

McIntosh as Synecdoche: How Teacher Education's Focus on White Privilege Undermines Antiracism

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In this article, members of the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective argue that Peggy McIntosh's seminal "knapsack" article acts as a synecdoche, or as a stand-in, for all the antiracist work to be done in teacher education and that this limits our understanding and possibilities for action. The authors develop this argument by questioning the lack of critique of McIntosh's 1988 classic "invisible knapsack" article and sharing two narratives by members of their collective that illustrate problems with both the acceptance and the rejection of McIntosh's conception of white privilege. This discussion illuminates how white privilege pedagogy demands confession and how confession is a dead end for antiracist action. The authors also explore how McIntosh's ideas can lead to dangerous misreadings of student resistance. Acknowledging the initial fruitfulness of McIntosh's ideas, it is time for us to move to more complex

treatments of working with white people on questions of race, white supremacy, and antiracism.

Most teacher educators in the United States are white. The primary answer proposed by white teacher educators to questions of how to combat institutional racism, how to eliminate educational disparities, and how to educate white teachers to work effectively in diverse classrooms is to have future and practicing teachers read Peggy McIntosh's 1988 essay on white privilege and the "invisible knapsack." While this characterization of diversity work in teacher education discounts the sorts of complex responses provided by some teacher education and professional development programs to problems of race and racism, *to an amazing degree, the antiracist aspirations and responsibilities of white teacher educators have been concentrated in McIntosh's discussion of white privilege.* McIntosh acts as a synecdoche, or as a stand-in, for all the antiracist work to be done—and this limits our understanding and our possibilities for action.

For a number of us in the Midwest Critical Whiteness Collective (MCWC), McIntosh's theorizing of white privilege was a significant part of our early understanding of white racism and how it functioned in our society. MCWC is a group of educators, researchers, and activists whose work focuses on race and critical whiteness studies. One of the strengths of our collective is that we are engaged in a variety of educational spaces, including antiracist work with students in K–12 schools, future and practicing teachers, high school administrators, university faculty, community members, and other activists. We are grateful for and respect McIntosh's historical contribution to antiracist work in education. Indeed, it is through a sincere and ongoing engagement with her ideas and the teaching practices they have inspired—what we will call, after Levine-Rasky (2000), "white privilege pedagogy"—that we make our critique. Our critique relates both to McIntosh's text and to how her text has been taken up in pedagogical contexts. It should be noted that McIntosh has exerted influence over how her text has been used within white privilege pedagogy, including through the creation of the educational organization Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED).

Our critique is developed in relation to two stories narrated by members of MCWC, Jessie and Mary. The first narrative explores white privilege pedagogy from the perspective of the student or workshop participant. Jessie draws on her experiences in the National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum and describes an important SEED ritual called "Serial Testimonies." In our interpretation of Jessie's narrative, we argue that this ritual teaches participants that the crucial action they need to take as white people is to confess their privilege rather than, for example, take antiracist action. Or perhaps more accurately, their confession ends up being the antiracist action.

But what if particular white people do not want to confess? In the second narrative, Mary tells a story about when she worked at a small state university that serves a number of rural poor and working-class white students. Mary's

narrative focuses on how John,¹ one of her white students, rejected McIntosh's ideas. In her role as teacher educator, Mary was tempted to label this resistance as she had seen countless research articles label it—as a sure sign of John's racism. However, Mary observed that John was, at the same time, moved by accounts of the historical and ongoing oppression of black and Native peoples in his region and was eager to work out what this new knowledge meant for his teaching. With the help of Mary's narrative, we argue that McIntosh's ideas of white privilege ignore issues of social class and geography and end up functioning as a sort of test or filter in which the only way to pass—as a good white person and good white teacher—is to acquiesce publicly to McIntosh's claims about how white privilege works.

We provide some background and context for Jessie's and Mary's narratives in relation to our work. Specifically, we share some results of our own close reading of McIntosh's canonical text; discuss the limited critical treatment of this text, given its prominence and visibility within educational writing on race, whiteness, and white racial identity; and sketch briefly the sorts of methodological commitments we bring to our work with Mary's and Jessie's stories. We illuminate how white privilege pedagogy demands confession from students and how confession is a dead end for antiracist thought and action. We also explore how McIntosh's conception of white privilege simplifies the complexities of white racial identity and can lead to dangerous misreadings of student resistance.

Acknowledging the initial fruitfulness of McIntosh's ideas, it is time for us to move to more complex treatments of how to work with white people on questions of race and white supremacy and also for new theorizations of the identities and actions white people might take up in the name of antiracism.

Background and Contexts

Reading McIntosh

MCWC meets once a month for two to three hours. When we decided that we wanted (or needed) to make better sense of what was meant by *white privilege*, we began to share personal experiences we had reading and teaching McIntosh's text. Over time, we grew curious about two themes that ran through many of these experiences. The first had to do with a kind of paralysis that seemed to accompany our reading of her work. That is, reading and discussing McIntosh's text did not seem to lead to action—if anything, it seemed to inhibit it. The second theme was resistance to McIntosh's conceptualization of white privilege. But unlike the many accounts of such resistance we had heard in conversations with other antiracist educators and had read in educational research (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Sleeter, 1993), we seemed to be narrating experiences in which the resistance was harder to discount as some straightforward defense of white innocence or supremacy.

