

UNDERSTANDING & DISMANTLING

RACISM

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHALLENGE
TO WHITE AMERICA

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WHITE POWER AND PRIVILEGE

To be White in America is not to have to think about it.
—Robert Terry, *For Whites Only*

To white readers: we are not only trying to solve the wrong problem; we are also studying the wrong people. We need to study us.

For many years our attempts to understand racism have been guided by a false and misleading assumption: that in order to study racism we need to study people of color. Think about that for a minute. It is certainly true that if we want to study the *results of racism*, people of color are the ones to put under a microscope. If we want to study *racism*, however, it is us—white people—who need to be investigated carefully.

We need to study us.

Specifically, we need to study white power and privilege. As we have seen in the previous chapter, white power and privilege are at the center of racism and are the reason and purpose for which racism exists. This is the problem we need to study and solve if we are going to be effective in our efforts to end racism. In the code language of this book, I have given the name "Power" to describe the results of the oppressive power that controls people of color

and compels them to use their lives and energies to serve and support white people. And I have given the name "Power" to describe the power that causes this oppression and at the same time provides disproportionate benefits for the white society. It is not enough to focus on Power¹—the problems experienced by people of color. The real problem is Power², the structures of our society that are designed to create and preserve power and privilege for the white society.

The goal of this chapter is to study Power², white power and privilege. Let's begin by shifting the imagery a bit. In chapter 1, I borrowed an image from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in their portrayal of institutions as having "feet" that kick communities of color, resulting in hurting, controlling, dominating, disempowering, and destroying people of color.

Now, building on that image, besides having "feet," an institution can also be portrayed as having other body parts such as hands and arms, head and heart. If Power¹ describes the feet of an institution kicking people of color, then Power² will describe the rest of the institution's body as serving the white society. In this chapter, we will study how the hands and arms, head and heart of institutions in our society serve white people, producing Power², white power and privilege.

For the most part, this chapter is addressed to white readers, especially on how white power and privilege affect our lives. If the reader is a person of color, it is important for me to acknowledge that as a person of color you are probably already aware of much of the information within this chapter. In your life's experience you have had to learn about white power and privilege in order to survive. It may be difficult for white people to realize it, but the fact is that you as a person of color probably know more about us as white people than we know about ourselves. I hope you as a person of color are willing to continue reading this chapter, to test the validity of this information from your own perspective, as well as to test your own knowledge about white people.

The specific objectives of this chapter are as follows:

- To gain a more complete understanding and analysis of the system of power and privilege in the United States that benefits white people;
- To comprehend the ways in which white power and privilege is concealed and disguised—including the ability of white people to deny its existence;
- To enhance the ability of readers to perceive, describe, and accept the reality of white power and privilege in our society;
- To create a personal awareness within white readers of our own personal power and privilege based on our whiteness.

From "Black Like Me" to "White Like Me"

It requires a major transition in our thought processes to turn from the subject of studying people of color to the subject of studying white people. Since our society has been studying people of color for such a long time, and we already have many models for studying people of color, it might be easier to use one of these models to help us turn to this new subject of studying white people.

One of the classic efforts to study people of color is described in a book published in 1960 entitled *Black Like Me*.¹ John Howard Griffin, a white journalist in New Orleans, used skin coloring and injections to turn his skin dark. With the appearance of an African American, he traveled around southern Louisiana, southern Mississippi, and eastern Texas, experiencing what it is like to be black. His goal was to write a book about black people that would help white people better understand the reality of racist oppression. Millions of white people have read this book and have been helped through Griffin's experiences to better understand the reality that black people have to go through in our society. When the thirty-fifth anniversary edition of *Black Like Me* was printed in the mid-1990s, it was still an international bestseller with sales of more than ten million copies. A movie version with the same title and starring James Whitmore was also produced in 1964.

