Abstract
The persistence of white privilege and escalating racism in the U.S. challenge religious educators to analyze the roots and destructive potential of both. This paper draws on historical and contemporary analyses in dialogue with personal reflection and the oral histories of two leaders who seek to recognize and live beyond their own privilege. The purpose of the study is to describe the landscape of white privilege and analyze the interplay of public and personal dynamics. The analysis reveals the educational potential of personal narratives and structural analysis in understanding and transforming white privilege into humble work for justice.

The thesis of this paper is that white privilege is a persistent feature of the landscape of racial tensions in the United States, and that the personal and public work required to address the influence of such privilege requires deep understanding and transformative responses, reaching far beyond shame and guilt. To feel shame or guilt as a white person is inevitable and necessary, but it is not enough. It is only of value if it is a starting point for radical and continuing change. To make generalized claims regarding the pernicious guilt of white people is also inevitable and necessary, but only if it leads to more nuanced analyses of white privilege, white normativity, and internalized perspectives and attitudes that shape the lives of white people, young and old, rich and poor.

Wisdom in Personal Reflection
I begin with a personal reflection – a necessity in the work of white normativity and privilege and in the work of overcoming racism. As seen in the brief literature review below,
much writing on whiteness, privilege, race, and racism takes the form of memoirs. The human complexities tell stories that transcend platitudes, “oughts,” and simplistic analyses. The literary form of memoir is also critical for honest self-reflection, which is critical if people are to examine such powerful and often unseen forces as white normativity and privilege.

As a child who grew up in the white Southern middle class on the United States, I was not even aware of the privilege that I had, simply by being white. I did have some sense, however; my conscience was not fully dead. Why would African American and white people need separate drinking fountains, waiting rooms in the train station, schools, and restrooms? I asked myself these questions, but did not question them deeply until I was in high school. What I did question deeply was hateful language. Nothing in my socialization made me immune to the vitriol of derogatory terms used against African American people in my native Louisiana or against Latino/a people in my father’s native Texas. I did not hear such terms in my home, but I did hear them occasionally in my extended family and I cringed. I hated those words and those sentiments, and yet I did not become a staunch protestor until I was in college and beyond. I began to grow my conscience slowly, and also to grow in my awareness of the complicity with which white people (me included), at least in the United States, engage in racist structures, policies, and practices, often without conscious awareness. Indeed my change was slow in part because, as a white person, that was a luxury that I could afford. I was not forced by my life experience to face the deepest ruptures of racism.

As I became more astutely aware of my white complicity, I also felt more hopeless about myself as a white person. One such moment was years ago when I was teaching a class as a very young professor. An African American man in the course frequently argued with what I presented, protested the syllabus, and resisted participation with others in a listening or interactive way. He often dominated class discussions with his protests, and I sought mostly to accept his interventions and weave them back into the class or simply acknowledge that he had a good point (he often did). He was a force in the class, and I was intimidated. I reached out to him, but none of my efforts succeeded. As a white woman, I felt terrible shame in my whiteness and was quite sure that anything I did to quell his protests would be perceived as a racist act, and could well *be* a racist act. Thus, I muddled through, thinking throughout the semester that I was not teaching the course well due to my own hopeless racism. Many years later, another African American man who had been in the class said to me as we were reminiscing about our pasts: “You know we were really frustrated with you in that class. We asked ourselves, ‘When is she going to put this student in his place so he will stop disrupting the class and interrupting our learning?’” I was shocked. I suddenly realized that my own shame in being white had led to self-doubt that had quelled my ability to act wisely as a teacher. I continue to have such experiences, often in my educational leadership role. I have not completed my quest to live honestly with my whiteness and be a humble partner with others in the work of transformation. I keep trying, but my debilitating shame and guilt can still at times overtake my wiser self.

