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# UNDERSTANDING WHITE PRIVILEGE

by Francis E. Kendall, Ph.D., © 2002

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*"We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be 'outside' the system. One is always in the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way that challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I take and which therefore have the option of not taking. It is something that society gives me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to have it, however noble and equalitarian my intentions."*

– Harry Brod, "Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael Messner (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 280.

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## What Is White Privilege?

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Privilege, particularly white or male privilege, is hard to see for those of us who were born with access to power and resources. It is very visible for those to whom privilege was not granted. Furthermore, the subject is extremely difficult to talk about because many white people don't feel powerful or as if they have privileges others do not. It is sort of like asking fish to notice water or birds to discuss air. For those who have privileges based on race or gender or class or physical ability or sexual orientation, or age, it just is- it's normal. The *Random House Dictionary* (1993) defines *privilege* as "a right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person beyond the advantages of most." In her article, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," Peggy McIntosh (1995) reminds us that those of us who are white usually believe that privileges are "conditions of daily experience... [that are] universally available to everybody." Further, she says that what we are really talking about is "unearned power conferred systematically" (pp. 82-83)

For those of us who are white, one of our privileges is that we see ourselves as individuals, "just people," part of the human race. Most of us are clear, however, that people whose skin is not white are members of a race. The surprising thing for us is that, even though we don't see ourselves as part of a radical group, people of color generally do see us that way.

So given that we want to work to create a better world in which all of us can live, what can we do? The first step, of course, is to become clear about the basics of white privilege, what it is and how it works. The second step is to explore ways in which we can work against the racism of which white privilege is a cornerstone.

White privilege is an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our

institutions. One of the primary privileges is that of having greater access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of our skin color doors are open to us that are not open to other people. For example, given the exact financial history, white people in the United States are two to ten times more likely to get a housing loan than people of color – access to resources. Those of us who are white can count on the fact that a nation's history books will our experience of history. American Indian parents, on the other hand, know that their children will not learn in school about the contributions of their people.

All of us who are white, by race, have white privileges, although the extent to which we have them varies depending on our gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical ability, size and weight, and so on. For example, looking at race and gender, we find that white men have greater access to power and resources than white women do. The statistics from the 1995 Glass Ceiling Commission show that, while white men constitute about 43% of the work force, they hold 95% of senior management positions in American industry. Looking purely at white privilege, white women hold about 40% of the middle management positions, while Black women hold 5% and Black men hold 4%. Unless we believe that white women or African American men and women are inherently less capable, we have to acknowledge that our systems are treating us unequally.

White privilege has nothing to do with whether or not we are "good" people. We who are white can be absolute jerks and still have white privileges; people of color can be the most wonderful individuals in the world and not have them. Privileges are bestowed on us by the institutions with which we interact *solely because of our race*, not because we are deserving as individuals. While each of us is always a member of a race or races, we are

sometimes granted opportunities because we, as individuals, deserve them; often we are granted them because we, as individuals, belong to one or more of the favored groups in our society. At some colleges and universities, for example, sons and daughters of alumnae and alumni might have lower grades and test scores than other applicants; they are accepted, however, because their parents graduated from the institutions. That is a privilege that the sons and daughters did nothing to earn; they were put ahead of other possible applicants who may have had higher test scores and grades because of where their parents had gone to school.

### **The Purposeful Construction of White Privilege: A Brief History**

Often it is not our intent, as individual white people, to make use of the unearned benefits we have received on the basis of our skin color. Most of us go through our days unaware that we are white or that it matters. On the other hand, the creation of a system in which race plays a central part – one that codifies the superiority of the white race over all others – has been in no way accidental or haphazard. Throughout American history white power-holders, acting on behalf of our entire race, have made decisions that have affected white people as a group very differently than groups of color. History is filled with examples of the purposeful construction of a systemic structure that grants privileges to white people and withholds them from others.

