

MATIAS'S *FEELING WHITE*, LENSIRE'S *WHITE FOLKS*, AND SLEETER'S *THE INHERITANCE*:  
CRITICAL REVIEW ESSAY ON THREE NEW BOOKS AND THEIR  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO WHITE TEACHER IDENTITY STUDIES

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*Feeling White: Whiteness, Emotionality, and Education*

Cheryl E. Matias / SensePublishers / 2016

*White Folks: Race and Identity in Rural America*

Timothy J. Lensmire / Routledge / 2017

*The Inheritance*

Christine Sleeter / Self Published on Amazon / 2018

In this critical review essay, I provide an intellectual history of the developing field of White Teacher Identity Studies (WTIS) and situate the contributions of Cheryl Matias's (2016) *Feeling White*, Tim Lensmire's (2017) *White Folks*, and Christine Sleeter's *The Inheritance* (2018) within that field. Regarding WTIS, I provide an account of the longer intellectual histories I have provided in other publications, while staying focused on the importance of the field for teacher educators, teacher education, and ultimately, the racial conscientization of White teachers. Regarding the three books, I recognize that their contributions overlap with each other but emphasize the emblematic contribution of each book: Matias's White emotionality, Lensmire's White ambivalence, and Sleeter's White identity learning. In my discussion and conclusion, I bring the three books' contributions together in re-imagining the field of WTIS for teacher education and teacher educators and, more broadly, consider the importance of these books to the field of critical White studies (CWS), WTIS' so-called "parent" field, and within the broader arc of decolonizing theory and practice.

### Twenty-Five Years of WTIS

I begin by briefly tracing the intellectual history of WTIS, emphasizing a shift toward whiteness pedagogies that took place around 2003. My colleagues and I have provided more detailed accounts of WTIS in other publications for interested graduate students and researchers (Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire, 2016; Jupp, Leckie, Cabrera, and Utt, in press). As a field, WTIS emerged from African American scholars' theorizing White identities within African-American, African-Caribbean, and pan-African intellectual traditions. Scholars such as Fredrick Douglass, Ida B. Wells Barnett, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Carter Woodson, C. L. R. James, James Baldwin, and Malcom X provided the broad social-historical understandings of race and White identities that provided the horizon of intelligibility for fields like WTIS to exist in the first place, and these historical resources require recognition and continued reading and engagement. I will return to the centrality of the new/old aspect of the historical archive on whiteness and White identities in the discussion and conclusion of this essay.

Within this horizon of intelligibility, we can begin to approach WTIDS as part of the move toward emancipatory social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century (Wallerstein, 1992/2007, 2004). Specifically, the civil rights, anti-war, feminist, gay, and student movements emblematic of 1968 created a renewed international intellectual foment, emphasizing the politics of knowledge that denounced social sciences' previous Malthusian, bureaucratic, and managerial roles within liberal welfare states and instead pushed toward unfinished emancipatory knowledge projects that continue to challenge social science researchers. In Anglophone terrains, emancipatory social sciences emerged especially in ethnic, cultural, gender, and critical legal studies fields, among others. New left content from those new areas infiltrated many fields that had previously provided direction to administrative and bureaucratic efforts. As part of the intellectual foment, Apple (1979), Banks (1981), Giroux (1985), Miller (1982), Pinar (1975), Grant (1975), Grant and Sleeter (1985) and many others emphasized this new left content in education, including the fields of curriculum theory, curriculum and instruction, and teacher education. In the 1980s and 1990s, multicultural education emerged as a codified institutional response within teacher education which, in turn, provided one opening for the CWS scholarship of Scheurich (1993, 2002) and Sleeter (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 2001) to present resounding race-based critiques of education research, teacher education, and White teachers.

In my reading, it is Sleeter who variously, emphatically, and persistently “invents,” “hatches,” and then “advances” WTIS at a time when no such field existed. Sleeter, along with other CWS and WTIS scholars, created an analytical vocabulary of White teachers’ race resistance (1992), race-evasion (1993), and racialized silences (1994). After a decade of work in WTIS, Sleeter (2001) emphasized the often-cited notion of the overwhelming presence of whiteness in teacher education that remains as relevant today as it was back then. It is no accident that Sleeter’s (2018) *The Inheritance* is reviewed here, as she differs significantly from other critical scholars and pedagogues who engaged in WTIS through CWS and then later dropped the line of research (e.g., Fine, Weis, Powell, & Mun Wong, 1997; Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe, 1999; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 1999). Sleeter, along with Matias and Lensmire, have provided consistent contributions to WTIS over time, even after CWS faded as cultural studies’ ostensibly new “hot topic” of the 1990s. Each of these three scholars has demonstrated commitment to WTIS beyond the particular debility of cultural studies’ trendiness, and this commitment is reflected in the quality of the three books I selected to review here, all of which I unequivocally recommend for purchase.

