

# A Narrative on Whiteness and Multicultural Education

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As an educator, I have a dual responsibility for developing and actively undertaking a process of introspection and self-examination regarding my race and other dimensions of my identity. First, I have a responsibility to myself to constantly work to examine my identity and how it informs the lenses through which I see and experience the people and world around me. Second, I have a responsibility to the students, workshop participants, and community groups I reach in my teaching and facilitating to explore how my identity development affects their experiences in my classes and workshops. If I fail to address either of these responsibilities, I also fail to be the most effective educator – and most effective person – I can be.

For the past five years, I have been a facilitator and instructor for Multicultural Education courses and workshops designed to engage educators in this process of self-examination. In these forums, I have regularly requested that individuals describe from their personal experience what it means to be “female,” “Jewish,” “Latino,” or other identity descriptors. Through facilitating the exchange of these experiences and advocating for the introspective process of exploring them, I have worked to build atmospheres conducive to prejudice-elimination and self-growth among educators.

Yet, despite facilitating such experiences for others, I have failed, until recently, to model a similar process regarding my own identity – particularly my identity as a white person. A variety of factors within my personal experience influenced this.

One such factor is a lack of other people doing self-reflective multicultural work who identify primarily with groups in power. As Derald Wing Sue (1993) has pointed out, those white people who become involved in multicultural work tend to do so for academic reasons rather than self- or social-development. Such “multiculturalists” are often, as I have been, resistant to exploring multicultural issues introspectively because doing so may elicit a sense of responsibility for working toward transformation of self – perhaps the most difficult, exhausting work of all. As a result, I was exposed to very few people representing groups I identified with who modeled a self-reflective approach to Multicultural Education.

A related factor contributing to my longtime failure to examine my whiteness was a lack of direct consideration for the identity development of white people and other “majority” groups in the field of Multicultural Education. In most of the classes, workshops, and conferences I participated in, conversations revolved strictly around the experiences of individuals from traditionally oppressed groups. Likewise, the literature on Multicultural Education has traditionally focused on the experiences of oppressed groups (Howard, 1993). While I recognized (and continue to see) the essentiality of creating atmospheres in which historically unheard voices can be shared and heard, my own self-development depended on another dialogue. In this dialogue, I would stop relying on people of color to teach me what it means to be oppressed. I would take ownership and responsibility for examining my role in racial oppression, my prejudices, my assumptions, and how all of these are affecting my teaching and my students' learning.

The third, and most influential, factor in my lack of process for self-examination regarding my whiteness was what I now call the “luxury of whiteness.” Because I have never been subject to discrimination on the basis of my race, I have the luxury of being able to easily disengage or distance myself from a discussion on race or racism. In fact, I had received so many messages from television, my school textbooks, films, and other media growing up that whiteness was “the

norm” that I did not, until recently, see myself as racialized at all. The logic of luxury was clear – because I had no race, I did not have to do the self-examining work on my racial identity.

That is the ultimate luxury of whiteness: the ability to see myself as neutral and thus excuse myself from any responsibility for addressing racial issues in education, society in general, and most importantly, myself. Even as a facilitator and instructor of Multicultural Education courses and workshops, I was able to avoid addressing my own issues by assuming either the role of advocate or the role of cultural theorist. Being was easier that way – succumbing to the pressure of academia which, as an institution, is terrified of self-examination, and so discourages it through insisting on the scientific method and objectivity.

Even at the height of my immersion into academia, as I maintained comfort in the luxury of my whiteness, I recognized the contradiction I was speaking, breathing, thinking, and living. But because I had settled into a comfort zone lined with the luxury of whiteness, I, the person who had facilitated introspective processes for other educators, needed a facilitator of my own, to ask me the difficult questions and push me to challenge myself.

In the summer of 1996, Gene-Tey Shin, a close friend and colleague of mine with whom I had done some teaching and facilitating on Multicultural Education, demonstrated for me how important such alliances are. While preparing for collaboration on a book and a series of workshops, Gene-Tey and I engaged in a series of lengthy, often mentally-draining, dialogues on our individual conceptualizations of Multicultural Education and how we fit into these conceptualizations. Our conversations lasted over the course of many meetings, many hours, many days, and many weeks.

In the midst of these conversations he asked me a question that I had been asked a thousand times before: “How did you, as a white person, get involved in multicultural work?”

Having been asked this question so often, my response came as if scripted: “It’s the way in which I can make the world a better place. It’s my contribution to society.”

