

# Dismantling Racism

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## Table of Contents

Definitions	1
The Institutions of White Supremacy	2-3
Race: The U.S. Creation Myth and its Premise Keepers	4-7
Racism in the English Language	8-10
White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack	11
Daily Effects of White Privilege	12-13
Guidelines for Working with Communities of Color	14
Detour-Spotting for white anti-racists	15-20
Something about the subject makes it hard to name	21-24
How to Interrupt Racist Comments	25

## Synopsis

Racism is a very difficult subject to talk about in our society because we are often taught to identify racism only as outward and objective acts of discrimination against another person on the basis of race. It is important that we widen the discussion of racism to include all levels and institution within society in order to fully understand the scope of racism that is imbedded within our culture. This section goes to the heart of racism and how many white people are unaware of the complexity in which it still thrives.



## DEFINITIONS

**Prejudice:** Favorable or unfavorable opinion or feeling about a person or group, formed without knowledge, thought or reason.

**Power:** The ability to do or effect something or anything or to act upon a person or thing; possession of control or command over others.

**Racism:** Any attitude, action or inaction which subordinates a person or group because of her/his race/color/ethnicity. Racism is the systematic mistreatment experienced by people of color.

**Bigotry:** Obstinate and irrational devotion to one's own party, belief or opinion.

**Discrimination:** The act, practice, or instance of restricting something categorically rather than individually as the according or deferential treatment of person of an "alien" race or religion.

**Ethnocentrism:** attending to view other cultures as alien and/or inferior.

**Institutions:** Are fairly stable social arrangements and practices through which collective actions are taken.

**Institutional Racism:** Institutions have the power to reward and penalize. Career opportunities are available to some and closed to others. They reward by the way social goods are distributed, deciding who receives training and skills, medical care, formal education, political influence, moral support and self-respect, productive employment, fair housing, self-confidence and the promise of a secure future for self and children.

**Individual vs. Institutional Racism:** Racism is overt and covert. It takes two closely related forms; Individuals acting against individual minorities, and acts by the total white society against minority communities. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury, destruction of property, for example. The second type is less overt: it originates in the operation on established and respected forces in our society.

When white terrorists bombed a black church and killed five black children in Alabama in 1967, that was an act of individual racism which was deplored by most white people. However, when 500 black babies die each year because of lack of food, clothing, shelter, and proper medical facilities, and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically and emotionally as well as intellectually because of poverty and discrimination against the black community, that is a function of institutionalized racism.

**Paternalistic Racism:** Whites set the standards to which all peoples are expected to conform. These standards perpetuate the assumption of white superiority.

# THE INSTITUTIONS OF WHITE SUPREMACY \*

## A. DEFINITIONS

1. An institution is an organized expression of the way a society achieves its goals.

For example, San Francisco State University is an institution whose purpose is to provide a college education to a certain proportion of California residents and visitors. Each Department in the University functions as a mini-institution within the larger one.

2. A system is a grouping of institutions organized to express the way a society achieves its goals. For example, San Francisco State University is part of a *system* of state funded universities known as the California State University system. This system is itself part of a larger complex called *the educational system* which includes all levels of educational institutions, public and private, in California; and ultimately, in the United States. Thus, systems can be seen as increasingly larger, more comprehensive ways in which U.S. society organizes its goals of educating its population.

The most important systems in the U.S. are: *economic, legal, family, education, military, political/state, religious, communications, health and social services, artistic/cultural/entertainment.* (Many specific institutions overlap categories of systems.)

(Thanks to Joe Barndt of Crossroads Ministry in Chicago, who presented most of this material at a meeting of anti-racist educators and organizers in New Orleans, June, 1994.)

3. Power: Ownership and control of the major institutions of the state.

I refer to the people who own and control the major institutions in the United States as "the white male ruling class." They are a class because they are tightly organized in their own self interest of maintaining and expanding their power. Since the first invasion of these lands by Europeans, the rulers have been white, and have passed down their inherited wealth and positions to their sons. Now, in the era of transnational capitalism, some few people of color from Japanese corporations have become part of this ruling class.

Historically, the institutional decision-makers in this class have been men, although women of the ruling class benefit from the power of the men. And, since the early 19th century, white women have been legally able to own and control property independent of men. But until the past two decades, there have been few if any white women in seats of institutional power. That situation may now be changing.

( I do not view women CEO's or billionaires as a sign of feminist progress.)

4. Power: access to the people who own and control the major institutions.

Access usually comes from an organized effort of those who already have white privilege. For example, the AMA (American Medical Association) exerts tremendous power, as a national organization, over both private and public health care policy in the United States. This power results from: (1) The social composition of the AMA: mostly well off white males; (2) and its capacity to organize and be a national spokesperson for individual doctors.

## 5. The white supremacy system:

"White supremacy is an historically based, *institutionally perpetuated* system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of establishing, maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege."

Another way of expressing the same thing is a definition provided by People's Institute of New Orleans and Joe Barndt: *Racism is race prejudice plus power. Therefore, institutional racism is "Systemic institutionalization of race prejudice plus power."* I use the term "white supremacy" as a synonym for "racism."

### B. THE MAJOR COMPONENTS OF THE U.S. WHITE SUPREMACY SYSTEM

1. **Racial Oppression:** The institutionalized domination of peoples whose ancestors came from the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Arab world by peoples whose ancestors came from Europe. The domination is based on both skin color and on ancestral origins.

2. **White Privilege:** Institutionalized preferential prejudice for and treatment of white people based solely on their skin color and/or ancestral origin from Europe; and exemption from racial and/or national oppression based on skin color and/or ancestral origin from Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Arab world.

3. **Capitalist exploitation:** The institutionalized rip-off of the land of indigenous peoples and the labor power of African peoples which provided the basic wealth for the white colonial ruling classes both in the colonies and in Britain. In the colonies, the accumulation of wealth enabled the colonists to wage war on Britain, declare their independence, and found the "United States of America."

With the founding of the U.S.A., more European immigrants could come here, most of whom would end up selling their labor power to the sons of the original white male rulers. This historical process brought livelihood for many and vast wealth for the few.

4. **Male supremacy:** The institutionalized domination of all women by white men of all classes. The original architects of the U.S. white supremacy system were rich white men. The first non-ruling class white beneficiaries of the white privilege system were middle and working class white men.

But white women have also benefited from living in a white supremacy system, and most have actively supported it. For example, white women did not protest when their men slaughtered indigenous women to make room for homesteads for white women and men; nor did they argue against the forced separation of African families when they were brought here as slaves.

5. **Institutionalized violence:** Europeans founded the U.S. white supremacy system on theft, genocide, kidnaping and enslavement. Slave patrols, militia, lynch mobs, Texas Rangers, Border Patrols, police departments and the U.S. military keep the system going.

6. **Institutionalized perpetuation of white culture:** All the institutions in the white supremacy system perpetuate different aspects of white culture; and white culture is the matrix in which white supremacy institutions flourish.