Sleeter’s early work in the field is emblematic of the first decade of WTIS, which articulated White teachers’ racism, race-evasion, and resistance to racialized understandings of themselves or their students. After a decade in which the field pursued these analytic directions (Jupp et al., 2016), several (now senior but then) rising scholars in the study of race in education challenged WTIS to move beyond over-simple understandings of White identity (e.g., Asher, 2007, Leonardo, 2002; McCarthy, 2003). By the mid 2000s, these scholars urged WTIS to take on particular social-historical instantiations of White identity (McCarthy, 2003), new analytics beyond White privilege (Leonardo, 2002), and questions of identity complexity in educating teachers (Asher, 2007). In particular, Marx’s (2003) special issue of *Qualitative Studies in Education* became emblematic both of the frustration with (Thompson, 2003) and the critique of (McCarthy, 2003) WTIS as a field.

Despite these frustrations and critiques, Marx’s special issue also provided new directions in WTIS on whiteness pedagogy (Marx & Pennington, 2003) that have now become the center of WTIS research. Overall, Julie Pennington’s research, both by herself and with others (Marx & Pennington, 2003; Pennington, 2007; Pennington & Brock, 2012), exemplifies WTIS in transition between denouncing White teachers’ privilege and resistance toward commitments to *both* (a) denouncing White privilege and resistance *and* (b) studying whiteness pedagogies that might further advance

Whites' racial conscientization. In several places, my colleagues and I have called this shift second-wave WTIS, or second-wave whiteness pedagogies (e.g., Berchini, 2016; Boucher, 2016; Crowley, 2016; Flynn, 2015; Lensmire, 2011, 2014; Mason, 2016; Miller, 2017; Tanner, 2016, 2017; Shim, 2018, in press). The books reviewed here, by advancing notions of White emotionality, White ambivalence, and White identity learning, exemplify the developing field of WTIS, a field which currently insists on calling out whiteness and White racism in teacher education, yet also drives relentlessly at articulating the always problematic and necessarily reflexive work of whiteness pedagogies.

### Three New Books

I will now characterize the three books by providing an overview of each book's contributions and then exploring one emblematic chapter or section from each book. Following the order of publication year, I will begin with Matias's (2016) *Feeling White*, move on to Lenmire's (2017) *White Folks*, and finish with Sleeter's (2018) *The Inheritance*.

Cheryl Matias's (2016) *Feeling White* pushes WTIS forward by seizing on and articulating new directions in White emotionality and social psychoanalysis. From a working class background in Los Angeles, Matias is a motherscholar of Color who labors toward the racial conscientization of (predominantly) White preservice and in-service teachers in the urban teacher education and graduate studies programs at the University of Colorado Denver (UC Denver), where she teaches the "diversity class." Forged during her public school teaching in South LA and New York City, Matias's series of autobiographical essays depicts White emotionality intertwined with social-psychoanalytic and pedagogical concepts, infusing critical resources needed to advance whiteness pedagogies in the present moment, including Freud, Fromm, bell hooks, Fanon, Thandeka, Cheng and others. Conceptualized through data gathered in her teaching and her experiences as teacher and researcher, Matias explores the dangerous minds of White teachers, her racialized trauma as motherscholar of Color, the racialized disgust behind White teachers' "caring," Fromm's notions of capitalistic sadomasochism and whiteness, White narcissisms, racial fetishes in education, White grief and melancholia, and other social-psychoanalytic concepts that clearly push WTIS in new directions. Understood through her positionality as motherscholar of Color within whiteness's overwhelming presence in teacher education, her psychoanalytic and experiential understandings need to drive the next leg of dissertation work and subsequent

publication for further refinement in WTIS as a field. Additionally, Matias's decolonizing theory and practice in whiteness pedagogies represent key new directions in both WTIS and CWS that I will return to in my concluding sentences.