“But why do you do it?”

Indignant, I answered, “I have to do it. I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“But why do you have to do it?”

I remember distinctly, after offering two or three more “saving the world” responses, still being challenged by Gene-Tey to answer from an inward place instead of an outward place. I sat there, with my head buried in my hands for what seemed like an hour. A myriad of experiences flashed through my mind: experiences with my father, with my teaching, and with my own development--or lack thereof.

“I have to do this because without it I feel incomplete, unaware. I have never done anything through which I experience more opportunity for personal growth. Until I began working in the area of Multicultural Education, there were entire realms of existence that I was completely unaware of and shielded from. But most importantly, I didn’t know myself before I started doing this work. I have to do it for me.”

This experience reminded me that, while Multicultural Education is partially about addressing issues on a societal level or in the education system overall, my process for being a truly effective multicultural educator had to begin with a renewed dedication to address the “self” half of my responsibility duality. I had to immerse myself in a systematic process of examining how my experience as a white person informed my teaching and facilitating as well as the lenses through which I saw my students.

## Finding and Exploring My Whiteness

Around the same time Gene-Tey and I started collaborating, I was preparing to write my dissertation. I decided to do a study on the experiences of white men involved in multicultural teaching and facilitating. But with my new dedication to a self-reflective paradigm of multicultural work, I was not content with the idea of continuing my practice of facilitating a discussion of racial or gender issues for other people as I sat comfortably by and recorded their stories for my academic gain. I was determined, despite academic perceptions of what makes good “scholarship,” to fully immerse myself in the process-- to, in effect, be a case study in my own research.

In order to piece together a case study on myself, I needed to develop methods for self-interview. Because I collected the narratives of the other participants through tape-recorded interviews, I decided to record my narratives on audio tape. For two months, whenever I recalled a story from my life that may have contributed to my racial identity development, I recorded myself telling the story as if speaking to a friend. When a tape recorder was not accessible, I recorded recollected stories in a journal. Some of the stories I recorded had been locked away in my memory for years – even decades – just waiting to emerge at a teachable moment:

Now that I think of it, there were no people of color around us in Forest Ridge, either. It's odd that I never asked my folks about it because at that time my two closest friends from school were people of color: one was Guatemalan, and the other was African American. I don't remember ever wondering about it. I just remember loving having so many kids around to play with.

Many of my memories were very painful and emotional, both because the events were unpleasant when they occurred, and because I began to realize that, through most of my life, I had no understanding of the significance of these experiences:

I was driving Aaron and Rich home from school or basketball practice, I don't remember which. Rich--he was white--was sitting up front with me and Aaron was in the back. Rich started talking about a girl in school whom he had dated who was dating someone else who happened to be African American, and a friend of Aaron and me. Just telling this story now puts a knot in my stomach...it's very difficult. So, I guess Rich forgot that Aaron was in the back, and he referred to this girl as a 'nigger lover,' right there, right in front of Aaron and me. I didn't have the nerve to look in the rearview mirror for Aaron's expression, but then Rich must have caught himself because, after a few seconds, he turned to Aaron and said, 'No offense. I didn't mean you--you're not a nigger. You know what I'm talking about.' All Aaron could say was 'uh-huh.'

I also recorded what I remembered of my reactions to these various events that shaped my internal experience of being white.

It was horrible, just so painful. I dropped Aaron off, and didn't confront Rich at all. I just took him home. As I drove home, I remember this incredible pressure filling my body until I just burst into tears. I wasn't even crying because I knew Aaron was hurt. I was crying because I realized that there was a piece of Aaron's existence--a considerable piece--that I had no concept of, and probably didn't want any concept of. I always thought we were so alike, inseparable, and in some ways we were. But this incident suddenly placed a race on Aaron for me.

After recording all of the stories I could remember during that two month period, I organized them chronologically, producing an autobiographical narrative of my white identity development.

### Case Study: Me

The block quotes in the following excerpt from my personal autobiographical narrative case study are pulled directly from my journal and audio tapes. As I wrote up the study, I added the pieces between the block quotes to maintain the narrative's flow.

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Until high school, I had no conception of my whiteness, or of race in general, as a social or political issue. Though my anger toward my father for his racially prejudiced jokes and comments drew

images of Aaron, Andy, Adolfo and others in my head, when I was with my friends of color, I failed to see their race as a point of identification for them.