## RACE: The U.S. Creation Myth and its Premise Keepers ★

By Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez

*This article was first written as a presentation for the "Challenging White Supremacy Workshop" founded by Sharon Martinas in San Francisco in 1993. Originally entitled "What is White Supremacy?" it was intended to offer a basic, introductory understanding of racism to a mostly white audience. Slightly edited and updated here, the article has always been a practical tool to begin opening minds that the society has kept closed for centuries.*

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### What is White Supremacy?

The basic definition of the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop says:

"White Supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege."

#### I. What does it mean to say it is a system?

The most common mistake people make when talking about racism (White Supremacy) is to think of it as a problem of personal prejudices and individual acts of discrimination. They do not see that it is a system, a web of interlocking, reinforcing institutions: political, economic, social, cultural, legal, military, educational, all our institutions. As a system, racism affects every aspect of life in a country.

By not understanding that racism is systemic, we guarantee it will continue. For example, racist police behavior is often reduced to "a few bad apples" who need to be removed, instead of seeing that it can be found in police departments everywhere. It reflects and sustains the existing power relations throughout society. This mistake has real consequences: by refusing to see police brutality as part of a system, and that the system must be changed, we guarantee such brutality will continue.

The need to recognize racism as being systemic is one reason the term White Supremacy is more useful than the term racism. They refer to the same problem but:

- A. The purpose of racism is much clearer when we call it "white supremacy." The word "supremacy" means a power relationship exists.
- B. Although racism is a social reality, it has no biological or other scientific basis. Race is an unscientific term for differences between people; there is a single human race.
- C. The term racism often leads to dead-end debates about whether a particular remark or action by an individual white person was really racist or not. We will achieve a clearer understanding of racism if we analyze how a certain action relates to the system of White Supremacy. The term White Supremacy gives white people a clear choice of opposing an inhuman system—or not.

#### II. What does it mean to say White Supremacy is historically based?

Every country has a creation or origin myth, which is the story people are taught of how their country came into being. Ours says the United States began with Columbus's so-called "discovery" of "America," continued with settlement by brave Pilgrims, won its independence from England with the American Revolution, survived a civil war, and expanded westward until it became the enormous, rich country you see today.

That is the origin myth we are all taught. It omits three giant facts about the emergence of the United States as a nation. Those facts demonstrate that White Supremacy is fundamental to its existence.

- A. The United States is a nation state created by military conquest in several stages. The first stage was the European seizure of the lands inhabited by indigenous peoples, which they called Turtle Island. Before the European invasion, between nine and eighteen million indigenous people lived in what became North America. By the end of the so-called Indian Wars, about 250,000 remained in what is now the United States, and about 123,000 in what is now Canada (see *The State of Native America*, ed. by M. Annette Jaimes, South End Press, 1992).

That process created the land base of this country.

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The seizure of Indian land and elimination of indigenous peoples was the first, essential condition for the creation of what became the United States. The first step, then, was military conquest and genocide.

- B. The United States could not have developed economically as a nation without enslaved African labor. When agriculture and industry began growing in the colonial period, a tremendous labor shortage existed. Not enough white workers came from Europe and the European invaders could not put the remaining indigenous peoples to work in sufficient numbers. Enslaved Africans provided the labor force that made the growth of the United States possible.

That growth peaked from about 1800 to 1860, the period called the Market Revolution. During this time, the United States changed from being an agricultural/commercial economy to an industrial corporate economy. The development of banks, expansion of the credit system, protective tariffs, and new transportation systems all helped make this possible. The key to the Market Revolution was the export of cotton, and this was made possible by slave labor. So the second, vital step in the creation of the United States was slavery.

- C. The third major step in the formation of the United States as a nation was the seizure of almost half of Mexico by war--today's Southwest--in 1846. A few years later, in 1853, the U.S. acquired a final chunk of Arizona from Mexico by threatening to renew the war. This expansion enabled the U.S. to reach the Pacific and thus open up valuable trade with Asia that included markets for export and goods to import and sell in the U.S. It also opened to the U.S. vast mineral wealth in Arizona, agricultural wealth in California, and new sources of cheap labor to build railroads and develop the economy. Thus the third step in the formation of this nation was military expansion.

This completed the territorial boundaries of what is now the United States. Those were the three foundation stones in the creation of the United States as a nation. Then, in 1898, the U.S. takeover of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba by means of war against Spain extended the U.S. to become an

empire. All but Cuba have remained U.S. colonies or neo-colonies, providing new sources of wealth and military power for the United States. The colonization and incorporation of Hawaii completed the empire.

Many people in the United States hate to recognize the truth of the three steps. They do not like to call the U.S. an empire. They prefer the established origin myth, with its idea of the U.S. as a democracy from its early days. They and the institutions that uphold that myth could be called the Premise Keepers.

III. What does it mean to say that White Supremacy is a system of exploitation?

The roots of U.S. racism or White Supremacy lie in economic exploitation by the theft of resources and human labor. That exploitation has been justified by a racist ideology affirming the inferiority of its victims. The first application of White Supremacy or racism by Euroamericans was against indigenous peoples, whose land was stolen; then Blacks, originally as slaves and later as exploited waged labor; followed by Mexicans when they lost their land holdings and also became wage-slaves. Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and other Asian/Pacific peoples also became low-wage workers here, subject to racism.

In short, White Supremacy and economic power were born together. The United States is the first nation in the world to be born racist and also the first to be born capitalist. That is not a coincidence. In this country, as history shows, capitalism and racism go hand in hand.

IV. How does White Supremacy maintain and defend a system of wealth, power and privilege?

Racist power relations are sustained by the institutions of this society together with the ideology of Whiteness that developed during western colonization. The first European settlers called themselves English, Irish, German, French, Dutch, etc.--not white. Over half of those who came in the early colonial period were white servants. With so many enslaved Africans brought to the colonies, the planters who formed an elite class in the southern colonies were soon outnumbered by non-whites. In the Carolinas, 25,000 whites faced 40,000 Black slaves and 60,000 indigenous peoples in the area.

Class lines hardened as the distinctions between rich

and poor became sharper. The problem of control loomed large and fear of revolt from below grew among the elite. There had been revolts by white servants and Black slaves from the early years. Elite whites feared most of all that discontented whites -- servants, tenant farmers, the urban poor, the property-less, soldiers and sailors -- would join Black slaves to overthrow the existing order. As early as 1663, indentured white servants and Black slaves in Virginia had formed a conspiracy to rebel and gain their freedom.

Then, in 1676, came Bacon's Rebellion by white frontiersmen and servants alongside Black slaves. The rebellion shook Virginia's planter elite. Many other rebellions followed, from South Carolina to New York. The main fear of elite whites everywhere was a class fear. Their solution: divide and control.

On one hand, the Slave Codes were enacted that legalized chattel slavery and severely restricted the rights of free Africans. The codes equated the terms "Negro" and "slave." At the same time, rules were set for "servants." Their bonds were loosened, they were granted certain privileges such as the right to acquire land, join militias, and receive bounties for slaves they caught.

