

## Situating Oneself in a Racialized World: Understanding Student Reactions to Crash through Standpoint Theory and Context-Positionality Frames

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### Abstract:

Through a thematic analysis of 136 student reactions to the movie *Crash*, this study examines how individuals situate themselves in terms of race, racism, and race relations in the film and how their racial locations inform this situatedness. We utilize principles of standpoint theories as the theoretical framework for the analysis. We first describe this situatedness in terms of six emergent genres of responses that varied across positionality and contextual focus. Then, we discuss how the patterns of responses may be explained through standpoint theories and conversely how the emergent organizing framework may complement standpoint theories.

Keywords: Race; Racism; Standpoint Theory; Racial Standpoint; *Crash*

### Article:

In the United States, race serves as one of the most powerful lenses through which we experience the world. While little biological difference exists across groups that we commonly understand as distinct races (Graves, 2004), race has considerable material and social implications and consequences in our everyday lives. Advancing a constructionist race theory, Omi and Winant (1994) argued that race is a matter of social structure and human signification sociohistorically formed through multiple racial projects—interpretations, representations, or explanations of racial dynamics. At a macrosocietal level, racial projects function to shape policies and societal meanings, and at a microsocial level, they are adopted as “common sense—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 60). Thus, discursively created racial categories and racial meanings (Hall, 1992) permeate our lives at both structural and personal levels. It significantly mobilizes our perceptions of, and interactions with, others (Orbe & Harris, 2008).

While we all participate in, and are subjected to, racial projects, the racial locations that we occupy necessarily affect our ontological and epistemological orientations in the world. Research on race and communication demonstrates the contrasting ways in which race is understood and experienced by whites and people of color. People of color see their experiences being racialized and thus are different from those of European Americans (Miller & Harris, 2005). European Americans tend to emphasize the universality of human experience (Jackson, Shin, & Hilsen, 2000; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) and believe that racism is largely a historical issue (Simpson, Causey, & Williams, 2007; Warren, 2003; Yep, 2007). This gap makes race dialogue across racial lines difficult; people of color often find that their experiences are discredited by European Americans and are afraid that the subject of race creates animosity among others (Simpson et al., 2007). European Americans fear that they may offend people of color and that they may be considered racist (Simpson et al., 2007); the resulting response is often silence (Miller & Harris, 2005).

Those studies clearly indicate the importance of paying attention to racial locations as a step toward improving race relations (Cooks, 2003; Orbe & Harris, 2008). One framework that champions identity location as the pivotal site for understanding social relations is standpoint theories. Communication scholars (e.g., Allen, 1998; Bell et al., 2000; Harris & Donmoyer, 2000; Orbe & Warren, 2000; Wood, 2005) have shown strong support for

the epistemological importance of standpoint theories. Yet, the theories have not been widely used as a framework for studying race relations. In this paper, we employ standpoint theories as a theoretical lens for inquiring ways in which people understand and interpret race and race relations.

We chose to examine how individuals situate themselves with regard to race and race relations by analyzing short essays that college students wrote in response to the movie *Crash* (Haggis, 2005). We began this project with a premise that audience reactions to films tell much about their subjective, everyday sense-making. In our media saturated culture, we learn how to think about the world through cinematic gaze (Cooper, 2002; Denzin, 1995), thus blurring the boundary between cinematic experience and “real” experience. By organizing and bringing meanings to our lives, films become what Kenneth Burke called “equipment for living.” In this regard, films can influence viewers emotionally and behaviorally and sometimes facilitate their renegotiation of identity (Brummett, 1985; Young, 2000). Particularly for socially charged issues such as race, sex or gender, and class, films provide common sites for diverse audiences to reflect and engage in class discussions (hooks, 1996). As such, student reactions to *Crash* were not simply movie reviews; by telling their gut reactions and personal experiences in response to the film, students situated themselves in discussions about race, racism, and race relations.

### *Synopsis of Crash*

Few movies in recent years engaged race as candidly and unequivocally as *Crash* did. It presented race relations as a complex issue involving the visible and invisible, and conscious and subconscious. It gazed race from many social and cultural locations and how they affect perceptions, interpretations, and actions. Writer and director Paul Haggis wrote the script based on his 28 years of experience in Los Angeles (Ursic, 2005). Haggis commented that the film, though set in Los Angeles, is “about the world around us right now. It’s the fact that we’re moving further and further from each other and we don’t feel safe” (Ursic, 2005, paragraph 13). While the film is fiction, many actors in the film told Haggis how realistic the plots are; they have experienced unsettling episodes and emotions very similar to the ones in the film (Murray, 2006). Without wide advertisements and with limited showings at theatres, this low-budget independent film nonetheless received a number of awards including the Oscar for best motion picture of the year in 2006.

*Crash* begins with a car accident in which a police detective was involved on his way to investigate a murder case. In the background is the voice of the detective, muttering “In L.A... We crash into each other so we can feel something.” This utterance sets the tone for the rest of the film. *Crash* follows a series of collisions—racial, cultural, class, and personal—that occur in Los Angeles over the course of two days prior to the accident. The collisions involve an ensemble of individuals whose lives become intertwined: two young black men who make a living as car thieves; a district attorney who needs to win over minority support and his unhappy wife; a racist white cop who cares for a sick father; a younger white cop who displays every nonracist behavior until the end; a black police detective who has a mother addicted to drugs and a delinquent brother (one of the car thieves); a black television director who made many compromises to succeed in the white dominated Hollywood and his wife who gets molested by the racist cop; a Latino locksmith who changes locks at the district attorney’s house and a Persian’s store; the Persian storeowner who blames the locksmith when his store was vandalized. *Crash* shows collisions of those characters and the stories that lead up to the collisions.

