

White Folks

by Daniel Oppenheimer (<https://thepointmag.com/author/doppenheimer/>)

Timothy Lensmire begins his new book, *White Folks*, with a story about becoming white. As a senior at Boonendam High School, in the rural Wisconsin town of Boonendam¹—and a recent winner of a statewide storytelling competition—Lensmire was asked to reprise his performance at the annual school awards dinner. This is how he found himself, one humid spring night in early 1979, standing before a local audience, performing “De Tar Baby.” Or rather, the Disney-adapted version of Joel Chandler Harris’s original Uncle Remus tale.

Lensmire, now a professor of education at the University of Minnesota, took on the “blacked up” voices and mannerisms of Uncle Remus, Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and Brer Bear. The audience loved it.

“It felt sacred as I performed for my community,” Lensmire writes, “People laughed and clapped and cheered. Afterward, farmers who hauled milk to the small cheese factory run by my dad and my uncle (and earlier, by my grandfather) slapped me hard on the back, laughed, seemed almost to cut me with their dry, callused skin as they smiled and shook my hand.”

At the time, “De Tar Baby” was an unalloyed triumph for Lensmire. He’d won the state competition. The townsfolk loved it. His parents were proud. And he felt vindicated. “I was especially proud of and effective with Brer Bear,” he writes. “I stood

with shoulders hunched, a blank look on my face, lips flapping, stammering.”

In 2017, Lensmire sees the performance rather differently, and with some shame. He was doing a kind of blackface minstrelsy, performing a cartoonish blackness for his white audience. He was leading his audience through what Ralph Ellison once described as a “magic rite,” meant to shore up white people’s sense of security in their own whiteness.

That white people so fervently need such affirmation, and consolation, is one of the curious realities that *White Folks* is dedicated to investigating. Why, of all possible source materials, would the young Lensmire turn to Disney’s *Song of the South* for a Wisconsin storytelling competition? Why was *Song of the South* so resonant among white audiences that Disney re-released it, in the 1970s, decades after it debuted? Why was Lensmire’s audience so entertained, even moved, by his performance? Why did he win the state competition? Why, even in a state as white as Wisconsin, in a small town in which there were few or no black people, did black people (or black people as imagined by whites) play such a potent role in the construction of white identity?



Until the publication of *White Folks*, Lensmire’s most significant intervention in this conversation was his 2013 critique, in the *Harvard Educational Review*, of Peggy McIntosh’s canonical article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” “McIntosh as Synecdoche: How Teacher Education’s Focus on White Privilege Undermines Antiracism,” was the combined effort of the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective, a group of teachers and educational theorists, focused on issues of race and whiteness, that Lensmire helped found at Minnesota. The piece draws on their experience training future teachers in the style recommended by McIntosh, and then

over time coming to perceive flaws in that pedagogy. At the center of their critique is the role of “confession” in McIntosh’s model, which the collective, arguing that it focuses too much on individual culpability and catharsis, describes as “a dead end for antiracist thought and action.” The article concludes with a call for “more complex treatments of how to work with white people on questions of race and white supremacy.”

White Folks may be viewed as an attempt to respond to this call, weaving together two strategies. The first is theoretical. From the broad body of academic and belletristic work on whiteness, Lensmire pulls out and wrestles with those insights he believes to be most useful for moving forward. This includes engaging with many of the founding mothers and fathers of the academic study of whiteness, including Theodore Allen, Nell Irvin Painter and David Roediger, as well as with literary figures like Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, and psychoanalytically minded critics like Leslie Fiedler and Rev. Thandeka.

The second—and more distinctive—strategy is personal: Lensmire decides to go home.

In the early months of 2006, Lensmire returned to Boonendam to interview white folks about their feelings on race. He asked his subjects about their childhoods and families, about the role they thought race played in their own lives and communities, and about contemporary issues of race and racism. He listened but also gently prodded, interceding at strategic moments with a question or challenge. In this way he was able to elicit both the stories as his subjects told them to themselves, and some of the hidden patterns that could emerge only under thoughtfully applied pressure.

Take Frank, a white high school teacher in his forties. Lensmire interviews Frank twice, for a total of about four hours. What emerges from these interviews is a picture of a man torn, in his soul, over issues of race.

The conflict goes back to Frank's earliest years, and to his efforts to make sense of how his father and his Uncle Norman talked about the Ojibwe Indians in the area. In particular how their talk squared—or rather, didn't square—with their own behavior. The Ojibwe were resented by many whites in the area for the exemption they were granted, as natives, from local fishing regulations. Uncle Norman, in particular, found the disparate treatment infuriating.

“Awww, the Indians are stealing,” Frank remembers him griping. “They're drunks. All they're doing is going drunken spearfishing, not doing anything sporting. And it's a bunch of shit—their culture, they're not the same ones that were here two hundred years ago. They should do what we have to do.”

If the memory had simply been that—Frank's racist uncle being racist—it would have been a familiar story. But even as a boy Frank had known there was more to it. He had been with his father and uncle many times when they'd flagrantly broken precisely the rules they were angry at the Ojibwe for not having to follow. They'd overfished, or killed deer that were too small. Young Frank had borne confused witness, as well, to the bogus rationalizations his father and uncle would concoct in case a game official caught them.