With these privileges they were legally declared white on the basis of skin color and continental origin. That made them "superior" to Blacks (and Indians). Thus whiteness was born as a racist notion to prevent lower-class whites from joining people of color, especially Blacks, against their common class enemies. The concept of whiteness became a source of unity and strength for the vastly outnumbered Euroamericans -- as in South Africa, another settler nation--and key to defending White Supremacy against class unity across color lines.

## Manifest Destiny

Since the time of Jefferson, the United States had its eye on expanding to the Pacific Ocean and establishing trade with Asia. Others in the ruling class came to want more slave states, for reasons of political power, and this also required westward expansion. Both goals pointed to taking over Mexico. The first step was Texas, which was acquired for the United States by filling the territory with Anglo settlers who then declared their independence from Mexico in 1836. After failing to purchase more Mexican territory, President James Polk created a pretext for starting a war with the

declared goal of expansion. The notoriously brutal, two-year war was justified in the name of Manifest Destiny.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, born at a time of aggressive western expansion, said that the United States was destined by God to take over other peoples and lands. The term was first used in 1845 by the editor of a popular journal, who affirmed "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government."

The concept of Manifest Destiny and racism are profoundly linked. Even those who opposed expansion did so for racist reasons. For example, major opposition to gobbling up Mexico came from politicians saying "the degraded Mexican-Spanish" were unfit to become part of the United States; they were "a wretched people . . . mongrels."

In a similar way, some influential whites who opposed slavery in those years said Blacks should be removed from U.S. soil, to avoid "contamination" by an inferior people (see *Manifest Destiny* by Anders Stephanson, Hill & Wang, 1995). Earlier, Native Americans had been the target of white supremacist beliefs that said they were dirty, heathen "savages" and also fundamentally inferior in their values. For example, they did not see land as profitable real estate but as *Our Mother*. Such people had to be forcefully isolated on reservations or, in limited cases, forcefully assimilated by being removed from their own culture.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny established White Supremacy more firmly than ever as central to the U.S. definition of itself. The arrogance of asserting that God gave white people (primarily men) the right to dominate everything around them still haunts our society and sustains its racist oppression. Today we call it the arrogance of power and it can be seen in all U.S. relations with other countries.

The material effects of White Supremacy on peoples of color are all too clear in terms of economic, social, political and cultural inequity. Even that ultimate affirmation of dominion, racist murder or lynching, still occurs to remind us that age-old power relations remain unaltered. That is not to deny the positive effects of long years of struggle to change those power

relations, but to recognize that White Supremacy remains intact systemically, as seen in the constant harm it does to the daily lives and aspirations of peoples of color.

Less understood than the material are the psychological and spiritual effects of White Supremacy. Few whites understand what internalized racism does to people of color, who do not discuss those effects easily themselves. The self-hatred, desire to be like whites or even to be white, and assumption of inevitable failure are the dreadful legacy of White Supremacy's teaching those lies by every means at its disposal. Maintaining control over any community has always required not only physical domination but also the ideological domination that says: things are as they should be. As you inferior creatures deserve them to be.

### **White Supremacy and Globalization**

Racism has never stood still or remained unchanged in history. Today we see new forms emerging from the rapid growth of globalization. We can see that White Supremacy has become more global than ever and millions of people of color have become globalized.

Global economic integration is not new in itself; we have seen the world capitalist economy in operation since the 15th century if not earlier. But today it is an extremely powerful set of inter-related policies and practices with a huge field of operations. It includes the "global assembly line" for production, with parts made in different countries; the whole world defined as the potential market for a commodity; and technological advances that facilitate economic integration more than ever in human history. With corporate globalization has come a neo-liberalism that means privatization, deregulation, the decline of social services, and other policies.

The main victims are nations of color (politely called "developing" instead of impoverished) and peoples of color, as shown by the vast increase in migrant labor. The vast majority of immigrants to the U.S. today are the globalized: women and men, mostly of color, driven from home by dire personal poverty to find survival usually in the global capitals. New eruptions of White Supremacy often confront them.

It's been said that militarism is racism in action. We could also say that globalization is White Supremacy in

action, as never before. Manifest Destiny now rages across not only Las Americas but the whole world.

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## RACISM IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The following article has been excerpted from Racism in the English Language, a booklet that gives neither author nor publisher.

**Languages and Culture:** An integral part of any culture is its language. Language not only develops in conjunction with a society's historical, economic and political evolution, but also reflects that society's attitudes and thinking. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts, but actually shapes thought. If one accepts that our dominant white culture is racist, then one would expect our language - an indispensable transmitter of culture - to be racist as well. Whites, as the dominant group, are not subjected to the same abusive characterization by our language that people of color receive.

Before beginning our analysis of racism in the language, we would like to quote part of a TV film review which shows the connection between language and culture.

"Depending on one's culture, one interacts with time in a very distinct fashion. One example which give some cross-cultural insights into the concept of time is language. In Spanish, a watch is said to "walk." In English, the watch "runs." In German, the watch "functions." And in French, the watch "marches." In the Indian culture of the Southwest, people do not refer to time in this way. The value of the watch is displaced with the value of "what time it's getting to be." Viewing these five cultural perspectives on time, one can see some definite emphasis and values that each culture places on time. For example, a cultural perspective may provide a clue to the development of the negative stereotype of the slow and lazy Mexican who lives and exists in the Anglo value system, where time "flies," the watch "runs" and "time is money,"

**Color Symbolism:** The symbolism of white as positive and black as negative is pervasive in our culture. "Good guys" wear white hats and ride white horses, "bad guys" wear black hats and ride black horses. Angels are white and devils are black. The definition of black includes "without any moral light or goodness; evil, wicked, indicating disgrace, sinful," while that of white includes "morally pure, spotless, innocent, free from evil."

**Ethnocentrism or From a White Perspective:** Implicit in the English usage of master/slave concept is ownership of the slave by the master; the captives (slaves) were African individuals with human worth, right and dignity and the term "slave" denounces that human quality, thereby making the mass rape of African women by white captors more acceptable in the minds of people and setting a mental frame of reference for legitimizing the atrocities perpetuated against African people.

**Passive Tense:** For instance, some history texts will discuss how European immigrants came to the United States seeking a better life and expanded opportunities, but will note that "slaves were brought to America." Not only does this omit the destruction of Africa societies and families, but it ignores the role of northern merchants and southern slaveholders in the profitable trade of human beings. Other books will state that the continental railroad "was built," conveniently omitting information about the Chinese laborer who built it or the oppression they suffered.