By refusing to fall prey to binarism (e.g., villain –hero, conscious–subconscious, dominant–oppressed) and by creating multilayered interconnectedness among the characters, *Crash* offers a rich site for reflecting on racial dynamics. In this study, we examine how students read the film and how the reading reveals their sense-making about race and race relations. A myriad of meanings may be conveyed by a single film and even a single scene (Brooker, 2001; Young, 2000) depending on the viewer’s background. While all of us are implicated in racial projects, and by extension, racialization, our experience with and perception of the world vary depending on the place of our respective racial groups in the hierarchy of social structure. This is perhaps best explained through standpoint theory.

### *Standpoint Theory*

Standpoint theories grew out of one simple idea; the world looks different depending on your social standing (Allen, 1998). Individuals have similar and different vantage points from which they see the world, and the vantage points are the result of a person's field of experience as defined by social group membership (Collins, 1990). Historically, standpoint theories have been used by scholars to understand how women and men come to see the world differently (Harding, 1986, 1991; Smith, 1987; Wood, 1992). However, given the assumption that societal groups with varying access to institutional power bases have different standpoints, standpoint theories appear to offer a productive framework to link existing interracial communication theory and research to everyday life applications (Orbe & Harris, 2008). As such, the following summary of the theory focused on the social location primarily defined through racial and ethnic group membership.

Standpoint theories are based on several premises. First, social locations—including those based on gender, race, class, and so forth—shape people's lives (Wood, 2005). This idea is grounded in the analysis of the master-slave relationship that realized that each occupied a distinct perspective in terms of their lives (Harding, 1991). All persons, one way or another, are placed into racial or ethnic groups based on the dominant classification systems, which in turn influences how they perceive and come to understand the world around them. The largest difference in such experiences, it is reasoned, is between those racial and ethnic groups that have the most and least societal power (Collins, 1990). In the United States, this means people of color from different racial and ethnic backgrounds have more similar racial locations. European Americans, in comparison, have had greater access to societal power, which has resulted in dominant group status. Based on the arguments of standpoint theorists (Swigonski, 1994), European Americans and U.S. Americans of color have different—even possibly oppositional—understandings of the world.

Second, there is an important distinction between occupying a racial “location” and having a racial “standpoint” (Hallstein, 2000). Everyone has a racial location or a racialized perspective, defined primarily in terms of the racial and ethnic groups to which they belong (or are placed into). However, a racial standpoint is achieved “earned through critical reflections on power relations” (Wood, 2005, p. 61) and through the creation of a political stance that exists in opposition to dominant cultural systems (Collins, 1997). In the U.S. society, the dominant worldview based on European American experience may be a location from which to see the world, but it cannot be a racial standpoint. This distinction between location and standpoint also means that being a person of color does not necessarily guarantee the development of a racial standpoint.

Third, a person can develop multiple standpoints shaped by membership in traditionally marginalized groups (Wood, 2005). Thus, it is possible, for example, that a European American may not have developed a racial standpoint but may have cultivated other standpoints based on his or her membership to groups defined by sex or gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Finally, racial standpoints are not achieved individually; they can only be accomplished through working with other people of color (Hallstein, 2000). In this regard, racial standpoints are fundamentally collective and dialogic constructions.

Racial standpoint, in short, refers to more than social location, experience, or perspective; it encompasses a critical, oppositional understanding of how one's life is shaped by larger social and political forces. Such understanding is only achieved dialogically. To the extent that a person occupies multiple social locations and is placed variously in shifting power relations (Collins, 1997), racial standpoints are also fluid and multiple (Bell et al., 2000). Thus, significant diversity can exist within any particular group (Bell et al., 2000; Collins, 1997). With this understanding of standpoint theories in mind, this study examines how students situate themselves in relation to the film, *Crash*, and how their racial locations inform this situatedness.

### *Methodological Framework*

Participants. Over the course of 18 months (June 2005~October 2006), 136 students provided written descriptions of their perceptions of, and reactions to, *Crash*.<sup>1</sup> These students were enrolled in undergraduate communication classes at three different universities; two in the upper Midwest (one large state university and one mid-sized community college) and one in the Southeast (a mid-sized regional university). Fifty-four participants were from the southeastern campus, 51 from the midwestern university, and 31 from the

midwestern community college. The majority of student participants were enrolled in classes focusing on interracial and intercultural communication, and a smaller percentage were in introductory courses on interpersonal communication. Many students identified their racial backgrounds using identifiers as “African American,” “European Americans,” “black,” “Caucasian,” “white,” and “Latino/a.”<sup>2</sup> Those identifiers, in conjunction with the comments themselves, were used to understand their racial locations.