- The writing of the U.S. Constitution which, in ten articles, very intentionally confirmed the holding of Black people as slaves, as property.
- White people's believing that our destiny was to "own" the land on which we all currently live, even though that required forcibly removing the native people who had lived here for centuries.
- Our breaking apart of Black families during slavery, sending mothers one place, fathers another, and babies and children yet another.
- Choosing to withhold from African Americans the ability to read so that they could not reproduce any of their culture or function well enough in our literate society to change their status.
- The removing of American Indian children from their homes, taking them as far as possible from anything they knew, and punishing them if they tried to speak in their own languages.
- The passing of laws that were created to maintain the legal separation and inequality of

whites and African Americans (*Plessy v. Ferguson*)

- The making of "politically expedient" decisions by many (if not most) white suffragists to align themselves with white Southern men, reassuring them that by giving the vote to *women* (read "white women" since at that time about 90% of the Black women lived in the South and were not by law, able to hold property and thus vote) the continuation of white supremacy was insured.
- The manipulation of immigration laws so that people of color, particularly Chinese and Mexican as well as European Jews, were less free to immigrate to the U.S. than Western and Eastern Europeans.
- The removing of American citizens of Japanese ancestry from their homes and taking their land and their businesses as our own during World War II.
- The using of affirmative action to promote opportunities for white women rather than for people of color.

It is important to know and remember this side of American history, even though it makes us extremely uncomfortable. For me, the confusion and pain of this knowledge is somewhat eased by reminding myself that this system is not based on each individual white person's intention to harm but on our racial group's determination to preserve what we believe is rightly ours. This distinction is, on one hand, important, and, on the other hand, not important at all because, regardless of personal intent, the impact is the same.

Here are a couple of examples. For many years, it was illegal in Texas for Spanish-speaking children to speak Spanish at school. This meant that every individual teacher and principal was required by law to send any child home for speaking his or her own language whether the teachers and/ or principals believed in the law or not. Based on the belief that people who live in the United States should speak English, mixed with racial bigotry against Mexicans, the law was passed by a group of individual white legislators who had the institutional power to codify their and their constituents' viewpoints. Once a particular perspective is built into law, it becomes part of "the way things are." Rather than actively refusing to comply with the law, as individuals we usually go along, particularly if we think the law doesn't affect us personally. We participate, intentionally or not, in the purposeful construction of a system that deflates the value of one people's culture while *inflating* the value of another's. More recently, this same kind of

thing occurred in a county called Georgia that was experiencing a large influx of Mexican immigrants. By saying that firefighters might not speak Spanish and would therefore not be able to find the grocery store that was on fire if the sign outside said “Tienda de Comida,” the county officials made it illegal to have store names in languages other than English. However, the bakery, Au Bon Pain, was not asked to change its sign. Presumably, the firefighters speak French better than they speak Spanish.

As we see from these two examples, the patterns set in history are continued today. Not only in the on-going pervasive and systematic discrimination against people of color in housing, health care, education, and the judicial systems, but also in the less obvious ways in which people of color are excluded from many white people’s day- to- day consciousness. Think, for example, of how regularly you see a positive story about an American Indian or a Latina/o on the front page of the newspaper you read. How long would it take you to name ten white heroes? Could you name ten women of color, other than people in sports and music, who have made major contributions to our society? The freedom not to notice our lack of knowledge about people of color is another privilege that is afforded only to white people. All of us, including students of color, study the history of white, Western Europeans everyday in our schools unless we take an ethnic studies course or a course consciously designed to present the many other threads of the “American experience.”

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### **Privilege from Conception**

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White people’s privileges are bestowed prenatally. We can’t *not* get them and we cannot give them away, no matter how much we do not want them. For example, if I walk into any drug store in the country that carries hair products, I can be sure that I will find something that was designed for my hair. Black hair products are much harder to find; often African Americans have to drive for miles to buy what they need. Further, I know that when a Band-Aid box says “fresh color,” it means my skin color, not those of my Asian or Latina friends. If, in an attempt to “give back” my privileges, I said to the drug store clerk, “I don’t want the privilege of always being able to get shampoo for my hair when my Black friend can’t,” the clerk would think I was nuts. What we can and must do is work daily to combat our privilege by bringing to consciousness others’ and our own, the system in which we are living.

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### **White People: Taking Racism Seriously**

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Far too many of us who are white erroneously believe that we do not have to take the issues of racism seriously. While people of color understand the necessity of being able to read the white system, those of us who are white are able to live out our lives knowing very little of the experiences of people of color. Understanding racism or whiteness is often an intellectual exercise for us, something we can work at for a period of time and then move on, rather than its being central to our survival. Further, we have the luxury of not having to have the tools to deal with racial situations without looking incompetent.