**Politics and Terminology:** "Culturally deprived," "economically disadvantaged" and "underdeveloped" are other terms which mislead and distort our awareness of reality. The application of the term "culturally deprived" to third world children in this society reflects a value judgment. It assumes that the dominant whites are cultured and all other are without culture. In fact, third world children are bicultural, and many are bilingual, having grown up in their won culture as well as absorbing the dominant culture. In many ways, they are equipped with skills and experiences which white youth have been deprived of, since most white youth develop in a monocultural, monolingual environment. Burgess suggests that the term "culturally deprived" be replaced with "culturally dispossessed," and that the term "economically disadvantaged" be replaced by "economically exploited." Both these terms present a perspective and implication that provide an entirely different frame of reference as to the reality of the third world experience in U.S. society.

**Loaded Words and Native Americans:** "Discovery" as used in the Euro-American context, implies the right to take what one finds, ignoring the rights of those who already inhabit the "discovered" thing. The white European perspective turns these definitions around to serve the purpose of distorting history and justifying Euro-American conquest of the Native American homelands. Euro-Americans are not described in history books as invading Native American lands, but rather as defending their homes against "Indian attacks." Since European communities were constantly encroaching on land already occupied, then a more honest interpretation would state that it was the Native Americans who were "warding off," "guarding," and "defending" their homelands.

Native American victories are invariably called "massacres," while the indiscriminate killing, extermination and plunder of Native American nations by Euro-Americans is defined as "victory." Distortion of history by the choice of loaded words used to describe historical events is a common racist practice. Native Americans are further characterized by the further misuse of language. Rather than portraying Native Americans as human beings in highly defined and complex societies, cultures and civilizations, history books use such adjectives as "savages," "beasts," "primitive" and "backward."

**Loaded Words and Africans:** The generalized application of "tribal" in reference to Africans - as well as the failure to acknowledge the religious, cultural, and social diversity of African peoples - is a decidedly racist dynamic. It is part of the process whereby Euro-Americans justify, or avoid confronting their oppression of third world peoples. Africa has been particularly insulted by this dynamic, as witness to the pervasive "darkest Africa" image. This image, widespread in Western culture, evokes an Africa covered by jungles and inhabited by "uncivilized," "cannibalistic," "pagan," "savage" peoples. This "darkest Africa" image avoids the geographical reality. Less than 20% of the African continent is wooded, for example. The image also ignores the history of African cultures and civilizations. Ample evidence suggests this distortion of reality was developed as a convenient rationale, for the European and American slave trade and western colonialism.

**Qualifying Adjectives:** A few final observations. The sports pages of newspapers and magazines call third world athletes by their first names more frequently than white athletes. Many newspaper articles are written in a "we/they" form.

Conclusion: To recognize the racism in language is an important first step. Consciousness of the influence of language on our perceptions can help to negate much of that influence. But it is not enough to simply become aware of the effects of racism in conditioning attitudes. While we may not be able to change the language, we can definitely change our usage of the language. We can avoid using words that degrade people. We can make a conscious effort to use terminology that reflects a progressive perspective, as opposed to a distorting perspective.

# WHITE PRIVILEGE: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

Peggy McIntosh

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 over privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women's status in the society, the university, 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 was most likely a phenomenon of white 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 casing 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 make 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 for women of color that white women who they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly 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."

## 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 these 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 line 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. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my color widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization" I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. 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 that fit into my cultural traditions and into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. 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.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.

14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. 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.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. 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.
19. 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.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
21. 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.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
23. 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.
24. I can be pretty sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin.

## Guidelines for Working with Communities of Color

1. Recognize that not all communities of color are alike, even if they look alike to you. Example: An "Asian" community may actually be Korean, Japanese, Chinese, etc.
2. Learn about the community you wish to work in. General knowledge increases your credibility and reduces your ignorance.
3. Learn and listen. Your agenda may not be theirs. Their way of working as a community may differ from yours.
4. Learn and respect community's value base. Accept that the Euro-value base is probably different, although there may be commonalities.
5. Develop community contacts. These may be persons who care about the issue of domestic violence and similar issues in their community. Seek common ground with them.
6. Do not advertise services until you have trained the staff to deal with racism or have made efforts to reduce barriers such as language, parenting methods, culturally (in)appropriate behavior, and basic needs (food, clothing, etc.).
7. Not all people speak English. If you have PSAs in different languages it implies that services will be offered in those languages.
8. Develop community specific services based on what that community deems as appropriate - i.e. - Spanish speaking support groups, etc.
9. Do not just gather information from the community, offer to share information and resources, as appropriate. Some communities may be offended by offers of help, remember that communities of color have no reason to trust White/Euro-Americans.
10. Hire from that community, but not just for tokenism.

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.

Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley College 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.

## DETOUR-SPOTTING for white anti-racists\*

*joan olsson*

For white people living in North America learning to be anti-racist is a re-education process. We must unlearn our thorough racist conditioning to re-educate and re-condition ourselves as antiracists. There is scant social or political encouragement for this journey of reeducation. We are constantly tempted to detour off course by the racist propaganda of society and our own guilt and denial. In the face of society's and our own resistance, sustaining the will to continue this journey takes bold and stubborn effort.

This journey sends us into unfamiliar territory. No white person has ever lived in a non-racist North America. We were never taught the skills of anti-racist living. Indeed, we were carefully taught the opposite: how to maintain our white privilege. Racism, the system of oppression (of people of color) and advantage (for white people) depends on the collusion and cooperation of white people for its perpetuation.

Most of us first became aware of racial prejudice and injustice as children. As white infants we were fed a pabulum of racist propaganda. That early "training" was comprehensive and left little room for question, challenge or doubt. Our childhood games, rhymes and media conspired: "Eenie, meenie, minie, mo; Catch a n...r by his toe ..." We played cowboys and Indians. All of us knew the Indians were bad and had to die. My WWII generation watched "Bugs Bunny" outwit evil Japanese villains. As Lillian Smith acknowledged:

"These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from the conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands...and become difficult to tear out." (1)

Our generous child wisdom told us racism was wrong, but there was no escaping the daily racist catechism. We resisted the lies, the deceit and the injustice of racism, but we did not have the skills to counter the poisonous messages. Our conditioning filled us with fear, suspicion and stereotypes that substituted for true knowing of people of color. We internalized our beliefs about people of color ourselves, other white people and about being white. Those internalized attitudes became actualized into racist behavior.

As I continue my journey toward becoming a re?conditioned and effective anti?racist, I have become aware of “habits,” attitudes and their attached behaviors, which divert me from my intended goal.

To change the detouring behavior, I must first be fully conscious of what I’m doing, the behavior and its consequences. Next, I need to reflect on the behavior’s attitudinal roots. Finally, I determine the prescribed, desired change I want to make and the best strategy for achieving it. Sometimes I need to remove the behavior from my personal repertoire. More often though, re-tooling is necessary, replacing the discarded pattern with new behaviors. It will likely take repeated attempts before I have fully internalized and externalized the desired change.