We decided that we needed to return to McIntosh's essay and, together, read it carefully. The original 1988 essay contains narrative elements and a list of forty-six privileges that McIntosh associates with being white. Specifically, it names concrete ways in which the social, legal, and economic constructions of race benefits white people in their daily lives, such as seeing whites represented positively in media and school curricula and not targeted or marginalized in social settings because of race. McIntosh (1988) writes that white privilege is "an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions" (pp. 1–2). Her text ranges widely, treating a series of important topics but in little depth. For example, she calls for further exploration of issues such as interlocking systems of oppression and domination and the need for redistributing power and wealth.

In the decades since it was written, this piece has been excerpted, shortened, and distributed by McIntosh herself (2008) and by others in a wide variety of written forms and pedagogical spaces. These excerpted versions tend to emphasize the list of privileges to the exclusion of the more nuanced narrative sections. Despite numerous comments in her original text about how various aspects of it needed to be developed in future work, McIntosh has not, to our knowledge, revised or elaborated on her ideas in the intervening decades.

The more we read the piece together, the more confused we became. Part of this confusion was caused by the fact that the list of privileges really seems to be *just a list*. McIntosh suggests that the privileges might be divided into different categories (p. 10), but she does not tell us how to categorize them. There is little about the order of the list to help us make sense of the key aspects or contours of white privilege.

Further, our confusion was also grounded in how McIntosh describes privilege. First, she seems to assume that lessening privilege for white people would also, in some direct way, lessen oppression for people of color. We found this especially puzzling since a number of privileges on McIntosh's list seem better characterized as human rights, to which she refers as "what one would want for everyone in a just society" (p. 10). In the case of such privileges, it seems that the struggle should be to guarantee them for everyone rather than lessen them for some.

Second, even as McIntosh gestures toward systemic oppression, her text focuses overwhelmingly on conceptualizing privilege as individual and seems to equate individual white people coming to understand their white privilege with overcoming systems of racial oppression. Stated differently, while reading and working with McIntosh's piece might be a consciousness-raising exercise for individual white people, her text provides limited help with understanding and undermining systemic white supremacy. There is no call to activism, unless activism is conceived of as individual white people somehow lessening their own white privilege.

Where's the Critique?

When we went to educational research to help us make better sense of McIntosh's text and our emergent critique, it seemed that nearly every article discussing whiteness in education referenced McIntosh and approached the study of whiteness from the perspective of white privilege. In her review of the broader field of whiteness studies, McWhorter (2005) observes that "no thorough overview of Whiteness Studies ever omits reference to Peggy McIntosh's article" (p. 545). Similarly, Lowenstein (2009), in her extensive review of research on multicultural teacher education, notes the significance of McIntosh's ideas of white privilege to this body of research. As Lowenstein points out, the recurring notion that white future teachers are "deficient learners about issues of diversity" (p. 163) is often grounded in research that documents how these future teachers have "reacted to discussion of White privilege with resistance, anger, or defensiveness" (p. 179; see also Case & Hemmings, 2005; Cockrell, Placier, Cockrell, & Middleton, 1999; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). McIntosh's salience in educational writing about whiteness is indicative of the power of her piece and of the positive ways in which researchers and teacher educators have reacted to it over time.

We found only a handful of articles that question or take issue with McIntosh's central thesis. These pieces question how whiteness and white racial identity are represented in work on white privilege, how little attention is given to the structural origins of privilege, and how confession of privilege seems to exhaust antiracist action.

In her thoughtful piece in *Philosophy of Education*, Logue (2005) observes that white privilege pedagogy has emphasized the "perks" of white privilege without exploring its possible costs. In her effort to recover the insights of critical traditions that "challenge the inherent valuing of privilege as a good" (p. 373), Logue notes that

the driving metaphor for privilege . . . might be thought of as a "free ticket" to access all life has to offer found inside an "invisible weightless knapsack" granted to some at the expense of Others. Anti-colonial and critical social scholars, however, might be inclined to point out that the "free ticket," the "special provisions, maps, passports and blank checks" lead not to the land of luxury and freedom but into a state of dehumanization, "psychic alienation," and "corporeal malediction." And with the rise of "instrumental reason" and new forms of domination, the "privilege" of the "administered individual" is to be a participant in a catastrophic form of liberation, which provides only a hollow semblance of freedom. (p. 374)

For Logue, then, a better way to theorize whiteness and white racial identity is to read white privilege "contrapuntally" (Said, 1994), in a way that recognizes both the perks and perils of white privilege.

Leonardo (2004), like Logue, thinks that the “discourse of white privilege” is severely lacking. Even as he makes appreciative gestures toward McIntosh and her writing on privilege, he is worried that, in the end, white privilege discourse may actually enable white people to *resist learning* more about white racism and “perpetuate a legacy of white refusal to engage racial domination, or acts of terror toward people of color” (p. 150). Thus, for Leonardo, the examination of white privilege must be

complemented by an equally rigorous examination of white supremacy [because] the conditions of white supremacy make white privilege possible . . . As such, a critical pedagogy of white racial supremacy revolves less around the issue of unearned advantages, or the *state* of being dominant, and more around direct processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it. (p. 137)

Blum (2008), in what he calls a “mild critique” of “white privilege analysis,” agrees with Leonardo that inadequate attention has been paid to the “actual structures of racial inequalities” (p. 319). He also criticizes what we noticed in our close reading—that the privileges in McIntosh’s list are not all the same and are elaborated ineffectually. In addition, Blum argues that white privilege analysis tends to simplify and clump together the experiences of various ethnic and racial groups as if they were all the same.

