

A Critical Whiteness Exploration of the National FFA Organization

Abstract

The *FFA for All* campaign from the National FFA Organization represents an important step for diversity, equity, and inclusivity in the youth organization. The challenge of making the FFA more inclusive for diverse students presents question for investigation. What elements within the FFA represented barriers to people of color from participating in the FFA? This study utilized a framework of Critical Whiteness Studies to explore how the traditions and ritual of the FFA manifest Whiteness. Traditions and ritual of the FFA were chosen as data sets as these activities are codified as potentially routine activities for all FFA chapters and members. The study found that Whiteness appeared in a variety of the FFA rituals and traditions, including the FFA Creed, FFA Opening Ceremonies, and FFA Award Systems. Whiteness emerged through the concept of meritocracy as well as the ideological representations found with the FFA rituals and traditions. These elements of Whiteness may help explain why students of color have not been equally represented in the FFA as White students. The study concludes with recommendations for action for making the FFA diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all students to fulfill the promises of the *FFA for All* campaign.

Keywords: Whiteness; National FFA Organization; Ideology; Meritocracy

Introduction

The National FFA Organization (FFA) has committed to making the organization more inclusive. The FFA initiative designed to accomplish this is a partnership with the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) and is entitled *Agricultural Education for All*. The initiative includes becoming more relevant for diverse students, celebrating diversity in the FFA, and providing results-orientated training (National FFA Organization, 2020). The goals of this initiative are important. The need, development, and implementation of the *Agricultural Education for All* initiative requires some critical discussions about the FFA. Specifically, what ideological issues within the FFA drove the very need for the *Agricultural Education for All* initiative. In other words, why is the FFA not inclusive to all students? There are many possible ways to answer this question. Given the historical and current social power of White people in the history of agriculture (Harris, 1993; Hartmann & Martin, 2021; Reece, 2019; Roediger, 2017; Quisumbing King et al., 2018), and school-based agricultural education (Barajas et al., 2020; Martin, 2014; Martin & Kitchel, 2012, 2015; Martin & Hartmann, 2020; Phelps et al., 2012), this study utilized a Critical Whiteness framework to explore how Whiteness manifested in the FFA and possible hinders the ability of FFA advisors and stakeholders to be more inclusive.

We want to address a potential criticism to this piece upfront. Some might argue that students of color have been and are in the FFA. Furthermore, students of color have found success in various aspects of the FFA, including being state and national officers. This fact does not negate the importance of studying the FFA from the perspective of Whiteness. This study was not about the students of color who found success in the FFA (i.e., Martin & Kitchel, 2014), rather this study focused on the barriers that students of color might face in the FFA because of how Whiteness might be manifested in the FFA. We want to acknowledge and draw attention to the possibility that the FFA has people of color currently in the Organization, and that it also currently has elements within the traditions, rituals, and history which reinforce Whiteness. Further, a Critical Whiteness

framework requires looking at themes and historical context of the FFA and not be distracted from the trends by individual stories or what Cullen describes as Perfectly Logical Explanations (Cullen, 2008).

Critical approaches to research in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) are needed to identify how organizations and programs may struggle to create inclusive environments for teachers and students. A critical methodology explores the dominant representations and voices in the FFA, as well as how systems of power, oppression, and privilege are maintained (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Kincheloe & MacLaren, 2008). While it is true that topics such as race in SBAE have been the focus of research published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* (Bowen & Rumberger, 2002; Croom & Altson, 2009; Elliott & Lambert, 2018; Jones & Bowen, 1998; LaVergne et al., 2012; LaVergne et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2009; Talbert & Edwin, 2008; Vincent et al., 2012; Vincent & Torres, 2015; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003; Warren & Alston, 2007), most of these studies have utilized epistemologies, frameworks, and methods which did not focus of the critical issues of power, oppression, privilege, and hegemony in SBAE. The cumulative findings of these studies highlight the challenges in making SBAE more inclusive for generally diverse audiences. Recently, more studies have utilized such approaches to varying degrees in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* (Barajas et al., 2020; Cline et al., 2020; Elliott & Lambert, 2018; Hartmann & Martin, 2021; Martin & Kitchel, 2015; Murray et al., 2020). These studies have focused on systems of power and privilege within the broader contexts of agricultural education.

Research has highlighted the privilege that White teachers and students have in SBAE. This privilege is manifested in a variety of ways, such as the rural and conservative ideological roots of the FFA (Martin & Kitchel 2013, 2015), the abundance of White role models in SBAE compared to students of color (LaVergne et al., 2011), and the FFA “takeover” of the NFA (Jones et al., 2021; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). This privilege means that students of color do not have the same level of power in SBAE compared to White students (Barajas et al., 2020; Elliott & Lambert, 2018; Warren & Alston, 2007). These findings and other published research (Martin, 2014, Martin & Hartmann, 2020; Martin & Kitchel, 2012) indicate that White people have structural power and privilege in SBAE (i.e., Whiteness). While a Critical Pedagogy of Agriculture framework for SBAE has emerged in the literature as way to empower students of color in SBAE (Hartmann & Martin, 2021), there is still a need for research to explore how Whiteness is manifested in SBAE.

