Book Review

Lensmire, T. J. (2017). *White Folks: Race and Identity in Rural America*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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Citation: Shannon, P. (2017). Book review of "White folks: Race and identity in rural America." *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 32*(9), 1-3.

The 2020 U.S. census (if funded) is likely to confirm the increased racial diversity of rural (urban and suburban) America, pressuring "whiteness" to assume more aggressive strategies to maintain its status and privileges. At present, we suffer many such examples, from the overt demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia; to the veiled efforts to re-segregate schools in Gardendale, Alabama; to the nearly opaque increases in use of the word "nigger" in Google searches that run along the western side of the Appalachian chain. *White Folks* can help rural researchers and teachers make sense of these and other daily practices, see the complexities within the identities of the people engaged, and recognize the roles of place in learning to be "White."

Lensmire believes in people, democracy, and justice. He assumes that because all people possess equal moral worth they should have the right to participate as peers with all others in social life. He understands "whiteness" as a (perhaps, *the*) fundamental barrier to the American people constructing and enjoying just communities and democracy. To uncover how he (and others) learned to be "White" in rural northern Wisconsin, he appropriates Antonio Gramsci's notion of critical elaboration, "knowing thyself as a product of the historical processes to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (p. 9). At this moment, I can think of no more important text for teachers and teachers-to-be to read and discuss than Lensmire's short, carefully theorized book.

Spoiler alert: Although hopeful, Lensmire does not provide readers with a happy ending for any individual or the country as a whole. Rather, he sees possibilities for new critical elaborations within individual and group struggles to extend the rights and benefits of U.S. democracy to all.

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The *Journal of Research in Rural Education* is published by the Center on Rural Education and Communities, College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802. ISSN 1551-0670

Lensmire's prose is strong and empathic, telling stories that are both simple and incredibly complex. His methods are (auto)ethnographic, and his subject is public pedagogy—the ways public space, popular culture, and everyday practices teach us what we should know, who we should be, and what we should value. Over time, he gathered stories from middle-aged farmers, teachers, factory workers, nurses, truckers, and shop owners who live in his home town, the place where they and he learned to be "White." These lessons always involve real and imagined people of color and lead, he argues persuasively, to "deeply conflicted, ambivalent" understandings about the construction of their White racial identities (p. 42). In the "Forethought," Lensmire places his study, tracing the land and its ownership from an Ojibway creationist tale through French colonization, the local and later consequences of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Pittsburgh German Settlers Club purchase of 3000 acres in 1856, the influx of Polish immigrants before the turn of the century, and the slow modernization and post-modernization of the rural up to the present. Over four chapters, he and the seven participants in his ethnography sift through past and present life events and beliefs to develop levels of understanding about how whiteness works on and for them.

In the first chapter, Lensmire shows readers his methods of analysis, offering three frames with which to make sense of his award-winning performances surrounding the 1978 state high school oral forensic competition. He had performed an adaptation of the Disney version of "Da Tar Baby" from *Song of the South*, offering contrasting oral and corporal interpretations of Uncle Remus, Brer Fox, Brer Bear, and Brer Rabbit. His first frame employs time and place, helping readers to see popular culture's seductive powers and its uses and abuses of rural themes, desires, and pleasures. In this light, his performance becomes an entertaining act of belonging—of solidarity with "his" people. The second frame names his performance as a minstrel show and historicizes that art form within the context of the production of American wage laborers between colonial times and the Civil War. Only White men (and women and children) were eligible for this status,

which "freed" individuals to sell their labor power to sustain themselves, placing them below owners but above old-world serfs and new-world slaves. At first, minstrel shows were speculative representations of the lives of "dependent" others, projecting the desires and dispositions of preindustrial lives on them. From this perspective, Lensmire's act reproduces and reaffirms "whiteness" as a marker of distinct and preferred status in compensation for the new mechanized disposition and physical demands of wage laboring. His third frame troubles a raced history of minstrelsy, finding in it traces of envy as Whites "play at" other ways of thinking, moving, and being that disrupt and extend performers' and audiences' possibilities of being. Examined this way, Lensmire understands his choices as forms of resistance to the confines of community, schooling, and whiteness. Overall in his brave analyses, whiteness becomes a means of solidarity, oppression, justification, and desire.

