

# MY SKIN, MY EYES: USING WHITE PRIVILEGE AND WHITE RACIAL SHAME FRAMEWORKS

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ELISE TOEDT

*University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to consider how white identity is maintained, in part, by the way its meaning is interpreted, and to explore how different frameworks for discussing the influence of whiteness affect the ways white teachers might take up their white identities. I argue that using a feminist poststructural approach (Butler, 1993; Davies, 2003; Kumashiro, 2002; St. Pierre, 2000), by re-reading one's stories of racial identity, can mobilize white teachers for anti-racist action in a contextualized manner, situating identity as both made by and making larger social discourses about whiteness. I share the poem "Bule", published in *Infinite Rust*, where I write about my white identity in the context of living outside of Jakarta, Indonesia for two years. I model the re-reading process by critically interpreting "Bule" using two frameworks for understanding whiteness: the white privilege framework, popularized by Peggy McIntosh (1988), and the white racial shame framework, created by Reverend Thandeka (1999). I chose to re-read a *poem* about identity because by virtue of its form, a poem can reveal knowledge as partial and identity as shifting. This allows me to think about racial identity as a performance that protects and maintains white supremacy, and also a performance I have agency to disrupt. While I take both frameworks and their implications seriously, I conclude by discussing how Thandeka's framework allows for a more nuanced, situated interpretation of whiteness. I hope that my example of writing and re-reading an autobiographical account of white identity contributes to second wave white teacher identity study's goal to avoid essentializing whiteness in order to understand it with complexity as it functions psychologically and sociopolitically (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Jupp, Berry & Lensmire, 2016; Lensmire, 2013; Tanner, 2018).

I am invested in this work because I believe it is the responsibility of myself and others in the white community to reckon with the legacy of white supremacy, and to take seriously the ways we live out our whiteness. In this paper, I use the words “they/their” and “we/us” when I am talking about those of us racialized as white; while I realize those who are white in America experience whiteness in different ways, I view discussing our collective position within white supremacy as a move to build collaboration in efforts to acknowledge, hold ourselves accountable for, and change the ways we collectively and individually interact with our whiteness. I am also invested in this work as a white American educator who has taught in urban, suburban, and international schools at the middle school, high school, undergraduate and graduate levels. I grew up in a family where my whiteness was visible to me and openly discussed as an asset to protect: My grandfather, whose family immigrated from Italy to a southern first ring suburb of Chicago, was a member of the working class with an elementary school education who expressed fear and disdain when the demographics of his neighborhood changed from primarily Italian and Irish to primarily African American. He maintained an us/them mindset until his death, believing in white superiority to non-whites. Growing up, when my choices did not protect whiteness (such as dating people of color, cultivating friendships with non-whites, or moving to non-white spaces), or when I questioned white ideals of meritocracy, I came to understand that my place in my community was in danger. I was thus a bit taken back when, as I started my teaching career, whites usually talked about race as something non-white people had, and much less about what it means to be white. In these spaces, whiteness as property was protected through silence.

### **Rationale**

This paper contributes to current efforts within second-wave white teacher identity studies (WTIS) to make visible the ways in which white teachers’ interpretations of their racialized experiences impact their ability to develop race-visible, anti-racist identities, and to consider methods for understanding whiteness that extend beyond the white privilege framework. In their review of white teacher identity literatures from 2004-2014, Jupp, Berry & Lensmire (2016) define white teacher identity studies as “an area of education research that seeks to prepare and conscientize a predominantly White preservice and professional teaching force for teaching and learning across cultural differences in public schools” (p. 1151). Jupp has published extensively concerning the development of white identity studies (Jupp, 2017; Jupp, 2018; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire, 2016). In his recent review of

three books in this field, Jupp briefly outlines the development of WTIS, placing second-wave whiteness studies as a shift from a focus on privilege. Instead, scholars engage in an active critique of the white privilege framework and focus on whiteness pedagogies that can be used to increase white racial consciousness (Jupp, 2018). He writes that currently, work in this field “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” (2018, p. 4). Part of this reflexive work is examining the ambivalence of white identity formation; by re-reading my poem using two frameworks, I engage in making apparent how learning about white identity is a complex and situated endeavor that resists resolution, demanding ongoing engagement, and consider Thandeka’s framework as an alternative to McIntosh’s for understanding white identity.