For Blum, the inadequacies of white privilege analysis result in a significant narrowing of what is imagined as possible political projects for white people. In the main, white privilege analysis demands that white people somehow “divest of their own individual privilege” (p. 318). Blum thinks we should ask something different of ourselves as white people:

Suppose we shift from the question, “How can I divest myself of White privilege in my own life?” to the quite different question, “What can I do to make my society more racially just?” That question can lead down very different paths, and lead to quite different antiracist projects that have a different kind of meaning to students who engage in them. (p. 318)

While our critique builds on all these authors’ work, Levine-Rasky’s (2000) article on white privilege pedagogy is probably closest to what we are trying to accomplish here. Levine-Rasky recounts criticisms similar to those of Logue, Leonardo, and Blum, with additional helpful discussions of how affect and various double-binds plague our work on whiteness in education. For our purposes, two problems that Levine-Rasky identifies with white privilege pedagogy are especially important. The first is her observation that this pedagogy tends to reify whiteness as an “objective, observable quality definitive of a distinct population” rather than as a “constructed category that involves contradictory relations to the process of racialisation” and that is “produced by and productive of social contexts of power shaping the relative meanings of whiteness and of ‘difference’” (p. 274). This simplifying, this smoothing out, of whiteness

and white racial identity within white privilege pedagogy is one of the major themes in Mary's story.

The second important problem Levine-Rasky names, but does not explore in depth, is akin to Blum's worry about how white privilege analysis narrows the political projects white people might take up. Levine-Rasky observes that, too often, white privilege pedagogy demands little more of white people than the confession of privilege. Jessie's story helps us explore how this unfortunate result is produced.

Our engagement with educational writing that is critical of how white privilege has been conceptualized helped us better understand some of the power and limitations of McIntosh's text. Our work substantiates and deepens these criticisms, but we also move beyond them by paying close attention to how McIntosh's ideas are taken up, pedagogically, by actual people in particular social contexts. In our work within MCWC, our understandings of white privilege were most challenged, and our labor most rewarded, when we were sharing stories with each other and trying to make sense of what these stories might mean.

Narrative and Method

As humans, we lead storied lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative research examines how we experience and make meaning of the world through telling stories. It assumes that stories are multivoiced, drawn from an individual's past and current experiences, and dependent on the audiences to whom they are told (Moen, 2006). Narrative is thus both phenomenon and method, grounded in and offering a view of life practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 2010).

In our work on white privilege in MCWC, we used narratives from our own lives to highlight troubles that attended both the acceptance of and resistance to McIntosh's conception of white privilege; we used our own stories to "ask questions of meaning, social significance, and purpose" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 120). Our own stories were thus a "mode of knowing that captures in a special way the richness and the nuances of meaning in human affairs," replete with multiple meanings and ambiguity (Carter, 1993, p. 6). Our personal experiences and identities became central to the social construction of knowledge as we blended story with theory in an attempt to analyze the ubiquitous discourse of white privilege.

In concluding their book on narrative and dialogue in education, Noddings and Witherell (1991) asserted that

stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference often generated by samples, treatments, and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course, they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remem-

ber that we are in the business of teaching, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. (p. 280)

In what follows, we focus on two personal narratives to explore some of the ways that white privilege pedagogy limits and even undermines our antiracist aspirations and educational projects.

Confession and Resistance

Jessie's Story

As a young teacher, I sought opportunities to further my education, to explore and expand my notions of effective pedagogy, and to connect with colleagues in my school and district. During my first year of teaching, I heard good things about a professional development program in my district called SEED, so I signed up to become a participant.

I looked forward to our monthly SEED meetings. As a teacher in an increasingly diverse suburban district, I had lots of questions. I wanted to know how to better engage a culturally and racially diverse student population; how to promote family involvement; how to make my pedagogy relevant to students' lives, needs, and interests; and how to better reflect and act on the political and sociocultural implications of my teaching. I didn't necessarily know how to articulate these questions then. Basically, I wanted to be a better English teacher for the diverse group of seventh-grade students in front of me.

It didn't take long for me to realize that SEED would offer me answers to some of my questions or, at the very least, offer a space in which I could air them. I was, then, a bold teacher but a shy student, and I learned the first night of our monthly three-hour SEED seminars that the structure of SEED would be a good fit for how I liked to learn.

That first night, Julia, one of our facilitators and a district teaching mentor, handed the twenty-five participants in my group a notebook, a note card, and a marker. "Write your name on the note card and decorate it with something about yourself," she told us. Then, she had us paste the note card on the cover of the notebook. After that, she had us read Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," an autobiographical poem recalling Kincaid's instructions from her mother on how to be a girl. It starts: "Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry." Next, we wrote our own gendered versions of our pasts using Kincaid's poem as a model. My piece began, "Find a boyfriend. Find a man. Hide the fact that you are smart." We each shared poems with the rest of the group. We did this one by one without commenting on the poems of others.

We did this writing and sharing during each session of SEED. And as an English teacher who believed in writing and sharing, I liked it. We sat in a circle, without tables in front of us, so we could look at one another and listen intently. Each meeting began with an opening check-in where participants

were encouraged, one by one, to share something relevant about their teaching or their lives. Some shared bits about their day, others about questions related to their teaching; some shared stories from their families, and others would pass and listen.