As a way of preparing to study white people, what would it be like to turn *Black Like Me* around and to write a book entitled *White Like Me*? It would not be a book by people of color about white people, but rather it would be a book written by us about ourselves—specifically about our whiteness. We wouldn't even have to change our skin color to do the research. Although everyone's life experience is different in many regards, I am assuming that all of us who are white have a great deal in common with regard to our racial identity, and especially with regard to white power and privilege. My suggested goal for each white reader is to develop the ability by the end of this chapter to begin to describe your experience as a white person, perhaps even to write an autobiographical sketch entitled *White Like Me*.

Actually, in 2004 antiracism activist Tim Wise published a book by this very title: *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*. In his book, Wise describes his life as "a white man, born and reared in a society that has always bestowed upon me privileges and advantages that it has just as deliberately withheld from people of color."² Wise is very clear in his book—as I will try to be in the discussion of Power³ in the next chapter—that racism not only gives white people advantages, but is also ultimately destructive of white people, and our own humanity is at stake when we take on the task of resisting and eradicating racism.

In addition to Wise's book, additional evidence that we are not alone in our exploring white power and privilege is in the growing numbers of colleges

and universities that in recent years have developed “white studies programs,” resulting in a number of academic studies and books being published on the subject. In addition, a number of antiracism organizations are addressing the issue of white privilege. It is very important that these efforts be acknowledged. Much of the information in this chapter is a product of the collective efforts of a growing number of people.³

Studying Us

Where do we begin? How much do we know about ourselves as white people? How much time do we spend thinking about what it means to be white? It is probably an accurate assumption that discussions of white power and privilege are not part of our normal dinnertime conversations. And yet—as I hope this chapter will effectively demonstrate—being white is probably the most significant feature of our identity that makes it possible for us to live the way we do, even more so than gender, class, and nationality.

Nevertheless, it is this feature of our identity—our whiteness—of which we are the least conscious. Robert Terry, one of the earliest researchers of white identity, put it this way in his book *For Whites Only*: “Being White means not having to think about it.”⁴ The very survival of a person of color requires thinking about what it means to be a person of color many times in a day. But we who are white don’t have to think about being white. By not thinking about it, we also do not have to think about the issue of racism and the benefits it gives to us as white people. Racism is designed to work without our thinking about it. We have an unspoken agreement with the forces of racism that we will receive its benefits if we promise not to think about it. In fact, racism can’t survive if we *do* think about it. The very act of thinking about and analyzing white power and privilege is an act of resisting racism that threatens it to the very core.

Most white people have a great deal of difficulty describing their feelings about being white. Since we never have to think about it, our first reaction is often the discovery that we have few thoughts and feelings about it. For many people, the second reaction is the feeling of invisibility of our white identity. As white people, we see neither our whiteness nor the results of being white. We are not aware (or we have learned to pretend not to be aware) of the fact that the color of our skin carries so much weight and power in this society. Thus, the starting place for our exploration of our white power and privilege is with the questions, Why is it so difficult for us to perceive them? and, How do we go about making them visible to ourselves?

Escape into Color Blindness

There is a connection between this sense of invisibility and the increasingly popular concept of “color blindness,” one of the most dangerous and insidious ideas being perpetuated today. An entire generation of post-civil rights white children

have been taught—and are still being taught—that they should train themselves not to see color. Not seeing the color of a person of color is said by this philosophy to be a way of practicing equality. In fact, the opposite is true. Although a person advocating color blindness may have good intentions, not seeing the color of a person of color is a way of making the person invisible. It also prevents us from seeing that the society is still structured in ways that are detrimental to persons of color. Not noticing a person’s color may have the intention of correcting inequality, but it has the opposite affect of helping to cover it up.⁵

Advocating “color blindness” is also a way of avoiding seeing our whiteness. Just as “not seeing color” disguises the disadvantages racism causes for people of color, ignoring and not thinking about our whiteness is a way of covering up and denying the advantages provided for us because of our white skin. Peggy McIntosh from Wellesley College has done research and written several articles on white privilege. She compares white privilege to an “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks.” This knapsack is given at birth, and white people draw upon its assets throughout their lives. Dr. McIntosh began her exploration of privilege in a program of women’s studies that addressed the issue of sexism and the phenomenon of male privilege. Emphasizing the way in which those with any form of unearned privilege are conditioned not to see their privileges, Dr. McIntosh writes:

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressive-ness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are just seen as oppressive, even when we don’t see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.⁶

Some people explain the fact that it is so difficult to see our whiteness and our white privilege by using the image of a fish not knowing it is swimming in water. The environment has become so natural and the privileges have become so internalized in our subconscious that we do not notice them until they are taken away. The discovery of these privileges by those who previously were unable to see them can be a tremendous shock.