I literally never thought about race as an issue. I mean, I knew we were different, that we looked different. I even knew that our parents talked differently. But I saw this as a matter of culture, not at all as a matter of racial difference. These were kids I spent all my time with--all my time. I always thought we were so alike--all athletes, all into video games, all big eaters. It was easier to focus on that, I guess.

Likewise, my whiteness was not a point of identification for me.

I can't remember ever referring to myself as 'white' or thinking about how I was racially different from people of color during that time, until late in high school. I was ignoring everyone else's race all my life, and ignoring my race to an even greater degree.

While I recognized differences between myself and my friends of color, I saw these purely as cultural and visual.

I knew we looked different, and I knew we ate different foods and that we used some different language. In fact, my mother has told me that I used to come home marveling at the wonderful foods Adolfo's mom made. I called it "Guatemalan food." I was amused by how Adolfo's mother would say something in Spanish, and he'd answer in English. This was how I saw them as different. I didn't have the least recognition that race may have been an issue for them in a political or social sense.

My Tae Kwon Do school was as diverse as my peer group, yet I still failed to understand that these differences were, in part, racial.

Sa Ba Nim [Master Lee] really stressed this idea of family and togetherness. We would sit around--this incredibly diverse group of Asian Americans and Asian natives, African Americans and African natives, Latinos, and everyone--with our arms around each other, we would hug each other, we would meditate together. In my eyes--in my head--it was some sort of deracialized utopia. I really considered the people there my brothers and sisters. I loved it. Anyway, I didn't have any clue that, in all likelihood, when some of these people left the school, their race was very much an issue. I didn't have a clue.

Until high school, I had little awareness of race as a social or political issue, and was at a stage of total unawareness regarding my own white racial identity...

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Another incident involving Aaron occurred during our senior year of high school, increasing my awareness of race as a social and political issue.

Before school, Aaron and I, and whoever was with us, would hang out, just walk around and socialize. We were walking toward the main hallway one morning, and I looked up, and a group of African American guys were standing in front of us. These were guys we both knew. They were a couple years younger than us, but we played basketball with them after school and hung out with them during school sporting events. So Aaron and I stopped and one of the guys--I believe it was Darrel--stepped forward, right in front of Aaron and said, 'You hang out with all these white people. You're not black. You have black skin, but you aren't black.' The entire time, I was just looking down at the floor, I couldn't even look up. Then, they just walked away, and Aaron and I remained standing there in the hall. There must have been people around us, scattering to get to homeroom, but if you asked me then, I would have sworn we were the only two people in that hallway. After a few seconds, Aaron said, 'I'll see you at lunch,' and hurried off.

Working through this incident in my own mind became a turning point in my awareness about the social and political dynamics of race on an individual level.

At that moment, I didn't feel anything but confusion--I was stunned. It was weeks later before Aaron and I discussed it. But in thinking through it, I began to see much more clearly what Aaron's race meant in terms of our relationship. With this and the incident with Rich I really started to understand that Aaron was African American--that this race was part of his identity and his experience.

Even while I came to recognize that Aaron, Andy, Adolfo and my other friends of color identified with a race, I continued to fail to see myself as racialized...

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As I was coming to terms with my whiteness, and the concept of people being racialized in general, I remained in denial about the significance of my whiteness.

So I was white. I was a white person who, through most of my life, had friends of a variety of races. It was the classic 'I'm white, but some of my best friends are black' attitude. Of course, race was of great significance to people of color--I had come to terms with that--but for me, there was no history or politics behind it, no socialization or privilege. I didn't deny that I was white anymore, but I denied that my whiteness shaped me in any way.

Later in the semester, one of my professors assigned Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege and Male Privilege" paper (1988).

One thing I was really touched by that first semester, when I was taking Multicultural Education as a student, was reading Peggy McIntosh's paper on white and male privilege... I've read this paper probably twenty times now, and it still hits me pretty hard. So, Peggy McIntosh compiled an incredibly long list of things that comprise her "knapsack of white privilege". She can go into stores without being followed around, she can go to board meetings and be around people of our race, she can find greetings cards with people that look like us, and on and on. I'm reading it saying 'Yes, I can do that, and that, and that, and that,' all the way down the list. Then it hits me. I remembered Aaron telling me a story about being followed around in a store near campus and all these other stories that coincide with the list. I read the list again. My eyes were welling up as I read it the second time because here was something that should have been so obvious to me--so obvious... But I didn't see it, or didn't want to see it...

