

## What is racism? - Ijeoma Oluo

It was an argument with a coworker that started where many arguments with coworkers start nowadays, on the Internet. This coworker had posted a meme about how poor people should be given drug tests if they want to get welfare benefits. You know the kind of post I'm talking about, one that sends a message like "If I need a drug test to get a hardworking job, you should have one to get the free stuff my hardworking tax dollars are paying for."

I've seen these memes countless times and they are never anything less than a gut punch to me. I pointed out that as someone who had grown up on welfare and was subjected to this attitude her entire childhood, this sort of stigmatization really hurts poor people who are just trying to survive. Poor people shouldn't have to prove how much they deserve to have a roof over their heads and feed their children.

There are a few ways to react when somebody tells you that your language is unintentionally hurting them. And while I was hoping for a quick apology or maybe just a quick correction, my coworker decided to double down on her claims—and add that she thought that poor people should also be sterilized because "a lot of women take advantage of the system by having more kids to get more money."

Suddenly it was like I was on a TV talk show circa 1984 talking about Welfare Queens. I honestly didn't think that people really believed that myth anymore. A myth that was used to dehumanize a generation of welfare recipients. And, as someone who wouldn't have existed had there been forced sterilization of poor people, I took offense to this comment. In addition, as someone aware of our country's racist history of forced sterilization of women of color, I knew how dangerous statements like these can be.

The discussion became heated quite quickly as my coworker tried to both state that she had not intended to offend me or my brother (who also worked at the same company and was witnessing this argument online), but maybe I needed to be "less angry," because this was why people like me got a bad reputation. Note: "people like you" is a good warning that a conversation is about to head into pretty racist territory. Shit got pretty intense (black-on-black crime was even brought up, I believe), and an entire evening was dedicated to an emotionally draining, and ultimately fruitless, conversation.

The next day, I was talking to a friend about the incident. I was still very upset about what had happened the night before. Believe it or not, I, like most people, really do just want to live in peace and not have four-hour-long arguments about race and poverty on the Internet. And it is always a bit of a gut punch to realize that someone you have been sitting next to for months or even years secretly harbors views that deny your basic humanity as a black woman. No matter how many times it happens, I have yet to get used to it.

"It's really difficult to realize that you've been sitting next to someone capable of racism like that," I explained over coffee.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ijeoma,” my friend interrupted, literally putting a hand up to stop me from speaking further, “let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, stunned and confused.

“You can’t just go around calling anything racist. Save that word for the big stuff. You know, for Nazis and cross burnings and lynchings. You’re just going to turn people off if you use such inflammatory language.”

I really *really* wanted this to just be a matter of misunderstanding. I really wanted this to be a case where perhaps he just didn’t know how harmful everyday racism is, and once he did, he would change his mind. I tried to explain the real danger of unchecked racism and microaggressions to people of color. But he wasn’t going to hear it. There was “real racism” as he defined it, which was a post–reconstruction era horror type of racism, and there was whatever I was talking about (which he wasn’t comfortable categorizing but he was pretty sure wasn’t that big of a deal)—the day-to-day reminders that I’m less than, that I should just learn to get over or find a more pleasant way to confront. He went on to discuss how his grandma, for example, said some racist things, but she was a kind person and it would be cruel to call a harmless old lady racist and would only make her more racist. It seemed far more important to him that the white people who were spreading and upholding racism be spared the effects of being called racist, than sparing his black friend the effects of that racism.

No matter what I said, no matter how I described the effects that this sort of racism had on me and other people of color, he was not going to accept me using the word “racist” to describe it.

That was when I learned that this was not a friend I could talk to about this really important part of my life. I couldn’t be my full self around him, and he would never truly have my back. He was not safe. I wasn’t angry, I was heartbroken.

We couldn’t talk about the ways in which race and racism impacted my life, because he was unwilling to even acknowledge the racism that was impacting my life and he was unable to prioritize my safety over his comfort—which meant that we couldn’t talk about me.