On the other hand, our white power and privilege are quite visible to people of color. Often, a person of color will state the belief that white people are deliberately lying when we say we don’t see these privileges. However, there is something far more insidious here than outright lying. We are dealing with our lifelong conditioning not to see our whiteness and our white privilege.

The fact is, however—as I hope will be clear by the end of this chapter—our whiteness and our white power and privilege are not the least bit invisible. On the contrary, they have been blatantly and arrogantly flaunted down through the centuries. As we shall see, there has been nothing less than an exaggerated visibility to our power and privilege in the historical process that intentionally legalized the requirement of white skin in order to receive and exercise white power. We who are white need to come to the place where we can see that our whiteness and our white power and privilege are anything but invisible, to the place where they can be seen by us as one of the most visible aspects of our lives.

White Power: Not the Same as White Privilege

Before delving more deeply into this subject, I want to propose definitions of white power and white privilege. To begin with, we are talking about two different entities: white power is not the same thing as white privilege, and we must clearly distinguish between the two. White power is almost never individually possessed, but is held collectively and passed on collectively from generation to generation as an inherited birthright intended specifically for a race of people designated as white. White power functions through societal systems, institutions, and culture. As we shall see below, white power is the product of historical intentional design, and is still inherently present within our systems, institutions, and culture today.

White privilege, on the other hand, is the individual results or products of white power. It is individually received and experienced in the daily lives of individual white persons. White power produces white privilege. White power is collectively expressed, while white privilege is usually a personal and individual experience.

A white institution has the power to produce products and services that are designed primarily for the privileged use of the white community. To have white privilege is to be the consumer of these products and services. For example, an institution such as a bank, school, store, or government office that is controlled by and primarily addresses the needs of white people is an expression of white power. A white individual receiving products or services from such an institution that is designed particularly for his or her needs will be receiving white privilege.

Some white people find it difficult at first to see and feel a sense of white power. In fact, many of us are shielded from the necessity of participating in the direct management of the sources of our power. However, it is much easier to be in touch with, to see, and to feel our white privileges. Then, if we trace those privileges to their source, we will also be able to be in touch with, to see, and to feel white power.

Each white person perceives white power differently and experiences white privileges differently. To some of us they will be more obvious than others. These differences are influenced by a number of other factors besides our whiteness, such as our class and gender. For example, a rich white man will perceive white power and experience white privilege differently than a poor white woman. The rich white man will perceive white power as only one of a series of collectively empowering influences on his life, along with the power that comes with his class and gender. And he will experience his white privileges as a natural accompaniment to his class and gender privileges. The poor white woman, on the other hand, will have greater difficulty perceiving white power amidst all her other perceptions of powerlessness. And her white privileges will be in stark contrast to her lack of other privileges. She may even use her white privileges in an aggressive manner to demonstrate that she stands a little bit above someone else.

Since white power needs to be distinguished from white privilege, let's take a separate look at each of them, first a closer look at white power and then a closer look at white privilege.

A Closer Look at White Power

As we have already seen in the history of racism that was reviewed in chapter 1, rather than being invisible or hidden, white power emerged as a central characteristic of colonialism and was legally and intentionally decreed in the defining and shaping of our nation. For 90 percent of the history of our country—from 1492 until the time of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s—every aspect of life in our country was defined explicitly and intentionally as an expression of white power. The United States was built on the fundamental and blatant understanding that our nation and its resources were reserved exclusively for white people. The other races—the “nonwhite” people—existed for the sole purpose of serving and supporting the interests of white people.