At this stage of my awareness, I recognized my whiteness and began to understand the significance of whiteness. Still, I avoided discussing these things in an introspective way, choosing instead to focus on them as social or cultural phenomena. I took this approach to graduate school where, even as a facilitator for the Multicultural Education class, I spoke about white privilege in abstract terms, on a cultural or social level...

A series of events during graduate school brought me to re-evaluate my approach to exploring what it meant for me to be white. The first of these occurred when my parents moved into their third house in Sterling, Virginia.

A year or so into graduate school, they moved into this beautiful new house on the outskirts of Sterling. It was Christmas or Thanksgiving, I can't remember which, but my sister and I were out in the front yard throwing the football. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two young African American kids playing in a yard across the street and a few houses down. Actually, I think they were also throwing a football with their father. As my sister and I kept throwing the football, I couldn't take my eyes of these kids. I didn't really know why I was so surprised to see them there until later that night. I was in bed, reading or doing a crossword, and I realized, 'Hey, that is the first family of color that has ever lived in the same neighborhood as my parents.' That's what was so surprising.

At that point, I started to recall our previous neighborhoods, the lack of people of color, and our moving patterns.

All I could think of was 'white flight...white flight.' We lived in Sugarland, then moved to Forest Ridge at the same time as most of our neighbors. When we lived in Sugarland, there were no people of color living around us--none in my classes, either. Now that area is heavily populated by African Americans and Latinos. In effect, I realized that my parents had the privilege to move to an area they wanted to live, and be surrounded by people that looked like our family looked. It was this crazy separation for me--that I was so used to having diverse friends, but not at all used to coming out of my parents' house and seeing families of color. There's still a lot for me to think about there...

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That summer, I worked for the Housing Division at the University of Virginia. I managed a research project, supervising thirteen employees, three of whom were African American women.

Sitting in the office one day--which was actually just a computer lab, so it was very open--three African American women whom I supervised approached me. One of them, who had worked for me the summer before, just walked up and asked, 'Paul, you're intimidated by black women, aren't you?' I was dumbfounded. My reply was something like, 'What do you mean?' Well, they described for me how they perceived me as being uncomfortable around them. Of course, I had fancied myself as someone who really valued diversity, who made connections with anyone and everyone, so I was devastated. I felt lucky that I was approachable enough for them to bring this to my attention.

It was during that summer that I began developing ideas for a dissertation. I was considering doing something about multiculturalism and the Internet or multicultural awareness of teachers, but these two events were so powerful that I knew I had to do something focused on my own awareness. I remember Gene-Tey saying at one point, 'Write whatever it is you have to write. Write about whatever is burning inside you.' So I said, 'Well, here I am doing this multicultural facilitating, constantly asking everyone to think about what it means to be whatever they are without asking myself the same thing.' So that became my dissertation topic, exploring what it means to be white and a male and doing multicultural work.

I am currently in the process of exploring for myself what it means to be white. In doing so, I am continuing my process of white identity development...

#### Lessons Learned and Self-Recommendations

Engaging in the process of recording, then analyzing, my own racial identity narrative has been the most difficult, emotional, exhausting endeavor I have ever undertaken. It has also been the most important endeavor, digging into my personal history and piecing together the person – the educator - I am now. The result was a rich series of lessons about who I am and about the self-examining process in general. These are summarized below.

#### Lessons Learned

1. The power of narrative and autobiography. The most immediate lesson I learned was how powerful narrative can be as a tool for self-development and growth. I was amazed by the way in which my various stories fit together to create a larger picture of my development. Stages emerged through the timeline of my experience, allowing me to explore what sorts of events moved me along the continuum of awareness, both in terms of my whiteness and of the construct of race overall. And most importantly, by telling my stories, I owned my experience and took responsibility for it. I was not constrained by a set of predetermined response categories on a survey, and did not simply attempt to fit my experience into someone else's modality of white identity development. I located my issues and in doing so located personal opportunities for further growth.

2. The origins and development of my "lenses". I began the study with an understanding of lenses – that how I view or judge other people is a function of my own experience and place in the world. Yet, shielded by the luxury of my whiteness, and safe from racial oppression, I had remained comfortably unaware of how my lenses were tinted. As I challenged myself to internalize this concept, I developed a basis for better understanding my relationships with individual students and colleagues. I learned that my lenses were tinted by a number of positive and negative experiences: growing up in all-white neighborhoods, having racially diverse circles of friends at school, specific experiences regarding Aaron and other friends, joining a fraternity in college, etc.