This is consistent with the goal of second-wave white identity studies to highlight work with white teachers who are attempting to understand whiteness as a complex, historically situated, continual element of their identity. This work focuses on white teachers who are attempting to “come to grips with their own complexity and complicity in a white-supremacist system and seeking to learn how to fight against it,” as well as exploring the “context of their meaning-making and action” (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016, p. 986). This is critical because historically, schools have been used to reproduce the social order and the status quo (Kliebard, 2004; Kumashiro, 2002; Watkins, 2001). As Kumashiro (2002) writes, schools “privilege certain groups and identities in society while marginalizing others, and they legitimize this social order by couching it in the language of ‘normalcy’ and ‘common sense’” (p. 45).

The privileging of white identities is exacerbated when white teachers believe their racial identity is neutral, imagining race is something possessed by the “Other”, free of political implications for whites, so long as whiteness remains silent. Studies continue to find that silence concerning racial difference is reinforced as the desired, commonplace norm in white-majority spaces— what Mazzei (2011) refers to as “desiring silence.” Mazzei defines desiring silence as “a desire to voice whiteness in ways that function to maintain privilege (i.e. power), identity and that resist the potential for loss” (p. 658). She writes that the function of this desiring silence for white teachers is to maintain the status quo, and continue in current identity structures, where one’s white identity and sense of self remains unchanged and unquestioned. Likewise, in her study exploring the experience of four students of color in her multiculturalism class, Amos (2016) points out the “act of evading

power and race represented power itself” (Amos, 2016, p. 1013). By actively avoiding and resisting engagement concerning their position of racial power, white students in her class maintained their position and negated questioning their identity within social context.

As a poet and teacher, I find this “desiring silence” is protected in the predominantly white teaching force and also protected via silence about personal racial identity in the poetry of white Americans. In an interview with Kate Kellaway published in *The Guardian* (2018), nationally recognized poet Danez Smith, author of the viral poem “dear white america”, reminds us, “Every poem is political. In poems not obviously political, the writer is trying to avoid something.” In this paper, I use an autobiographical poem to challenge “desiring silence”, a move which is likewise consistent with the feminist declaration that everything is political. “Desiring silence” separates me from communal or political understandings of my identity, tempting me to think of myself as an individual, a luxury held up by the white supremacist notion of meritocracy. In her keynote speech at the Annual Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice in November of 2018, Dr. Nichole Guillory reminded attendants, “There are so many fronts — that is how white supremacy works.” By re-reading our racial narratives, white teachers can take up the project of facing these fronts in our lives and communities.

### **A Feminist Poststructural Approach to Autobiography**

A feminist poststructural framework supports thinking about identity as a discursive construction, thus allowing white teachers to deconstruct the idea that their identity is “race-less” or whiteness is “silent.” St. Pierre (2000) explains that “deconstruction propels our ability to move outside seeing race relations as “natural”, or as our living out of identity constructions as inevitable or absolute” (p. 483). A feminist poststructural approach to autobiographical writing encourages white teachers to re-read themselves so that they can understand identity as a performance shaped by and shaping social contexts through the reiteration of citational practices. Butler (1993) writes that performativity is not a “singular or deliberate ‘act’”; it is “the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (p. 2). Butler’s view of identity as performance challenges white teachers to critically analyze the hegemonic discourses that have shaped their understandings of race, looking for ways these discourses are maintained or disrupted through daily performances of identity.

By interpreting autobiographical stories using alternate frameworks for understanding whiteness, white teachers can see that they have agency to change the discourses they maintain and, in this way, understand themselves as both shaped by and shaping these discourses. Goodson (1994) explains that stories are particularly located for interrogating and changing the social constructs in which our lived narratives are embedded because “stories can be ‘located’, seen as the social constructions they are, fully impregnated by their location within power structures and social milieux” (p. 20). Understanding autobiographies within larger social constructs contributes to the project of interrogating and changing the world within which we are all embedded.