Human Resources Reserved for the “Humans”

It is very difficult for many people to comprehend how the United States as an emerging democracy could fight a revolutionary war for freedom and at the same time be so oppressive. In order to understand this, we need to get inside the hearts and minds of the colonists, freedom fighters, and constitution writers of early America. As amazing as it may sound to us now, during our colonial years through 1776, and then for nearly a century after we became a nation, there was a commonly held legal and cultural assumption that no one else but white people were human. Each of the other racialized groups

was defined in terms that made them less than human. Thus it was a natural thing for our forefathers and foremothers to create systems and institutions for white people exclusively. While a small minority of white people believed this was wrong, the majority simply believed that white people were the only human beings around!

Let's look at the beliefs a little more closely. There were two fundamental assumptions between the years of 1492 to 1865 that were the major building blocks for the constructing of a nation based on white power:

1. White people were the only humans. We were civilized. We had souls. We were Christian. We were in charge. And all the land and resources belonged to us. Although there was a constantly changing definition of which European groups belonged to the category of white people, you had to be classified as white to qualify for citizenship and to receive the privileges that came with it.

2. People of color were not considered to be human:

- Native Americans were defined as "not human." From a legal and cultural point of view Native Americans were considered to be savages, without souls, and without human rights. Therefore it was possible to kill a Native American without fear of persecution or prosecution. This assumption made possible the genocide that wiped out more than 90 percent of the Native American population.
- African Americans were defined as "not human." Throughout the entire period of slavery until 1865, African Americans were legally defined as chattel property with no human rights. The highest degree of humanity legally attributed to African American people prior to their emancipation in 1865 was "three-fifths of a person." In a compromise between northern and southern political forces, the U.S. Constitution legally defined African Americans (free and enslaved) as three-fifths of a person for purposes of determining the population represented by (white) elected officials. Beyond official law, however, there was a clear cultural assumption that "one drop of blood" from a black person was all that was necessary to make a person devoid of humanity.
- The humanness of Latinos/Hispanics and Asian Americans was considered questionable, even though not legally defined until later. The legal status of the humanity of these groups did not become an issue until after the middle of the nineteenth century. When the question was raised in everyday cultural life, however, it was usually resolved with their being grouped together with Native Americans and African Americans in the "nonwhite" (and therefore "not human") category.

White Power at the Heart of Every Institution

In any society the end-purpose of systems and institutions is to serve human beings. In our society, if none other than white people were considered to be human, there would be no reason to create systems and institutions for anyone but white people. By the mid-1800s, nearly all of our national systems (economic, educational, religious, health-care, governmental and military, and so forth) were all in place. All of them were created legally and intentionally with the purpose of serving the humans—the white people. This was our national policy and practice, and it was carried out openly, overtly, and legally.

Thus, we can see that white power was established a long time ago. The devastating truth is that *every system and every institution in the United States was created originally and structured legally and intentionally to serve white people exclusively.* (This does not refer, of course, to organizations created specifically to resist racism.) As I will argue more clearly in the discussion on institutional racism in chapter 5, this original manifestation of white power is still in the DNA of every one of our systems and institutions.

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At the same time, we need to be clear that white power has not always looked the same at every stage of history. As noted in chapter 1, in the mid-1800s the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution marked a major shift in this story of intentional development of white power. When slavery was abolished, the humanness of all people was declared, and civil rights for all people were theoretically recognized. However, this theory was not put into practice. New legal methods of restriction quickly took the place of the old, and there were no changes whatsoever in the intentional design of our societal structures. White power remained the unchanged official policy of the United States until the mid-1950s. Until that time, every system and every institution in the United States was still structured legally and intentionally to serve white people exclusively.