Most of the obstacles and detours encountered on our journey of re?education are those same habitual behaviors birthed in our internalized beliefs. The behaviors will vary with each white person. I recognize that no two white people share exactly the same experiences and societal moldings. We learned racism in our unique and personal ways from different teachers and at different times. But we all learned the lessons well. I have observed in myself and other white people some common patterns of guilt, denial and defensiveness which appear regularly in our interactions with people of color and other white people.

Eighteen common detours from our anti-racist journey are examined in this way:

#### #) *The Detour’s Title*

Attitudes or behaviors that signal a detour or wrong turn into white guilt, denial or defensiveness.

##### *Reality Check and Consequence*

A clarification of the underlying meaning and consequence of this behavior pattern.

#### 1) *I’m Colorblind*

“People are just people; I don’t see color.” Or “I don’t think of you as Chinese.”

##### *Reality Check and Consequence*

Statements like these assume that people of color are just like us, white, and have the same dreams, standards, problems, peeves that we do. “Colorblindness” negates the cultural values, norms, expectations and life experiences of people of color. Even if an individual white person

could ignore a person’s color, the society does not. By saying we don’t see their color, we are also saying we don’t see our whiteness. This denies their experience of racism and our experience of privilege.

“I’m colorblind” can also be a defense when afraid-to discuss racism, especially if one assumes all conversation about race or color is racist. As my friend Rudy says, “I don’t mind that you notice that I’m Black.” Color consciousness does not equal racism.

#### 2) *The Rugged Individual and The Bootstrap Theory*

“America is the land of opportunity, built by rugged individuals, where anyone with grit can succeed if they just pull up hard enough on their bootstraps.”

##### *Reality Check and Consequence*

The “rugged individual” and the “bootstrap theory” are two of the crown jewels of U.S. social propaganda. They have allowed generation after generation to say, “If you succeed, you did that, but if you fail, or if you’re poor, that’s your fault.” Belief in this propaganda is founded in a total denial of the impact of either oppression or privilege on any person’s chance for success.

#### 3) *Reverse Racism*

- (a) “People of color are just as racist as white people.”
- (b) “Affirmative Action had a role years ago, but today it’s just reverse racism; now it’s discriminating against white men.”
- (c) The civil rights movement, when it began was appropriate, valuable, needed. But it’s gone to the extreme. The playing field is now level. Now the civil rights movement is no longer worker for equality but for revenge.”

##### *Reality Check and Consequence*

- (a) Let’s first define racism:  
Racism= Racial Prejudice (white people and people of color have this)  
Plus  
Systemic, Institutional Power (white people have this)  
To say People of Color can be racist, denies the power imbalance inherent in racism. Certainly, people of color can be and are prejudiced against white people. That was part of their societal conditioning. A person of color can act on their preju-

*dices to insult, even hurt a white person. But there is a difference between being hurt and being oppressed. People of color, as a social group, do not have the societal, institutional power to oppress white people as a group. An individual person of color abusing a white person – while clearly wrong, (no person should be insulted, hurt, etc.) is acting out of a personal racial prejudice, not racism.*

- (b) This form of denial is based in the false notion that the playing field is now level. When the people with privilege and historical access and advantage are expected to suddenly (in societal evolution time) share some of that power, it is often perceived as discrimination.
- (c) This was said by Rush Limbaugh, who is obviously no anti-racist, but this comment is loaded with white people's fears of people of color, especially if "they" gained control. Embedded here is also the assumption that to be "pro-Black" (or any color) is to be antiwhite. A similar illogical accusation is directed at women who work for an end to violence against women and girls. Women who work to better the lives of women are regularly accused of being "anti-male."

4) ***Blame the Victim***

- (a) "We have advertised everywhere, there just aren't any qualified people of color for this job." Or "If he only had a stronger work ethic." Or
- (b) "If she just felt better about herself..." Or "Internalized racism is the real problem here." Or
- (c) "She uses racism as an excuse to divert us from her incompetence." And "He goes looking for racism everywhere." (As if racism is so hidden or hard to uncover that people of color would have to search for it.)

***Reality Check and Consequence***

All "blame the victim" behaviors have two things in common. First, they evade the real problem: racism. Second, they delete from the picture the agents of racism, white people and institutions, which either intentionally perpetuate or unintentionally collude with racism. As long as the focus remains on people of color we can minimize or dismiss their reactions, and never have to look directly at racism and our own responsibility or collusion.

5) ***Innocent By Association***

"I'm not racist, because ...I have Vietnamese

friends, or my lover is Black, I donate to Casa Latina, or I marched with Dr. King."

***Reality Check and Consequence***

This detour into denial wrongly equates personal interactions with people of color, no matter how intimate they may be, with anti-racism. It assumes our personal associations free us magically from our racist conditioning.

6) ***The white knight or white missionary***

"We (white people) know just where to build your new community center." Or "Your young people (read youth of color) would be better served by traveling to our suburban training center."

***Reality Check and Consequence***

It is a racist, paternalistic assumption that well meaning white people know what's best for people of color. Decisions, by white people, are made on behalf of people of color, as though they were incapable of making their own. This is another version of "blame the victim" and "white is right." It places the problems at the feet of people of color, and the only "appropriate" solutions with white people. Once more the power of self-determination is taken from people of color. Regardless of motive, it is still about white control.

7) ***The White Wash***

"He's really a very nice guy, he's just had some bad experiences with Koreans." Or "That's just the way Uncle Adolf jokes. He's very polite to the Black janitor in his building."

***Reality Check and Consequence***

We're trapped here by another version of our guilt response. We attempt to excuse, defend or cover up racist actions of other white people. We are particularly prone to this if the other person is close to us, family or friend, and if we feel their actions reflect on us.

8) ***I Was An Indian in A Former Life (2)***

"After that sweat lodge I really know what it feel like to be an Indian. I have found my true spiritual path."

***Reality Check and Consequence***

This is spiritual or cultural appropriation and poses a serious threat to the integrity and survival of Native cultures. To fill a void in their own spiritual core, some white people are drawn into the New Age garden to pick from a variety of Native spiritu-

al packages usually offered for sale. Since Native spiritual practice is inseparable from their history and current community, it cannot be disconnected from that context to service white people searching for life's meaning. Appropriating selected parts of Native cultures romanticizes the lives of Native peoples while denying their struggles. Their lands and livelihoods stolen, indigenous peoples now witness white people trying to steal their spirituality. Rather than escape our white racism by finding a spiritual path, we instead collude in one more way with the genocidal attacks on Native cultures.

9) *The Isolationist*

"I thought we resolved this issue (racism) when it came up on the board last year." Or "We need to deal with this specific incident. Don't complicate it by bringing up irrelevant incidences of the past." Or "This only happened today because the TV news last night showed police beating a Black kid."

*Reality Check and Consequence*

Attempts are made to isolate a particular incident of racism from of the larger context. We blame a publicized incident of racism outside our organization to rationalize an internal incident and to avoid facing the reality of racism within. When trying to resolve an accusation of racism within an institution, we often see the incident in a vacuum, or as an aberration, in isolation from an historic pattern of racism. Racism has been so institutionalized that every "incident" is another symptom of the pattern. If we continue to react incident to incident, crisis to crisis, as though they are unconnected, we will find genuine resolution only further from our reach.