How can I be more fully aware of my own attitudes, actions, and values exercised in the world? I can trace some of the more profound moments of discovery but, in this paper, I will pose a newer challenge. I have long been active in multi-, inter-, and many-cultured work, almost always working with a team or another person of an ethnicity different from mine. I have engaged in deep conversations; worked in shared projects; read much of the literature; attended lectures and conferences; conducted ethnographic, interview, and oral history studies across
cultures; helped establish a multicultural research and resource center at a time when that was more relevant than today; partnered with persons of color to support their work behind the scenes; and worked intensively (and hopefully with some modicum of wisdom) to support increased diversity and equity in my home institutions. One would think that I would have learned a thing or two, and I have; however, the major thing I have learned is that I know little and what I know can easily be distorted by my not knowing, or by my witting and unwitting misuse of white privilege and power.

In sum, I have now been engaged in intentional work on multi- and many-cultured understanding and relationship-building for some 40 years, and was engaged in more general, less focused efforts before that. I continue to learn how much I do not know, how much my humility is tinged with shame and guilt that undermine my ability to act more wisely than I do. I am also struck by the degree to which the world has changed, sometimes in slowly building more just structures, values, attitudes, public declarations, and rights protection. Yet even the most significant and effective changes have severe limits, and the most positive aspects of the justice movements can too easily deceive people into thinking that we have reached a new and better place. I awake every morning to signs of persisting, growing discrimination, injustice, and oppressive, life-destroying values and attitudes. The pernicious, hate-filled attitudes and actions in U.S. white cultures are often covered with a thin veneer to hide or disguise them, even from the white persons and communities that perpetuate them. Such changing contexts pose new challenges for white folks in the U.S. who seek to live beyond their own white-privileged assumptions and actions.

For me personally, I have made new discoveries after my long years of working to build relationships and just systems in my personal life and in the ways I described above. I have discovered that my voice and actions are often misguided and unwelcome, and that self-examination and self-transformation are needed. I have discovered that, in the present moment, my voice needs to be muted or silent much of the time in order not to mute others’ voices; yet, I also need to speak boldly in words and actions and to discern when, why, and how to speak out. These are my responsibilities as a human being, a Christian, and an educational leader, namely to be humbly bold in words and actions. I need to contribute whatever I can to building healthy communities grounded in dignity, and to reshape social structures within my context and in the larger public sphere. What I need to live into that vocation is vision based on honesty, self-awareness, perpetual learning, and discernment of the complex and ever-changing realities of the communities in which I live, teach, and lead.

**Wisdom in the Human Community**

An increasing range of voices address white normativity and privilege directly and indirectly. This paper does not offer a thorough literature review, but it engages with diverse approaches and perspectives, revealing nuances and complexities in the words of public commentators, historians, biographers, and social analysts.
What is the nature of racial classifications and prejudice in the United States?

The public commentators are multiple, and I will offer only a sample. One of the classic narratives of the historical and social-psychological dynamics of white normativity is Thandeka’s Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America (2000). In this careful analysis, she reveals the interplay of religion, race, and class (money) and the many social and psychological factors that contribute to a sense of whiteness and to the dynamics of self-contempt. She opens with narratives of white Americans and their memories of small defeats, which create “the disconcerting feeling that something about one’s own white identity is not quite right” (2000, 1). She elaborates on the effects, “This misalignment with one’s own identity could serve as a definition of shame” (ibid.).

Curiously Zeus Leonardo (2009, 1-3) also begins with a narrative, his own childhood story of an encounter that awakened him to racial difference and a lifelong quest to make sense of that experience and those of countless others in schools and beyond. His quest led him to use the tools of critical social theory to analyze race and whiteness; to analyze the complex interactions of race, class, and education in order to pose a more honest and real multiculturalism; and to explore such topics as “the myth of white ignorance” (107-126). For both Thandeka and Leonardo, the interacting historical, social, and interpersonal forces form the complex phenomenon of whiteness, and what I am addressing in this paper as white normativity and privilege. Others describe these dynamics through memoirs (Irving 2014; Vance 2016), always revealing the complex interplay of diverse factors of race, social class, region, and life experience.