Agricultural education researchers have heard the message regarding the need for these approaches before. During the 2011 American Association of Agricultural Educators conference in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, the world-renowned multicultural scholar, Dr. James A. Banks, told the audience that agricultural education researchers must take on the challenge of researching issues of power and privilege within agricultural education ourselves (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). We cannot wait for the broader educational community to do this work as the need is too great. A decade after Dr. Banks' call to action for more critical research, we aim to critically explore the historical roots of power and privilege in SBAE. The purpose of this study is to explore how Whiteness has manifested itself in SBAE historically, through a critical Whiteness framework approach.

Theoretical Framework of Critical Whiteness Studies

Whiteness as a theoretical framework posits that society is dominated by structural rules which favor White people over people of color (Bell, 2000; Leonardo. 2004; McLaren & Muñoz, 2000). The research field of Whiteness emerged from Critical Race Theory (Feagin, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) and as its own separate field and theoretical framework for research (Leonardo, 2014; Matias

et al., 2014). Whiteness is a social construct that is learned, codified, and reaffirmed in families, society, law, and even education through structural racism (Feagin, 2006; Feagin & Elias, 2013; Omni & Winant, 1994, 2013; Wingfield, 2013). The structural advantages which White people have does not mean that White people will not face any challenges (i.e., Allen, 2009; Newitz & Wray, 1997), however, the structural advantages presented to them will help White people recover these challenges faster than people of color (i.e., Allison, 1998).

Under a theoretical framework of Whiteness, being White supersedes other identities, such as gender, race, class, etc. This supersession is central to critical frameworks of research. For example, feminism would place issues of gender in the forefront while LatCrit places the identity of being Latina/o ahead of other identities. Researchers have begun to explore the intersectionality of identities (i.e., merging feminism and Latinx to explore the realities of being Latina). This concept has also been applied to Whiteness (Allen, 2009; Ellsworth, 1997; Fasching-Varner, 2012; Hughey, 2010). There are many merits to examining the intersectionality of Whiteness, however the limited number of published critical research studies in SBAE makes such an endeavor challenging.

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) as a theoretical framework emerged over the past 25 years to become a significant thread in critical research approaches. CWS specifically focuses on structural advantages that White people have in society and how White people protect those advantages through conscious and unconscious actions, bias, racism, and/or bigotry (Leonardo, 2013; Matias et al., 2014). While CWS research focuses on White people, the intent of the research is to not privilege White people by framing their stories. The goal is to challenge the power and privilege of White people by centering on the acts of privilege, power, violence, and resistance to change (Cabrera, 2014; Dyches & Thomas, 2020; Foste & Irwin, 2020; Matias, 2013). White people are not completely ignorant of their structural advantages (Leonardo, 2009; Cabrera, 2014) and CWS research works to uncover how White people may hide their racial knowledge and identity.

The dominance of White people can also be maintained through cultural rhetoric and ideologies that are reinforced from the bottom-up. These include White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias & Allen, 2013), color-blindness (Leonardo, 2009; Ullucci & Battey, 2011), and meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2007; Mills, 1997). In particular, the concept of meritocracy, or the belief that people only succeed because of their ability, has resonated in United States, and often functions to maintain White privilege. Meritocracy places the success and failure of one's life squarely on their own efforts without regard to structural advantages or disadvantages they faced (Lewis, 2003; Perry, 2002). This concept overlooks the challenges of structural racism in our institutions and the enormous wealth gap created by structural racism over time. The blame falls on the individual rather than the system. Meritocracy is just one of the differing ideological representations used to maintain the power and privilege of White people, whether wittingly or unwittingly (Picower, 2009; Rivière, 2009; Tatum, 1999). By utilizing a theoretical lens of Whiteness, this study explores how White people have a structural advantage within SBAE.

Purpose Statement

This Critical Whiteness Study explored how School-Based Agricultural Education is shaped by Whiteness. Specifically, the National FFA Organization was chosen as the focus. The purpose of this study was to identify how Whiteness appears within the National FFA Organization. The following research question guided the study:

1. How did Whiteness manifest in the traditions and rituals of the National FFA Organization?

Methods

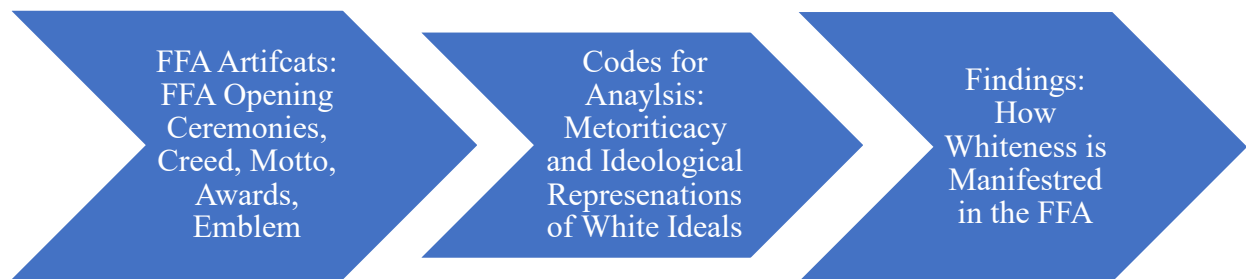
This study utilized critical theory epistemology within a theoretical framework of Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS). Critical theory (also called critical inquiry) epistemology seeks to uncover the ideologies which shape society. Certain groups are privileged, and other groups are oppressed in a society. Furthermore, the oppression that groups face can take many forms and may demand a variety of research methodologies to examine (i.e., historical, philosophical, narrative etc.; Kincheloe, 1991; Kincheloe & MacLaren, 2008). Critical theory frameworks are rarely utilized in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* (e.g., Martin & Kitchel, 2015). Critical theory epistemology is important because mainstream research practices generally reproduce systems of power (Kincheloe, 1991; Kincheloe & MacLaren, 2008).

This study utilized philosophical methodology (Burbules & Warnick, 2006) to examine rituals and traditions of the FFA, as well as historical methodology (Rury, 2006) to explore the history of the FFA. The theoretical perspective of CWS guided the data analysis of both the philosophical and historical sections of the study. CWS articulates that White people in the United States utilize specific social arguments, imagery, and legal concepts to maintain their privilege over people of color and to patrol the behavior of other White people to maintain Whiteness (Leonardo, 2014; Matias et al., 2014). The utilization of CWS with philosophical and historical methods facilitated the need of Whiteness theory to guide data analysis.

The following steps were utilized in the data coding process of this study. First, we identified key rituals, traditions, and historical points of the FFA to form a list of artifacts to analyze. Previous critical, sociological, and historical research into the FFA helped guide us in the identification process of these artifacts (Martin & Kitchel, 2013, 2015). These included the FFA Creed, FFA Opening Ceremonies, FFA Awards, etc. Second, we utilized key concepts in Whiteness theory to analyze the identified artifacts (see Figure 1). These concepts included meritocracy (Allen & Liou, 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 2007; Castagno, 2008; Mills, 1997; Putnam, 2017) and ideological representations of Whiteness (Babb, 1998; Bucholtz & Lopez, 2011; Okun & Jones, 2021; Picower, 2009; Privera & Howard, 2006; Rivière, 2009). Third, we reviewed notes and compared our theoretical analysis of each artifact. We challenged the arguments that we presented during our individual data analysis. The goal was to reach a more accurate theoretical representation of how Whiteness was being represented in each artifact.

Figure 1

Data Analysis Schema



The research team had experience with critical pedagogy and published research utilizing multiple critical theory perspectives, including Whiteness. One member of the research team was considered an insider to SBAE and the FFA having been a former agriculture student, FFA member, agriculture teacher, and FFA advisor. The other two members were familiar with SBAE and the FFA, working with both groups professionally. One of these two members was also a high school teacher. Two members of the research team identify as White, and one researcher identifies as Latina.

Critical theory research approaches similar standards of rigor and trustworthiness to qualitative research, including the need to critically examine the positionality of the researchers to the topic. One member of our research team was an insider to the FFA (former FFA member and advisor), and two other members of the research team were outsiders. The broad range of positionalities of the researchers led to enhanced member checking for credibility during the data analysis process. The member checking included both the theoretical definition of concepts under the Critical Whiteness Study epistemology as well as the meaning and intentions of the FFA rituals and traditions being analyzed. Member checking during the data analysis process also led to rich descriptions of the themes, increasing the dependability of the analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The differing positionalities of the research team also helped to ensure the minority voices in the FFA were centered in the data analysis process which is a key component of critical research standards of rigor (Koro-Ljungberg, 2010).

Findings

The creation of the Future Farmers of America (not just the FFA), a process which began in the mid-1920s and culminated in 1928, led to the creation of rituals and traditions that gave the organization identity. Ideological tenets of Whiteness can be found within these rituals and traditions. The findings section was divided into the key identified concepts Whiteness was manifested within FFA artifacts being studied.