Shy as I was, I began to feel comfortable in this community. Julia and Heather, our cofacilitators, created an atmosphere where sharing our experiences became important content for the course. On the day of our fourth or fifth SEED seminar, the ritual of check-in was put into high relief by an incident that occurred on my way to work that morning.

It was a cold morning, and the sky was still dark. I lived in the urban area next to the first-ring suburb where I taught. I took the freeway to work each day. That morning, as I came up to the ramp lights to wait for my turn to enter the freeway, an African American man approached my car. He motioned for me to roll down my window, and I did. He pointed to a pregnant woman, also African American, standing to the side of the ramp and told me that his car had broken down. He and his wife needed money for a tow and to fix the car. I handed the man all of the money I had in my wallet. As snow flurries began to fall, I drove away and cried all the way to work.

I thought about the incident on and off throughout the day but didn't decide to relay it to my SEED group until the moment we began our ritual check-in. When my turn came, I shared the story about the man and his wife, and again I cried. Heather thanked me for sharing my story and moved to the next person in the circle. I remember the eyes of my colleagues on me, and while I wanted to feel their support and understanding for the power of this incident in my life, I recall wishing that I hadn't shared the story. During our break, Julia came over and thanked me again for sharing. She put her hand on my shoulder.

I can only guess why the incident and its retelling made me cry. I believe I was frightened by the black man walking up to my window in the darkness of morning. And I believe I was frightened even more by my racially motivated fear. Rolling down my window was an act of defiance against that fear. Sharing the story in opening check-in was another act of defiance against that fear, but the retelling left me vulnerable in a new way. I shared my story, and through my tears I tried to make known that the incident moved me not because I felt unsafe or taken advantage of but because I lived a life where I would never have to stand on the side of the road and ask for money. But as I wrapped up my story and Heather moved on to the next person in the circle, I never felt that my words were fully understood.

SEED facilitators refer to the opening check-in and the process of sharing in seminars as "Serial Testimony." In a Q&A with the codirectors of SEED on the Wellesley Center for Women Web site, Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style state (Wellesley Centers for Women, 2004):

Members of seminar sit in a circle or around tables facing each other and speak briefly, timed, for a minute or perhaps two minutes, on a given question. When

you speak for just a fragment of time and listen to others the rest of the time, a kind of database begins to form within the room and teachers literally see what they have been doing more clearly than before.

The goal of this process, shared across SEED seminars around the United States, is to create a democratic space where time for personal testimonies is distributed equally and knowledge is framed through participants' stories, what Style refers to as "looking through the textbooks of our lives" (Nelson, 1991, p. 66).

Although Heather and Julia didn't name it as such to us, Serial Testimony, as demonstrated in the opening check-in, was an important part of every SEED meeting. Serial Testimony allowed us to each share our thoughts on a given topic, issue, or question before opening it to the entire group. This was part of the reason that I grew to feel so comfortable sharing my thoughts on sensitive topics not typically explored among teachers in a critical way. Such topics my first year included gender equity, gay rights, cultural and racial identity, and interrupting oppression in education settings, to name a few. Serial Testimony, in this way, allowed me and other participants to share our initial thoughts and be heard without response and critique from other participants. Not only did I grow to feel confident speaking about difficult topics, but I also began to employ a similar sharing strategy in my own seventh-grade English classroom. I saw this turn taking as a way to build community and promote risk-free participation in my classroom.

White privilege was the topic of our March meeting. It was our seventh session that year. For homework, we read McIntosh's work and were asked to write a response in our journals to the prompt, "What does it mean to be white?" I was moved by the article and felt that McIntosh had articulated something that would change the way I viewed the world and my place in it. In my journal, I wrote, "White means normal . . . Normal has no definition to me. No spirit, no connection to a larger truth, no sense of belonging to something larger than myself." McIntosh was right. I had privilege. And I was ready to confess it in order to rid myself of it.

After my reading the night before, I was excited to talk about the article with my SEED group. We sat in a circle with the "knapsack" article and our journals in our laps. Heather asked us each to take one or two strips of paper and, using McIntosh's list as a model, write on each a privilege that we enjoy because of our skin color. I took two strips of paper and rewrote two of the items that I had included in my journal. I waited and watched the other white educators write on their strips of paper as well. Heather placed a black backpack in the center of the room. When we had all finished writing, she asked us to walk up to the backpack one by one, read our privilege, and drop it in the backpack. Once everyone had read at least one privilege, we could read a second if we chose. I was perhaps the fourth or fifth person to walk up. "No one presupposes that I am undereducated," I read and then dropped my privilege in the backpack. Later I read, "No one crosses to the other side when I

walk down the street.” With a collection of privileges in our group backpack, Heather ended the activity and asked us to reflect on what we had heard.

Looking back, I cannot recall a single privilege from another participant that struck me as more profound than another. Heather, an American Indian, noted that it was difficult for her to participate because she lacked privilege due to skin color, but each of the white participants in our group was able to identify one or two privileges in their day-to-day lives and to drop them in the backpack. The conversation that followed, as I remember it, was one of agreement with McIntosh’s article and her list. We willingly named, shared, and disposed of our privileges. I had entered ready to confess, to rid myself of white privilege. But just as when I had shared my experience of a black man approaching me for money, I later began to question whether this format had resulted in me ultimately being understood—or whether it had actually changed anything.