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Probably one of the most telling signs that we have problems talking about race in America is the fact that we can’t even agree on what the definition of racism actually is. Look at almost any discussion of race and racism online, and you’ll see an argument pop up over who is racist, who isn’t, and who has the right to claim they are suffering from racism. The most common definitions of racism (in my own summation) are as follows: (1) Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race. Or (2) Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power. While these two definitions are very close to each other in many ways, the differences between these two definitions of racism drastically change how you look at and address racism in America.

For the purposes of this book, I'm going to use the second definition of racism: a prejudice against someone based on race, when those prejudices are reinforced by systems of power. And this is a definition I recommend you use in your day-to-day life if your goal is to reduce the systemic harm done to people of color by racism in America. Let me explain why.

When we use only the first definition of racism, as any prejudice against someone based on race, we inaccurately reduce issues of race in America to a battle for the hearts and minds of individual racists—instead of seeing racists, racist behaviors, and racial oppression as part of a larger system.

There are a lot of individual, unapologetic racists out there. They're easy to spot—they're the people sharing the Obama = monkey memes. They are the people sewing swastikas to their jackets and talking about "White Genocide." This book is not for them and they are not my primary concern. This book will not tell you how to get unabashed racists to love people of color. I'm not a magician. Furthermore, many of those people have very little real power on their own and tend to stay on the fringes of society. We, as a society, like our racism subtler than that. What special power virulent racists do have can often be thwarted by just staying away from wherever you see "Obama is a Muslim" signs.

What is important is that the impotent hatred of the virulent racist was built and nurtured by a system that has much more insidiously woven a quieter, yet no less violent, version of those same oppressive beliefs into the fabric of our society. The truth is, you don't even have to "be racist" to be a part of the racist system.

The dude shouting about "black-on-black crime" is reinforced by elected officials coding "problem neighborhoods" and promising to "clean up the streets" that surprisingly always seem to have a lot of brown and black people on them—and end with a lot of black and brown people in handcuffs. Your aunt yelling about "thugs" is echoed in our politicians talking about "super-predators" while building our school-to-prison pipelines that help ensure that the widest path available to black and brown children ends in a jail cell. But a lot of the people voting for stop-and-frisk crime bills or increased security in schools would never dream of blaming racial inequity on "black-on-black crime" or calling a young black man a "thug."

In contrast, a lot of the racists holding "white power" signs aren't even registered to vote. It's the system, and our complacency in that system, that gives racism its power, not individual intent. Without that white supremacist system, we'd just have a bunch of assholes yelling at each other on a pretty even playing field—and may the best yeller win. But there is no even playing field right now. Over four hundred years of systemic oppression have set large groups of racial minorities at a distinct power disadvantage. If I call a white person a cracker, the worst I can do is ruin their day. If a white person thinks I'm a nigger, the worst they can do is get me fired, arrested, or even killed in a system that thinks the same—and has the resources to act on it.

Looking beyond the differences in impact of these two definitions of racism, how we define racism also determines how we battle it. If we have cancer and it makes us vomit, we can commit to battling nausea and say we're fighting for our lives, even though the tumor will likely

still kill us. When we look at racism simply as “any racial prejudice,” we are entered into a battle to win over the hearts and minds of everyone we encounter—fighting only the symptoms of the cancerous system, not the cancer itself. This is not only an impossible task, it’s a pretty useless one.

Getting my neighbor to love people of color might make it easier to hang around him, but it won’t do anything to combat police brutality, racial income inequality, food deserts, or the prison industrial complex.

Further, this approach puts the onus on me, the person being discriminated against, to prove my humanity and worthiness of equality to those who think I’m less than. But so much of what we think and feel about people of other races is dictated by our system, and not our hearts. Who we see as successful, who has access to that success, who we see as scary, what traits we value in society, who we see as “smart” and “beautiful”—these perceptions are determined by our proximity to the cultural values of the majority in power, the economic system of those in power, the education system of those in power, the media outlets of those in power—I could go on, but at no point will you find me laying blame at the feet of one misguided or even hateful white person, saying, “and this is Steve’s fault—core beliefs about black people are all determined by Steve over there who just decided he hates black people all on his own.” Steve is interacting with the system in the way in which it’s designed, and the end result is racial bigotry that supports the continued oppression of people of color. Systemic racism is a machine that runs whether we pull the levers or not, and by just letting it be, we are responsible for what it produces. We have to actually dismantle the machine if we want to make change.

