

Complicating “White Privilege”: Race, Poverty, and the Nature of the Knapsack

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In my favorite photograph of my Grandma Wilma, taken during her early teens, she stands outside her Kitzmiller, Maryland, house. The house’s exterior, cracking and worn, hints at the working poor life she and her family are living in Appalachia. Evidence, too, is her attire: full-length overalls, dusty and stained, hang over a plain white t-shirt. The tips of dirty shoes peek out from the bottoms of pant legs that appear too long for her short frame. The scenery, Grandma’s house and clothes, exude working poor humility, the kind Doris Ulmann captured in her 1930’s Appalachian photo-documentaries. The casual do-gooder might look at the photo and think, *I don’t know how people lived like that, in those dirty clothes and broken-down houses*, not realizing that poverty continues to wreak havoc in Appalachia and other parts of the United States today.



I study Grandma: the way she stands, shoulders back, perfectly postured; the way she rests her hands on her hips, elbows winged out, claiming her space; the way she teases the camera, chin flirtingly downturned, eyebrows arched over smiling eyes; the way she manipulates the photographer, as if to say what she never, never, *never* actually would say: *I’m bigger than this—bigger than these overalls, bigger than this house, bigger than this town, bigger than you. I know it and I know that you know it. And that’s why I’m smiling so big you barely can capture me in a single frame.*

She was right, you know. Like many of her peers in that coal mining town, Grandma was bigger than all of that—than what many people assume women like Grandma, from towns like Kitzmiller, are capable of being. She was bigger than that then and always has

been. She was valedictorian of her high school class, editor of her school newspaper, favorite confidant to a network of friends spanning two towns. Like many of her neighbors, Grandma was bigger in spirit, bigger in talent, bigger in smarts than what that little coal town should have been able to contain. But she also was poor. She was terribly poor despite the 14-hour shifts her father, my Great Grandfather Henry, worked in the coalmines, chipping and digging and coughing up dust.

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I have spent, over the years, considerable time on the front lines of the “white privilege” brigade, committed to challenging myself and other White people to think critically about the upper end of the racial power hierarchy in the U.S. During that time I have attended and conducted numerous workshops about white privilege and its impact on schools and other systems and organizations; participated in and facilitated a variety of dialogues and caucus groups on racism and whiteness; and acted against white privilege in myriad, although not always effective, ways.

It has been a relatively short time—just more than twenty years, in fact—since that term, “white privilege,” was popularized by the feverish, largely grassroots, pre-World-Wide-Web circulation of a now-famous essay written by my now-equally-famous friend and colleague, Peggy McIntosh. She titled her essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” The white privilege *concept* wasn’t new, of course, nor was it uniquely Peggy’s, a fact she has explained over and over with great humility through the years. Scores of People of Color throughout the brutal history of European colonization had spoken and written about the *concept* of white privilege for generations before Peggy wrote about the power whiteness afforded her. W.E.B. DuBois, Gloria Anzaldúa (whose book, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, knocked me on my proverbial hind-end and changed everything I thought I knew about social justice), James Baldwin, Harold Cruse, Rayna Green, Hinmatóowyalahtq’it (also known as Chief Joseph): Each, despite never using the term, wrote or spoke about white privilege before doing so was hip; when nobody grew wealthy writing and lecturing about white privilege; and, in some cases, when speaking truth to white power put People of Color at *grave* risk. Rayna Green continues to do so today. Still—and this, in and of itself, is a marker of privilege—it took Peggy’s essay to plant the concept firmly into the mainstream “diversity” lexicon, which is another way of saying *White people seemed intrigued enough by the knapsack not to dismiss it*. And so the notion of “white privilege” stuck; it appears as though it’s here to stay.

I dove into the white privilege discourse as part of my training as an anti-racism educator in the mid-1990s, just a few years after my white educator peers had started shuffling through their knapsacks. The shuffling often occurred back then, as it does today,

in white caucus groups, organized dialogues among white educators. During these dialogues we more or less took turns pouring the contents of our knapsacks onto the floor before encouraging each other to “own” whatever came out, taking responsibility for racism. Rarely did we get around to talking about what it meant to be an anti-racist or to be *for* racial justice. Rarely did we use those dialogues to grow ourselves into more powerful change agents. This, I think, persists as a problem in white caucusing and other forms of race dialogues today: too much conversation about how hard it is to be a white person taking responsibility for white privilege; way too much thinking that the dialogue, itself, *is* the anti-racism rather than what *prepares* us for the anti-racism.

However, looking back now, having observed how conversations about whiteness have evolved over the past 20 years, what stands out to me most about those early conversations about “white privilege” is this: Even then, in those few years after that phrase, “white privilege,” had entered white people’s “diversity” lexicon, the rules of the conversation already had been established, and firmly so. Many were the standard “be respectful” rules, some of which—“speak from personal experience” or “use I statements,” for instance, which could limit participants’ opportunities to speak to *systemic* racism—actually, as far as I could tell, *privileged* white people in conversations about white privilege.