Confession as (Antiracist?) Ritual Action

In white privilege pedagogy, participants like Jessie engage in practices such as Serial Testimonies, dropping notes with written privileges into backpacks, or forming a group in the middle of the room and stepping forward as privileges are read aloud. These activities can also include reading a “white benefits checklist” and putting “a check beside any benefit that you enjoy that a person of color of your age, gender, and class probably does not” (Kivel, 2002, p. 32). These activities encourage participants to learn how white privilege operates in society and, more specifically, in their own lives.

Frequently, this learning is assessed through a test of sorts that asks white people to document how white privilege operates in their lives and if they are willing to repudiate that privilege. With Levine-Rasky (2000), we interpret such activities as *ritual confessions*. These ritual confessions are, of course, pedagogical. They teach. As antiracist educators and researchers, we must question the functions of these confessions and what they ask white teachers like Jessie to understand and do.

Before taking up these questions, however, we want to make clear that we are not asserting that examining white privilege has no value; nor are we dismissing these practices outright. Jessie valued her work in SEED, and those of us who are white must indeed examine the historical, social, and cultural constructions of what it means to be white, how that whiteness is privileged, and how it shapes our lives and relationships. The construction of whiteness is, as McIntosh asserts, meant to be invisible, normal, and natural. Understanding and challenging this is important.

However, there is an undercurrent to all of this talk about white privilege. McIntosh’s writing on white privilege focuses on the individual, starting with the word *privilege itself*, from the Latin *privus* (one’s own) and *lex* (law), meaning to exempt oneself from laws applied to others (Gordon, 2004). White

privilege pedagogy retains this individualistic focus. Each white person is to conceptualize white privilege individually and personally.

Focusing on the individual rather than the structural obscures the social, economic, and political constructions of whiteness. White privilege pedagogy does not address the historic, economic, political, social, and cultural roots of the racial system that led to the creation of a category of “white” marked by privilege (Jacobson, 1998; Roediger, 1991). White privilege is not the cause of racial differentiation and structures; it is the effect of the socially, politically, and economically constructed system that we call race.

Examining white privilege outside of this system may serve, as Leonardo (2004) worried, to mystify the structural nature of racialized and inequitable systems. While we certainly cannot pretend that white privilege is not a part of this system, addressing it alone and as the property of individual white people without an understanding of *why* it exists will not allow us to dismantle the systemic aspects of racism and reshape individual relations. Such a focus on the individual stalls racial analyses at personal levels without moving them toward structural or institutional understandings.

This individualizing is further reinforced through confessional practices. Through confession, participants like Jessie are not engaged in the kind of discussion, reflection, conversation, or questioning that could lead them to a different understanding of racism. Certainly, the Serial Testimonies Jessie describes provided a space that might be incredibly important for coming to better understandings of how race and whiteness work in our society. Unfortunately, within such rituals, the “textbooks of our lives” are opened but are not, in the end, read carefully or critically. Participants cannot talk back, question, or engage in dialogue; ironically, they may, as in Jessie’s experience, fill up a knapsack they were supposed to be unpacking. In a bizarre way, the ritual of confession of white privilege—designed to address how whiteness is underanalyzed and misunderstood by white people—creates a space without room for much analysis and understanding.

This problem is apparent in Jessie’s experience of telling the story of her morning commute. Given the assumptions and format of Serial Testimonies within SEED, her story could only be heard as a confession. But was it a confession, really? What was she confessing? Was she even trying to confess? Knowing that she would never be in the socioeconomic situation of asking for money on a freeway ramp, and even confessing this, did not lessen her worries or increase her understanding of the material consequences of race.

Jessie’s story also raises important issues about racially motivated fear and even the desire to overcome or defy that fear, which in turn suggests questions about differences in our control over and responsibility for enactments of white privilege. For example, confessing that you assigned negative judgments to and were afraid of a black man and confessing that you will not be the target of surveillance at a clothing store are not the same. The former is

an action for which you can attempt to take individual responsibility; the latter is something over which you have little individual control.

None of this was talked about—nor could it be—within the confession rituals of white privilege pedagogy. There was no space for Jessie to struggle to understand why she felt vulnerable, both on the freeway ramp and in the SEED classroom. And this means that everything just stopped.

Confession does not end or change privilege. Instead, this type of confession can only fulfill a “redemptive function” that enables the release of the “bearer of white privilege from the responsibility of action” (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 276). Confessing white privilege might lead to emotional catharsis (Thandeka, 2001)—as Jessie stated, she had a desire to rid herself of privilege and subsequently feel relief. But confession can also lead to inertia and misunderstanding. When she told her commuting story to her colleagues in SEED, Jessie struggled to articulate what upset her and had the sense that no matter how well she articulated her experience, it couldn’t be heard. Her story is so much in excess of the confession of white privilege.

At some point, participants like Jessie may come to realize that simply naming and confessing white privilege does not give them much insight into their lives as racialized beings, nor does it intervene in changing the structures that privilege some lives over others. White privilege pedagogy does not point toward action that can lead to structural change. In the end, ritual confession *is* the action against racism that is imagined and demanded within white privilege pedagogy.

Mary’s Story

Teaching the multicultural education class required for teacher licensure in a small, predominantly white university in the Midwest gave me the opportunity to explore issues of diversity with future teachers, many of whom desired to return to the small rural towns where they had been students. When I considered the role of teachers in rural classrooms, and their potential to interrupt cycles of oppressive practices, the responsibility to facilitate transformative change had a sobering impact—I had to do this right. I wanted my students to see, and perhaps feel, in a vicarious sense, the impact a history of racism, discrimination, and prejudice has on individuals. I hoped that the activities, readings, video clips, experiences, writing, and discussions would evoke emotions of empathy that I was certain would lead them to action. I wanted to move them toward a pedagogy of social justice.