I was working with a college at which senior administrators were trying to decide how to move forward with diversity intake. One of the vice principals said, “There are so many people who want diversity to fail.” The conversation seemed theoretical and removed to me. What an odd thing to say: “There are so many people who want *diversity* to fail,” with the attitude of, “well, we tried, it was an interesting experiment, now let’s send all of ‘them’ back to the countries they came from. Too bad – it was an exciting thought.” If, instead, someone had said, “There are so many people who want diversity to fail. I’m afraid we won’t succeed,” an action plan would be drawn up in a heartbeat and monitored daily to get the school back on track. Or would that be the response? Is there a sense that, at the root, “We don’t need to worry; we will always be here”? I think the underlying sense is there: for some eliminating racism is life and death, a question of survival, *being seen* as opposed to being invisible. For others, this is an interesting intellectual exercise from which we can be basically removed.

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### **Making Decisions for Everyone**

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White privilege is the ability to make decisions that affect everyone without taking others into account. This occurs at every level, from intellectual to individual. The following story could look simply like an oversight: “Oops, I forgot to ask other people what they thought.” However, it is typical behavior for white women who want women of color to join them in their endeavors.

During a visit with an out-of-town friend – another white woman and a librarian – we began to plan a conference for librarians on racism that we named “Librarians as Colleagues: Working Together Across Racial Lines.” We talked and talked, making notes of good exercises to

include, videos to use, materials that might prove helpful. It was absolutely clear that we needed a diverse committee to work with me, the facilitator, and we created one that would include all voices: two white women (one Jewish), a Latina, a Chinese American woman, straight women and lesbians, and several African Americans. By the end of our conversation, I was extremely excited and couldn't wait to contact the women on the "planning committee."

At the first meeting with these women, during the introductions, I talked about my twenty-five year history of working on issues of racism and particularly my own work on what it means to be white and Southern. Then I presented what my friend and I had thought up as the plan for the conference and all of us talked about the particulars. (In other words, I presented my credentials as a "good white person" and then proceeded to create a conference that was exactly what my friend and I had planned without any input from people of color.)

A couple of weeks later, at our second meeting, the women of color pointed out that I had fallen into the classic trap of white women: the come-be-part-of-what-we're-doing syndrome. "If you truly want us to work with you to create a conference, we will. But it means starting over and building a plan together. If you want us to enter the planning process in the middle and add our ideas to yours, we're not interested."

### **White People Don't Have to Listen**

Being white enables me to decide whether I am going to listen to others, to hear them, or neither. As one of those in what Lisa Delpit calls "the culture of power," I also silence others without intending to or even being aware of it. For example, a colleague of mine, an African American woman, attended a conference on the process of dialogue. Of the forty-five people there, she was one of four who were not white. The whites were of the intellectual elite: highly educated, bright, and, for the most part, liberal people. As the meeting unfolded, it became increasingly clear that, if the women of color didn't mention race, no one would. The white people were not conscious enough to the fact that race – *their* race – was an integral aspect of every conversation they were having. When the women of color did insert the issue into the dialogue, the white people felt accused of being "racist." In this instance, "silencing" took place when the planners were not clear that race was present at the conference even if no people of color attended; the white participants didn't

include the reality of others in their plan; and, when the issue was raised by my colleague, she was made to feel that she was the one who was "causing trouble."

In her article "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children" (*Harvard Education Review*, Vol.58, Number 3, August 1988), Delpit includes the profoundly disturbing comments of an African American teacher that illustrate how we silence dialogue without being aware of doing it or meaning to.

When you're talking to White people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for *everybody*, for *everybody's* children. They won't listen. White folks are going to do what they want to do *anyway*.

It's really hard. They just don't listen well. No, they listen, but they don't *hear* – you know how your mama used to say you listen to the radio, but you *hear* your mother? Well, they don't *hear* me.

So I just try to shut them out so I can hold my temper. You can only beat your head against a brick wall for so long before you draw blood. If I try to stop arguing with them I can't help myself from getting angry. Then I end up walking around praying all day "Please Lord, remove the bile I feel for those people so I can sleep tonight." It's funny, but it can become a cancer, a sore. (pp. 280-281)

As Delpit says, these are not the sentiments of one isolated person who teaches in a particularly racist school. The feelings are representative of a vast number of people of color as they interact with white people on a daily basis.