These several analyses reveal the internal and external complexities of whiteness, which Cheryl Matias (2016) analyzes complexly. She argues that whiteness evokes strong emotions of shame, denial, disgust, grief, abuse of colonial power (as in surveillance of brown bodies), and narcissism, all playing roles in educational structures and pedagogy. She thus encourages deep probing and critical analysis of emotions for the sake of transforming white teachers, their approaches to teaching, and the educational structures. She describes this work as “a project to reaffirm our humanity by recognizing the racialized state of our emotionalities, its association with the permanence of whiteness, and how education can be one avenue that can lead us down a path that liberates our communal heart” (6). These analyses have been expanded historically by others (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Billings 2016), and they have been expanded through socio-political analyses of race in the United States (Hill 2017) and the global dynamics of violence (Le Tran 2017). The work to date points to the complexities, interactions, consequences, and resistances built into ideologies of whiteness and their influences on the life practices of white people.

The analyses continue in the work of social activists and public commentators as they evaluate what is needed to restore the promises of democracy and social justice. One leading contemporary analyst and spokesperson is Rev. William Barber, who leads the Moral Mondays movement. Barber (2016)’s analysis focuses on the present and future, though he analyzes history to inform the present. He is convinced that the urgent work for this moment is to build coalitions across race, social class, and social issues in order to work together for political and social change. He narrates his own story of leading what he calls a “Third Reconstruction” in the U.S. According to Barber, the first reconstruction followed the first (and partial) Emancipation Proclamation, which declared the emancipation of slaves in ten states, ushering in the
Reconstruction era and lasting until 1877. The second reconstruction was the Civil Rights movement. Both of these movements had positive effects; yet both evoked counter-reactions, resistances, and efforts to tear down and retreat from advances that had been made.

Rev. Barber draw on historical analysis and memoir to make his case for “fusion movements,” bringing people together in the work of justice, healing, and reshaping social, economic, and political structures. Such fusion movements have counterparts elsewhere. For example, Thandeka addressed the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 1999 with “Why Anti-Racism Will Fail.” She argued that race cannot be understood as a phenomenon separate from social class, and she protested over-simplified claims that all whites are racists and need to be taught about their racism so they can confess. Her argument was not a naïve excuse for whites, but a call for whites to take responsibility for being more than a category. The category of whiteness should not be used as an excuse to oversimplify realities of race and isolate those realities from economics or from the social-psychological hurts, angers, and prejudices that fuel social destruction. More important, whiteness should not be used as an excuse to avoid the harder task of taking responsibility for social change, nor for patronizing actions. Thandeka urged people to learn, to develop empathy for others, and to organize communities and coalitions that reflect and enact a larger social vision. To place Barber and Thandeka together as fusion- or coalition-builders is not to argue that they are the same, but to emphasize the stark destructiveness of racial prejudice, discrimination, and violence, at the same time emphasizing that the analysis should not be the dead-end of the story; it should be the motivator to join with others in effecting deep cultural change and, in the case of Barber, immediate political effects.

What does it mean to be white?

The complexity of this question is great, especially given issues of social class, regionalism, and cultural histories. I will focus here on social class since that has been identified as a major force in white rage (in the case of economic struggle) and the multiplication of white privilege (in the case of wealth and other forms of privilege). A white woman from Appalachia asks why she is not included in the analysis of racial oppression, given her experience of stark poverty and debilitating social forces within her family, community, and larger society. A young white man growing up in an impoverished section of a large U.S. city asks why he is identified with white privilege when his experience is anything but privileged. Some recent authors have analyzed the experience of growing up poor and white within families and communities that are poor and white, carrying generations of trauma as the legacy of social oppression. Nancy Isenberg (2016) tracks the history of class in the U.S. over a period of 400 years in a book with the compelling title White Trash. J.D. Vance (2016) approaches the subject in the form of a family memoir in his Hillbilly Elegy. His memoir chronicles the generations of suffering in a family that, even when parts of it became economically middle class, suffered from the neglect, rejection, and oppression of their poor white culture, deeply embedded in their lives and harshly judged by the larger society.