Chapter Three, which is co-authored with Michael Zemblyas, is emblematic of Matias' psychoanalytic work in WTIS. Analyzing preservice students' dispositions toward anti-racist work, Matias and her coauthor drive at contradictions between students' written reflections of caring such as "I am well on my way to become [sic] an anti-racist educator" (p. 33) that contradict other defensive expressions of White victimhood such as "How can I prove myself as anti-racist when people of Color are probably going to see me as a racist based on the fact that I am White?" (p. 35). Analyzing students' institutionally sanctioned disposition for "caring," Matias and her colleague refuse to ignore preservice teachers' contradictory expressions of disgust such as "The only thing I really knew [about Muslims] was that typically terrorists follow this faith" (p. 37). Importantly, Matias and her colleague drive at authentic critical racial consciousness emblematic of Freire's (1970/2002) emphases on authenticity, humanization, dialogue, and conscientization. In theorizing learning and teaching with preservice teachers, Matias and her colleague develop the notion of strategic empathy to take on the emotional labor of actually conducting the interventions that are needed for preservice and in-service teachers' racial conscientization. Matias and her colleague (2016) explain:

Teacher candidates and educators who struggle with traumatic racial injury bring different histories with them to school. ... Therefore, developing pedagogies that utilize strategic empathy and pedagogies of discomfort would mean being committed to developing affective connections and investments without dismissing the explicit and critical interrogation of past emotional histories, knowledges, and experiences. We, as teacher educators, have to be prepared to accept that this process is long and painstaking and that it will be full of emotional landmines; but, it is of the utmost strategic importance to expose the insidious emotional power of racism and its affective investments in White teacher candidates' identities. (p. 40)

Throughout *Feeling White*, Matias consistently explores White emotionality via social-psychoanalytic concepts that push WTIS in key new and needed directions in whiteness pedagogies. Matias directly takes on the explosive White emotionality of

conducting interventions in whiteness pedagogies in ways that should drive both theory and practice in teacher education.

Tim Lensmire's (2017) *White Folks* explores White emotions via social psychoanalytic concepts, with special emphasis on White identity complexity, context, and especially, White ambivalence. Lensmire, whose career has involved a continual engaging in, critiquing, and expanding notions of critical pedagogy, is a professor in the University of Minnesota's (UM) Department of Curriculum and Instruction in Minneapolis. Working through his Midwest, White, working class, and rural background, Lensmire's engagement in and critique of critical pedagogy has driven his empirical-conceptual research in CWS and WTIS. Through this engagement and critique, Lensmire's work brings new historical and intellectual resources to WTIS, including labor history, black-faced minstrelsy studies, American and African-American literature and literary criticism, and social psychoanalysis of White identity learning. Thinking with Twain, Ellison, Fiedler, Morrison, and Thandeka, Lensmire's White research respondents from the fictionalized rural town of Boonendam are the protagonists of *White Folks*. Contrasting with (sometimes) flattened depictions of White resistant, race-evasive, or silent identities in early WTIS' literatures, Lensmire's *White Folks* demonstrates that respondents carefully learned and studied their White identities as socialized and institutionalized through fear, shame, or abuse at the hands of White parents, caretakers, friends, and colleagues' anxiety over being perceived as "good White people."

Emblematic of Lensmire's notion of White ambivalence is his work in Chapter Two, on Delores. Lensmire gets Delores talking about her lived experience of the 1960s as a student at Midwest State University near Boonendam, and in particular, Delores struggles with her now grown up daughter's incomprehension that Delores describes herself as a bystander during the violent riots and civil rights movements of the Midwest, of which Kent State and the Democratic Convention of 1968 were representative in her memory. At length, Delores explains that she understood there were two types of "good" people in the civil rights movements, the protesters and the bystanders. Narrating from this slippery position, Delores loses her footing more than once as she tries to explain her bystander identity, even while recalling anti-bullying training that insists, *There are no innocent bystanders*. In the slipping and getting back up, Delores's narrative provides much gendered social-psychoanalytical content: fear of her father and other family members' threats prohibiting her involvement in civil rights, fear of police brutality and violence of the riots, and anxiety over what the "good" Whites in Boonendam would think of

her if she joined the marches. Paradoxically, Delores argues at the end of the interview that she agreed with the protesters about the dignity of all people. Lensmire (2017) explains Delores's ambivalence:

Note the tension, the ambivalence, Delores gets to right at the end of this part of the interview. A tension between believing in the inherent dignity of every human being and a fear of the violence that might be done to you if you struggle to change a world that doesn't honor this dignity. Her response to this was to try to be an innocent bystander. (p. 27)

Against the backdrop-memory of cathected and patriarchal White threats, fear, and inner anxiety, Delores's bystander identity is interpolated through a patriarchal, White, hegemonic super-ego that asks: "What's going to happen to me if I protest?" (p. 29). As exemplified in Delores's interview, Lensmire's *White Folks* engages Boonendam's White ambivalence, not to affirm or defend ambivalent White folks, but rather to understand, discuss, or otherwise leverage White identities' fissures for whiteness pedagogy interventions and White racial conscientization. Moreover, Lensmire's *White Folks* makes us remember that preservice and in-service teachers are *women* forging identities within a whitened and hegemonic patriarchy. This last gendered *and* racialized theme is key in Sleeter's *The Inheritance*.