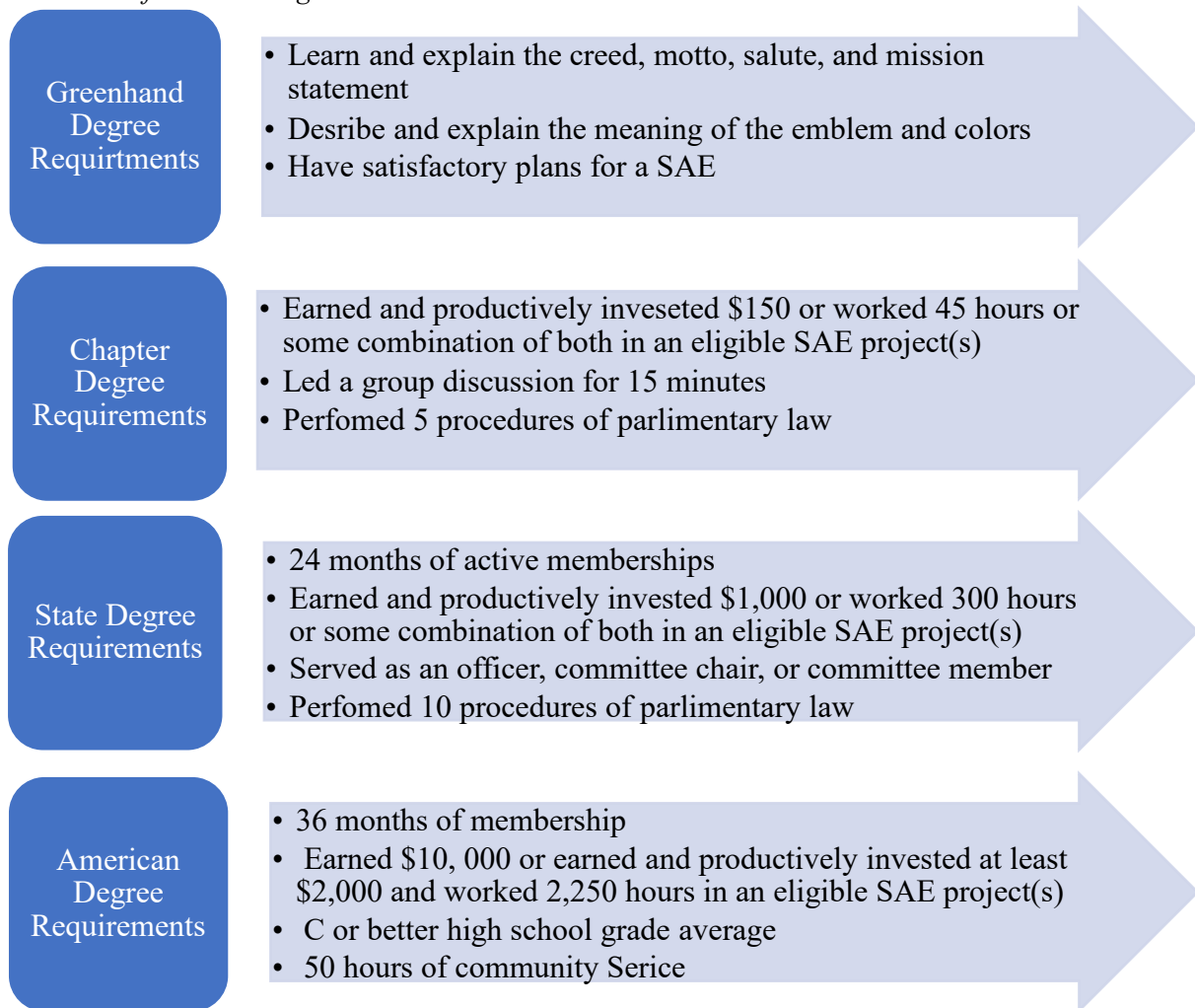
Whiteness through Meritocracy

The concept of meritocracy is key in Whiteness (Mills, 1997). The idea is that an individual has the power to overcome struggle and be self-sufficient on their own, also referred to as the bootstrap mentality. However, a central problem with the concept is that it overlooks the historical and contemporary advantages that White people have compared to people of color. Also, meritocracy tends to place the success of the individual ahead of family and community. This Western mentality is itself overly White and not always a core value within communities of color (Yosso, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2007; Okun & Jones, 2021).

The award structures of the FFA advantage White FFA members for several reasons, often beyond just the concept of meritocracy. FFA awards are culturally important within the organization. There are students who become FFA members and only participate in a handful of activities. They may choose not to participate in a FFA competition or merit-based event. It is easy to conceive that there are tens of thousands of the FFA members at this level. However, there is prestige placed on FFA members who advance through the various systems of awards (i.e., meritocracy) in the FFA. This prestige could reinforce or create a young person’s standing and power in the local community as well as lead career opportunities and/or college scholarships. The following figure highlights one important FFA award system, FFA Degrees.

Figure 2

Partial List of the FFA Degree Recruitments



Note. This list does not include the FFA Discovery Degree for FFA members in 7th and 8th Grades. This list of requirements for each degree is not exhaustive.

The quintessential example of how the FFA award system works is the FFA Degree System (National FFA Organization, 2021). There are five different degree levels that an active FFA member can earn. This paper will not focus on the Discovery FFA Degree as it is for 7th and 8th grade agriculture students and not part of the four sequential degree process (see Figure 2). The

Greenhand Degree is the entry level degree and designed to be awarded for members after their first-year membership. The Greenhand Degree is not just given for time in the organization. FFA members earn the degree through understanding the traditions and rituals of the FFA, reciting the FFA Creed, setting up a plan for Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE), and other requirements. The member must become vested in the culture of the FFA. The Greenhand Degree is awarded at the discretion of the local FFA advisor. Once a FFA member earns their FFA Greenhand degree then they are eligible for the FFA Chapter degree.

