotions that White people feel when their privilege is made evident, or when their superior position in society is challenged has provided me with some

insight into reactions of anger, denial and combativeness. I believe these reactions occur because the students are experiencing *emotions*, but are not aware of this fact. They believe they are *responding logically to nonsense*. White people, and particularly White men, are so accustomed to believing that they are logical and unemotional that they do not consider their emotions to be emotions at all, but *thoughts* and *ideas*. Their unbearable discomfort is transmuted into arguments that deny every reality but their own. This makes sense to them, because their reality is what they see reflected in the larger culture. The more they are called out on their privilege and behavior, the more entrenched they become in their denial and rage.

I advise prefacing discussion of White Privilege with a talk about *emotions*. Students should be encouraged to identify and label their emotions, to think about how they feel physically, *in their bodies*, when they think about White Privilege (They may identify things like a racing pulse, tightness in their chests, nausea, etc.). The instructor should stress that emotions are neither good nor bad. They are neither right nor wrong. They simply are. Thinking about and labelling emotions prior to discussing the actual issues may give students a better chance of recognizing the difference between their thoughts and their feelings. This may improve the quality of discussion, particularly if the group leader displays empathy for the difficult emotions, but does not accept flawed logic or denial of reality.

#### **For Future Research.**

To other researchers, I recommend further investigation into Christonormativity as a means of oppression, particularly as it functions to legitimate White supremacy groups such as the KKK, the “Alt-Right” and the Christian Identity movement. I would also welcome the testing of my theory of codominance using other characteristics and spatial locations.

## Conclusion

Although business as usual continues in Grand Haven, many of the people there are fractured and broken in a fundamental way. This brokenness must be understood through their particular racial/cultural, religious, and historical frameworks, which together create their perception of their community as a place that is “naturally” White, conservative, and Christian. The challenge to this long-held and unexamined perception has been jarring. Citizens are still scrambling for a way to reassert their power and control, and reestablish a meaningful story of who they are and what they are about, all the while realizing that the world beyond the city limits cannot be held at bay forever. There are Others outside and Others within. Things they believed to be plain, obvious, common sense matters are being challenged. What will emerge in the wake of this event is yet to be determined. Retrenchment is possible. Ossification. Paranoia. Violence is not an unlikely possibility under these conditions. This researcher, who is also a hometown girl, holds out hope for a better resolution, one where residents come to accept the reality that *difference* is the norm. That *difference* is always already present, even in Grand Haven, Michigan. That we all share this planet, and even their little piece of heaven is not exempt from the surge of history. The ever flowing waves of change.

Across the nation, small-town America is experiencing an ending and a beginning. Global population shifts and a variety of “push-pull” factors are affecting immigration patterns and bringing global strangers and small-town Americans into intimate proximity (Leitner, 2012). The world outside is entering. Down the quaint streets, past the White picket fences and rows of sunny tulips, they come. With unfamiliar languages, faiths, and cultures, they come. Carrying the Quran, the Hebrew Scriptures, and *The Portable Atheist*, they come. With dark faces, veils and saris. With all the flavors, colors, and voices of humanity, they come. The “we” is undone.

When viewed through this lens, what is happening in Grand Haven can be regarded as emblematic of the struggle to define identity, community and ideology in this confusing new landscape. While the comments and attitudes of many of the residents are small-minded and unkind, we demonize these individuals and disparage their troubled emotions at our peril. Constant, gnawing feelings of insecurity and fear are the hallmarks of anxiety. According to Alan Hunt, anxiety is “frequently inarticulate; it often cannot name the underlying fear which gives rise to a complex experiential array or concern, worry, nervousness, aggression, and fear” (Hunt, 1999). In his essay on anxiety, Hunt describes a period of social anxiety in 1970s Britain known as the “mugging panic.” Hunt notes that discourse at the time portrayed a sense that “something had ‘gone wrong’ with British society in that ‘things weren’t like they used to be.’” Note here a common feature of social anxiety with the invocation of an assumption of a preexisting ‘golden age’ or, more modestly, of a prior period of stability” (Hunt, 1999, p. 512). Anxiety and moral panic describe the situation in Grand Haven quite concisely. When we consider what could be called “The Dewey Hill Panic,” through the framework of Alan Hunt’s thesis on anxiety, we have reason to be concerned for what may come of such feelings. When faced with a generalized and unknowable threat to imaginaries of privilege, status and prosperity, a group may locate a “substitute target” which may then “become the target for variable responses of anger, hatred, or avoidance” (Hunt, 2013). In Grand Haven, this substitute target could be atheists, Blacks, Latino/as, Jews, or any other individual or group that is labeled an outsider to the community. As Ishiwata succinctly phrased it, “anxiety animates hate” (Ishiwata, personal communication, 2015).

It is interesting to note that not one person involved in this debate has stated that the fact that the first cross on Dewey Hill was a KKK cross was *reason enough in itself* to remove the

cross from the site. As I prepare to complete this project and graduate from my Master's program, I wonder whether I should seek an opportunity to share the results of my study with residents of Grand Haven and along with them, ideas for healing. I am already planning to send a copy to the Lakeshore Ethnic Diversity Alliance, which will likely welcome the insight. I may also offer a copy to the local library, and schedule an appointment with the mayor or City Council members to discuss my findings. These are a risky propositions, as few enjoy seeing themselves through others' eyes or having their shortcomings pointed out. I have considered their indignation and perhaps sense of betrayal that "one of their own" could conduct such an investigation. The motto for *Race Traitor Magazine* is "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (Ignatiev, 1997). I believe this to be true. The treason he discusses is not a rejection of human beings who are White, but rather a rejection of the White privilege and the oppression of non-White peoples upon which this privilege depends. My loyalty is to humanity. I believe in the possibility of a better world, and am willing to take personal risks as I play my small role in the historical struggle for justice.

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