Chapter Two introduces Delores and Frank—the former to explore fear in whiteness and the latter to discuss what lies beneath polite White society after civil rights legislation. Delores relates the disciplining of her racial imagination during (and after) her urban student-teaching semester in the late 1960s. Hers is an intergenerational tale in which her parents warned, "if you're in trouble, you do not come home," and decades later, her grown daughter chides "where were you when" people were struggling for civil rights. At the time, her parents' threat rendered her an uneasy, but remote, observer of protests, riots, and the violent responses of police, fearing that any level of involvement would leave her alone in the world—a fear that remains as her daughter seeks to engage. Frank tells of his anxiety over his efforts to appear non-racist in public, while participating in highly racialized discourse in the privacy of his poker nights with friends. He struggles with which are his true beliefs and feelings, wonders where he might discuss his confusions, and hopes that his young children will develop more consistent commitments to egalitarian values. Troubled about their racial status, both Delores and Frank acknowledge their whiteness, but take few overt steps toward acting on its consequences for others or themselves.

In the chapter "We Use Racial Others," Frank, Robert, William, and Stan explore the roles of stereotyping and scapegoating in negotiations of their identities. Lensmire detects both a defensiveness and an openness in their remembrances and actions. Frank recalls the duplicity in his Uncle Norman's (and his father's?) reluctance to extend rights and benefits to racial others because the past is past, and their contemporaries are simply greedy. Robert explains how he idolized professional athletes of color as a boy, following their exploits, reading their biographies, and training his body to resemble theirs. Struggling within a declining rural economy, William imagines his family in continuous competition for resources with all racial others, worrying about the hustle of the other to gain unfair, and even official, advantage. Stan expresses empathy for people of color because he feels that they, like he, are judged according to surface features and not by the depths of their characters. Across these stories, imagined people of color become foils for self-understanding and justifiers for actions (or inaction).

The final chapter presents counternarratives that disrupt gently the whiteness of this community. Erin and Libby offer "warm" stories about the first time they realized they were White. Erin describes a special day on which a "goodwill" group of Black children visited her Catholic elementary school in the late 1960s. She distinguishes herself from the group by hair texture, skin color, and jump roping skills, while remembering her joy in playing and sharing with visitors in the "bright" sun. Libby's story centers on her first encounter with a real Black person. Her mother invited a Black college student selling encyclopedias door-to-door into their living room for a conversation with her older male siblings and her. She recalls that the salesman expressed surprise at the hospitality—"It's really refreshing" because "This is very white up here"—and reports that the talk continued outside the house for "a long time" without her mother. "There weren't any walls there" (p. 72). Beyond the notion that some authorities sometimes work to create environments that connect racial groups, Lensmire finds these stories significant in understanding these White narrators' later acts to connect with racial others while at work. Libby breaks with her fellow factory workers in order to train (and befriend) newly employed Hmong Americans, and Erin differs aloud with her medical caregiving peers over issues of racial profiling in patients' treatment, resisting accusations of being "too trusting." In these small acts, Lensmire finds some hope.

While relating the story of others, Lensmire weaves his understandings of what is being said—sometimes multiple versions of the same story—testing theories of whiteness. Some are confirmed to varying degrees. His use of Ellison's work is artful, demonstrating that "whiteness" is a cudgel of oppression, but also a defensive condition brought on by the psychic effects of the racial (and gendered) contradiction between the equity implied in the U.S. Constitution and everyday practices. Lensmire affirms and troubles Thandeka's thesis that U.S. norms and institutions actively and effectively discipline individuals' (and groups') actions to assuage those psychic effects, showing slight tears in totalizing consequences of whiteness. To theorize how Whites use people of color in the constructions of their identities, Lensmire plays with Fiedler's and Ellison's notions that Whites project their worries about their moral and ethical selves onto racial others, casting off their concerns, but also infusing their desires. The resulting cloth of these chapters gives democratically hopeful meaning to Lensmire's last sentence: "We, white people, are racist,

deep down. But the deep down is neither monologic nor finished" (p. 87).

Although *White Folks* does not address explicitly the roles of schooling in past, recent, and current teaching of whiteness in this rural community, Lensmire shows how that community's history deposits, nurtures, and troubles traces of racial identities among its White citizens. Whether or not racial differences are apparent in their communities, rural teachers and would-be teachers should have the opportunity to take up such critical elaborations of their own racial identities and to consider their teacherly positions of and on whiteness, White privilege, and White supremacy within increasingly diverse rural populations. As Delores's story shows, there are no innocent, colorblind bystanders. Surrounded with texts that speak to the historical, social, economic, and political realities of U.S. racial inequality, Lensmire's book should be at the center of rural teacher education curricula.