The FFA Chapter degree requires that a FFA member become more involved in the local FFA chapter. This includes general participation benchmarks such as planning FFA events, demonstrating knowledge in parliamentary law and ability to speak in public, accumulating community service hours, and more. The SAE requirement becomes more important with Chapter Degrees as the member must have either productively invested \$150 in their SAE or worked at least 45 hours outside of class time in their SAE project or some combination of both. Historically SBAE has broadened the definition of what a SAE projects could be (Bird et al., 2013; Rank & Retallick, 2017), from heavily production agriculture focused to broader interpretations of careers in the agriculture, food, and natural resources domain. The local FFA advisor has sole discretion on what counts as a SAE for the Chapter Degree and designates who is eligible for the award. The bestowment of a Chapter Degree is an important benchmark for a FFA member.

The next two sequential Degree levels, State FFA Degree and American FFA degree, represent some the highest levels of recognition in the FFA. The requirements for earning these Degrees are numerous, including more leadership at the local FFA level. The Degree requirements are more challenging and typically mean that FFA members earn these awards during their last year in high school or even after high school graduation. The increased requirements of money earned and/or hours worked in the FFA member's SAE project is particularly challenging. State FFA Degree applicants must have earned and productively invested \$1000 from their SAE project or worked 300 hours outside of class time, or some combination of both. The American FFA Degree requires that applicants must have earned \$10,000 from and productively invested \$7,500 from their SAE project or worked 2,250 hours outside of class time and earned and productively invested \$2,000, or some combination of both which follows an equation designed by the National FFA Organization.

These two Degrees represent high levels of meritocracy in the FFA Organization. Anecdotally, FFA chapters often display the names of past FFA members who have earned either their State FFA Degree and/or American FFA Degree on the walls of the agriculture classroom. The prestige attached to progressing through the differing FFA Degrees increases the motivation and/or pressure that FFA members and FFA advisors feel to pursue these individual awards. While the differing degree requirements include chapter and community activities, these requirements become relatively small compared to work related requirements once a FFA member becomes eligible for a State and American FFA Degree.

The SAE work requirements can often disadvantage FFA members from non-production agriculture backgrounds. FFA members from non-production agriculture backgrounds, many from urban and suburban communities, typically earn hourly wages. To earn enough money for a State or American FFA Degree, these members must have steady employment and/or work many hours. This can be challenging for many students in suburban and urban communities for various social and economic reasons. Also, students from marginalized families (including those in rural communities) might have familial responsibilities that supersede their ability to work consistently at a job or they might have not access to employment which fits the definition of a SAE project, or access to transportation, or a myriad of other reasons. FFA members from production backgrounds

(mostly situated in rural communities) may have the ability to work with large quantities of commodity crops and/or livestock valued in the thousands of dollars. For example, an acre of corn could be worth between \$600-\$800 in the Midwest or an individual steer might be worth \$600 at slaughter. If a FFA member can access this type of agricultural capital for their SAE project (whether from family, friends, or community directly tied to the wealth gap) then their path to a FFA Degree may be much easier.

The racial and ethical make-up of farmers and ranchers also has a role to play in who can more readily find success with some of the FFA awards. The United States Department of Agriculture (2017) reports that 95% of agricultural producers were White. Thus, access to production agricultural capital is heavily skewed to White FFA members. This does not only positively impact the ability of a rural White student to obtain a State and/or American FFA Degree, but it also enables them to participate in the FFA Proficiency Award system (2021) which is predominantly focused on production agriculture topics. FFA members of color do not have the same level of access to these types of experiences as their rural, White counterparts creating a unique layer of inequity. Whiteness shapes the experiences of FFA members of color by emphasizing the meritocrat aspects of the FFA as well as limit their ability to advance in the meritocracy of the FFA.

Finally, the importance of meritocracy in the FFA is emphasized in its traditions and rituals. For example, FFA members are expected to recite and understand the FFA Creed. The significance of such an action should not be overlooked. The author of the FFA Creed, E.M. Tiffany, wanted the FFA Creed to be an active force which guides FFA members (National FFA Organization, 2021). A line from the second paragraph of the FFA Creed highlights the importance of the individual over the community, “I believe in my own ability to work efficiently and think clearly... in the ability of progressive agriculturists to serve our own and the public interest in producing and marketing the product of our toil” (para. 3). This line is followed by a similar idea from the third paragraph, “I believe in less dependence on begging and more power in bargaining...” (para. 4). The importance of the FFA Creed is not lost on FFA members as they are required to recite the Creed to progress through the FFA Degree system and is a common feature in FFA culture.