So a good question to ask yourself right now is: why are you here? Did you pick up this book with the ultimate goal of getting people to be nicer to each other? Did you pick up this book with the goal of making more friends of different races? Or did you pick up this book with the goal of helping fight a system of oppression that is literally killing people of color? Because if you insist on holding to a definition of racism that reduces itself to “any time somebody is mean to somebody of a different race” then this is not the book to accomplish your goals. And those are real and noble goals when we call them what they are—we really should be more kind to each other. But when I look at what is putting me and millions of other people of color at risk, a lack of niceness from white people toward me and people who look like me is very far down the list of priorities.

However, if you came with the second intention—to fight the systemic oppression that is harming the lives of millions of people of color—then you are who I have written this book for. But either way, I encourage you to keep reading, because understanding the truth about racism in America might help you make more friends of different races, too—and they have a better chance of being real friends who will feel safe with you.

If you are not yet convinced that the definition of racism as racial prejudice backed by systems of power is the one to go with, I’m fairly confident that the rest of the chapters in this book will do the trick. When reading the subsequent chapters, remember that the concepts and

issues discussed in the book were not born from the ether, nor are these racial oppressions the work of a bunch of random white people waking up each morning and saying to themselves, “Today I will do what I can to oppress a person of color” coalescing into the creation of a society with racial disparities of socioeconomic well-being so large and entrenched that they trap multiple generations in the same expectations of success or failure. We live in a society where race is one of the biggest indicators of your success in life. There are sizable racial divides in wealth, health, life expectancy, infant mortality, incarceration rates, and so much more. We cannot look at a society where racial inequity is so universal and longstanding and say, “This is all the doing of a few individuals with hate in their hearts.” It just doesn’t make sense.

We cannot fix these systemic issues on a purely emotional basis. We must see the whole picture. How do you fix the school-to-prison pipeline on an emotional basis? How do you fix an economic system that values the work done traditionally by white males over that done by women and people of color on an emotional basis? How do you change an education system tailored almost exclusively to the experiences, history, and goals of white families on an emotional basis? How do you address an overwhelmingly white system of government on an emotional basis? We can get every person in America to feel nothing but love for people of color in their hearts, and if our systems aren’t acknowledged and changed, it will bring negligible benefit to the lives of people of color.

Furthermore, ignoring the factor of institutional support of racial bias as a component of racism means that we erase the real harm done by that institutional support. When we say, “all racial prejudice is equally harmful,” we are denying a large portion of the harm done to people of color and cutting ourselves off from opportunities to repair that harm. But when we acknowledge racism as a part of a system, instead of being limited to our ability to win over racists, we can instead focus on how our actions interact with systemic racism. No, the problem isn’t just that a white person may think black people are lazy and that hurts people’s feelings, it’s that the belief that black people are lazy reinforces and is reinforced by a general dialogue that believes the same, and uses that belief to justify not hiring black people for jobs, denying black people housing, and discriminating against black people in schools.

We have to remember that racism was designed to support an economic and social system for those at the very top. This was never motivated by hatred of people of color, and the goal was never in and of itself simply the subjugation of people of color. The ultimate goal of racism was the profit and comfort of the white race, specifically, of rich white men. The oppression of people of color was an easy way to get this wealth and power, and racism was a good way to justify it. This is not about sentiment beyond the ways in which our sentiment is manipulated to maintain an unjust system of power.

And our emotions, ignorance, fear and hate have been easily manipulated to feed the system of White Supremacy. And we have to address all of this, our emotions, our ignorance, our fear, and our hate—but we cannot ignore the system that takes all of that, magnifies it, and uses it to crush the lives and liberty of people of color to enrich the most privileged of white society.