Collecting student reactions. Over the course of 18 months, student reactions were collected in nine different communication classes: three intercultural communication classes, three interracial communication classes, and three interpersonal communication classes. In all of the intercultural and interpersonal classes, students were given the opportunity to complete an extra credit assignment, and, in the interracial communication classes, the student reactions were incorporated into the course assignments as the first of three required papers.<sup>3</sup> Though the assignments were slightly different, both types of assignments asked students to apply course materials but also provide their own free, “gut” reactions to the movie, including their personal experiences, insights, and reflections.<sup>4</sup> Our analysis focuses on these free, gut reactions, for such reactions are likely to bare a person’s ideas without the constraint of course concepts. All papers were type-written and double-spaced. In total, the 136 participants generated 395 pages of text.

Process of analysis. Following the collection of student reactions, the two authors conducted a preliminary qualitative analysis. Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis method is helpful in identifying prominent meanings in texts, thus was adopted for analyzing the reaction papers (see, e.g., Apker, Propp, & Ford, 2005; Wright & Orbe, 2003). We utilized his three criteria to assist in the emergence of themes. First, we looked for frequent appearances of particular words and phrases (repetition). Second, we recorded how common meanings were communicated via various articulations (recurrence). Third, and finally, we also took note of how certain excerpts were emphasized through different codes (e.g., ALL CAPS), punctuation (!!!! or ???), or format (**bold** or *italics*). Following a review of the preliminary themes generated from the initial analyses, a re-examination of the text was performed and ultimately produced several key organizing principles for understanding diverse student reactions to the film.

### *Key Organizing Principles for Themes: Positionality and Contextual Focus*

The initial review of the text revealed a multitude of potential themes through which we could organize—and gain insight into—the student reactions to *Crash*. For instance, many students described a plethora of emotions in response to the film, including feeling shock, empowered, disturbed, touched, moved, uplifted, disgust, confused, sadness, pride, and anger. Students also implicitly or explicitly commented on the optimism and/or pessimism of the movie, especially in terms of its focus on racial and ethnic prejudices, stereotyping, and/or discrimination. As microlevel points of analysis, all of these descriptions provided keen insight into the emotional and cognitive impact that *Crash* evoked among the students; however, further examination of the text prompted an organizing framework for understanding the multidimensional ways in which participants responded to the film. While we note a variety of responses, there were no noticeable differences across the regions and the universities. We suspect that this may be because students came from similar racial demographic environments (e.g., white majority neighborhood and white majority schools). As the following analysis shows, significant differences are best explained through a recognition of racial locations or standpoints.

In the emergent framework, student reactions to *Crash* varied along two dimensions: positionality and contextual focus. Positionality, in this regard, refers to proximity—attached or detached—with which students viewed, interacted with, and ultimately processed the film. For a group of students, the film reflected a reality that they “could not imagine” or something that was “completely foreign” to them. These student reactions were largely articulated as though they were a detached observer. In contrast, other students positioned themselves as actively involved within the reality that was reflected in the movie. As such, they watched and were engaged by the film “as a participant instead of an observer.” Contextual focus refers to the scope of social interaction in which their comments were directed. Student responses roughly clustered around three levels of scope; some student reactions were articulated with a focus on the personal issues, some concentrated around racial issues,

and yet others addressed societal issues. Along the two dimensions, therefore, six primarily groupings of responses emerged (see Table A1 in Appendix). These six groups of responses are not meant to be rigid; within the essays, the authors sometimes used a personal voice and other times adopted a generic voice. Similarly, attachment and detachment sometimes coexisted within an essay. Nevertheless, most essays clearly had a dominant tone along the two dimensions. In the next section, using the six frames, we discuss how students situated themselves in response to the race relations and racism portrayed in the film. Then, we provide our assessment of how standpoint theories provide insights into understanding the situated responses.

### **Personal/Detached Reactions: Unnamed Privileged Sense of “Them”**

We use “Unnamed Privileged Sense of ‘Them’” to describe student reactions that were situated within a personal/detached frame. Notably, this group of reactions was all authored by European American students. The reactions were first marked by detachment from the ways in which racial relations were depicted in the film. For some, this was based on the fact that they reportedly had no to little exposure to racial conflicts: “The first time I saw it, I remember feeling sad and disgusted at the end, but still sort of detached. I didn’t grow up in an area where racist hatred was apparent, nor do I live in one now.” Accordingly, when witnessing blatant acts of racial discrimination, they struggled to believe “that those sorts of things actually happened.” One European American student from the Midwest wrote:

For me, personally, a lot of things in this movie were unfamiliar to me. I grew up in a fairly small neighborhood, which was not very culturally diverse, to say the least ... It was sort of hard to believe that things like the events in the movie actually happens.

In fact, several students described being “amazed,” “shocked,” and “naive” in regard to the realities of racism. “I can not believe how mean the human race is to one another,” wrote one student. Such a perspective involved a personalization of the movie, but it was done so through a distant -“I can only imagine”- positionality. The result was a more “passive” reaction to the movie.

Other students were not able to identify with the film because it was perceived as “over the top” in terms of exaggerating the realities of racism. A European American male from the South was absent on the day the film was scheduled and wrote in his reaction paper that he started watching the film at home before but could not finish it because it was “too harsh.” Similarly, another student from the same school, a European American female, wrote:

Personally, I didn’t like the movie Crash. I went to the movies to see it when it came out, and it is the only movie that I have ever walked out of ... I hated Crash.... It was just too depressing for me. It was also so extreme. I know that racism definitely exists, but I’m not convinced that it is as extreme as Crash tried to make it out to be.