Echoing concerns of Matias's White emotionality and Lensmire's White ambivalence, Christine Sleeter's (2018) novel *The Inheritance* advances WTIS by exploring gendered White identity learning. Professor Emeritus of Education at California State University, Monterey Bay, Sleeter has worked in the field of WTIS for several decades, and her work is therefore difficult to characterize in this space as it spans different conceptual-empirical research traditions in education. From a middleclass White Oregonian background, Sleeter is one of a group of scholars, activists, and teacher educators who participated in and developed multicultural education in the 1970s and 80s. Pushing multicultural education in ever more critical directions, Sleeter worked through and contributed to CWS, critical race theory, critical family history, ethnic studies curriculum, and decolonizing theory and practice. Influences from all of these bodies of conceptual-empirical research are detectable in Sleeter's *The Inheritance*, but most notably, the latter three are deployed through the aesthetic form of the young adult pedagogical novel or *bildungsroman* genre. After having preoccupied herself over a lifetime with the formation of White preservice and in-service teachers for teaching across power and difference, Sleeter

follows Patricia Leavy's (2016) notion of social fictions in creating a research-based novel that narrates White female teachers' identity learning. *The Inheritance* is Sleeter's second novel, following *Whitebread* (2015).

*The Inheritance* is a page-turning read, but more importantly, it narrativizes new territories in WTIS that Matias, Lensmire, and others (e.g., Amos, 2016; Berchini, 2016; Boucher, 2016; Crowley, 2016; Flynn, 2015; Jupp, 2017; Mason, 2016; Miller, 2017; Picower, 2009; Shim, 2018, in press; Tanner, 2016, 2017) have been pursuing. Sleeter's novel tells Denise's story of coming to know her White identity and family history within the arc of US settler colonialism. Denise's story begins with her interrogation of her grandmother's statement that her mother, Denise's great-grandmother, was "the first White child born in Colorado" (p. 1). Starting with the protagonist's intellectual curiosity, the novel traces Denise's critical family history (Sleeter, 2008, 2011), which leads back to her great-grandfather's appropriation of stolen Indian lands, land speculation in Colorado, and finally, Denise's own San Francisco home inherited from her Grandmother. Within the novel's development, Sleeter narrates Denise's White emotionality, White ambivalence, and especially, White identity learning. In Sleeter's portrayal, Denise works through White guilt and shame, the anger and incredulity of other Whites' reactions to her new understandings, the broken relationships with family and boyfriend, and Denise's difficult identity learning that confronts her family's settler colonial past. As Lensmire does in his discussion of respondent Delores, Sleeter locates whiteness pedagogies with preservice and in-service teachers squarely at the intersection of White female teachers, patriarchy, and whiteness. From my purview, a better understanding of this intersection should drive future research, theory, and practice in WTIS.

In sum, Sleeter's novel narrates the difficult knowledge and enacts the social psychoanalysis that (predominantly) White women need to embrace and work through in order to understand the White privilege, whitened ontology and epistemology, responses of people of color to Whites' anti-racist activism, and the ongoing settler colonial forces of whiteness in the present moment. Perhaps more importantly for teacher educators, Sleeter's novel renders the complex issues White teachers face in taking up anti-racism and drives at the needful critical question in teacher education: *What is to be done* in curriculum, schools, and with children now that I understand White privilege and how it emerges from a history of settler colonialism?



## Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, I discuss the new directions that the three recent books provide to WTIS and CWS, and I finish with speculative remarks on the role of WTIS in decolonizing theory and practice. Summarizing their contributions, the three books reviewed here identify and insist on new conceptual and empirical content in WTIS. This new content focuses on White emotionality, White ambivalence, and White identity learning. In driving in these new directions, these three books break new ground in WTIS by providing research-based representations to pedagogically fold back into teacher educators' interventions with White preservice and in-service teachers. In breaking this new ground, these books drive WTIS' second-wave, which advances understandings of whiteness, White privilege, and race-evasion via whiteness pedagogies that work through social psychoanalytic concepts and resources. These resources provide directions that already take into account the critiques of static and monolithic White identities (Asher, 2007; Leonardo, 2002; McCarthy, 2003) and instead drive at White identity ambivalence to push beyond early WTIS that seemingly imagined mostly linear, rational, and transmissive approaches to teaching about White privilege and whiteness to preservice and in-service teachers. Instead of stasis and transmissive linear approaches, these three books emphasize White emotionality, White ambivalence, and White identity learning as key concepts for whiteness pedagogies.