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While all of the above may make sense as you are reading it now, I understand that it does little to help in conversations where people are entrenched in their definition of racism that does not consider systems of power. So how do you move forward in discussion of race when accusations of “reverse racism” and “racism against whites” start flying?

First off, understand that this is almost always a defensive reaction to feelings of fear, guilt, or confusion. This is an attempt either to move conversation to a place where the person you are talking to is more comfortable, or to end the conversation completely.

Consider restating your intention in engaging in this conversation and ask the person you are talking to to confirm what they are talking about: “I am talking about issues of systemic racism, which is measurably impacting the health, wealth, and safety of millions of people of color. What are you talking about right now?”

Often, if somebody is just trying to use “reverse racism” arguments to shut you down, this is where they will just repeat themselves or claim that you are a hypocrite if you will not shift the conversation instead to the grievances against them that they just decided to bring up. If this happens, it is pretty obvious that you aren’t actually having a conversation and it is probably best to walk away and maybe try again later if productive conversation is actually your goal.

But if somebody does want a productive conversation and genuinely believes that being called “cracker” is the same as being called “nigger” and feels angry and invalidated by the insistence that both do not meet your definition of racism, they will say so. This is an educational opportunity. This is a great way to let that person know that you do hear them, and that your experiences do not erase theirs because even though their experience is valid, it is a different experience.

A response I’ve used is, “What was said to you wasn’t okay, and should be addressed. But we are talking about two different things. Being called “cracker” hurts, may even be humiliating. But after those feelings fade, what measurable impact will it have on your life? On your ability to walk the streets safely? On your ability to get a job? How often has the word “cracker” been used to deny you services? What measurable impact has this word had on the lives of white Americans in general?”

In all honesty, from my personal experience, you are still not likely to get very far in that conversation, not right away. But it gives people something to think about. These conversations, even if they seem fruitless at first, can plant a seed to greater understanding.

If you want to further understanding of systemic racism even more among the people you interact with, you can try to link to the systemic effects of racism whenever you talk about racism. Instead of posting on Facebook: “This teacher shouted a racial slur at a Hispanic kid and should be fired!” you can say all that, and then add, “This behavior is linked to the increased suspension, expulsion, and detention of Hispanic youth in our schools and sets an example of behavior for the children witnessing this teacher’s racism that will influence the way these

children are treated by their peers, and how they are treated as adults.” I do this often when I’m talking about racism, and pretty regularly somebody will comment with something like, “That’s an aspect of this situation I hadn’t considered, thank you.”

If you hear someone at the water cooler say, “black people are always late,” you can definitely say, “Hey, that’s racist” but you can also add, “and it contributes to false beliefs about black workers that keeps them from even being interviewed for jobs, while white workers can be late or on time, but will always be judged individually with no risk of damaging job prospects for other white people seeking employment.” That also makes it less likely that someone will brush you off saying “Hey, it’s not that big of a deal, don’t be so sensitive.”

Tying racism to its systemic causes and effects will help others see the important difference between systemic racism, and anti-white bigotry. In addition, the more practice you have at tying individual racism to the system that gives it power, the more you will be able to see all the ways in which you can make a difference. Yes, you can demand that the teacher shouting racial slurs at Hispanic kids should be fired, but you can also ask what that school’s suspension rate for Hispanic kids is, ask how many teachers of color they have on staff, and ask that their policies be reviewed and reformed. Yes, you can definitely report your racist coworker to HR, but you can also ask your company management what processes they have in place to minimize racial bias in their hiring process, you can ask for more diversity in management and cultural sensitivity training for staff, and you can ask what procedures they have in place to handle allegations of racial discrimination.

When we look at racism as a system, it becomes much larger and more complicated than it seemed before—but there is also more opportunity to address the various parts of it. And that is what the rest of this book attempts to at least begin to do, chapter by chapter. So now that we know what racism is, let’s get to work.

chapter 2 from Oluo, Ijeoma. *So You Want to Talk About Race* (pp. 30-37). Basic Books. Kindle Edition. 2019.