His dad would rationalize: *Well, some of the fish was Mom's.*

“Well, she wasn't actually here catching them.”

Aw, don't worry about it. We'll say she went home early.

There was hypocrisy, too, in Uncle Norman's denigration of the Ojibwe as drunks and layabouts. He was a heavy drinker himself, and lived a troubled life. Frank's father was less volatile than Norman, but he was a partner-in-crime to his brother in ways that were obvious to Frank even when he was young.

At one point, Frank tells Lensmire about the dark places that his uncle can go when he's really in his cups:

FRANK: I think [Norman] spent seven years in Vietnam. He decided to come back and then another brother went over. His name was Eric and he got killed, and then Norman went into the psychiatric hospital, spent a year there, and now, to this day, he drinks heavily. But when he's drinking—I've experienced this—he's broken down and cried, "I think I might have been the guy that assassinated Martin Luther King. I'm not sure."

This scene, Lensmire suggests, points to a kind of whiteness that arises not only from its hate or fear of blackness—a fear that has all too often been tied, in American history, to fantasies of revenge and violence—but also from the tension between those malignant emotions and an acute awareness of black humanity. "What white people cannot live with," writes Lensmire, "is their social role as white people in the American drama given that playing this role demands the betrayal of the sacred principle of equality. Wanting to believe in America, freedom, and equality, but confronted with the hard work and uncertainty of democracy as well as with massive inequality all around us, we scapegoat and stereotype people of color."

A recurring theme in Lensmire's profiles is that racial conflict emerges not only out of exchanges between people of color and white people, but also within groups and families of whites, and within the individual psyches of white people.

Delores, an older white elementary school teacher, confesses to Lensmire that she was too passive and fearful, as a college student in the 1960s, to attend civil rights protests. She was afraid, she tells him, that if she got in trouble her parents wouldn't let her come home. Decades later her daughter, now a student at the same state college where Delores studied, takes a class on the 1960s and reproaches her mother for not being more active. "They had to write a poem," Delores told Lensmire, "so [my daughter] wrote about me not getting involved, and the title of the poem was 'From the Other Side of the Street.'"

Robert, a high school teacher and basketball coach, tells Lensmire about the time he chose to suspend a white player for using a racial slur against the team's only black player. He faced so much heat from the white parents that he ended up resigning. Stan, who runs a dairy farm in Boonendam, tells Lensmire about the first time he ever saw a black man, at the annual county fair. His mother took the opportunity to "scare the living shit" out of him and his siblings. She said that if they didn't behave, then "that big Black man over there" would abduct them, and she wouldn't even try to get them back. William, a farmer, talks about his sister dating a black man, and the rift it has caused in his family. William and his mother have been suspicious of the boyfriend, and now his sister thinks they're racists.

"This accusation seemed to hurt William profoundly," writes Lensmire, "and I think this was exactly because he was ambivalent, conflicted, inside. William not only knew about the racism of others, he felt it inside himself. However, he did not want to feel that way."



Lensmire's subjects hold all sorts of racist and racially distorted ideas about people of color, particularly about black people. Yet they also articulate commitments to racial fairness and equality, and express desires to connect across racial boundaries. Delores is proud of her daughter, and sees her willingness to deal directly with issues of racial justice as a better expression of her own Catholic values than her own passivity. Stan was fat as a boy, and remembers how people underestimated and stereotyped him because of his weight: the experience seems to have helped him imagine what it might be like for people of color to be misjudged and discriminated against. When his mother asks him to try to persuade his sister to stop dating a Mexican immigrant, Stan refuses. As a boy Robert and his brother were athletes and avid sports fans, and many of their favorite athletes were black. It wasn't just how his idols played that mattered to Robert; he was also impressed by their resilience in the face of racism. Their "moral dramas ... taught him about intolerance and that it was 'okay' to accept and emulate people of color."

Perhaps the most dramatic example of internal conflict shows up in the tug of war Frank describes between his professional persona at the high school, and the role he plays when he's with his buddies at their weekly poker games. In these "high" and "low" spaces, as Lensmire describes them, Frank encounters radically different incentive structures, and he reacts accordingly. At work Frank feels as though he has to carefully measure every word he says, on racially sensitive topics, for fear that if he says the wrong thing his co-workers, all of whom are white, may tag him as a racist. At the poker games, it's the opposite. Racist talk is rewarded, and social opprobrium awaits the person who preaches caution. "Maybe I'm not a racist," he tells Lensmire, "but in that subculture, I'll go way out on a limb and say some pretty horrible things because I'm being rewarded by other people that are functioning in a subculture mentality."

One result of this split, for Frank, is his sense that there is nowhere he can talk about race in ambivalent and inevitably clumsy ways. There's no "middle place," so to speak, where he can talk through his jumbled thoughts and impulses in order perhaps to arrive, over time, at a more integrated and coherent perspective. In the high spaces, the danger is that he'll say the wrong thing and be shamed. In the low spaces, the danger is that he'll shame his friends, if he dissents from their racism. In either case there's anxiety, confusion, and a fear of shame and rejection.