We want to emphasize a few points in relation to meritocracy in the FFA. A FFA member can choose to participate in an event which is competitive or features elements of individual merit. A FFA member does not have to earn any of the FFA Degrees. There are a variety of local activities which emphasis interpersonal development, school relations, and/or community involvement. However, prestige in the FFA, whether for the FFA member or advisor, is focused on progression and recognition within the various FFA award systems as an individual or as an individual on a small team. There are few opportunities to earn recognition of as large group in the FFA (i.e., National Chapter Award). Many cultures place greater emphasis on the success of the group and/or community success over the individual, including Hispanic/Latinx and Indigenous cultures (Lardier, 2017, Mijs, 2016 Banks & McGee Banks, 2020). This cultural emphasis of individual advancement over community/group well-being is a hall mark of Whiteness through meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva, 2007; Mills, 1997).

Whiteness through Ideological Representations

The FFA has a variety of traditions and rituals for FFA members to study, follow, and enact. These range from wearing the FFA Jacket to participating in the FFA Opening Ceremonies as well as reciting the FFA Motto and FFA Creed. This section will examine how Whiteness is manifested in the FFA Opening Ceremonies, FFA Emblem, and FFA Creed.

President George Washington in the FFA Opening Ceremonies

An ideological tool of Whiteness can be found within the Opening Ceremonies of the FFA (National FFA Organization, 2021). During the FFA Opening Ceremonies the FFA officers recite a scripted passage, ideally from memory, in front of an emblem of their office. Most of the emblems are objects, including a rising sun for the FFA President, plow for the FFA Vice-President, and an ear of corn for the FFA Secretary. The FFA Treasurer is positioned next to an emblem of President George Washington. He is the only person represented during the ceremonies. The FFA Treasurer recites the following passage when prompted:

“I keep a record of receipts and disbursements just as Washington kept his farm accounts—carefully and accurately. I encourage thrift among the members and strive to build up our financial standing through savings and investments. George Washington was better able to serve his country because he was financially independent.” (National FFA Organization, 2021, p. 36)

What is clear from the passage is that the emphasis is being placed on Washington the farmer and not Washington the general and/or politician. This should lead to the critical question of who was Washington the farmer?

We must not overlook the fact that Washington was a slave owner when we are describing his prowess as a farmer. There is no disputing the fact that Washington was enthusiastic about agricultural innovations and improving agricultural output. Yet, it was not Washington who was toiling in the fields at Mt. Vernon. His financial independence came from enslaved people. If we examine the office ceremony passage more acutely and compare it to the historical record, we see a painful juxtaposition. In particular, the part that reads, “... Washington kept his farm accounts – carefully and accurately” is worth unpacking. The following passage from the official Mount Vernon (Mount Vernon Ladies Association, 2022) website described his process of careful and accurate record keeping:

When in residence at Mount Vernon, Washington rode across his plantation daily to inspect progress. When away, such as during the presidency, he demanded exhaustive weekly reports from his plantation manager recording “in what manner the hands have been employed.” These reports reveal the grueling and diverse labor that enslaved people performed to grow and harvest crops, manage livestock, clear swamps for new fields, and move supplies across the plantation. Washington read each report carefully and questioned details he found dubious. (Plantation Management section, para. 2)

The importance of rituals like the FFA Opening Ceremonies should not be overlooked. The recited passages are carefully crafted to convey meaning. The meaning revealed when we critically examine Washington as a farmer is one of brutality and the darkest chapters in the history of the United States.

We recognize that some people may feel uncomfortable by this critical examination of the FFA Opening Ceremonies. This is not a critique of Washington as a general, founding father, or as first President of the United States. We are not critiquing Washington’s image on United States currency. This is solely a focus of what the implications are of focusing on Washington as a farmer in a key ritual of the FFA. A White student may not think twice about reciting a passage that honors Washington’s ability to force enslaved people to work on his plantation. However, what would a student of color think when they are asked to recite or listen to this passage? What historical virtue

is the FFA trying to uphold? This critical examination resembles the debate on removing confederate statues (O'Connell, 2020).

FFA Emblem

There are a variety of overt representations of agriculture in the traditions and rituals of the FFA that reinforce Whiteness. They are visible for students to see and experience. Yet, the cultural ramifications of these representations can be more challenging to identify. The emblem and the individual pieces within it are worth examining. The FFA emblem is comprised of the ear of corn, rising sun, plow, eagle, and owl. Three of these emblems (rising sun, horse--drawn plow, and owl) are also part of the FFA Opening Ceremonies (2021). The creations of these emblems date back to the 1920s and originated from a southern agrarian perspective. The Southern Agrarian ideology was a conservative and rural-focused view of agricultural values (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). Thus, the FFA emblems are designed to appeal to a more rural audience. However, is the FFA Emblem designed to be more culturally attractive to rural, White students?

The answer to this question is straight forward. Segregationist policies were dominate when the FFA was founded. A separate youth organization for Black students enrolled in vocational agriculture was formed at the same time as the FFA. It was the New Farmers Association (NFA). The NFA emblem was like the FFA emblem in that it also had a hand-drawn plow, rising sun, eagle, and owl. However, the NFA emblem utilized a cross section of a boll of cotton with two leaves instead of a cross section of an ear of corn (National FFA Organization, 2021). The cultural importance of cotton for Black framers in the Jim Crow South and at the height of sharecropping cannot be overlooked. The organizers of the NFA recognized the culturally differences between White and Black students. The FFA emblem was for White students. The NFA was absorbed by the FFA in 1965 and the NFA emblem removed (Jones et al., 2021).