10) *"Bending Over Blackwards"* (3)

"Of course, I agree with you." (Said to a person of color even when I disagree) or "I have to side with Betty on this." (Betty being a woman of color.)

*Reality Check and Consequence*

Our white guilt shows up as we defer to people of color. We don't criticize, disagree, challenge or question them the way we would white people. And if we do disagree, we don't do it with the same conviction or passion that we would display with a white person. Our racism plays out as a different standard for people of color than for white people. If this is our pattern, we can never have a genuine relationship with a person of color. People of color

when we are doing this. Our sincerity, commitment and courage will be rightly questioned. We cannot grow to a deeper level of trust and intimacy with people of color we treat in this way.

11) *BWAME*

"But What About Me. Look how I've been hurt, oppressed, exploited...?"

*Reality Check and Consequence*

This diminishes the experience of people of color by telling my own story of hardship. I lose an opportunity to learn more about the experience of racism from a person of color, while I minimize their experience by trying to make it comparable or less painful than mine.

12) *Teach Me, Please*

"I want to stop acting like a racist, so please tell me when I do something you think is racist."

*Reality Check and Consequence*

White people often assume we can learn about racism only from people of color. We further assume that people of color have the energy and/or desire to do this teaching. My understanding is that most people of color are weary of educating white people about racism. We will get stuck. We'll get frustrated and impatient with ourselves and other white people in this struggle. And we'll stay stuck if we don't seek help from other white anti-racists. Our inclination has been to ask people of color to help us. We should seek out other white people BEFORE we go to people of color. Perhaps, as we become more trustworthy as allies, we will build genuine relationships with a few people of color who offer their reflections for us when we get stuck. This is at their discretion, not ours. We can't assume people of color should be so grateful for our attempts at anti-racism, that they will be willing to guide us whenever we are ready to be guided.

13) *White On White, and Righteously So*

"What is wrong with those white people? Can't they see how racist they're being?" Or "I just can't stand to be around white people who act so racist." And

*You're Preaching To The Choir*

"You're wasting your time with us, we're not the people who need this training."

*Reality Check and Consequence*

We distance ourselves from “other” white people. We see only confirmed bigots, cardcarrying white supremacists and white people outside our circle as “real racists.” We put other white people down, trash their work or behavior, or otherwise dismiss them. We righteously consider ourselves white people who have evolved beyond our racist conditioning. This is another level of denial. There are no “exceptional white people.” (4) We may have attended many anti-racism workshops; we may not be shouting racist epithets or actively discriminating against people of color, but we still experience privilege based on our white skin color. We benefit from this system of oppression and advantage, no matter what our intentions are. This distancing serves only to divide us from potential allies and limit our own learning.

14) *The “Certificate of Innocence”*

Sometimes we seek or expect from people of color some public or private recognition and appreciation for our anti-racism. Other times we look for a “certificate of innocence” to tell us we are one of the good white people.

*Reality Check and Consequence*

If our ally commitment depends on positive reinforcement from people of color, we set ourselves up for sure failure. The first time a person of color is displeased with our actions, we could respond, “Well, if the people I’m doing all this for don’t want my help, then why bother? I quit.” Clearly, we’re challenging racism for “them” not for us. We have not identified our self-interest, as white people, for fighting racism. Until we do, we cannot stay on this lifelong journey.

15) *Smoke And Mirrors*

We use the current PC language; we listen to the right music; we state the liberal line; we’re seen at the right meetings with the right people. We even interrupt racist remarks when the right people are watching and when there is no risk to us. We look like an anti-racist.

*Reality Check and Consequence*

This is the “Avon Ally,” the cosmetic approach. People of color and other white anti-racists see through this pretense quickly. This pseudo-anti-racist posturing only serves to collude with racism and weakens the credibility of sincere white anti-racists.

16) *The Accountant*

We keep a tally sheet. If we perform some “feat of anti-racism,” we expect reciprocity from an individual or group of color, usually with some prestige or power that can serve our interests.

*Reality Check and Consequence*

“I scratch your back, you scratch mine is NOT justice seeking nor ally behavior. It serves only to reduce justice work to some kind of power brokering currency.

17) *Silence*

We stay silent.

*Reality Check and Consequence*

Our silence may be a product our guilt or fear of making people of color or white people angry with us or disappointed in us. We may be silent because our guilt stops us from disagreeing with people of color. We may be afraid that speaking out could result in losing some of our privilege. We may be silenced by fear of violence. The reasons for our silence are many, but each time we miss an opportunity to interrupt racism, or to act as allies or to interact genuinely with people of color or other white people. And no anti-racist action is taken as long as we are silent.

[A note about silence: Silence is a complicated issue/matter. There are times when faced with a potential intervention situation that I may choose not to interrupt – for reasons of good sense or strategy. Anti-racists need courage, but foolish risks makes little sense. When the choice is between intervening in this moment, alone, or gathering allies to speak out later in a more strategic way, the latter may prove more effective.]

18) *Exhaustion And Despair – Sound The Retreat*

“I’m exhausted. I’m only one person. I can stop and rest for awhile.” Or “Racism is so pervasive and entrenched, there just isn’t any hope.”

*Reality Check and Consequence*

Despair is a real enemy of anti-racists. For our commitment to be a lifelong one, we must find ways to mitigate the effects. Burn-out or desertion are of no use to the struggle. We can remember men who jumped on a “Take Back the Night” bandwagon, challenging violence against women – for a while. Until the attention on them as good men waned. Until the “glamour” of the issue faded. One of the historical, repeated failures of

“liberals” in social justice movements has been short-term and inconsistent commitment to the “issue du jour.” If we quit, for any reason, we engage our “default option.” (5) As white people, we can take a break from the frustration and despair of anti-racism work. Such retreat will result in no significant consequences for us. Racism doesn’t allow such a respite for people of color. One of the elemental privileges of being white is our freedom to retreat from the issue of racism. If things get too tough we can always take a break. And our work against racism doesn’t get done.

### The Journey Continues

Once identified, behaviors like those above are possible to change. The patterns are repeated less often. We re-educate and re-tool ourselves to avoid racist behaviors and to take more potent anti-racist action.

People of color will continue to demand their rights, opportunities and full personhood. But racism in North America won’t end because people of color demand it. Racism will only end when a significant number of white people of conscience, the people who can wield systemic privilege and power with integrity, find the will and take the action to dismantle it.

That won’t happen until white people find racism in our daily consciousness as often a people of color do. For now we have to drag racism into our consciousness intentionally, for unlike our sisters and brothers of color, the most present daily manifestation of our white privilege is the possibility of forgetting about racism. We cannot. Racism continues in the name of all white people. While there is nothing about racism to celebrate, there is much to celebrate in a life lived in the pursuit of justice.