3. My relationship with the luxury of whiteness. As I wrote my own case study, I watched the luxury of my whiteness play out. My experience with the luxury and my definition for the luxury were one in

the same: I relied on it heavily without recognizing it was there. Until I began writing the study, I had relied almost entirely on people of color to teach me about race and racism, as if I played no role. My understanding of race was wholly based on what I knew about the experiences of people of color. My whiteness gave me the luxury of talking and thinking about race from a distance, even though I was the person who most desperately needed to be self-reflective.

4. The contextual nature of my racial identity. I found that my process of self-awareness was steeped in both external and internal contextual contributions and challenges. For example, externally, I have always attended racially diverse schools but lived in racially homogeneous neighborhoods. Internally, I have fought to reconcile the racial prejudices of some close relatives with my tendency to be part of heterogeneous social circles. This highlights the essentiality of engaging in a personal process of self-examination and exploration regarding whiteness – such contextual factors are not spoken for, and therefore not examined, in the existing literature.

5. The illusion of “color-blindness”. I used to buy into the same theory of color-blindness that many educators continue to lean on today. “I don't see colors, I just see students.” I learned that this was a tool I used to deny the importance of race. I also learned that it was not true. I do see race, and I see it through the lenses and from the place of luxury I have as a white person. I was only color blind to the extent that I denied the significance of my own whiteness – what it means to me as well as what it means to my students and workshop participants. Just as I had ignored my whiteness as a key ingredient in my identity and being, taking a color blind approach would mean ignoring a piece of the identity of a student, family member, friend or colleague. Such an approach is neither possible nor desirable.

In order to continue my process of self-examination regarding my whiteness, I developed a list of recommendations for the continuation of my process toward self-awareness and introspection in light of my position as an educator and facilitator. These are listed below.

#### Self-Recommendations

1. To be an effective educator, I must constantly model a process of self-examination. It is no longer sufficient for me to ask others to invest themselves in self-reflective activities about what it means to be female, African American, Jewish, or poor without simultaneously investing myself in such a process. As part of this process, I must recognize and openly take responsibility for my luxury of whiteness, my assumptions, and my prejudices and how these might affect my interactions with my students and colleagues.

2. I must model a process of self-examination in my contributions to the literature. In reviewing the literature for my dissertation, I found that, with few exceptions, the authors who advocated for self-examination in white educators failed to employ a research approach that modeled it. By identifying myself, telling my story, and making myself vulnerable, I both equip the reader with a greater understanding of the perspective I bring to the research and I demonstrate the process I am advocating. It is not enough to write articles describing what other people need to do to be “multiculturally competent.” Instead, I must accept the responsibility that comes with being an educator, continuing to practice what I teach even if it goes against the grain of traditional academia.

3. I must make a point to directly address the experiences of white people in my teaching and research on Multicultural Education. In order to do so, my approach must not be in the spirit of blaming or encouraging guilt. I will rededicate to facilitating and participating in experiences in which I and those I work with collaborate towards developing greater awareness of how my position in groups of power informs my habits as an educator and the experiences of the people I reach. I can no longer focus my teaching only on the experiences of people of color, in effect giving them the responsibility to teach me and other white people about oppression. Instead, I must work to promote an approach to Multicultural Education practice and research which challenges the

tendency to excuse the participation of those who most desperately need to be part of the conversation.

4. I must continue my process of self-examination, and begin to more deeply explore the other dimensions of my identity: gender, sexual orientation, religion, social class, etc.

With these lessons learned and self-recommendations, I have become refocused on internalizing the essentiality of awareness I advocate in my teaching. My students, sensing my dedication and struggle for self-growth, have responded in kind. The more vulnerable I am willing to make myself, the more vulnerable my students are willing to make themselves. The result is growth for all. Still, the most important result of the study for me was not the list of lessons learned or self-recommendations. Instead, it was the realization of how much I still have to learn about my whiteness and other strands of my identity, and how they affect my teaching. Neither I nor the world around me is ever static, and the constant flux is a reminder to me that I must continue to assign energy to self-examination if I am to be the most effective educator and person I can be.

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**Fuente: Critical Multicultural Pavilion [en línea]**

[http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/edchange\\_narrative.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/papers/edchange_narrative.html)