Although Lensmire stays away from too much direct extrapolation here, it's not hard to see this as a microcosm of the polarity of our national discourse. There are the high spaces of the dominant liberal establishment, where a wrong word or phrase can get one excommunicated or forced to do public penance. And there are the low spaces of the right-wing media, where racism is encouraged and contempt is reserved for those who would stake their identities on calling it out. What can get lost in both spaces, Lensmire suggests, is how unstable racial identity and racial politics often are.



I first found Lensmire's work a few years ago, at a time when I was working in public relations in the division of diversity at a public university. I was struggling with some of the job's contradictions. Particularly vexing, for me, was the apparent conflict between the intellectual work we were doing, in our professional development seminars, and the actual work we did outside the lecture room. Once a month, senior diversity staff would gather for a lecture and discussion on the theme of "power and privilege." The lectures were from faculty in the humanities and social sciences, and were heavy on concepts of white privilege, white supremacy, white racism and

neoliberal complicity with systems of oppression. The discussion was just amongst us. We'd talk about what we heard, and about how it connected to our assigned chapter from that year's text, bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress*.

I loved it. It was like being back in graduate school, if only for a few hours a month. It was fun and stimulating to listen and talk and occasionally to argue. But it was also increasingly clear, as time went on, that our enthusiasm for these ideas aligned awkwardly, and sometimes not at all, with the actual practices of the division.

The division of diversity provided diversity training, but only to the staff and faculty of the departments, centers and divisions that wanted it. We ran programs to support students of color and other marginalized students in their academic and social lives. We helped to recruit more faculty and students of color. We investigated allegations of, and ran programs to reduce, bias on campus. What we didn't do was push racial politics into the rest of campus life, or out into the community, in a way that our once-a-month theory sessions would suggest we should—assertively and persistently.

In part, we didn't do that because of politics: the university's continued viability in a conservative state depended on keeping most of the alumni happy, and carefully picking our battles. But I also think some blame goes to the theories and vocabulary of privilege discourse. The language seemed designed more for our own edification than for application to the complex situations that we came across in our work. Affirming white people's complicity with privilege and power, in spaces far removed from the actual complexities of the job, seemed to discharge a kind of confessional duty. Once we'd done it, we were good for a while. And it wasn't just us white folks who were good. Our colleagues of color were good too. Meanwhile, outside of those rooms, we

defaulted to low-proof language like “diversity,” “inclusion,” “access” and “excellence”—words which, in their generality and vagueness, corresponded much more closely to the menu of good but marginal work we were actually doing.

It’s a bit too glib, maybe, to suggest that the development seminars were another version of that magic rite that Lensmire had conducted back in Boonendam, where certain constructions and performances of race serve to temporarily soothe the cognitive dissonance of those whose ideals are routinely betrayed by the power structure from which they benefit. White privilege and supremacy talk is not blackface minstrelsy. But it does not seem unlikely that the prevailing language for theorizing whiteness and white people has evolved to provide psychological benefits to a very particular constituency, within very particular contexts. Or that these psychological rewards are not always consistent with commitment to the kinds of actions that would truly threaten larger structures of power and privilege.



White Folks is a short book and a conflicted one, which sometimes seems to be written for too many masters: the other members of Lensmire’s collective; Lensmire’s academic contemporaries; college and graduate students; Frank, Delores, Stan and the others back in Boonendam. But it’s animated by a series of questions that are subtly, but importantly, different from the kinds of questions that often dominate our conversations about race. Do we, in the high spaces, understand white people—and ourselves *as* white people—as well as we believe we do? Have we fully disentangled our strategies for making egalitarian demands from our own needs for consolation and absolution?

And what do we do (if that's the right way to put it) with Frank? "Frank wished for a bigger, more expansive world for himself, his friends, his family," Lensmire writes. "Frank hoped that his own children would act differently, be 'braver.' He hoped that his own children would not stay silent in the face of explicitly racist talk and jokes, as he and his father often did."

Such passages suggest, though of course they don't prove, that the pool of potential converts to the cause of racial progress may be greater than we tend to assume. They also suggest the potential efficacy of engaging in good faith, and with forbearance, with people who hold some toxic beliefs (which is to say, maybe, all of us). We don't know if Frank's reflectiveness will persist beyond his conversation with Lensmire, or if his behavior in the basement will change. What we can say is that Lensmire has succeeded in creating a middle space—less judgmental and scholastic than the high, more humane and introspective than the low—where Frank felt, at least for a short window of time, comfortable reflecting on his father's hypocrisy, on his own complicity with the racism of the basement culture, and on his hopes that his children would be better than he was.

"We white people are racist, down deep," writes Lensmire, toward the end of *White Folks*. "But the deep down is neither monologic nor finished." The first part of that proposition is true, more or less, but it's the second part that seems equally important to keep in mind, if we are to have any hope of it not being the whole story.