### **Use of Autobiographical Poetry Writing**

As a genre, poetry is especially conducive to re-reading using a poststructural feminist approach because poems are partial, situated, and often resist resolution. The use of autobiographical poetry engages in specific renderings of personal stories, externalizing discourses about the self to which the writer can return in order to understand how identity constructions function. Miller (1998) offers that as part of a queer curriculum, autobiography offers teachers a way to approach writing about oneself which “compels us to consider ‘tangles of implication’ — how we are implicated in our desires for and enactments of, as well as in our fears and revulsions toward, those identities and practices that exceed the ‘norm’” (p. 371). Miller differentiates autobiography as part of a queer curriculum from traditional teacher autobiographies, which often reinforce the idea that teacher stories are the product of linear narratives ending with resolution of identity conflicts. Instead, consistent with a post-structural understanding of identity, Miller’s approach understands teachers as “situated simultaneously in multiple and often conflicting identity constructions” (1998, p. 371). Within these identity constructions, teachers are positioned within larger sociopolitical discourses; autobiographical writing is one way to notice these discourses at work.

Through his post-structural re-reading approach, Kumashiro (2002) encourages teachers to critically analyze the ways that “oppression is produced by discourse, and in particular, is produced when certain discourses (especially ways of thinking that privilege certain ideologies and marginalize others) are cited over and over” (p. 51). He suggests that one way we can notice and change these citational practices is to use autobiography to “write in ways that trouble familiar stories” (p. 66). I take up this post-structural approach as I trouble the ways whiteness appears in my poem.

Writing and analyzing the poem “Bule” using the white privilege and white racial shame frameworks is an example of how one can externalize internal discourses of whiteness. I discuss the ways Thandeka’s framework in particular creates space for thinking about white identity as a construction that is both made in discourses about whiteness, and can be unmade through the ways in which whiteness is addressed as a sociopolitical construction that is psychologically protected within white communities as an unsaid, and deeply engrained, element of identity.

### **Poem and Analysis: Re-Reading “Bule”**

In what follows, I include the poem “Bule” and provide a brief overview of the white privilege and white racial shame frameworks. Subsequently I re-read the poem using each framework, followed by a discussion of what each framework offers, and a critique of each. As I re-read the poem using each framework, I look for ways my ideas about whiteness are formed, and work to challenge my citational practices related to white identity in order to see the ways that, as Kumashiro writes, “oppression can be seen as the repetition, throughout many levels of society, of harmful citational practices” (p. 51).

While I consider both frameworks, each offers something different for interpretation. McIntosh’s framework asks me to consider how white privilege benefits me materially, and whether or how I will personally use these privileges. With this come questions about what privilege costs in terms of my connection to myself and others, how these privileges can be actively addressed, and whether a confession of my privileges is an effective strategy for combating white supremacy as it manifests in my personhood and in society. Thandeka’s framework asks me to consider how whiteness is developed and protected in white families and communities, and the psychological harm caused by burying shame caused by complicity with white supremacy. With this I must also consider the implications of viewing white racialization as harm. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of using these frameworks. I discuss how Thandeka’s framework is consistent with the goals of second wave teacher identity studies because it aids white teachers in addressing their complex racialization in order to actively work through the ways in which white supremacy manifests within internalized discourses of whiteness.

## The Poem

Bule

The first word they teach me  
is want.

*"Mau ojek ke Hypermart"* I say  
perched on his motorbike  
and we ride, village on both sides,  
lush green and bright flowers

one gas station one bank  
one store they stare

I crouch over him wind warm  
his smell like bucket bath and mangos

he leaves me at the entrance.  
They shout the second word I learn  
*"bule!" "white!"*

I hate my hair  
my skin, my eyes, I hate my tall.

I fill a laundry basket with a pot a pan,  
silverware blankets shampoo

I hand crisp money and smile  
the cashier, shy.

Someone asks for my autograph  
but my hands are full.

Back on the bike  
I balance the basket

I hate my hair my tall my eyes  
I hate my heart my weak my pale  
How will I live so lonely for maybe years?