We should also not overlook the significance of the FFA Emblem in contemporary society. These are rural-centric representations of agriculture and life. We should expect suburban and urban students (White, as well as students of color) to possibly have challenges culturally connecting with the cross section of an ear of corn and a plow. This is not to say that they would be put-off by these emblems; suburban and urban students may not be drawn to them (Martin & Kitchel, 2015; Phelps et al., 2012). So, why has the FFA kept rural-centric imaginary? The answer partially lies in the very agrarian ideology in which the FFA emerged, Southern Agrarianism. The Southern Agrarian ideology places great value on the conservative ideal of tradition (Martin & Kitchel, 2013). The continuation of this idea today seems logical for the FFA. Yet, what tradition is the FFA maintaining? We argue that is maintaining a rural tradition centered on White people with its imaginary.

FFA Creed

The overt agricultural imaginary also appears in the FFA Creed. The FFA Creed outlines the ideological values that FFA members should aspire to in their lives. While the FFA has tried to update this key document to reflect a more urbanized society, the strong rural representations remain. The following passage is from the second paragraph of the Creed (National FFA Organization, 2021):

I believe that to live and work on a good farm, or to be engaged in other agricultural pursuits, is pleasant as well as challenging; for I know the joys and discomforts of agricultural life and hold an inborn fondness for those associations which, even in hours of discouragement, I cannot deny. (FFA Creed section, para. 2)

The point of the paragraph is to reinforce the farm ideal which is the fabric of agrarianism. While farm life and work could be viewed as racially and ethnically neutral, we must examine this ideal of farm life and work from critical Whiteness perspective. A recent study by Horst and Marion (2019) found White people own 98% and operate 94% of farmland in the United States. While over half of the farm laborers in the United States are non-White, is the FFA Creed referring to farm laborers as well? To this end we cannot easily summarize. Nonetheless, the predominance of farm wealth and capital being in the hands of White people means that few people of color can share in the direct ideological representation of the pleasantries of farm work and life.

The second paragraph of the FFA Creed is utilizing contextual experiences which are primarily centered on White and rural experiences. This point is further emphasized when examining the view of farm laborers as described in *Beasts of the Field*, about Hispanic farmworkers (Street, 2004).

The main thing about the labor supply is to muelize it.... The supreme qualities of the laborer are that he shall work cheap and hard, eat little and drink nothing, belong to no union, have no ambitions and present no human problems. Particularly, he should appear from nowhere, when we need him, put up with what accommodations he finds, provide his own food, and then disappear...until the busy season comes around again. Some sort of human mule with the hibernating qualities of the bear and the fastidious gastronomic tastes of the goat, would be ideal provided he is cheap enough. (Introduction)

The overwhelming number of White farm owners and operators creates an issue of representation which is not a direct fault of the FFA. The FFA did not pursue policies of discrimination which alienated people of color from agriculture or presented almost insurmountable barriers to farm acquisition (Daniel, 2013; Horst & Marion, 2018; Waddell, 2019). A similar phenomenon has happened in many rural communities in the United States over the past 150 years, notwithstanding rural communities with high levels of Hispanic/Latinx residents in the Southwest. People of color have generally been pushed to more urban centers because of racist policies and actions (Frey, 1979). The FFA is not responsible for these historical actions and yet White FFA members disproportionately benefit from such policies and actions.

The FFA has chosen to maintain elements of their rituals which push ideas and values which are centered on White norms. Students of color, predominantly located in urban and suburban centers cannot identify with work and life on a good farm nor the joys and discomforts of agricultural life. Even students of color in rural areas will probably struggle to find a farmer, rancher, or agriculturalists of color to be their role model. The lack of diversity in agriculture in the United States (not including farm labor) presents a real challenge for the FFA in recruiting students of color.

Moving Forward

The ideals presented by the FFA within their *FFA for All* campaign are important (National FFA Organization, 2020). We believe that the FFA can be a very positive organization for all youth. We argue that the FFA needs to work on increasing representation of engaged and successful non-White people in the FFA and/or agriculture. The challenge with this approach is to avoid tokening non-White experiences (Shim, 2021). The FFA has started to address the complicated events in their past on their website, including the history of women in the FFA (National FFA Organization, 2019) as well as the FFA and NFA merger (National FFA Organization, 2022). The former was

written by Alston and Dexter who are two of the leading researchers on the topic of the NFA. A recent text co-authored by them and Cox (Alston et al., 2022) is a fantastic resource for teachers and students who want to explore the history further. Representation can also be achieved by offering examples within the FFA rituals which affirm of the values and/or contexts of people of color, such as community-centered agriculture and food justice movements. All of the aforementioned work is a great start, and more work is needed to reach the greatest number of diverse students.