### ENDNOTES

1. Lillian Smith, *Killers Of The Dream*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York, 1949. Page 91.

2. Paraphrase of title by Andrea Smith. “*For All Those Who Were Indian In A Former Life*.” First printed in *Sojourner: The Women’s Forum*, November 1990.

3. I first heard this phrase from Rev. Joe Barndt of Crossroads Ministry and the author of *Dismantling Racism*. Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis. 1991.

4. Credit to Kathleen Carlin for her “Principle of Intentions versus Effect” from her anti-sexism work. Translated here to a racism corollary. Before her death in 199 she was the Executive Director of Men Stopping Violence in Atlanta, GA.

5. Term from Dr. Molesi Kete Asante, Chair of African American Studies, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.

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SOMETHING ABOUT THE SUBJECT  
MAKES IT HARD TO NAME

8

Gloria Yamato

Racism—simple enough in structure, yet difficult to eliminate. Racism—pervasive in the U.S. culture to the point that it deeply affects all the local town folk and spills over, negatively influencing the fortunes of folk around the world. Racism is pervasive to the point that we take many of its manifestations for granted, believing “that’s life.” Many believe that racism can be dealt with

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Margaret L. Andersen + Patricia Hill Collins (eds.). Race, Class + Gender. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1992.

effectively in one hellifying workshop, or one hour-long heated discussion. Many actually believe this monster, racism, that has had at least a few hundred years to take root, grow, invade our space and develop subtle variations . . . this mind-funk that distorts thought and action, can be merely wished away. I've run into folks who really think that we can beat this devil, kick this habit, be healed of this disease in a snap. In a sincere blink of a well-intentioned eye, presto—poof—racism disappears. "I've dealt with my racism . . . (envision a laying on of hands) . . . Hallelujah! Now I can go to the beach." Well, fine. Go to the beach. In fact, why don't we all go to the beach and continue to work on the sucker over there? Cuz you can't even shave a little piece off this thing called racism in a day, or a weekend, or a workshop.

When I speak of *oppression*, I'm talking about the systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of one group of people by another for whatever reason. The oppressors are purported to have an innate ability to access economic resources, information, respect, etc., while the oppressed are believed to have a corresponding negative innate ability. The flip side of oppression is *internalized oppression*. Members of the target group are emotionally, physically, and spiritually battered to the point that they begin to actually believe that their oppression is deserved, is their lot in life, is natural and right, and that it doesn't even exist. The oppression begins to feel comfortable, familiar enough that when mean ol' Massa lay down de whip, we got's to pick up and whack ourselves and each other. Like a virus, it's hard to beat racism, because by the time you come up with a cure, it's mutated to a "new cure-resistant" form. One shot just won't get it. Racism must be attacked from many angles.

The forms of racism that I pick up on these days are 1) aware/blatant racism, 2) aware/covert racism, 3) unaware/unintentional racism, and 4) unaware/self-righteous racism. I can't say that I prefer any one form of racism over the others, because they all look like an itch needing a scratch. I've heard it said (and understandably so) that the aware/blatant form of racism is preferable if one must suffer it. Outright racists will, without apology or confusion, tell us that because of our color we don't appeal to them. If we so choose, we can attempt to get the hell out of their way before we get the sweat knocked out of us. Growing up, aware/covert racism is what I heard many of my elders bemoaning "up north," after having escaped the overt racism "down south." Apartments were suddenly no longer vacant or rents were outrageously high, when black, brown, red, or yellow persons went to inquire about them. Job vacancies were suddenly filled, or we were fired for very vague reasons. It still happens, though the perpetrators really take care to cover their tracks these days. They don't want to get gummed to death or slobbered on by the toothless laws that supposedly protect us from such inequities.

Unaware/unintentional racism drives usually tranquil white liberals wild when they get called on it, and confirms the suspicions of many people of color who feel that white folks are just plain crazy. It has led white people to believe that it's just fine to ask if they can touch my hair (while reaching). They then exclaim over how soft it is, how it does not scratch their hand. It has led whites to assume that bending over backwards and speaking to me in high-pitched (terrified), condescending tones would make up for all the racist wrongs that distort our lives. This type of racism has led whites right to my doorstep, talking 'bout, "We're sorry/we love you and want to make things right," which is fine, and further, "We're gonna give you the opportunity to fix it while we sleep. Just tell us what you need. 'Bye!!'"—which *ain't* fine. With the best of intentions, the best of educations, and the greatest generosity of heart, whites, operating on the misinformation fed to them from day one, will behave in ways that are racist, will perpetuate racism by being "nice" the way we're taught to be nice. You can just "nice" somebody to death with naïveté and lack of awareness of privilege. Then there's guilt and the desire to end racism and how the two get all tangled up to the point that people, morbidly fascinated with their guilt, are immobilized. Rather than deal with ending racism, they sit and ponder their guilt and hope nobody notices how awful they are. Meanwhile, racism picks up momentum and keeps on keepin' on.

Now, the newest form of racism that I'm hip to is unaware/self-righteous racism. The "good white" racist attempts to shame Blacks into being blacker, scorns Japanese-Americans who don't speak Japanese, and knows more about the Chicano/a community than the folks who make up the community. They assign themselves as the "good whites," as opposed to the "bad whites," and are often so busy telling people of color what the issues in the Black, Asian, Indian, Latino/a communities should be that they don't have time to deal with their errant sisters and brothers in the white community. Which means that people of color are still left to deal with what the "good whites" don't want to . . . racism.

Internalized racism is what really gets in my way as a Black woman. It influences the way I see or don't see myself, limits what I expect of myself or others like me. It results in my acceptance of mistreatment, leads me to believe that being treated with less than absolute respect, at least this once, is to be expected because I am Black, because I am not white. "Because I am (*you fill in the color*), you think, "Life is going to be hard." The fact is life may be hard, but the color of your skin is not the cause of the hardship. The color of your skin may be used as an excuse to mistreat you, but there is no reason or logic involved in the mistreatment. If it seems that your color is the reason, if it seems that your ethnic heritage is the cause of the woe, it's because you've

been deliberately beaten down by agents of a greedy system until you swallowed the garbage. That is the internalization of racism.

Racism is the systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of one group of people by another based on racial heritage. Like every other oppression, racism can be internalized. People of color come to believe misinformation about their particular ethnic group and thus believe that their mistreatment is justified. With that basic vocabulary, let's take a look at how the whole thing works together. Meet "the Ism Family," racism, classism, ageism, adultism, elitism, sexism, heterosexism, physicalism, etc. All these isms are systematic, that is, not only are these parasites feeding off our lives, they are also dependent on one another for foundation. Racism is supported and reinforced by classism, which is given a foothold and a boost by adultism, which also feeds sexism, which is validated by heterosexism, and so it goes on. You cannot have the "ism" functioning without first effectively installing its flip-side, the internalized version of the ism. Like twins, as one particular form of the ism grows in potency, there is a corresponding increase in its internalized form within the population. Before oppression becomes a specific ism like racism, usually all hell breaks loose. War. People fight attempts to enslave them, or to subvert their will, or to take what they consider theirs, whether that is territory or dignity. It's true that the various elements of racism, while repugnant, would not be able to do very much damage, but for one generally overlooked key piece: power/privilege.