### **White Privilege Framework**

I now move to analyze the poem using Peggy McIntosh's white privilege framework, popularized by her 1988 essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." I chose to use the white privilege framework as articulated in this essay because it is frequently excerpted and used across the country as a tool for leading white people to think about the ways they benefit concretely from their skin color. In education, the white privilege framework is often the only model used to discuss whiteness (Lensmire, et al, 2013, Tanner, 2018). When McIntosh's SEED curriculum is not used, elements of her framework, especially her list of benefits accrued due to white privilege, are utilized. McIntosh (1988) defines white privilege as an "invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious" (p. 2). She emphasizes the need to debunk the myth of meritocracy, as many whites believe privileges are based on individual effort rather than as a result of being "favored by hierarchical social systems that empower people differently" (2015, p. 234). Her framework and trainings encourage white participants to critically examine their race privilege in everyday circumstances. In her 2010 SEED "Guide for Facilitators on Presenting My White Privilege Papers," she recommends participants brainstorm how to "use unearned assets to share power..." She writes that "using these assets may lead to key changes in other behaviors ... such as ... acting against both the external and internalized forms of oppression and privilege" (p. 7).

Two elements of McIntosh's white privilege framework I'll use to re-read "Bule" are 1) examining unearned privileges which provide concrete daily benefits for me as a white person and 2) engaging if and how these unearned assets were used to act in ways that directly address oppressive habits of being. As I re-read, I also consider: Does the privilege of whiteness have a psychological cost? Does the confession of white privilege function as another way for whites to otherize race, thus returning to a protective silence?

### **Re-reading Using the White Privilege Framework**

Right away, my poem begins from a location of unearned privilege: I write "Bule" as an American expatriate in Indonesia. I attained my job because English is my first language, and I was teaching English Literature at an international school. This privilege to be the looker and consumer of experience without regard to how I am exercising privilege is infused in the first-person narrative voice of the poem. The autobiographical plot line immediately positions me as a consumer in possession of



the resources I need to establish a place in this country: the first word I learn is want, and I use the word “want” to procure a ride to Hypermart in stanza two. In stanza eight I list objects I bought at Hypermart, including “a pot, a pan, shampoo”. In stanza nine, I pay with “crisp money”. In the midst of naming my material privileges, I create a social class delineation between myself and the motorbike driver, who I describe with the phrase “his smell like bucket bath and mango” in stanza five. I lament my loneliness in the last stanza of the poem, but this was a racial and cultural isolation I actively chose in order to earn a profit while working in Indonesia. My hyper awareness of my skin color is painful to me, but as McIntosh (1988) writes, “whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress and violence” (p. 9). I am privileged that my white skin color protects me. Using McIntosh’s framework, I am thus asked to reckon with the many ways that white privilege benefits me materially, and to take note of these.

While I am led to focus on the material assets accrued by white people due to racial privilege, McIntosh’s framework does not address the psychological implications of whiteness. The internal conflicts resulting from whiteness are apparent in my poem, but there is no way to account for them within McIntosh’s framework. Tanner writes that he worries “white folks, with eagerness to reconcile race, ignore or look past the internal conflict at the core of white racial identity” (Tanner, 2018, p. 183) I can confess my privilege, and even take anti-racist actions, without addressing the ways that occupying the position of oppressor—and being trained to oppress by families and communities—results in a psychological wound that needs to be addressed in order for me to change the discourses about whiteness that I maintain.

Once I have confessed my privilege, and pointed out how it is apparent, McIntosh asks that I move to take anti-racist action. McIntosh’s framework demands that white individuals ask, “whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance, and if so, what will we do to lessen them” (1988, p. 11). My self-hatred in the poem hints at a desire to understand how whiteness is functioning in this new context; the poem alone does not evidence an explicit understanding, however, about my race advantage or provide examples of how I will directly challenge this through my actions, using advantages to “weaken systems of unearned advantage” through political and personal work (2010, p. 7). Perhaps this is where an understanding of the deep shame I have concerning my whiteness could move me towards action. Do I have the tools to move from sulking in how I feel separate from others in order to critically question

my place in this context, asking how I can use privileges, as McIntosh suggests, to act against external forms of oppression? What would this look like in this context?