Along with these two students, a significant number of students believed that the film “took things to the extreme in order to dramatize” contemporary life. What was noticeable about this group of comments is that the authors provided strong personal opinions objecting the extent to which the film portrayed racism without offering specific counter-testimonies; the arguments remained abstract.

In addition to these comments, yet another group of students argued that the racism portrayed in the film was the result of personal choices, and not of systemic discrimination. For example, a European American male from the South commented on how the two young African American males in the movie were to blame for the ways that others stereotyped them:

Looks are important; it is kind of a first line of defense, if you wish to be treated like a common citizen then dress like a common citizen. If you constantly walk around bitching about how you are discriminated against then that is what you will notice. Anytime you are chosen second in your mind it will be because of your race. If everything you do is to be different and stand out from the rest of common society then that is what everyone else notices. If you look like a criminal then you will be assumed a criminal, until you show otherwise. It is not about race. In reality, you look like by dress and actions a criminal, but you chose your clothes and your actions. Deal with it, but don’t whine about it especially when someone called your “game.” ... Sandra had all rights to make her request in her fragile state. It is not just about race. If a white man had done the job and had the same distinguishing features then she would have been just as skeptical.

Crash featured not only these young African American males who made their living as car thieves but also an affluent African American couple, who dressed elegantly and drove an expensive car, being subjected to racist encounters. The student who wrote the above reaction, however, chose to ignore this part of the film. In sum, the student reactions in this personal/detached frame included both naive, passive reactions as well as active denials of racism. The reactions were personal in that the students responded to the film as a person and/or saw racial discrimination as an individual issue. The reactions were detached because they were unable to see the film as a realistic representation of race relations and racial dynamics.

### **Personal/Attached Reactions: Colorblind Individualized “I”**

Although both are situated within a personal contextual focus, student reactions reflecting a “Colorblind Individualized ‘I’” frame are distinguished from those reflective of a “Unnamed Privileged Sense of ‘Them’” based on their attached positionality. The students writing from this perspective identified with various characters in the film in meaningful ways—regardless of race, gender, class or other aspects of identity. In particular, the reactions centered around personal characteristics that were viewed as transcending any cultural differences. As such, reactions were reflective of the idea that “there’s a character for everyone in Crash” \*all people “are able to relate to it.” This ability to relate to the humanity of all characters was a frequent source of comments, including those from one midwestern European American woman:

The characters were so versatile because no matter what background the character was from you could see yourself in their shoes. Even if the character was a black male, I as a white female had been in their shoes at least once in my life. This provides us with a powerful thought that we are all similar.

Concentrating on similarities among humankind allowed many students to personally identify with characters who experienced various life issues. Another European American woman from a southeastern state wrote about how the film continued to impact her beyond the classroom viewing and discussion. She shared:

I was going down XXXX Road and came upon [an] intersection [where] there was an exact replica of the wreck that had take place in the movie. This put it into perspective for me that it could happen anywhere and anytime. I was shocked and immediately began to replay the images of that movie in my head. By the time I got to my apartment, after being rerouted by traffic, I was in tears! I had no idea that this movie would so profoundly affect me in so many different ways. I don’t know how to feel about it at this point and am certainly trying to continue to make sense of it. I do know, however, that I have tried to be more conscientious of how I speak to and treat other people. I am sure that as a human being, I too have personal biases and even though I am aware of some, others may be more well hidden. This movie has made me examine all of those things on a more personal level.

Note that within this excerpt, the student approaches the issue “as a human being” concerned with “personal biases.” This was characteristic of the reactions written from a personal/attached perspective; student reactions centered on personal, common issues and personal reflections despite that the film explicitly addressed issues related to race and racism. Such was the case with another female student whose comments revolved around respect:

The movie is so powerful it makes me look at how I react in situations now. It makes me ask myself if I am one of the characters I have seen in the movie. The answer is yes. I do believe that I do become uncomfortable around people, of not just a different race, but any difference they have from me. Since seeing the movie many times, I now look at myself more; I try to make sure that I am not doing hurtful things to anybody ... I want to be treated fairly, and I want to treat others fairly too. I think that every person should be treated with respect. They should be looked at as an individual and not as a group. If every person is seen as a group then that is how stereotypes are born.

Like the Unnamed Privileged Sense of “Them,” the reactions situated within this frame were authored by European American students except for a couple of African American students who emphasized the importance of judging people individually. Overall, the student reactions that were both personal and attached personalized the experiences of the characters and provided self-examinations. However, they failed to racialize the characters’ experiences and were unable to address issues of race despite the obvious racial conflicts and racism in the film.

### **Racial/Detached Reactions: Innocent “I”/Responsible “Them”**

My parents are completely against racism, although they never made a point to talk about it, for the same reasons I have never made a point to talk about it, for the same reasons I had never thought about it.... I grew up privileged, in a place that didn't have any racism really... [Referring to all of the hate and distrust in the movie] This really struck me, because it just made me realize how stupid and utterly idiotic racism truly is.