I remember how my life changed when I read the work of the Reverend Thandeka (2001), Lisa Delpit (1995), Peggy McIntosh (1988), and others. The very idea that I had never recognized privileges associated with race, that I had never even considered what it meant to be white, seems impossible to me now but reinforces for me how important it is for my students to understand this concept.

It has been encouraging to see that my students also had that sort of eye-opening experience while reading McIntosh's (2008) prominent "knapsack" article. Indeed, the word *eye-opening* was used in the responses of one-third of the sixty students who read it as a homework assignment in a recent semester. Students in the course identified largely as white, and they had grown up in small and mid-sized towns in rural areas, with a few students from suburbs of urban areas. This "eye-opening" reflective reaction was the result I had hoped the article would have.

I am embarrassed to say how easy it is to think of yourself as some sort of superhero-teacher-educator, when student feedback inflates your self-image with comments like this:

As for this class, it is already more than I ever imagined it would be! I believe that I have grown immensely since the start of the semester, which has only been about 5 weeks! I feel like EVERYONE should take a class like this . . . yours in particular! The videos and readings are incredible and I find it hard not to be asking questions about myself and the way I do things. This class so far has made me want to be a better person and has shown me ways in which I can improve already with multiculturalism . . . I feel I have literally changed my whole perspective.

But before I could congratulate myself on a job well done, I was stopped short by another student's comment: "This is asinine."

The article is about the perceived problem of "white privilege" in America. The author created the article after reflecting on her own studies into the realm of male privilege and apparently she came to the realization that she received special treatment whether she wanted it or not just by the color of her skin. According to the article most white people are oblivious to the fact that they are receiving this treatment and the only way that it can be stopped is for them to recognize it and see it as a problem. The author also saw fit to include a list of some everyday things that she sees as being the direct result of white privilege.

It was early in the semester, so I had to think about who this student was. And yes, I could picture him. John was the one student clearly uncomfortable with some ice-breaking activities the first day of class, the one who arrived early to class and sat with his arms crossed, almost defiantly, and who rarely made eye contact. John's response continued:

My reaction to this article is that it is pretty far out there. The author is obviously a feminist and is into studying inequality amongst men and women so I guess it is only natural that she would find something else to make a big deal about when she got bored with gender inequality. I do not think that she makes a very legitimate argument for the existence of this so-called "white privilege." When some of her most compelling arguments include the availability of band aids that match skin color and being able to see people of her race on TV I find it hard to give her much credibility. I mean has she ever heard of BET (BLACK Entertainment Television)? . . . In my opinion the whole premise of the article is

asinine and without any real way to get meaningful data it cannot be proved so I am inclined to dismiss it as the ramblings of a bored feminist just looking for another way to stir up some fire. I refuse to be made to feel like I am wrong or be made to feel like I should apologize to anyone for being white or male.

His was not the only reaction that surprised me. Another student wrote:

My reaction to this paper was basically if you are a white male you should be ashamed of yourself. Even if what happened a hundred years ago wasn't done by you and you have tried to be accepting to all, you should still be ashamed. When I read the list of white privileges, to me it seemed like the data was taken from the 1970s or 1980s. Maybe, I have lived in a culturally censored world growing up but the privileges did not seem to be accurate.

While these comments took me aback, I have to admit that these were not the first negative reactions to McIntosh's piece I've ever had. The "I'm being blamed for being white and male" (and sometimes Christian) narrative had popped up before. In my mind, I would simply label these students as outliers, racist perhaps, and with just a touch of uneasiness I would dismiss their reactions that challenged my own (I cringe at this now). But there was something about John and his responses that compelled me to better understand his perspective.

As I got to know John, I learned that he was a hard-working individual from an extremely small town in a somewhat isolated rural farming community. Coming from a family of farmers, he was dedicated to pursuing a career as a middle school/high school tech ed teacher. He identified as poor and grew up in a community that lacked diversity of almost any kind—racial, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic.

For John, reading McIntosh was like some kind of joke. In his experience, being white had not offered him any kind of advantage that he could see. John described coming to school as a first-generation college student, barely able to pay tuition. When he arrived on campus, he saw people of color for the first time ever, and he thought that most were better off than he was—better clothes, nicer cars. Throughout the semester, I took many opportunities to talk with him, to learn more about him, and to get him to expand on some of his responses. But it was really his final paper, a reflection on the course, that called me to rethink McIntosh's work.

One of our first assignments we had in this course was to read the article by McIntosh, *Unpacking the knapsack of white privilege*. This really just irked me from the start and set the tone for the next few weeks of class. I could find very little in the article that I thought was of consequence and I got the feeling from it that it was more about trying to make white males feel guilty for things they most likely have no control over. Being a white male I got a little worked up about the whole list since I don't feel like I have anything to apologize for and I did not see much on the list that led me to believe there is a real problem with white privilege.

While he admitted there were other issues from class he still had trouble with, he ultimately felt that the class “had some merit” and that it “was worth the time to go through it.”