It seems that one move available to me in this framework is to compare myself to non-white others, grasping how the presence of their race has led to an absence of privilege. A concern here is whether the confession of white privilege functions as another way for whites to otherize race, thus returning to protective silence. In this logic, if I confess my privilege, I have done my part, and the burden of dismantling white supremacy continues to rest on people of color. In this way, I could avoid reckoning with my own racialized identity, making race again something non-white people have - as their burden, not mine.

### **Thandeka's White Racial Shame Framework**

I now turn to Thandeka, who directly addresses the personal within the realm of the communal, and the ways in which whiteness exists directly to protect and reify class boundaries established within white supremacist society. Reverend Thandeka's concept of white racial shame is outlined in her book *Learning to be White* (1999), where she examines linkages between race, class, and religion in the construction of whiteness. She analyzes the ways whiteness is continually created in America and how white children continue to be inducted into whiteness within their families. She writes that:

Whiteness is left unexplored as a seat of racial abuse against both Euro-Americans and African Americans. ... The absence of attention to the emotional abuse that makes it difficult for someone to relate wholeheartedly to another person obscures the hidden injuries to Euro-Americans within their own communities. It is those very injuries that, when discovered, produce feelings of shame and, in a racial context, white shame (p. 117).

Thandeka suggests that one way to interrupt the citational practices which reproduce whiteness is to critically examine how whites learn to silence and protect their racial identity as a result of early and continued socialization, and the ways in which they protect white supremacy by continuing in this silence and by continuing to nurse their unexamined shame. She urges readers to take seriously the ways whiteness is created in white communities, and the ways it is continually preserved politically and socially in order to create class chasms, protecting the white ruling

elite. In this way, her framework aligns with the goals of second wave teacher identity studies to situate whiteness as a complex construction working within the context of white supremacy (Casey, 2016; Lensmire, et al, 2013, Matais, 2013; Tanner, 2018).

I focus my poem analysis on two aspects of Thandeka's conceptualization of white racial shame: how whiteness is developed and protected within a family and community context, and how this results in a shame that is often buried. I also consider the dangers that accompany naming white racialization as trauma. I conclude by discussing how whites need to better understand ourselves as racialized and that this is what Thandeka's framework offers.

### **Re-Reading Using Thandeka's White Racial Shame Framework**

Thandeka asks readers to consider at what cost white children become white— what happens to a child's soul, or to their sense of morality, when they learn that in order to be cared for in their community, they must deny feelings of affinity towards racial Others? Thandeka theorizes that "in the face of adult silence to racial abuse, the child learns to silence and then deny its own resonant feelings toward racially proscribed others, not because it chooses to become white, but because it wishes to remain with the community that is quite literally its life" (1999, p. 24). In the poem, I talk about my white identity in relation to the Indonesians around me, identifying myself as "I" and the Indonesians around me as "they." "They" teach me the words "want" and "white," "they" stare. Throughout the poem a chasm is built between my internal experiences of self in contrast to those I perceive to be "Other", and this is anchored in my physical description of myself as white. The poem ends by reinforcing my conviction that relationship may not be possible with the line "how will I live so lonely for maybe years?"

Using Thandeka's theory for how white identity is formed, I can think about the time when I first learned to see myself as white, and the ways in which this allowed me to be an acceptable member of my white community, while at the same time engendering deep shame at separating myself from racial Others. I can question my re-enactment of separateness. I can consider how I created my white identity in response to my family's discourse and in what ways I am currently maintaining those discourses. If I believe that no child is born a racist, then I must grapple with how my white skin came to mean something to me psychologically, as well as within my sociopolitical context. Tanner (2018) writes that:

in order to understand the white psyche, it is essential to understand that a racial identity is not inherent in white people.... there is a moment before the white self becomes white. After that moment, the white self has been injured in a foundational way, and that injury creates serious complications (p. 24).

By understanding how my whiteness has been formed, I can also trouble the discourse about whiteness that I maintain: What does it look like to address the racial shame I hold? In what ways was I taught to maintain white supremacist logics and how can I undo these?