The most heavy-handedly enforced rule, and the one we, in the white privilege brigade, still seem determined to protect with the greatest earnestness, dictates that *Nobody shall, during a conversation about white privilege, mention any identity that is not a racial identity or any oppression that is not racism.* To my knowledge, there is no official rulebook governing conversations about white privilege. If such a rulebook did exist, though, I am sure that *this* rule would be printed in bold italics.

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Not more than a year ago, I visited my friends, Althea Webb and Bobby Starnes, at Berea College, a work college nestled into the hills of Appalachian Kentucky. During the trip I accompanied Althea and Bobby on a drive into the mountains, where coal companies continue to desecrate a once-pristine landscape by tearing off mountaintops, removing the coal, and, in the process, spoiling what, by some measures, is the most diverse ecosystem on Earth. I only recently had begun to explore my own Appalachian heritage, something rarely acknowledged on my mom’s side of the family despite the generations of young men our lineage lost to whooping cough, black lung, and other ailments associated with coal mining. It was during that trip that Bobby, herself a product of Appalachian eastern Kentucky, pointed out, after the umpteenth-or-so time I jabbered on about how *my mom’s*

peoples are Appalachian, that my mom's peoples being Appalachian meant, in point of fact, that *you, Paul, are Appalachian, too*. And I thought I wasn't a blusher.

Why, I wondered, had it never occurred to me to identify with Grandma, the person I admired more than anybody else I knew, as Appalachian? I pondered and journaled. I commiserated with my mom and with Grandma. I literally lost sleep. And then it hit me, and it came down to this: white privilege.

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Kitzmilller remains, as it was when Grandma lived there, a virtually all-white town. Grandma remembers one African American man who lived in Kitzmilller for a short while when she was a kid. She learned later, she once confided in me, that the Ku Klux Klan was active in the town. She assured me, though, that none of our relatives were Klanspeople and that it seemed more like *a club for men to ride around in sheets* than anything else.

A few years ago, while helping Grandma prepare to relocate to Georgia, I sat sorting through personal effects left behind by her mother, my late Great Grandma Grace. Hidden in an old toolbox beneath a marriage certificate from the 1920s and a dozen years' worth of labor union dues stubs I found a contract between an American Indian tribe and the town of Kitzmilller, apparently brokered by my Great Grandfather Henry. The agreement granted the tribe access to a hill on the outskirts of town for a few months each year, probably on land that constituted its ancestral territory.

A few more years ago, my Uncle Ross, along with my cousins, Ryan and Rebecca, moved to Kitzmilller, a familiar and, more importantly, *affordable* place from which to launch a business from home. The homecoming lasted mere months before Ross invited an African American business partner to his home for a meeting. Neighbors complained with subtle threats. Ross and Ryan and Rebecca moved to Florida.

According to the most recent U.S. Census data, 301 of 302 people—that's 99.67 percent—currently residing in Kitzmilller are white. The other 0.33 percent? She or he is, in Census parlance, "from two or more races."

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Some people, including those who are hostile to anti-racism efforts or, perhaps, those who are open to anti-racism efforts but new to conversations about white privilege, might argue that my Grandma and, for that matter, any white person mired in dire poverty, cannot also be considered "privileged." It is not uncommon for white people to dismiss the problem of racism by pointing, instead, to class. *I'm not white, I'm poor*; or *The real issue is poverty*.

I disagree. And because I disagree, I often begin the workshops I lead on poverty and economic justice with two clarifications. First, the fact that we will be discussing

poverty and class does not mean that class is the *real issue* or that we can excuse ourselves from understanding race and racism, too. Secondly, racism and economic injustice are linked inextricably in U.S. history. Slavery, colonization, “Manifest Destiny,” Jim Crow, “separate but equal”: each is an example of racial injustice driven by economic interests. We simply cannot understand class in the U.S. without also understanding racism. Class or, more precisely, *economic injustice* is the real issue, but so is racism as well as sexism and heterosexism and ableism, and the many intersections of these and other oppressions.

So do Grandma and other poor white people have white privilege? Yes, absolutely. Next to Ross’s African American colleague, Grandma is privileged by her whiteness. Next to the American Indian tribe that had to negotiate with white people for access to its own ancestral land, Grandma is privileged. Next to the many poor and working class People of Color in Appalachia who are not welcome or, in some cases, *safe* in towns like Kitzmiller, Grandma and every other poor white person enjoys some level of white privilege.

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I am tempted, here, to silence myself. I am tempted to revert to the absoluteness with which I was trained to enforce the white privilege rulebook.

Ah, ah, ah, I hear myself thinking. We’re talking about whiteness. We’re talking about racism. Don’t you see how your privilege allows you to avoid talking about race by hijacking the conversation and steering it toward class?