While many student writings reflected various levels of personal reactions to the film, others were situated within one's racial identity. The quote above, authored by a European American man from the Midwest, captures the essence of the Innocent “I”/ Responsible “Them” positionality. Reactions characterized as such reflect comments that are situated as both racial and detached. Many of the comments from this perspective were from students who explicitly self-identified as “white middle class.” In contrast to the reactions that processed *Crash* in personal terms, this group of responses focused on the conflicts and discrimination at a racial level. Moreover, unlike Unnamed Privileged Sense of “Them,” these reactions acknowledged how their racial location—in all cases, European American - “sheltered” them from noticing racism. For instance, a European American man in the Midwest commented that “I, a product of middle class white suburbia, could not believe such racism existed.” Another European American man in the South wrote that “I was naive that this kind of discrimination still went on. It's obvious to me now that minorities living in our society, continue to deal with discrimination even today.” Thus, now that the film and subsequent class discussions brought it to their attention, they “felt for” nonwhites.

Despite the acceptance of racism as a problem and the influence of their “white middle class” on the way they view the world, the reflections written from the Innocent “I”/Responsible “Them” perspective remained detached. The reaction by a European American woman living in the South illustrates this detachment:

In watching the film I myself had to stare at my own racial baggage in the face. I grew up in XXX.... We don't have too much black and white baggage. However, there is a huge tension between whites and Hispanics. Most of the people that you encounter in XXX are like Ryan Phillippe's character, they are racists but not on the surface. There is distrust of the “Mexicans” and a certain disdain for them about taking away jobs and things like that. It is difficult for me to go back home now and hear my family talking about Mexicans, there is so much that they don't know.

In this quote, the student began her reaction by saying that she has “racial baggage.” However, she did not pursue this reflection and instead quickly pointed out covert racism that exists among whites in her home state. The student in the above quote, along with many others in the racial/detached frame, admitted that their racial location is privileged, yet, instead of seeing themselves as implicated in the system of racial inequalities, they situated themselves outside racism. Shome (2000) argued that a variety of individualized rhetoric white persons use to deny white privilege “deflect” attention from racism. Such deflection is also possible when individuals acknowledge their group-based privileges but position themselves as different or better (e.g., enlightened) than the rest of the group.

### **Racial/Attached: Racialized “I”/“Us”**

We utilize “Racialized ‘I’/‘Us’” to characterize student reactions that reflected an attached/racial positionality. The vast majority of students who wrote from this perspective were students of color. The students articulated their identification with different scenes within the film, specifically those in which characters were the targets of racial prejudice or discrimination. One Latina woman living in the Midwest, for example, wrote that “Although I would like to think that most people don't look at you and automatically see the color of your skin, more and more, I feel that they do.” Such a conclusion grounded in lived experience often leads individuals to be conscious about how they interact with others. An Asian American student from the South commented that “Since I am someone that belongs to a culture that is different from that of the dominant white culture, I have always learned that I should not stereotype and discriminate against other people that are outside of my culture.”

Several African American students focused on “how real the scenarios were,” “how [they] could totally relate to it,” and how they weren't “surprised at what was in it.” For these students, many of the scenes that were

shocking to others reminded them of real-life scenarios that they had experienced first-hand. This point is effectively captured by the words of one African American man from a southeastern state who began his essay by simply writing: “I felt like I was in the movie.” This strong, often times intense, identification with several characters was illustrated through a vast array of essays. More often than not, students reflected specifically on the opening scene, as exemplified by these two excerpts:

The scene when Luda and Lorenz were leaving the restaurant and Luda makes a remark about being the only blacks in a sea of whites and how they should feel unsafe. I can totally relate to that comment. There has been numerous times when I have been the only black person among many white people. Needless to say, I felt uncomfortable. [African American woman, midwestern state]

When Ludacris was walking outside and the white woman clutched her husband as they passed is something that I go through all the time when it’s dark at night. I guess that white women feel scared when they see a black man walking their way late at night. [African American man, southeastern state]

These two individuals, along with many African American student authors, referred to this scene to articulate the parallel between the film and their “reality.” Their racial locations allowed them to identify intensely with the character, while such identification is difficult for European American persons.<sup>5</sup>

While many students of color wrote about being the targets of racism, a few African American students also commented on how they themselves are also perpetrators of racism. For example, a student brought up the scene where a young African American car thief mistakenly carjacks an African American television director, not realizing that the driver was also an African American. The director confronts the thief by saying: “You embarrass me. You embarrass yourself.” In response to this scene, the student pointed out complicity within the African American community and importance of moving away from it:

I know many people who dumb themselves down because they think that excelling in school or speaking correctly is a white thing, and that is a disgrace. We as black people should be ashamed of ourselves when we equate success to acting white. We need to lift our fellow black people up and be proud of our educated brothers and sisters.

A few European American student reactions were also situated in a racial/attached positionality. The students reflected on their privileged racial location and noted that the privilege served as a blinder. A female student from the South commented, for example: “I was raised to believe that all people are equal.... I am starting to realize that my naivete was not just me loving everyone. I was able to ignore racial problems that exist everywhere.” A few European American students also acknowledged how they saw themselves within several of the characters. For example, a female student in the Midwest expressed that she identified with the district attorney’s wife who, in one scene, displayed a blatant prejudice against a Latino locksmith who changed her house lock:

I suppose the movie is so shocking because it’s something we experience everyday but don’t see the consequences so drastically displayed in a two hour time span ... I am ashamed to admit that like Sandra Bullock, I too sometimes judge minorities without even blinking an eye.