White Power Suffers a Serious Defeat (But Recovers)

Fifty years ago, there was a dramatic and fundamental change in the structures of white power. For those who had eyes to see and ears to hear, the fraying of the edges of white power was discernable for decades before the advent of the civil rights movement. However, it was in the 1950s and 1960s that the walls came crashing down, however, and the legal foundations for white power suffered a serious defeat. The beginning of the end of the U.S. system of apartheid

was announced by the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, when it reversed *Plessey v. Ferguson*. Then, as a product of both the nonviolent marches and demonstrations and the violence of police brutality and assassinations, the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968 emerged. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments were finally being given their due. In many ways, the events of the 1950s and the 1960s were the beginning of a "second American revolution," a revolution that today in the twenty-first century still has not reached its end.

Tragically, white power was still not ended in the 1960s. The "second American revolution" has thus far only been a "revolution of intentions." We said we were going to do it differently, but we haven't really done it yet. It is extremely important for our analysis of racism to recognize that while white power is supposedly no longer approved or openly supported by law, it continues not only to exist, but to thrive. The evidence? The U.S. Congress and our state legislatures are still mostly white. The CEOs and boards of directors of most of our major corporations are still mostly white. The presidents and faculties of most of our universities are still mostly white. And even far worse, the underlying mission, purpose, values, structure, and culture of most of these institutional structures are still defined in the same terms as they were when they were legally serving only white people.

White Power Lives On

Legally, all the institutions in our society were directed to conform to the new expectations that they should function differently than they did in the days of legalized white power. Yet every measuring device available indicates that even in those cases where serious efforts are being made to do it differently, the results being produced are not very different. There is a reason for this: changing the law changes neither the structure nor the heart of an institution. Institutions do what they are designed to do, and our institutions have the same designs they had from the beginning, a design to perpetuate white power. If white power is part of the DNA of all our societal structures, then changing the law may be the beginning of change, but it does not yet get to the heart of the matter. As we shall see in chapters 5 and 6 in the discussion of institutional and cultural racism, in order for white power to be eradicated there needs to be fundamental transformation in the foundational structures of every system and institution in our country. The change has begun, but it is a very long way from being completed.

If the years prior to the civil rights movement represent 90 percent of our history, then the years since the civil rights movement represent only 10 percent of our history. Fifty years after the civil rights movement, it is time for us to become aware that this new revolution needs more than good inten-

tions. If 90 percent of our history was given to the intentional creation and maintenance of white power, and 10 percent of our history has been given to addressing our intention to change, and we are only now discovering how difficult that is, then the true revolution has yet to take place. The true revolution is the transformation of the underlying fundamental assumptions built into all of our systems and institutions. Until then, our systems and institutions will just keep on doing what they were designed to do: create and perpetuate white power. And the product of white power will continue to be white privilege.

A Closer Look at White Privilege

White power produces white privilege—specific and identifiable individual benefits and rewards that are delivered exclusively to white people simply because we are white. The next step in our exploration of Power² is to examine and understand this privilege that white power produces, and to develop the skill of discerning the privileges in our personal experience of everyday life.

To begin this discussion, I believe there can be no denying the facts and the basic statistics of white privilege: white people still get a better education, better jobs, better housing, better health care, better police protection, better almost everything than people of color. Most white people are more accepted, trusted, and helieved, are more encouraged, made more welcome, and given more respect in our society than are most people of color.

Unfortunately, there is a fairly standard response and explanation of all this by many white people: "I have what I have because I worked hard for it. And if people of color worked as hard as I do, they would get the same things that I do."

I am suggesting here an alternative and far more believable explanation: that these privileges come to white people as a product of the intentional design of white power, and they come to us automatically, whether we ask for them or not. We may have even worked hard for our privileges, but if they are restricted to being rewards for the hard work of white people, then they are still privileges. In this section on white privilege, I invite white readers to test whether it is in fact a reality in our society today that white people are still getting more and better services than people of color, and that the explanation of this is that these are white privileges delivered to white people by systems of white power.

In this section we need to get as practical and personal as possible. In a few pages from now, white readers will be invited to participate in several exercises to identify our privileges, including the writing of an autobiographical sketch. The premise behind these exercises is that we who are white need

to take responsibility for our own lives and learn for ourselves what it means to be white. If you are a white reader, you are asked to consider this invitation as a helpful way to study yourself and to learn more about your life as a white person.