The saddest element is that the individuals that the Black and American Indian educators speak of...are seldom aware that the dialogue has been silenced. Most likely the white educators believe their colleagues of color did, in the end, agree with their logic. After all, they stopped disagreeing, didn't they? (p.281)

White privilege allows us not to see race in ourselves and to be angry at those who do. I was asked to address a meeting of white women and women of color called together to create strategies for addressing social justice issues. Each of the women had been working for years in her own community on a range of issues from health care to school reform. As I spoke about the work that is required for white women and women of color to collaborate authentically, the

white women became nervous and then resistant. Why was race always such an issue for women of color? What did I mean when I said it was essential for white women to be conscious of how being of their race affects every hour of their lives, just as women of color are? They were all professionals, some said, why did it matter what color they were? The silencing of dialogue here occurred because the white women didn't see the race of the women in the room as an issue. It did not occur to them that their daily experience was different from that of the African Americans, Latinas, and Asian Americans in the room. Had I not been asked to raise the issue, the possibility of doing so would have been left to the women of color, as it usually is.

Believing that race is "N.M.I." ("Not My Issue") and being members of one or more groups that also experience systemic discrimination, we use the privilege of emotionally and psychologically removing ourselves from the "white" group, which we see as composed either of demonically racist people who spout epithets and wear Ku Klux Klan robes or white, straight, healthy males. For those of us who are white, and are also disabled, gay, lesbian, or straight women, our experience of being excluded from the mainstream hides from us to the fact that we still benefit from our skin color. By seeing ourselves as removed in some way from the privileged group, we may be all the more deaf to our silencing of people of color.

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### **Discounting People of Color**

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As white people, we have the privilege and ability to discount the worth of an individual of color, his or her comments and behavior, and to alter his or her future, based on our assessments. One of the most frightening aspects of this privilege is that we are able to do enormous damage with a glib or off-hand comment such as "I just don't think she's a good fit for our organization." Promotions have been denied on the basis of such comments. There are many ways in which our comments are given inflated worth because of the privilege we hold.

For example:

- Seeing those most affected by racism as wounded or victims and somehow, then, as defective. Identifying a member of an oppressed group as *wounded* is patronizing, particularly when done by someone with privilege.
- "Mis-hearing" the comments of people of color so that their words are less important, not understood or fully appreciated, and thereby heightening our sense of superiority.

- Rephrasing or translating for others, as if they cannot speak for themselves, without appearing rude to others like us.
- Being allowed, by others like us, to take up most of the airtime without saying much of substance.
- Suggesting that people of color need to "lighten up," not to take things so seriously.
- Saying or implying that, as a woman (or gay person or a working class person, and so on), you know what the person of color is going through. "I know just how you feel. When the children in the playground made fun of me because I was fat..." (I am not suggesting that race is the only cause of pain and discrimination. I am pointing out one of the ways in which white people suggest that someone else's experience can't be any worse than what we ourselves have experienced or can understand).
- Asking why people of color always focus on the negative, as if life can't be that bad. A similar way of discounting someone's experience is to say, "You always focus on race. I remember at two meetings last year..."
- Commenting, "I know we have a way to go, but things have gotten better." (Read, "Stop whining. What do you want from me, anyway? Didn't we fix everything in the 60's?" Or "I know what your reality is better than you do.")
- Seeing and keeping ourselves central, never marginal. For some years now, writers of color have been discussing the experience of living in the margins while white people are living in the center. In one of her early books, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), Bell Hooks defines it:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body...Living as we did - on the edge - we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. (p.ix.)

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### **Seeing White as "Normal"**

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Another element of this privilege is the ability to see white people as normal and all the others as different-from-normal. In describing heterosexuals' privilege, Allan G. Johnson also identifies a white privilege.

They have the privilege of being able to assume acceptance as "normal" members of society...live[ing] in a world full of cultural images that confer a sense of legitimacy and social desirability...

(*The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, p. 149.)