It had been interesting for me to observe John’s engagement with the class. Through discussions in and after class, and in his response journal, I could see significant changes throughout the semester. John was visibly moved as he described to small-group members a film he had recently seen on race and racism in the United States. He was stunned by historical readings on the removal and genocide of native populations, including in our region, and changed his “get over it” stance on the use of Native American mascots in schools. In a group project, John assumed the position of advocate for recent refugee students and demonstrated his understanding of the often-traumatic circumstances surrounding their arrival. John’s journal reflected a changing attitude in many areas, but especially significant was how he started challenging mainstream/conservative myths surrounding immigration. Ultimately, John expressed feeling “prepared to tackle multicultural issues” and how that would make him a better educator in the sort of small community in which he planned to teach.

That I had so completely alienated this student by using the McIntosh piece was, to use my students’ words, an eye-opener! Suddenly, the knapsack Peggy McIntosh carried seemed to be filled with privileges only certain kinds of white people enjoy, and I, like McIntosh—and unlike John—was one of those kinds of white people. And since my experiences were not necessarily the same as my students’, I needed to take a closer look at a text that has been considered a standard in my area of teaching.

John’s responses to McIntosh’s text and his work throughout the course made me ask: If students don’t see what McIntosh sees, does that make them racists? If they are white and poor and struggling, and if they have difficulty seeing advantages of being white, does that make them racist? Really? To assume that McIntosh speaks for all of us is, well, asinine!

Being Good, Refusing to Confess

For much of her story, Mary’s narrative is recognizable. We have read stories like this before. Indeed, Jupp and Slattery (2010) would say that it follows a “well-worn pathway for representing White, mostly preservice” teachers, a pathway that “focuses on respondents’ false consciousness, interventions, consciousness raising, and critical conversion” (p. 457). Mary noted the weight she felt in being responsible for making this narrative happen, the “sobering impact” of needing to “do this right” and “effectively facilitate transformative change” that would help her students “see, and perhaps feel, in a vicarious sense, the impact a history of racism, discrimination, and prejudice has on individuals.”

Both the acceptance of McIntosh’s ideas of white privilege by some students and the rejection of them by others are commonplace. The students

who accept McIntosh and confess their privilege are on their way to “critical conversion”—they are good white people and, by extension, are on their way to being good white teachers. (Although, as Jones and Enriquez [2009] remind us in their account of the four-year journeys of two teacher education students, we might certainly be wrong about this.) Those who resist might still confess, and much of the drama in research on white future teachers is created by the question of whether they will or will not, in the end, confess their privilege.

With Jessie’s story, we argued that demands for confession end up undermining rich conversations about race and racism, as well as forestalling antiracist action. Mary’s story helps us see how, in addition, the confession of white privilege is wrapped up with students having to prove, somehow, that they are good white people. To be a good white person means, among other things, not being racist. White people often have an immense fear of being called racist. Avoiding this label may mean continually worrying about being perceived as racist and then, when necessary, confessing when one’s limitations are realized.

In classrooms, such confessions can be documented and used as evidence to “prove” that one is antiracist. As we see early on in Mary’s story, they can be used to also prove that something good is happening in our multicultural teacher education courses. Mary was heartened when students confessed privilege and reported racial and moral conversions, as with the student who said, “I have literally changed my whole perspective.” Good white students, then, earn our gratitude as teacher educators and get rewarded for performances like these, in which they report their white privilege and thank others for helping them recognize it.

One of the crucial things that Mary’s story helps us understand is how McIntosh’s work can function as a filter that sorts and sifts white people in order to identify those who will not confess their privilege and who are therefore still racist. Those who resist might be asked again, be given another chance to confess; but if they continue their resistance, then they have shown their true, racist selves. We ask you, our readers, to consider this question in terms of your own work and experiences: How many white students in teacher education courses and how many participants in professional development programs have been written off for questioning or criticizing McIntosh’s ideas on white privilege?

This is where Mary’s story may become strange and unrecognizable. She was tempted to use McIntosh’s text as a way to detect and interpret John’s resistance as she had seen countless research articles interpret and label it—as a sure, straightforward sign of his racism. But instead, she tried to get close to the student in order to understand his perspective. And in the end, shocking though it may seem, she never made him confess his white privilege. She realized that through his engagement with other parts of her curriculum, he

found alternative routes to her goal that students understand the impacts of racism and prejudice and be moved to action.

Mary also considered seriously this student's critique of McIntosh's account of white privilege. Let us grant that John, in his early responses to Mary's curriculum, was appropriating and rehearsing all sorts of conservative rhetoric—rhetoric often heard in relation to political correctness and rhetoric that, unfortunately, we all hear every day. For example, he complained about “bored” feminists and about how they are always creating controversy about unimportant things. His claim that the main purpose of the article was to “make white males feel guilty” echoes continual assertions made by various conservative writers (Buchanan, 2011). But Mary's story also suggests that McIntosh's very personal list of white privileges might not have had that much to do with John's personal, material, day-to-day existence. Mary, as a teacher educator, remained open to John's class background and what it might mean for how he responded to her curriculum. She recognized that John's identity was complicated.