Gina Crosley-Corcoran, “Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person”

Huffington Post, 5/8/14, updated 12/6/17

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/explaining-white-privilege-to-a-broke-white-person\\_b\\_5269255](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/explaining-white-privilege-to-a-broke-white-person_b_5269255)

Years ago some feminist on the Internet told me I was “privileged.”

“THE F&#\$ ?!?!” I said.

I came from the kind of poor that people don’t want to believe still exists in this country. Have you ever spent a frigid northern-Illinois winter without heat or running water? I have. At 12 years old were you making ramen noodles in a coffee maker with water you fetched from a public bathroom? I was. Have you ever lived in a camper year-round and used a random relative’s apartment as your mailing address? We did. Did you attend so many different elementary schools that you can only remember a quarter of their names? Welcome to my childhood.

So when that feminist told me I had “white privilege,” I told her that my white skin didn’t do @%\*# to prevent me from experiencing poverty. Then, like any good, educated feminist would, she directed me to Peggy McIntosh’s now-famous 1988 piece “[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#).”

After one reads McIntosh’s powerful essay, it’s impossible to deny that being born with white skin in America affords people certain unearned privileges in life that people of other skin colors simply are not afforded. For example:

- *“I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.”*
- *“When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.”*
- *“If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.”*
- *“I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.”*

If you read through the rest of the list, you can see how white people and people of color experience the world in very different ways. But listen: This is not said to make white people feel guilty about their privilege. It’s not your fault that you were born with white skin and experience these privileges. But whether you realize it or not, you *do* benefit from it, and it *is* your fault if you don’t maintain awareness of that fact.



I do understand that McIntosh's essay may rub some people the wrong way. There are several points on the list that I felt spoke more to the author's status as a middle-class person than to her status as a white person. For example:

- *"If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area, which I can afford and in which I would want to live."*
- *"I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me."*
- *"I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed."*
- *"If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege."*

And there are so many more points in the essay where the word "class" could be substituted for the word "race," which would ultimately paint a very different picture. That is why I had such a hard time identifying with this essay for so long. When I first wrote about white privilege years ago, I demanded to know why this white woman felt that my experiences were the same as hers when, no, my family most certainly could not rent housing "in an area which we could afford and want to live," and no, I couldn't go shopping without fear in our low-income neighborhoods.

The idea that any ol' white person can find a publisher for a piece is most certainly a symptom of class privilege. Having come from a family of people who didn't even graduate from high school, who knew not a single academic or intellectual person, it would never occur to me to assume that I could be published. It is absolutely a freak anomaly that I'm in graduate school, considering that not one person on either side of my family has a college degree. And it took me until my 30s to ever believe that someone from my stock could achieve such a thing. Poverty colors nearly everything about your perspective on opportunities for advancement in life. Middle-class, educated people assume that anyone can achieve their goals if they work hard enough. Folks steeped in poverty rarely see a life past working at the gas station, making the rent on their trailer, and self-medicating with cigarettes and prescription drugs until they die of a heart attack. (I've just described one whole side of my family and the life I assumed I'd be living before I lucked out of it.)

I, maybe more than most people, can completely understand why broke white folks get pissed when the word "privilege" is thrown around. As a child I was constantly discriminated against because of my poverty, and those wounds still run very deep. But luckily my college education introduced me to a more nuanced concept of privilege: the term "intersectionality." The concept of intersectionality recognizes that people can be privileged in some ways and definitely not privileged in others. There are many different types of privilege, not just skin-color privilege, that impact the way people can move through the world or are discriminated against. These are

all things you are born into, not things you earned, that afford you opportunities that others may not have. For example:

**Citizenship:** Simply being born in this country affords you certain privileges that non-citizens will never access.

**Class:** Being born into a financially stable family can help guarantee your health, happiness, safety, education, intelligence, and future opportunities.

**Sexual orientation:** If you were born straight, every state in this country affords you privileges that non-straight folks have to fight the Supreme Court for.