White people express this privilege in many ways:

- We use ourselves and our experiences as the referent for everyone. “I’m not followed around in the store by a guard. What makes you think you are?”
- We reinsert ourselves into the conversation if we feel it has drifted to focus on a person of color or an issue of others’ race. “I don’t really think the issue is race as much as it is class.”
- We bring a critical mass with us wherever we go. Even if I am the only white person in a room of university administrators of color, I know that most of the other administrators in the nation’s schools look, relatively speaking, like me.
- We believe that we have an automatic right to be heard when we speak because most leaders in most organizations look like us. (Obviously, this privilege in particular is significantly altered, *though not eliminated*, by the intersections of socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)
- We have, as a racial group, the privilege not to have to think before we speak. If what we say is upsetting to others, our thoughtlessness, rudeness, anger, and so on, are attributed to us as individuals rather than as members of our race, as is the case for others. “I can’t believe Bill was such a jerk in the meeting today,” as opposed to, “Latinos are so passionate; they just don’t think before they speak.”
- We use the pain and experience of being deprived in our lives to keep us central and lessen our responsibility for the privileges we receive as white people. The pain and sense of being less-than, often based on reality, may emanate both from our personal life experiences – my father died when I was four – and our membership in groups from which privileges are systematically withheld – being poor or Jewish or gay or deaf. In our minds, this sense of struggling somehow lessens or removes our responsibility for our receiving or colluding in systematic white privilege. For example, I often hear, “I don’t have white privilege because I’m working class.” White working class people do not have the same *socioeconomic* privileges as white upper-middle class people. But, while class privileges are being withheld from them, they *are* given the same skin color privileges.

- We shift the focus back to us, even when the conversation is not about us. A classic example of this is white women crying during conversations about racism and women of color having to put *their* pain aside to help the white women who are crying. (African Americans and gays and lesbians, in particular, are expected to take responsibility for other people’s responses to and discomfort with them.)
- We use our white privilege to define the parameters of “appropriate” conversation and communication, keeping our culture, manners, and language central by:
  - Requesting a “safe” place to talk about race and racism. This is often translated as being “safe” from hearing the anger and pain of people of color as well as being able to say “racist” things without being held accountable for them.
  - Establishing the rules for “standard” English and holding others to our rules.
  - Setting up informal rules for communicating in the organizations and then failing to share those rules with people who are different from us.
  - Creating institutions that run by our culture’s rules but acting as if the rules are universally held, such as what time meetings start, how people address one another, the “appropriate” language to use.

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### If History is White

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The privilege of writing and teaching history only from the perspective of the colonizer has such profound implications that they are difficult to fathom. As white people, we carry the stories we were taught as the truths, often failing to question those truths and discrediting those who do. There are many embedded privileges here:

- We are able to live in the absence of historical context. It is as if we are not forgetting our history, but acting as if it never happened. Or, if it did, it has nothing to do with us today. For most of us who are white, our picture of the United States, both past and present, is sanitized to leave out or downplay any atrocities we might have committed. Our Disneyland version of history is that our white ancestors came here, had a hard time traveling west, finally conquered those terrible savages and settled our country, just as we were supposed to do – Manifest Destiny.
- We are taught that we are the only ones in the picture. If there were others, they obviously weren’t worth mentioning. An

example of this is the white crosses at the Little Bighorn Battlefield indicating where white men died, as if no indigenous people had been killed there.

- We are able to grow up without our racial supremacy's being questioned. It is so taken for granted, such a foundation of all that we know, that we are able to be unconscious of it even though it permeates every aspect of our lives. Charles W. Mills describes this phenomenon in his book *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997):

*...white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are...psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way accidental, but prescribed by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity.* (p. 19, italics his)

- While we are deprived of the skills of critical thinking by being given such a rudimentary view of our heritage, our ignorance is not held against us. We are taught little complicated history to have to sort through, think about, question, and so we have few opportunities to learn to grapple with complexities. We end up with simplistic sentiments like "America – love it or leave it" because we have only been taught fragments of information. We're told that George Washington couldn't tell a lie, but we aren't told that he owned African people who were enslaved or that he most likely has descendants by those slaves. We don't often have to wrestle with the fact that one of the biggest fights in framing the Constitution was over maintaining slavery.
- We have the privilege of determining how and if historical characters and events will be remembered. From the Alamo to the Filipino-American War to the Japanese internment to Viet Nam to training the assassins at Fort Benning, GA, who killed nuns and priests in El Salvador: we retain an extremely tight hold on what is and is not admitted and how information is presented. We do this as a culture and we do it as individuals.
- We control what others know about their own histories by presenting only parts of a story. Because we all got to the same schools, if you will, everyone, regardless of color, is told the "white" story. Japanese Americans are told that their families'

internment was purely a safety precaution, just as white children are. American Indian students see Walt Disney's "Davy Crockett" alongside their white schoolmates, learning that their great grandmothers were "squaws" and their ancestors were "savages." We all learn the "tomahawk chop" during baseball season. None of us sees a whole picture or our nation that includes the vast contributions of those who are not white. All of us are given a skewed picture of reality. This is part of what Charles Mills is writing about in *The Racial Contract*.