Similarly, the following European American student from the South expressed strong identification with a white character in the film:

Personally, I associated most with the character that had the farthest fall from grace, the police officer played by Ryan Phillippe. I am somewhat of an idealist but I recognize that I do have some preconceived notions about the cultures of others. In the film Ryan Phillippe’s character tries throughout the movie to do things to convince himself that he doesn’t hold any prejudices. He picked up a black man when no one else would, and he keeps that director from getting in trouble.... The one person who the viewers are led to believe may be free from prejudice ends up doing the worst thing in killing someone.... To me this tells the viewers that we have to address our stereotypes before we allow them to go too far. If we leave them unchecked then we’ll never resolve our issues.

For these European American students, the movie forced them to confront their own racial biases that they did not think they had. This was unsettling for some as reflected in the following comment by a female student from the South:



I was challenged and uncomfortable and I hated that I recognized many aspects of myself in several different characters.... I could see through the characters, the private racist thoughts that I would never admit to thinking, but of course I do. I could see how those thoughts affected actions later on in the storyline and how dangerous it is.

In contrast to the reactions in the Innocent “I”/Responsible “Them,” the students here did not see racism as attitudes held by other whites; they saw themselves as the owners of such attitudes.

Yet, a couple of other European American students also pointed out the importance of fighting racism because their friends, who are persons of color, have been the victims of racism. These comments reflected the authors’ understanding of their privileges as well as their role in the oppressive power relations. After describing his racial and gender privileges, one student shared:

I remember driving to work with my friend XXX who is black and being pulled over by a cop. The cop immediately made us get out of the car and put our hands on the hood while they searched us. Then the cop asked me to search my car. I had been pulled over eight to ten times before this incident but was never even asked to get out of the car. The more I relate these subplots from the movie to my life, the more I see racism in our society today.... You cannot simply watch this movie. You feel for the characters and begin to feel your own implication in the racist society that the movie portrays.

Overall, in the racial/attached frame, students related closely to the film and saw themselves as racialized subjects as active participants in racism. Not only did the students acknowledge their roles in the system but, as shown in the quotes above, they also consistently pointed out often unseen \*but real—implications of their behaviors in the interconnected world.

### **Societal/Detached: Social “They”**

Thus far we have described how student reactions reflected personal and racial perspectives—both detached and attached—of the film, *Crash*. In these final two sections, we describe how responses also were steeped in societal perspectives. Comments grounded within the “Social ‘They’” described racism and related issues as those relevant to “others” generally, or “some people” and “people” more specifically. In some cases within this framing, student reactions simply provided general commentary:

Overall this movie was a powerful statement about racism in one city, in one state, in one nation, of a much bigger world. It shed light on an ongoing problem that needs a solution. It suggests that one needs to learn the importance of others for themselves and until they do they will continue to be racist.

I thought the movie did an excellent job portraying the me-versus-the-world mentality many individuals have in today’s society.

Other examples of Social “They” made the case that racism was “pervasive” throughout society, but not an issue for them specifically. For instance, one student wrote:

Skin color has always been irrelevant to me, and cultural differences have never meant more than something new and interesting to learn about someone. I have never been able to comprehend why people treat each other the way they do when it is all so unnecessary.

Racism, in turn, was described as an issue for those who were “ignorant” to others:

The racial stereotypes that have been adapted by society are ignorant and continue to further fuel racial tension. *Crash* shows how blinding prejudice can be; often the characters are not purposely trying to be racist, they are simply ignorant to the facts.

For many of the students whose reactions were primarily situated within this positional frame, racism was regarded as a larger-than-life issue. For instance, students described racism as “sunk deeply into society” and something that “will always plague society.” Another student wrote that: “Racism is everywhere and I have always felt that there is nothing that can be done to really change people’s minds.”

In sum, in all of these descriptions from the Social “They” positionality, the student authors recognized racism as a societal issue with which people should be concerned. However, they did not see the issue as relevant to themselves and did not reflect how they were implicated in racial projects.

### **Societal/Attached: Social “We”**

In contrast to the “Social ‘They’” that described racism as something that others need to work on, the perspective that we characterize as “Social ‘We’” included comments from students who described the world as “our society.” This frame thus utilized language owning racism and related issues as part of their world; this was true for both European Americans and people of color. Upon reflecting on all of the different scenes within the film, many students appeared to take several things to heart. This included, as one student described, “looking at this movie and taking a deeper lesson away from it.” While a racialized positionality would have named racism specifically, those characterized as Social “We,” oftentimes did not explicitly name it as such.

Instead, references were typically made to societal challenges that “we all” need to face and work on. This is illustrated in the following comment by a biracial woman:

I think we have so much work ahead of us it is overwhelming, but if we don't try to help, then we have no right to complain. I think Crash just really showed people that we have a lot of work ahead of us. Because the movie was so diverse hopefully a diverse crowd watched it and it made a difference in a lot of lives.

When racism was explicitly named, the Social “We” perspective did not address it as a personal or racial issue. Instead, racism was described as a societal problem— something “we have to work on.” A European American man wrote:

Like many people who haven't seen this movie, I believed before I watched it that I was for the most part not racist. However, just like many others I found myself laughing at the racially charged jokes in the film. This did open my eyes, no matter how much I think that I am past race, there are still shades of it almost engrained in all of us. This is a issue larger than just me.

Recognizing one's role in tackling the societal problems, several students in this group also described what they are planning to do or what they began to do. For example, one European American woman in the South wrote that she immediately bought the movie after it was shown in class and had her parents watch it with her so they could talk about the issues presented in the film.