The issues raised in these historical and memoir accounts are intensified in the social structures that ignore and oppress all persons in the working class. Tex Sample (2018) speaks to this concern in Working Class Rage, arguing that the working class (of all racial and ethnic backgrounds) has been neglected in the U.S. and is enraged. He analyzes political and legal history, social studies of the working class, and stories of individuals and communities,
uncovering the complicated realities of working class life and the systems that oppress working people. He points to the failings of the political systems and citizenry to attend to the concerns of working people for just wages, secure patterns of life, and political voice. The oppressive forces on the working class, and the policies that favor the wealthy are strangling working people, at the same time that they are labeled as white and often grouped with people who have far more security, wealth, and power than they. Sample concludes his analysis with proposals for a vision of the common good, combined with practical action.

Of course, whiteness includes people born into privilege as well as those who are born into poverty or economic struggle. John Wise (2011) and Debby Irving (2014) reveal some of the formative intersections in their lives between whiteness and other forms of privilege, and some of the internal and external barriers they faced as they sought to build racial justice in their own contexts. Their efforts were often thwarted by their own hidden (and racist) assumptions and values. In fact, Wise attributes his writing of White Like Me

… to an admonition by people of color I knew in New Orleans to ‘take inventory’ of my life, to get clear on why I cared so much about racism, to understand my own motivation for challenging it. Until I did this, they insisted, my own work would be unfocused, my contributions minimal, my willingness to stay in the struggle transitory at best (Wise 2011, viii).

Irving (2014), similar to Wise, woke up to her own racial assumptions and deeply buried prejudices through a series of “wake-up” encounters over time, some that she sought and some not. In her efforts to build cross-racial relationships and her efforts to build racial justice, she had failed to see her own fears and dramatic mistakes. Facing herself was critical and, in that deeply personal work, she was helped by hard experiences that woke her up to her own racism. She was also helped by studying the history of people of color, and by interacting with people she knew who shared their own raw stories of injustice and oppression. Irving increasingly developed the courage to look inside herself (the inner work), and then to rebuild her outer work.

The stories of Wise and Irving can be seen in contrast with other white people of privilege who never questioned their privilege, their superiority, nor their dehumanization of others. One stark example is the story of two powerful, religious men, John Evans and John Chiverington, who, without any provocation, led the Sand Creek Massacre on November 29, 1864, killing 230 people, mostly women, children, and elderly persons of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. Gary Roberts (2016) chronicles the story, opening with an introduction to the two white-privileged men:

The two men most responsible were two powerful, respected leaders in the Methodist Episcopal Church: Territorial Governor John Evans and Colonel John Chiverington. The Church never condemned the massacre and never held these two men responsible (vii).

This is one story among many in the history of the United States in which two men of white privilege, combined with political, military, and ecclesiastical power, acted without concern for people who were non-white and, in that moment, completely without power. Such is the saga of white privilege. It haunts people like Tim Wise and Debby Irving who want to build racial
justice, and it feeds the power of those like Evans and Chiverington who blatantly disregarded the lives of people they deemed of little value.

**What can we learn from human life stories?**

I have already noted that much of the writing about race and white privilege is in the form of memoirs, which is itself revealing. Life stories have power to reveal complexities that are often hidden by statistics and historical dates. Metrics and information do reveal in other ways, but complex human dynamics are easily lost. Thus far, I have focused primarily on the narratives of white people as they probe their whiteness and life stories (Vance 2016; Wise 2011; Irving 2014). I have also attended to historical accounts, another form of narrative (Hill 2017; Billings 2016; Isenberg 2016; Roberts 2016; Bonilla Silva 2001). These personal and historical narratives stand alongside other research that features critical social analysis (Sample 2018), and alongside landmark works that analyze educational structures and practices (Leonardo 2009; Matias 2016). Interestingly, even the social analyses contain elements of personal narrative and analyses of personal formation.