- We are able, almost always, to forget that everything that happens in our lives occurs *in the context of the supremacy of whiteness*. We are admitted to college, hired for jobs, given or denied loans, cared for by the medical profession, and we walk down the street as white people, *always* in the context of white dominance. In other words, part of the reason that doors open for us is our unearned racial privilege. But we act and often believe that we have earned everything we get. We then generalize from our perceived experience of deserving the opportunities we receive to thinking that, if a person of color doesn't get a job or a loan, it's because she or he didn't earn it.
- We are able to delude ourselves into thinking that people of all colors come to the table having been dealt the same hand of cards. We act as if there are no remnants of slavery that affect African Americans today, that the Japanese didn't have to give up their land, their homes and businesses, or that the Latinos weren't brought back into what had been their country to do stoop labor.
- We can disconnect ourselves from any reality of people of color that makes us uncomfortable, because our privilege allows us to believe that people basically get what they deserve or we feel helpless to do anything about another group's pain. So we have kind, good people who, because of race and class privilege, are so removed that they don't *have* to see or experience others. Without that personal experience, they have no understanding of or motivation to address others' lives.

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### **Inclusion and Collateral**

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We have the privilege of being able to determine inclusion or exclusion (of ourselves and others) in a group.

- We can include or exclude at our whim. “She would be great here, but her research doesn’t focus enough on Latin America even though she’s a Latina.” And, moments later, “She would add a lot to our department, but she’s just so...Chicana!”
- I have the ability as a white woman to move back into my gender and commiserate with other *women* about men if I don’t want to be aligned with other whites.
- We are able to slip in and out of conversations about race without being questioned about our loyalty or called an Oreo or a Banana or a Coconut.
- We can speak up about racism without being seen as self-serving. In fact, we can even see ourselves as *good* at standing up for others and mentally pat ourselves on the back.
- We expect and often receive appreciation for showing up at “their” functions – the Multicultural Fair, the NAACP annual fundraising event, the Asian Women Warriors awards celebration – as if they don’t really pertain to us. If we aren’t thanked profusely by people of color, we give up because we feel unappreciated.

We have the privilege of having our race serve as a financial asset for us. We are beneficiaries of a system that was set up by people like us for people like us so that we can control the critical financial aspects of our lives more than people of color are able to. There is much research that shows that race, when isolated as a variable, overrides the variables of class and gender in impacting institution’s financial decisions. I am able to count on my race as a financial asset, if I have nothing else to offer as collateral. For example, as a white person I am far more likely to have access to expensive medical procedures, particularly pertaining to heart disease, than people of

color. Statistically, the likelihood is that I will pay less for a new car than a Black woman will. Examples of this element of white privilege are plentiful. For a more in-depth discussion of whiteness as financial collateral, see Cheryl I. Harris’s article, “Whiteness as Property” (*Harvard Law Review*, 1993, Vol. 106.)

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### Ongoing Excavation

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*We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty...*

- Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*,  
Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984, p. 128.

For those of us who are deeply committed to social justice work, the purposeful crafting of systemic supremacy of whiteness is one of the most difficult and painful realities to hold. It would be more comfortable to believe that racism somehow magically sprang full-blown without our having had anything to do with it. We would rather remain unconscious of decisions that reinforce white privilege that are made by a few on behalf of all white people.

However, if we are truly to understand the racial context of the twenty-first century, we have to grapple with our dogged unwillingness to understand the patterns of discrimination for what they are. We must ask how we participate in not seeing the experiences of people of color that are so very different from white people’s. We should question our resoluteness to identify class rather than race as the primary determinant of opportunity and experience, particularly when there is so much evidence to the contrary. In short, white people can continue to use unearned privilege to remain ignorant, or we can determine to put aside our opacities in order to see clearly and live differently. As Harvey Cox said in *The Secular City*, “Not to decide is to decide.”