In short, the students in this group included reflexive analysis of their own behaviors and attitudes but connected them to the larger society. In this regard, reactions grounded in a societal/attached perspective see the problems highlighted in the film—racial stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and cultural misunderstanding—as social problems that they need to actively work on.

### *Complementing Standpoint Theories with the Context-Positionality Framework*

As demonstrated throughout this essay, a thematic analysis of the student essays allowed us to understand diverse student responses to Crash. As anticipated, the vast majority of students, regardless of the region, race, gender, and other backgrounds, described the powerful ways in which Crash impacted upon them and articulated how the film prompted them to reflect on race relations in the U.S. What we did not expect were the ways in which the reactions were situated along two dimensions: positionality and contextual focus. Along these lines, we came to understand student reactions as personal/detached (Unnamed Privileged Sense of “Them”), personal/ attached (Color-Blind Individualized “I”), racial/detached (Innocent “I”/Responsible “Them”), racial/attached (Racialized “I”/“Us”), societal/detached (Social “They”), and societal/attached (Social “We”).

Throughout our organizing of student reactions along the six frames, we began to see several patterns of situatedness, which we believe are best understood through standpoint theory. First, without an exception, the “detached” perspectives, regardless of the contextual focus, were authored by European American students. In the personal/detached frame, the students not only universalized their viewpoints (Jackson et al., 2000;

Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) but remained detached from the film, being unable to (or unwilling to) imagine that people of color may indeed experience systemic racism as depicted in the film. As some students did, they could literally walk away from it. In the racial/detached frame, the authors expressed their concerns about racism and recognized that they have “white middle class” privileges. The privileged location, however, was not examined, and they located themselves outside racism and racial relations, leaving the issue of race as the problems of other European Americans who, unlike themselves, are racially prejudiced. Similarly, the essays written from the societal/detached perspective construed racism as a societal problem that someone else needs to tackle. This pattern of detachment necessarily reflects their dominant racial location in the U.S. society; it failed to address their role in the problem. The European American students in the study may come from diverse backgrounds based on class, gender, and other cultural and social locations. Nevertheless, as standpoint theories posit, European Americans share race-based group experience (Collins, 1997; Hallstein, 2000); they shared similar interpretations of and reactions to the film, reflecting their racial location.

In addition to the detached perspectives, the personal/attached positionality was predominantly inhabited by European American students. The students passionately explained the impact the film had on them. Their essays were plenteous with reflections as individuals as well as what needs to be done on personal levels. Their privileged racial locations facilitated a focus on commonalities and identification as “human beings.” On the other hand, the racial/attached positionality was mostly expressed by people of color that included African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and biracial/multiracial U.S. Americans. All but a few students of color strongly related to the film, describing their racial and racist experiences similar to the scenes shown in the film. These seemingly oppositional responses based on dominant/non-dominant group lines (Swigonski, 1994) provide a strong support for standpoint theories. Seeing through this theoretical lens, it is no surprise that students of color related to the film in racial terms. Likewise, it is difficult for European American students to see that claims such as treating each other as “human beings” and “persons” reflect their privileged racial locations (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Tierney & Jackson, 2002; Warren, 2003) void of avowal as a racialized subject.

Standpoint theorists caution us, however, that social/cultural locations and standpoints are not the same thing (Hallstein, 2000; Wood, 2005). Almost all students of color saw themselves as racialized subjects, particularly in terms of being subjected to racial discrimination and stereotypes. However, only a few of them included language indicating their political consciousness (Collins, 1997). One of these few students was an African American male mentioned in the analysis of “Racialized ‘I’/‘Us’”; he resisted the dominant view—which was internalized by many African Americans—that getting education and using the correct grammar is a “white thing” and called for the need to be proud of those practices as belonging to African Americans. Addressing such internalization and complicity and struggling for oppositional views are important for the development of a standpoint. Most students of color had important experiences to share, but few indicated that they have developed a racial standpoint. That is, political consciousness necessary for challenging unequal power relations has not been cultivated.

As standpoint theories postulate, persons belonging to dominant groups may not develop racial standpoints but can cultivate informed racial locations if, and when, they can critically reflect on and resist the dominant worldview and work to create an oppositional stance (Wood, 2005). While most European American students dissociated themselves from the film altogether or situated themselves outside racism, a few students showed hints of self-reflexive critique - an important step toward resisting the dominant perspective. As one student noted, they seem to realize their “own implication in the racist society that the movie portrays.”

As described above, standpoint theories serve as a productive lens for understanding ways in which students of various racial groups positioned themselves in relation to social and racial issues. It also provides motivational contexts for the racially diverse inclinations and aversions. Such understanding is imperative for improving interracial relations. Research on interracial communication points out the difficulties of engaging in race talk between European Americans and people of color due to the gaps of knowledge and experience (Warren, 2003; Yep, 2007) and accompanying emotional strains such as fear, defensiveness, and weariness (Miller & Harris,

2005; Simpson et al., 2007). Research also emphasizes the importance of developing awareness of our own racial location (Allen, 1998; Cooks, 2003; Orbe & Harris, 2008; Yep, 2007). Standpoint theories encourage us to recognize the racial location each of us occupies in the hierarchically racialized society and to examine why the gaps exist. Potentially then, the theories help us to approach race relations without being hindered by toxic individuation of racial antagonism (i.e., racism is no more than the acts of racist individuals), while at the same time urging us to own the racial location into which we are interpellated. The subject of race is then engaged not either as a societal or an individual matter but as existing in the structural-personal dialectics (Halualani, Fassett, Morrison, & Dodge, 2006).