To these works, I have added the social analyses of two African American leaders – Reverend William Barber (2016), whose book is itself a memoir of his leadership in a movement toward justice, and Thandeka (2000), who narrates individuals’ lives to interpret the dynamics of race-consciousness and racism. The richness of these life stories, together with the authors’ penetrating analyses of the narratives, uncover the potential of narrative to reveal and interpret complicated realities. Thus, narratives are rich sources for discovering and analyzing white normativity and privilege. They reveal the dynamics of persons’ lives as they interact internally and externally with cultural values, social class, race, ethnicity, and interpersonal relationships.

One other set of literature is very important to add here, and that is the life narratives of people of color, such as Barber, Thandeka, and Leonardo shared above. Some of these are narratives of the past, such as Zora Neale Hurston’s (2018) newly discovered manuscript, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last ‘Black Cargo’*. *Barracoon* is the story of Kossola, known as Cudjo Lewis, a survivor of the last ship known to have crossed the Atlantic bringing slaves to the U.S. The book is based on interviews conducted by Hurston with Cudjo in 1927, and it chronicles his life and his dreams for repatriation in Africa. His dreams were finally redirected into the founding of Africatown, a town for Africans, which was “a haven from white supremacy and the ostracism of black Americans” (135-136). Blackness and whiteness were intertwined in this slavery and post-slavery narrative, as they were in earlier decades and in decades since.

Contemporary story-tellers also share their distinctive journeys and struggles, and the journeys and struggles of their people. Ta-Nehesi Coates (2015) shares his life story and personal reflections in direct conversation with race. Michael Dyson (2017) preaches a sermon to white America. Both men mix personal narratives with cultural analysis and imagination. Dyson includes two major sections, “Repenting of Whiteness,” (43-124) and “Being Black in America” (125-194), revealing yet again the intricate relationship between white normativity and privilege with the experiences of being black in this country. Again, life stories are the teacher – the intersecting life stories that evoke emotions and invite people into honest reflections on themselves, their cultures, and social systems, alongside the complex economic, political, and religious forces that shape their lives.
Toward the Future: Promising Insights for Education

The limitation of an incomplete paper is the inability to weave all of the threads together. On the other hand, a dialogue between my personal reflections and the literature suggest at least six major insights for educational structures and pedagogy. I name these briefly now, and look forward to REA discussions that will help to nuance and expand upon them.

(1) **Racial consciousness and the work of racial justice are never complete.** The more you know and the more you accomplish, the more you discover that you do not yet know and the larger are the gaps where dreams are not yet realities. Education is a work of cultivating hope, perseverance, and courage.

(2) **Narratives are a major source of learning,** both for self-knowing and for cultural consciousness, for building relationships and for building justice. Educationally, we have many opportunities to shape story-rich environments for students and our own learning.

(3) **The arc of history bends toward justice** (King citation), but some efforts are seriously misguided and even demeaning and destructive of human lives. The journey of reflective and effective work toward justice is a long one, but giving up is not an option.

(4) **Encounter education creates opportunities to face hard questions and realities, to learn from others, and to take courage to learn and grow.** Encounters can be encouraged through human and ecological relationships, reading, film, and many other means.

(5) **Empathy and compassion are critical goals of education** (Moore and Kim, in press), and they can be cultivated in the process of daily human interactions and through narratives, conversations, meditative practices.

(6) **Liturgies and rituals are important contributors to acts of repentance, healing, and inspiration toward courage and strength.** This last point is less directly stated in the literature, but it is a powerful force in religious education. The deep emotions discussed in this paper, the hard grip of shame and guilt, and the realities of destructive forces in our inner selves and our outer work suggests the significance of appropriate liturgies and rituals in diverse human communities and educational settings.

These insights are threads for further study and discussion, but even in their nascent form, they offer promise in a world torn apart by racial hatred. The next steps will be critical if the promise is to become reality.

**References:**

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