While representation is important, we have argued that representation only might not be enough. To reach the ideals within the *FFA for All* campaign, the FFA must find ways to address exclusionary imagery within their traditions and rituals to recruit students of color more effectively. The implicit goal of FFA cannot be to assimilate students of color to Whiteness if the campaign is to be successful. A simple solution at the local chapter level could be to by-pass traditions and rituals which do not cultural fit their students. While this approach may work, it would necessitate the local agriculture teacher and/or FFA advisor being able to adapt FFA activities to their local context. There are few resources for teachers and advisors on how to effectively facilitate cultural modifications. Furthermore, teachers and advisors individually modifying how the FFA is locally implemented does not change the reality that Whiteness remains codified in some FFA traditions and rituals. There will be some who argue that traditions and rituals are important and must be maintained. We will not argue against the general value of tradition but maintaining all traditions for the sake of continuity is itself a form of Whiteness.

Conclusions

We want to reiterate that we were examining the rituals and traditions of the FFA and not the experiences of students in the organization. The local FFA advisor has a lot of freedom to choose which FFA rituals and traditions are conducted at the local level. There may be local FFA advisors who minimize or bypass the elements of the FFA traditions and rituals which cultural form barriers for their FFA members. The process of making a FFA chapter cultural relevant and the impact on FFA members are topics worthy of study. This study focused solely on the rituals and traditions themselves. Furthermore, we identified various ways which Whiteness appears in FFA rituals and traditions. This does not mean the FFA is inherently racist. This study identified elements within in the FFA which emphasize Whiteness and could represent a barrier to some students engaging in the FFA. We also recognize that as of 2022-2023 the National FFA Organization is working with state associations to create individualized state action plans to address equity, diversity, and inclusion issues. We believe the findings and recommendations for change from this study are an important process to the *FFA for All* campaign (National FFA Organization, 2020).

We have outlined numerous ways in which FFA represents Whiteness through its traditions and rituals. This list should not be viewed as exhaustive, as Whiteness can operate in many spaces and take many forms. For example, the FFA-NFA merger has been examined and negative impacts of that event on Black students and teachers documented (Jones et al., 2021; Wakefield & Talbert, 2003). The findings from these studies could be viewed from a Critical Whiteness perspective as well. Furthermore, the wide array of other critical approaches (i.e., Critical Race Theory, Feminism, Indigenous Pedagogy, etc.) and even postmodern approaches (i.e., auto-ethnographic, Foucauldian methods, etc.) should be utilized more often in SBAE research. These are important tools in our research toolbox which can give us a more complete understanding of how power and privilege in SBAE is manifested and hegemony preserved.

Nonetheless, there are things that the FFA can do to be more inclusive and encourage more diversity of teachers, students, and stakeholders within SBAE. Some of these suggestions resemble recommendations that other agricultural education researchers have suggested (Martin & Kitchel 2013; Phelps et al., 2012; Warren & Altson, 2007). First, the FFA must balance tradition with inclusivity and cultural awareness. There should be more of a focus on awards and activities which place the community and group ahead of the individual to reduce meritocracy and to represent cultures in which the community is more important. The historical examples of the lost activities of the NFA could provide some ideas to build upon. The FFA should reconsider traditions and rituals which affirm an ideology of Whiteness and assimilation to Whiteness. For example, instead of just encouraging FFA members to recite the FFA Creed, members should be encouraged to analyze the meaning of the FFA Creed and how they find (or don't find) their identities in that meaning. Students could be encouraged to examine the history of agriculture from a non-White perspective (Bowens, 2015). There could still be a Leadership Development Event (LDE) centered on the FFA Creed, but instead of a memorized a speech, members would speak to how they do or do not see themselves in the FFA Creed or what the FFA Creed means to them. Furthermore, icons within the FFA, such as George Washington as a farmer, should be reconceptualized to be more sensitive to in our national history, and in particular, the history of agriculture.

We acknowledge that some rituals and traditions of the FFA are problematic from a critical perspective and more challenging to solve. The FFA official dress system, which includes the iconic FFA Jacket, represents one such tradition. While not necessarily a function of Whiteness, the critical problems that the rigid FFA official dress policy warrants some discussion. The strict uniformity presented by the FFA official dress suppresses individuality, cultural expression, presents possible economic hardships for FFA members or chapters, as well as issues with access to clothing and the gendering of FFA members. However, we also recognize that the tradition of the FFA official dress is integral to the identity of the FFA. We recommend that agricultural education researchers, FFA stakeholders, FFA advisors, and experts in diversity related topics work to find the best way forward on similar issues.

We opened this manuscript with a call to action for more critical research studies in SBAE. In this time of societal unrest and change the dominate narratives within SBAE and even the broader field of agricultural education must be challenged through critical research approaches or the field will struggle to stay relevant within the larger educational research community. More importantly, ignoring the impact of societal events will have continued implications at the local SBAE level as we will struggle to recruit, retain, and serve teachers and students of color in our highly diverse society.

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