Here, then, is the rub: We, in the white privilege brigade, often, and somewhat generically, in my opinion, like to say that racism is about power. That word, *power*, might be the most often-spoken word in conversations about white privilege. Rarely, though, do we speak to the *nature* of power beyond the types of privilege so eloquently expounded upon by Peggy. This is where critical race theory, with its frameworks for deconstructing racism, has flown past the white privilege conversation. Critical race theorists centralize the fundamental questions too often left unasked in conversations about white privilege: What, exactly, does *power* mean in a capitalistic society? Why, in a capitalistic society, do people and institutions exert power and privilege? What are they after?

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So yes, yes, undoubtedly yes. Grandma has white privilege. But it’s a *relative* white privilege. It’s not the same white privilege that I have or that Peggy or Tim Wise has or, for that matter, that any white person has who manages to sustain a financially solvent career out of writing or talking about whiteness. I feel the tug—believe me, I do—of that race-only white privilege rule. Still, no matter how I slice it, I come back to this: Class matters, even when it comes to white privilege. In other words, I have come to believe that the white

privilege brigade, with me among its chief enforcers, has been wrong to police the complexities of class (and, for that matter, other forms of oppression), *out of* conversations about white privilege.

Worse, by doing so, we also have failed to interrogate the hierarchy of privilege among white people, including white people who are attempting to be anti-racists. And there is much to interrogate.

For example, Grandma doesn't stand to benefit economically from the "white privilege" industry; from the books and speaking engagements and t-shirts and bumper stickers that have generated considerable wealth primarily for white people who never have experienced the kind of sustained poverty Grandma has experienced.

Neither is Grandma in line for accolades or social kudos honoring her "bravery" for being a white person willing to talk or write about "white privilege," a concept which, again, white people co-opted from the literatures and narratives of Activists, Scholars, and Educators of Color. I often share with Grandma my admiration for who she is. However, she cannot afford to attend the White Privilege Conference, the biggest annual U.S. gathering of people concerned with white people's knapsacks, in order to participate in a white caucus group. She does not have books to sign or lectures to deliver at pricey events. I, on the other hand, might, upon finishing this essay, be celebrated for writing yet another piece about white privilege. It could help me get tenure.

No, Grandma's white privilege is nothing at all like my white privilege. It certainly doesn't resemble the white privilege enjoyed by Bill Gates or George W. Bush, nor even that enjoyed by Martha Stewart or Hillary Clinton. She does not have the white privilege of Peggy McIntosh or Tim Wise or Robert Jensen or Paula Rothenberg. *Pretending* that she shares that level of white privilege, or that a working class white third grade teacher experiences the same white privilege as a property class white lawyer (or law professor) or professional keynoter is, well, nonsensical. And it certainly isn't conducive to an authentic movement for racial justice because it limits the extent to which we allow ourselves to understand the messy complexity of racism. It limits, as well, the extent to which we succeed at fostering a movement to which working class and poor White people feel connected.

I couldn't afford to feed my kids last night. You attended a lecture about racism on the university campus—last time I was in that vicinity I was accosted by campus police—then, after asking the lecturer to sign your copy of her book, you met friends at a bar to continue the conversation over drinks. Now you want me to tell you about my privilege? Um, you first.

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As I mentioned earlier, I do understand the drive to minimize the ways conversations about racism are hijacked, reframed, or devolved into a *woe-is-me-as-an-anti-racist-white-person-with-racist-parents* affirmation for “good” white people. I recognize that the learning curve can be steep; it certainly has been for me. This is why the race-only rule persists and why it is enforced so vehemently.

Ah, ah, ah... We're talking about white privilege now.

At some point, though, we do ourselves and our movements a disservice when we refuse to consider class privilege and economic injustice within white privilege or, if you like, white privilege *privilege*. This is a matter of consciousness, of depth in understanding. It also is a matter of strategy, of effectively growing movements for social justice by acknowledging the varied ways in which people experience oppression. More than anything, though, it's a matter of honesty and ownership on the parts of white people who, like me, find themselves in a position to bolster their economic privilege through white privilege work. We must ask ourselves whether these conditions—struggling against white privilege and profiting from that struggle, something Grandma cannot do—are compatible.

This is especially true when our white privilege work, at times, has included insisting that economically disadvantaged white people who, like many People of Color, have experienced hunger, who are crowded into the most dilapidated schools, and who are disproportionate targets of economic injustice, take the same responsibility for white privilege as we take. It is especially true when we insist that *we're here to talk about race, not class*, as if economic injustice is not part of the same power hierarchy as racism.

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As I continue to study my favorite photo of Grandma, I ask myself this: Who, exactly, do I see? What of whiteness, of poverty, of Appalachia, of me do I see in Grandma? Is she White in the same way that I am White? Risking censure from the white privilege brigade, I offer the only honest answer I can muster: *no*.

Perhaps with that answer I am breaking with white privilege convention or providing white privilege deniers the ammunition they need to point, again, to class as *the real issue*. Still, the acknowledgement feels like a triumph, like a step toward a more honest conversation. And that, after all, is the only real way to racial justice.