Regarding WTIS, I think it is also important to recognize the "new" directions the three books offer are "old" directions as well, very much part of African diasporic archives. For example, social psychoanalytical directions are identifiable throughout Du Bois's bibliography, but especially in his recounting of the lynching of Sam Hose in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940/2011). After seeing Hose's knuckles on display in the butcher shop after the lynching, DuBois came to understand the deep-seated irrational fear, repulsion, and unmitigated violence demonstrated by White identities in confronting blackness and consolidating whiteness. Certainly, as DuBois reflects on the lynching, transmissive Cartesian rationalism or cool minded Baconian empiricism promise little in the work of unhooking White habits of mind and, to the contrary, can be seen to represent White supremacy's most compelling ideological tools. Importantly, both Matias's *Feeling White* and Lensmire's *White Folks* look into historical and psychanalytic archives to deploy Freud, Fanon, Fromm, Twain, Ellison, and Morrison in driving WTIS deeply into new/old social psychoanalysis.

Regarding CWS, I think the three books mark an important turning point in the relationship between WTIS and CWS. In early work, WTIS scholars understood their work as introducing CWS into education (Marx, 2003), and recently, Gallagher and Windance Twine's (2017) state of the CWS field completely ignores the conceptual, empirical, and pedagogical content of WTIS. This is paradoxical because, since 1990, WTIS has produced over 200 qualitative or narrative studies<sup>1</sup> on White teachers' identities with discernable patterns across studies and clear conceptual content and cohesion (Jupp et al., in press). This body of work, far from being an off-shoot, has fully taken up and answered McDermott and Samson's (2005) sociological call for more empirical work in CWS. I therefore argue that these three books begin to redefine the relationship between CWS and WTIS: my reading of the three books is that they represent exemplars of the recent and persistent work in WTIS that needs to be clearly taken up within CWS. Emphatically now, WTIS is a field that demands CWS scholars' attention, and I argue here that CWS scholars must reckon with WTIS' vast production, relevance, new directions, and especially, whiteness pedagogies. For example, Lensmire's *White Folks* recursively interrogates CWS previous assumptions in advancing the White ambivalence thesis, a thesis with important ramifications for future work in CWS.

Regarding decolonial theory and practice, I will keep my comments brief, because this direction is at once the most vanguard, yet paradoxically the most historicized of WTIS. Here, nonetheless, I think that WTIS has significant insights to offer recent and historical work on decolonial theory and practice. These are especially clear in Matias's *Feeling White* and Sleeter's *The Inheritance*. Recalling Freire's (1992/2002) latter work emphasizing dialogical hope, Matias and Sleeter remind us that WTIS work takes place within the social and psychoanalytical landscapes of *educator-and-educand* and that the revolution is necessarily and always pedagogical in the first place. Adding to Freire's perspectives, both Matias and Sleeter push beyond his naive humanisms toward locating whiteness pedagogies within the settler colonial history and present-day coloniality's matrix of power. In this way, both Matias and Sleeter drive at whiteness pedagogies that might begin to locate CWS' often US-centered and Anglophone contributions within larger transnational movements. Emerging from new/old directions of WTIS, whiteness pedagogies that work through social psychoanalysis should serve as one key dimension of decolonial theory and practice in the present moment, especially as this body of empirical-conceptual research emerges in education research and teacher education.

In sum, Cheryl Matias's *Feeling White*, Tim Lensmire's *White Folks*, and Christine Sleeter's *The Inheritance* all make important contributions to WTIS, but also advance and refine CWS and decolonial theory and practice. Moreover, all three of these books deserve attention in teacher education, CWS research, and decolonial theory and practice. Reaching back in the historical archive, while simultaneously pushing WTIS in new directions, the three books represent a field that has come to maturity, that works through its own and other social sciences' intellectual histories, and that has much more to offer the emancipatory social sciences in the present moment.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> This count excludes a few empirical quantitative studies and hundreds more conceptual and autobiographical essays on White teachers. See Jupp et al., In press for renderings of this empirical conceptual research and an account of twenty-five years of WTIS.