Thandeka argues that when white children learn to protect whiteness, it results in buried shame. She defines shame as an “emotional display of a hidden civil war. It is a pitched battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel: forbidden desires and prohibited feelings that render one different” (1999, p. 12). In the poem, my shame about my whiteness and the ways it separates me from others is explicit: In stanza 7, after naming myself as white, I name the white physical features I hate. In stanza 12, I enumerate on this list, writing that I hate my “hair, my tall, my eyes... my pale.” Using Thandeka’s understanding of racial shame, I can critically question the ways that enacting whiteness results in self-hatred; I can ask myself in what ways protecting whiteness and my place in white community has damaged my innate sense of self and my ability to connect to others.

As I do this, I must remember that “none of us are passive victims of socialization” (p. 14). hooks writes that those whites focused on the trauma of becoming white make “it seem that everyone has been socialized to be racist against their will” (hooks, 2015, p. 14). hooks fears that “this often becomes another apology for racism, one which seeks to erase a vision of accountability and responsibility which could truly empower” (2015, p. 14). As I take up Thandeka’s framework, I must ever return to the context of whiteness in America, and the concrete harm perpetuated within a racialized society where everyone is traumatized—but not equally—by the construction of race. The recognition of shame must be in the context of naming how white identity is shaped, in order to be accountable to how I act within this racial identity.

## Discussion

I wonder if we white educators, by verbalizing our everyday experiences of whiteness—not just its privileges but also its pain, its shame, its family ties, its communal implications, its political manifestations—we could come to better understand whiteness as a racial construction daily re-made. I think this could help us to understand whiteness in a more complex way, allowing us to be with it, rather than confessing its presence so that we can move away from the discomfort. Evie Shockley (2013), author of the poem “Ode to my Blackness”, reminds us:

To write about race is to write about the creation and perpetuation of racial categories (of which “black” is only one), and to consider the ways those categories have been used to arrange and manage our societies around an inequitable distribution of opportunities, resources, rights, and privileges (to put it generously).

With a workforce of 87% white teachers working with an increasingly racially diverse student population, the field of education has an obligation to critically address the ways whiteness manifests in the lives of white teachers, and to do this in a variety of ways (Jupp et al., 2016). Unfortunately, as Tanner (2018) points out, “whiteness defends itself from inquiry by making race about people of color instead of about white people” (p. 30). My hope is that white teachers can use an approach to re-reading like the one I demonstrated in this paper in order to understand our individual narratives of whiteness as always sociopolitically situated, and to become critically conscious of our racial positionality, taking steps to address how this affects our teaching as well as the daily ways we live out of our white identities.

Thandeka (1999) reminds us, “African Americans have learned to use a racial language to describe themselves and others. Euro-Americans also have learned a pervasive racial language. But in their racial lexicon, their own racial group becomes the great unsaid” (p. 3). As whites, we need to work to continually articulate ourselves as racialized. While both McIntosh and Thandeka’s frameworks suggest whites can change the discourse about whiteness by interrupting and challenging their assumptions about the political neutrality of whiteness, Thandeka’s framework moves beyond the consideration of material privilege to explore the ways that the internalization of white racial shame protects white supremacy through internal and community policing.

Thandeka asks that whites address the psychological wounds of separating themselves from others, as well as position their personal story within the country's history of white supremacy. To do this, white teachers must acknowledge and work through the complex discourses about whiteness living in their own experience. This work is much less concrete than the confession of privilege demanded by McIntosh's framework; as second wave white teacher identity studies scholars continue to reiterate, white identity must be viewed as ambivalent, complex, and multi-faceted if we are to make progress in changing the ways it manifests (Casey, 2016; Lensmire, et al, 2013, Matais, 2013; Tanner, 2019). By contextualizing the development of shame within family and community, white identity complexifies, and the shifting emotions which accompany whiteness can be worked through. Rather than reaching a stalemate, whites can work to recognize white identity as a performance which manifests real harm, and can take this harm seriously, addressing the ways it works within our psyches and within society.

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