Defining White Privilege

There is no dictionary definition of white privilege, but a definition can be derived from a more generic dictionary definition of the word *privilege*. Using this method, Kendall Clark, an antiracism writer, has produced a helpful definition of white privilege. The dictionary definition of privilege that Clark uses is from the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Based on this definition, Clark derives the following definition of white privilege:

1. *a.* A right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities.
b. A special advantage or benefit of white persons; with reference to divine dispensations, natural advantages, gifts of fortune, genetic endowments, social relations, etc.
2. A privileged position; the possession of an advantage white persons enjoy over non-white persons.
3. *a.* The special right or immunity attaching to white persons as a social relation; prerogative.
b. *display of white privilege*, a social expression of a white person or persons demanding to be treated as a member or members of the socially privileged class.
4. *a.* To invest white persons with a privilege or privileges; to grant to white persons a particular right or immunity; to benefit or favor specially white persons; to invest white persons with special honorable distinctions.
b. To avail oneself of a privilege owing to one as a white person.
5. To authorize or license of white person or persons what is forbidden or wrong for non-whites; to justify, excuse.
6. To give to white persons special freedom or immunity from some liability or burden to which non-white persons are subject; to exempt.

Commenting on this definition, Clark writes:

Why is it important to define "white privilege" so carefully? Because, in part, many people want to deny that it exists at all, especially in

response to other people's assertions that it is at work in some particular situation, that it exists unjustly and so should be dismantled. This pattern of assertion and denial is itself racialized: for the most part, people of color say white people enjoy white privilege, while white people for the most part deny not only that they have it, but that such a thing even exists. I have been assured countless times by white people that there is no such thing as white privilege and that the very idea is nonsensical.⁷

What do you, the reader, think of Clark's definition of white privilege? Does it communicate? Do you think you can use it to communicate with others? Continue to test this definition as we try to use it as a tool to help increase our awareness of white privilege.

Human Rights vs. White Privilege

One additional clarification in defining white privilege is the distinction that needs to be made between a "right" and a "privilege." In our society we theoretically recognize basic human and civil rights, beginning with those unalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" that are declared as endowed by the Creator in the introduction to the Declaration of Independence. The great majority of items that might be listed as white privileges could also be seen as rights that should belong to everyone. The question is: What is the difference between a right and a privilege? And when does a human right become a white privilege, or a privilege become a right? I want to suggest that when a human or civil right is theoretically intended for everyone, but is still reserved for less than everyone, then that right has become a privilege. From this perspective, the rights supposedly guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution are still merely privileges for some.

A right is for everyone, is guaranteed by and enforced by law, and all people experience it in similar or identical ways. A privilege is not for everyone, however, and can either be granted or withdrawn at the discretion of the one who has granted the privilege. Some rights in our society are theoretically quite evident: for example, the right to equal education for all, the right to a fair trial, equal voting rights, freedom of religion, and so forth. For centuries these matters were in fact never "rights," but were privileges for white people that were not available to most people of color in the United States. Still today, even though they have now legally been recognized as rights for all people, they are quite obviously still not being implemented equally for all people.

When does a privilege once again become a right? Only when there is evidence that they are finally and fully extended for everyone. As stated in chapter 1, the results are what counts; intentionality, legality, and opportunity

are not enough. Although the civil rights acts that were passed as a result of the civil rights movement extended legal recognition and the requirement that white privilege should finally become human rights for everyone, until these legal acts are implemented, until systems of white power are dismantled and replaced, the human rights that are meant for all are still white privileges.

Discerning and Naming Our Privileges: A Starter List

Now let us get practical and personal, and begin to name and count the white privileges that are all around us, but are, until now, for the most part nameless and countless. Using Clark's definition as our guide, what are the "rights, advantages, or immunities granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others"? What are our "exemptions from certain burdens or liabilities"? Following is a starter list. The question is whether you the white reader begin to recognize yourself on this list.

