

**Thandeka, *Learning to be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999), 169 pp.**

Studies in whiteness are a relatively new theoretical discourse which began in the 1990s. Whiteness studies are trying to recognize various possibilities for understanding the way in which white bodies inform and engage the world. Educator Zeus Leonardo at University of California—Berkeley says that “whiteness is a racial discourse, whereas the category of ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color.” Whiteness studies are categorized in two main camps: Whiteness abolitionist and Whiteness reconstructionist. David Roediger is the leading voice in the white abolitionist movement asserting that: “It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false; it is that whiteness is nothing but oppressive and false. Roediger proposes a process for whites to become “race traitors.” Whiteness reconstructionists postulate a rearticulation of whiteness. Educator Henry Giroux says: “Race increasingly matters as a defining principle of identity and culture as much for white students in the 1990s as for youth of color in the 1970s and 1980s. Race significantly frames how white youth experience themselves and their relationships to a variety of public spaces marked by the presence of people of color.”

Dr. Thandeka, a Unitarian Universalist scholar, falls into the whiteness reconstructionist camp. What was engaging for me was Thandeka’s entry point. She enters into whiteness studies discourse from a pastoral care perspective. Imagine that whiteness is viewed as heaven, something not yet realized, but longed for. In *Learning to be White*, Thandeka says that the process of becoming white is filled with many seemingly, small inconsequential defeats and abuses that damage the psyche of the child. Thandeka claims that a form of child abuse is the initial step to becoming white. That is, the white child knows something is wrong when they do not understand the racial clues they receive from their primary care giver(s) however, they have no framework with which to guide them to understanding whiteness rules, so they internalize that something must be wrong with them.

To try and understand the pervasiveness of Thandeka’s argument, play the Race Game that Thandeka presents—the Race Game has only one rule. For the next seven days use the ascriptive term white whenever you mention the name of one of your Euro-American cohorts. Thandeka says that African Americans have learned to use a racial language to describe themselves and others. Euro-Americans have learned racial language to describe others. Their own racial group, however, goes unnamed.

Thandeka argues that Euro-Americans are the victims of a type of “violence” that produces shame in learning to be white. She bases this on hundreds of narratives that she has collected. Thandeka says her collected narratives are “stories about children and adults who learned how to think of themselves as white in order to stay out of trouble with their caretakers and in the good graces of their peers or the enforcers of community racial standards.” The following is an example:

When Jack was five, his parents gave him a birthday party and invited his relatives with their children. He remembers going to the gate of his backyard and calling his friends over to join them. His friends, black, entered the yard. Jack became aware of how uncomfortable his parents were with the presence of his friends among them. He knew he had somehow done something wrong and was sorry.

Thandeka says that abuse occurs in three areas: (1) the psychic region that, in abuse, separates the self from its own feelings and sense of inner validity; (2) the residential ghettos to which the vast majority of the colored residents are invariably consigned in U.S. cities and towns; (3) the interplay between the child's inner world and external material world.

I asked myself this question: Why are the black residential ghettos in the United States ugly? Perhaps ghettos are not necessarily ugly because the people who live there are poor. Perhaps ghettos are a reflection of whiteness shame, guilt, aggression, and forbidden sexual desires imbedded in the whiteness versus blackness binary relationship. Whiteness demands that white people become better and better at being white. However, the bind exists that they will never achieve the heaven of whiteness because whiteness is perfect and they are defective. The process of becoming white inflicts the feeling of being inherently flawed.

The classical and traditional way of criticizing a scholar, such as Thandeka, is by claiming "bad scholarship—not enough use of primary sources." It is more difficult to incorporate into one's belief system that it is not just people of color who are damaged emotionally by white racism, but also white people who are emotionally damaged by white racism. The process of learning to be white, indeed, the psychological damage that happens, because subordinating the "other" is the work inherent in learning to be white, makes it difficult to read this analysis, and may be the best argument in favor of reading this work.

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