Important work has been done in education and psychology on white racial identity (Helms, 1993; Howard, 1999; McIntyre, 1997). However, this work, in the main, has not paid much attention to how whiteness intersects with issues of social class, gender, and sexuality or how it functions differently over time and place. McCarthy (2003) worries that, in our educational research and writing, whiteness is too often imagined as a sort of “deposit, a stable cultural and biological sediment that separates whites from blacks and other minorities” (p. 131). In contrast, McCarthy argues that whiteness and race are historically and socially variable, and that

[we] cannot understand race by studying race alone. You cannot understand the social, cultural, or political behavior of any group by looking at their putative racial location to the exclusion of a more complex examination of their social biographies and the complex and constantly changing social context of the modern world in which we live. (p. 132)

In her teaching and in her response to John, Mary chose to remain open to the complexity of his experience and identity. She found that there were ways other than white privilege confession to get him engaged in thinking about race and racism.

Mary's story, then, is not just about her students but also about herself, as both a teacher and a learner. Mary wanted the multicultural education course to wake her students up and move them to become teachers who work for social justice in their communities. Her desire to teach future teachers to “interrupt cycles of oppressive practices” was based on her own eye-opening experiences of coming to understand her white privilege. Because of these experiences, she selected a variety of texts, including McIntosh. She felt elated, like a “superhero” even, when she heard from students that they

had been moved, that they felt changed, and that their eyes had been opened. The readings worked as Mary had hoped. McIntosh's reading had moved some students to see the workings of white privilege in day-to-day life. She was "surprised," however, when not all of her students were converted by reading McIntosh. Although tempted to do so, Mary felt that she could not ignore these resisters. Her commitments to a progressive pedagogy demanded that she listen to and allow for a multiplicity of perspectives. Her story reminds us that white privilege pedagogy can be dangerous when it leads to essentializing readings of racial identity and student resistance. John could not read himself into McIntosh's depiction of a white person with privilege. However, through additional course material, a sense of connection to local history and place, and his resistance to McIntosh's ideas, his own complexity and intersectionality were provoked. And he was moved.

Conclusion

Once we realized how little criticism there was of McIntosh's conceptualization of white privilege, we started to talk about McIntosh's work as *authoritative*—with reference to how Bakhtin (1981) characterizes "authoritative discourse." Bakhtin explains that authoritative discourse could be religious, political, moral—the "word of a father, of adults and of teachers" (p. 342). He observes that authoritative discourse was not supposed to be played with or broken into smaller pieces and argues that

authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders . . . It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it . . . One cannot divide it up—agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third part. (p. 343)

Bakhtin helps us understand, perhaps, why we have sometimes felt like our work with McIntosh's text is somehow inappropriate or scandalous. With Jessie's and Mary's stories, we have illuminated and questioned the demand, within white privilege pedagogy, to accept or submit to McIntosh's ideas wholesale, as a "compact and indivisible mass." We have inquired into the ways that our own histories and social worlds and those of our students might frame our responses to McIntosh's representation of white privilege. We have asked whether it might be okay to "agree with one part" and "reject utterly" another.

Our work here suggests two primary implications for future antiracist teaching and research. First, and in solidarity with Leonardo's (2004) argument, we dramatize the need to displace white privilege from the center of antiracist work in teacher education and to focus instead on white supremacy (Casey, 2011; Davis, 2011). Furthermore, there is a great need for detailed and thoughtful accounts of what actually happens, good or bad, when we pursue such work in university classrooms and professional development. In our

conversations with other antiracist educators, we have found that these educators have sometimes developed over time—through trial and error, reading, reflection, and hard work—sophisticated approaches to using McIntosh’s text *in relation to* other curricular materials that focus on how white dominance is secured in American society. But they have rarely written about their teaching.

A wonderful example of the sort of writing that is needed is provided by Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore (2002), who begin with the problem of student resistance to their teaching but, as with Mary in her work with John, are not content with detecting racism in their white students. Instead, they reimagine and transform their purposes, curricular materials, and pedagogical practices. They begin to emphasize “macro-issues involved in racism and privilege”; pay attention to “intersections of race with gender, class, and sexual orientation”; and require students to plan for and take up antiracist projects outside the classroom (pp. 248–249).

Second, our work points to how McIntosh’s characterization of white privilege tends to simplify and flatten how we think of the racial identities of our white students and ourselves. That is, within white privilege pedagogy, white people are “addressed” (Ellsworth, 1997) as little more than the smooth embodiment of privilege, leaving little room for exploring what it meant that Jessie, for example, both feared the black man approaching her car and rejected that fear in herself and wanted to overcome it. Likewise, there is little room to examine the significance of Mary’s student John being both white and poor. For Berger (1999), the challenge is how to “advocate the idea of whiteness as a useful classification for examining white power and prestige without ignoring its limitation in defining and describing its subjects” (p. 206).

A small group of critical education scholars has taken up this challenge of reconceptualizing white racial identity in ways that are generative for antiracist teaching. Jupp and Slattery (2010), for example, have called for a “second wave” of white identity studies and have focused on describing and theorizing the “creative identifications” of progressive white teachers. Another route has been to portray white racial identity as “doubled” (Seidl & Hancock, 2011) or profoundly conflicted and ambivalent (T. Lensmire, 2008, 2010, 2011; A. Lensmire, 2012; Thandeka, 2001).

McIntosh’s conception of white privilege has been at the center of antiracist thought and action in teacher education. We argue, however, that McIntosh’s ideas simplify white racial identity in dangerous ways. We also demonstrate that white privilege pedagogy demands confession, but that confession is a dead end. Finally, we propose that white supremacy needs to replace white privilege as the central concern of our antiracist efforts. Much work remains to be done.

Notes

1. Names of students and other characters in the narratives are pseudonyms.

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