While in one sense we all have power we have to look at the fact that, in our society, people are stratified into various classes and some of these classes have more privilege than others. The owning class has enough power and privilege to not have to give a good whinney what the rest of the folks have on their minds. The power and privilege of the owning class provides the ability to pay off enough of the working class and offer that paid-off group, the middle class, just enough privilege to make it agreeable to do various and sundry oppressive things to other working-class and outright disenfranchised folk, keeping the lid on explosive inequities, at least for a minute. If you're at the bottom of this heap, and you believe the line that says you're there because that's all you're worth, it is at least some small solace to believe that there are others more worthless than you, because of their gender, race, sexual preference . . . whatever. The specific form of power that runs the show here is the power to intimidate. The power to take away the most lives the quickest, and back it up with legal and "divine" sanction, is the very bottom line. It makes the difference between who's holding the racism end of the stick and who's getting beat with it (or beating others as vulnerable as they are) on the internalized racism end of the stick. What I am saying is, while people of color are welcome to tear up their own neighborhoods and each other, everybody

knows that you cannot do that to white folks without hell to pay. People of color can be prejudiced against one another and whites, but do not have an ice-cube's chance in hell of passing laws that will get whites sent to relocation camps "for their own protection and the security of the nation." People who have not thought about or refuse to acknowledge this imbalance of power/privilege, often want to talk about the racism of people of color. But then that is one of the ways racism is able to continue to function. You look for someone to blame and you blame the victim, who will nine times out of ten accept the blame out of habit.

So, what can we do? Acknowledge racism for a start, even though and especially when we've struggled to be kind and fair, or struggled to rise above it all. It is hard to acknowledge the fact that racism circumscribes and pervades our lives. Racism must be dealt with on two levels, personal and societal, emotional and institutional. It is possible—and most effective—to do both at the same time. We must reclaim whatever delight we have lost in our own ethnic heritage or heritages. This so-called melting pot has only succeeded in turning us into fast food-gobbling "generics" (as in generic "white folks" who were once Irish, Polish, Russian, English, etc. and "black folks," who were once Ashanti, Bambara, Baule, Yoruba, etc.). Find or create safe places to actually *feel* what we've been forced to repress each time we were a victim of, witness to or perpetrator of racism, so that we do not continue, like puppets, to act out the past in the present and future. Challenge oppression. Take a stand against it. When you are aware of something oppressive going down, stop the show. At least call it. We become so numbed to racism that we don't even think twice about it, unless it is immediately life-threatening.

*Whites who want to be allies to people of color:* You can educate yourselves via research and observation rather than rigidly, arrogantly relying solely on interrogating people of color. Do not expect that people of color should teach you how to behave non-oppressively. Do not give into the pull to be lazy. Think, hard. Do not blame people of color for your frustration about racism, but do appreciate the fact that people of color will often help you get in touch with that frustration. Assume that your effort to be a good friend is appreciated, but don't expect or accept gratitude from people of color. Work on racism for your sake, not "their" sake. Assume that you are needed and capable of being a good ally. Know that you'll make mistakes and commit yourself to correcting them and continuing on as an ally, no matter what. Don't give up.

*People of color, working through internalized racism:* Remember always that you and others like you are completely worthy of respect, completely capable of achieving whatever you take a notion to do. Remember that the term "people of color" refers to a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These various groups have been oppressed in a variety of ways. Educate yourself

about the ways different peoples have been oppressed and how they've resisted that oppression. Expect and insist that whites are capable of being good allies against racism. Don't give up. Resist the pull to give out the "people of color seal of approval" to aspiring white allies. A moment of appreciation is fine, but more than that tends to be less than helpful. Celebrate yourself. Celebrate yourself. Celebrate the inevitable end of racism.

## WHITE PRIVILEGE AND MALE PRIVILEGE: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies

Peggy McIntosh

Through work to bring materials and perspectives from Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged in the curriculum, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. 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 recognized, acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon with a life of its own, I realized that since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege that was similarly denied and protected, but alive and real in its effects. As a white person, I

I have appreciated commentary on this paper from the Working Papers Committee of the Wesley College Center for Research on Women, from members of the Dodge seminar, and from many individuals, including Margaret Andersen, Sorel Berman, Joanne Braxton, Johnnie Butler, Sandra Dickerson, Marnie Evans, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Sandra Harding, Eleanor Hinton Hoytt, Pauline Houston, Paul Lauter, Joyce Miller, Mary Norris, Gloria Oden, Beverly Smith, and John Walter.

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realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at 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, males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. This paper is a partial record of my personal observations and not a scholarly analysis. It is based on my daily experiences within my particular circumstances.

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, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.

Since I have had trouble facing white privilege, and describing its results in my life, I saw parallels here with men's reluctance to acknowledge male privilege. Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that women are disadvantaged to acknowledging that men have unearned advantage, or that unearned privilege has not been good for men's development as human beings or for society's development, or that privilege systems might ever be challenged and changed.

I will review here several types or layers of denial that I see at work in protecting, and preventing awareness about, entrenched male privilege. Then I will draw parallels, from my own experience, with the denials that veil the facts of white privilege. Finally, I will list forty-six ordinary and daily ways in which I experience having white privilege, by contrast with my African American colleagues in the same building. This list is not intended to be generalizable. Others can make their own lists from within their own life circumstances.

Writing this paper has been difficult, despite warm receptions for the talks on which it is based. For describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work 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?"

The denial of men's overprivileged state takes many forms in discussions of curriculum change work. Some claim that men must be central in the curriculum because they have done most of what is important or destructive in

1. This paper was presented at the Virginia Women's Studies Association conference in Richmond in April, 1986, and the American Educational Research Association conference in Boston in October, 1986, and discussed with two groups of participants in the Dodge seminars for Secondary School Teachers in New York and Boston in the spring of 1987.

## HOW TO INTERRUPT RACIST COMMENTS

### Principles for Eliminating Racism

When racist comments are made, try the following:

- Remember that someone has to be doing clear thinking on the subject. Assume it is you.
- Listen non-judgmentally.
- Ask questions. Find out how they arrived at their thinking.
- Ask questions that lead them to reflect and rethink on what they said.
- Give them more information (most racism is done out of ignorance).
- Think about the ways they might be oppressed. Stay within their experience of oppression.
- Be playful, keep it light, but don't let them off the hook.
- Avoid arguments. You don't want to alienate them. You actually want them to get closer to you as an ally (supporter).
- Avoid making people feel ashamed, humiliated, or embarrassed. Your goal is to inform their thinking with new information.
- People don't have to admit they are wrong, so don't push for an admission.

All of this takes a lot of practice – you only get better by doing it.