**Sex:** If you were born male, you can assume that you can walk through a parking garage without worrying that you'll be raped and then have to deal with a defense attorney blaming it on what you were wearing.

**Ability:** If you were born able-bodied, you probably don't have to plan your life around handicap access, braille, or other special needs.

**Gender identity:** If you were born cisgender (that is, your gender identity matches the sex you were assigned at birth), you don't have to worry that using the restroom or locker room will invoke public outrage.

As you can see, belonging to one or more category of privilege, especially being a straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied male, can be like winning a lottery you didn't even know you were playing. But this is not to imply that any form of privilege is exactly the same as another, or that people lacking in one area of privilege understand what it's like to be lacking in other areas. Race discrimination is not equal to sex discrimination and so forth.

And listen: Recognizing privilege doesn't mean suffering guilt or shame for your lot in life. Nobody's saying that straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied males are all a bunch of a@@&&#s who don't work hard for what they have. Recognizing privilege simply means being aware that some people have to work much harder just to experience the things you take for granted (if they ever can experience them at all).

I know now that I *am* privileged in many ways. I am privileged as a natural-born white citizen. I am privileged as a cisgender woman. I am privileged as an able-bodied person. I am privileged that my first language is also our national language, and that I was born with an intellect and ambition that pulled me out of the poverty that I was otherwise destined for. I was privileged to

be able to marry my way “up” by partnering with a privileged, middle-class, educated male who fully expected me to earn a college degree.

There are a million ways I experience privilege, and some that I certainly don't. But thankfully, intersectionality allows us to examine these varying dimensions and degrees of discrimination while raising awareness of the results of multiple systems of oppression at work.

*Tell me: Are you a white person who's felt uncomfortable with the term “white privilege”? Does a more nuanced approach help you see your own privilege more clearly?*

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## **The Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer (pp. 304-5)**

- Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Father?  
People: I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
- Celebrant: Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?  
People: I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
- Celebrant: Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?  
People: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.
- Celebrant: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?  
People: I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant: Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?  
People: I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant: Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?  
People: I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?  
People: I will, with God's help.
- Celebrant: Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?  
People: I will, with God's help.

## **Genesis 1:26 - 31**

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, "Let us make humankind<sup>[e]</sup> in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,<sup>[d]</sup> and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind<sup>[e]</sup> in his image, in the image of God he created them;<sup>[f]</sup> male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." <sup>29</sup> God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. <sup>30</sup> And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for

food.” And it was so. <sup>31</sup> God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

### **Genesis 9:20 - 27**

<sup>20</sup>Noah, a man of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. <sup>21</sup> He drank some of the wine and became drunk, and he lay uncovered in his tent. <sup>22</sup> And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. <sup>23</sup> Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. <sup>24</sup> When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, <sup>25</sup> he said “Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” <sup>26</sup> He also said, “Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.<sup>27</sup> May God make space for<sup>a</sup> Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.”

### **Micah 6:8**

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

### **Luke 4:17-18**

<sup>17</sup> ...and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to [Jesus]. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: <sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” <sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

## **White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**

### **Peggy McIntosh**

**"I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group"**

Through work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to women's statues, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there are most likely a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of while privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that 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, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools , and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in women's studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are just seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow "them" to be more like "us."

Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley Collage Center for Research on Women. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), by Peggy McIntosh; available for \$4.00 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley MA 02181 The working paper contains a longer list of privileges. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of Independent School

## Daily effects of white privilege

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my race.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

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31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can chose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.
47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.

48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.

49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.

50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

### **Elusive and fugitive**

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a patter of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turn, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.

For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to over empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.

### **Earned strength, unearned power**

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage, which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. This paper results from a process of coming to see that some of the power that I originally say as attendant on being a human being in the United States consisted in unearned advantage and conferred dominance.

I have met very few men who truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance, and, if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Difficulties and angers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the members of the Combahee River Collective pointed out in their "Black Feminist Statement" of 1977.

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the system won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitude. But a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate but cannot end, these problems.

To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subject taboo. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that

democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

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