What is critically important toward this dialectical framework is understanding where we might be in our consciousness of, and approach to, race and race relations. While standpoint theories stress that there is considerable diversity within a racial group due to the fluidity and multiplicity of racial standpoints (Bell et al., 2000; Collins, 1997), the theories remain abstract as to what diversity may exist. This vagueness may have limited the applicability of the theories. We believe that the organizing framework that emerged from this study complements standpoint theories by providing a tool for assessing “where we are” in our situatedness with regard to race. While the six genres captured the essence of the student reactions to the film, on a larger scale, we suspect that they also reflect some of the primary ways that people across the United States understand racism and race relations. For example, the predominant tendency to view racism as an obsolete ideology (Giroux, 2003) or racial groups as simply cultural groups with essential—as opposed to constructed—differences (Kim, 2004) parallel the student reactions in this study.

Our organizing framework is by no means the only mapping tool, nor is it a fully developed one. However, it provides a template or a starting point for assessing our situatedness. Used together with standpoint theories, the framework helps to show diverse ways in which we situate ourselves with regard to race and race relations. Two individuals from the same racial group may acknowledge their racial location, but they may be different in their positionality and contextual focus. For example, as our analysis showed, two European American persons may agree that they have white privileges, but one may see racial inequalities as his or her problem while the other sees them as the society’s, not theirs. Similarly, as we discussed, most people of color see themselves as racialized subjects, but they may not see their racial standpoints/ locations from a societal frame. These differences in positionality and contextual focus engage us very differently with race relations.

The framework also allows us to visualize how our positionality and contextual frame may shift depending on given issues. For example, we may hold an attached, racialized perspective on a certain issue involving race relations, but we may see another issue from a detached, personalized perspective. Such visualizations help us to see not simply the complexity of race but also the points of divergence and convergence with others. Ultimately, we believe that race and racial relations must be seen from attached positionalities and with personal, racial, and societal foci. When we operate from a detached perspective, we are not likely to develop a racial standpoint. Similarly, if we only see problems arising from unequal power relations as personal matters, a racial standpoint is not likely to be cultivated. While most of the student reactions in our study were framed primarily within one perspective, a select few, like the following student, did reflect the type of multifocal perspective that we advocate here:

Each time I have finished watching the film *Crash* it makes me look at myself and the way that I interact with others. It allows me to see how my “racial baggage” affects my interactions with others in my life. The fact is we all have to share the same “homes” with one another. We all as a community, and as a country, need to focus on how to understand one another in great detail and how to communicate with one another more effectively.

As this student aptly points out, we need to engage racial others and critically reflect on our values, ideologies, assumptions and recognize their limitations. In doing so, we must be conscious of not only our racialized locations but also how we and others are simultaneously situated within personal, racial, and societal contexts.

## *Notes*

- [1] In seven of the classes, the film was shown in two consecutive classes. In the two remaining classes, the film was not shown in class, but students were required to view it on their own time outside of class.
- [2] Most students provided such self-identifiers in their reaction papers. Others who did not provide any racial or ethnic labels in their papers shared such information in other written assignments or class discussions during the semester. This approach was modeled after similar work by Harris and Miller (2004).
- [3] In all cases, the assignments aimed to enhance the students' pedagogical goal for the courses. That is, we did not give the assignments simply to collect the student responses to the film; the assignments were an integral part of the student learning of the course material in that they provided a method for students to reflect outside of the limitations of class time. To receive the credits, the students identified their names in the papers. Methodologically, this lack of anonymity may be seen as posing a threat to the authenticity of student responses. While we recognize the possibility of credibility threat of this nature, we believe that the students provided candid responses to the film. Upon giving the assignments, we stressed that we were interested in their honest reactions and that they were not graded for their evaluation of the film. Moreover, the responses were indeed diverse; if the students felt that they were pressured to answer in certain ways, we would have seen more uniformity.
- [4] We could have asked the students to analyze the film critically in response to a set of questions about race and race relations. However, we chose to ask students to give us their unimpeded reactions because we believe that such reactions will tell us more about how the students situate themselves in their world than a uniform analysis paper can. In the interracial communication classes, students were introduced to standpoint theory, but standpoint theories do not assume that individuals understand the theories. That is, regardless of whether we know the theory or not, we will read our social world (in this case, the film) from our racial locations. If the knowledge of the theory affected the students' reading of the film, we would have seen such differences reflected in their responses.
- [5] Few European Americans commented on the opening scene. When they did, their reading of the scene was different. For example, the difference was seen in the contrasting way the European American male student mentioned earlier responded to the same scene. They both raised the issue of fear, but the African American writers felt that it was the African Americans who should fear because they were the minorities while the European American student felt that the European American characters were entitled to fear the African American characters because they look like criminals.

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*Appendix*

**Table A1** Organizing Framework for Student Reactions

Contextual Focus	Positionality	
	Attached	Detached
Personal	Color-Blind Individualized “I”	Unnamed Privileged Sense of “Them”
Racial	Racialized “I”/“Us”	Innocent “I”/Responsible “Them”
Societal	Social “We”	Social “They”