Let's start with a few of the big ones—our large-scale rewards and privileges. At the top of our list are the higher salaries and other economic benefits received by white people. Of course, some white people earn a whole lot more than other white people, and some people of color earn more than some white people, but the vast majority of white people earn more than the vast majority of people of color. In addition, we receive the rewards of better and more accessible education and jobs. And then there are, of course, our better homes and living conditions, our better health and health care, our better treatment by the criminal justice system, and our better representation in the legislative halls of nation, states, cities, counties, and so forth.

Alongside these large-scale items, there are also the multitude of smaller, day-to-day "white skin privileges" that are so easily accepted, taken for granted, and generally unnoticed by us. A list of these might include the greater ease we have in opening a bank account, cashing a check, or getting a loan. It is much easier for us to have our ideas accepted or our contributions recognized in a discussion. We can shop without suspicion in a department store or food market. And these very same department stores and food markets are organized so that most of the merchandise is more oriented to people from our race and culture, with a small separate part of an aisle reserved for "ethnic" items.

White people occupy the central places in our history books, with people of color being relegated to footnotes, elective classes, and occasional recognition on holidays. The images of white people, when compared with people of color in the media, are far more positive. The values and ethics of white people are those most reflected in public life. Because of our white skin privilege, we can also be confident that our racial identity will not be used against us in applying for a job, looking for a house, relating to public authorities, or using public accommodations.

This is only a starter list. Do you agree with this list? Are any of the items surprising? Can you add to the list? Even if you knew you were receiving most or all of these things in your life, have you ever seen them as white privileges? You are invited to expand on this list in the exercises below by naming your own privileges as you become more conscious of your own rewards and benefits based on white skin privilege.

Getting Personal: My Awareness of My Own White Privileges

Even if we fully accept and are truly open to the principle of white privilege, getting in touch with them on a personal level is not a simple task. We need to know our own privileges, not just in an academic way of knowing, but to be aware deep within ourselves that we are receiving them at the moment they take place.

Following are three exercises designed to help us as white people to deepen our awareness and expand our list of white privileges. We who are white are not used to doing this. It tends to feel a little strange and awkward at first. As we move into the first of these exercises, I need to acknowledge that this will be a difficult task, and there may be a sense of being pushed unrelentingly into places we do not readily want to go. It may be helpful to keep in mind that our goal, at the end of this chapter, and by the end of this book, is to discover as much joy and freedom for white people as there is for people of color in the contemplation of strategies to dismantle and eliminate racism.

Before actually beginning to do these exercises, read through them a couple of times. Ask yourself what you need to know in order to begin doing them. If you are willing to do these exercises, it will be a serious and difficult commitment. As a way of doing these exercises, readers should set aside particular times, and perhaps even invite friends to participate with them. Another suggestion might be to keep a written journal of your feelings and thoughts as you participate in the suggested exercises.

Exercise One: Tracing Your Family History

Most white people, with a few adjustments for time and location, can identify themselves in the following words from Robert Jensen, a professor at the University of Texas:

All through my life, I have soaked up benefits for being white. I grew up in fertile farm country taken by force from non-white indigenous people. I was educated in a well-funded, virtually all-white public school system in which I learned that white people like me made this country great. There I also was taught a variety of skills, including how to take standardized tests written by and for white people.

All my life I have been hired for jobs by white people. I was accepted for graduate school by white people. And I was hired for a teaching position at the predominantly white University of Texas, which had a white president, in a college headed by a white dean and in a department with a white chairman that at the time had one non-white tenured professor.

There certainly is individual variation in experience. Some white people have had it easier than me, probably because they came from wealthy families that gave them even more privilege. Some white people have had it tougher than me because they came from poorer families. White women face discrimination I will never know. But, in the end, white people all have drawn on white privilege somewhere in their lives.⁸

When we read the above quote, the reality of white privilege seems fairly clear. However, it needs to be just as clear when we look at the particularities of our own lives. The goal of this first exercise is to identify and explore some of the inheritances of the past that established the foundations of the lives of each one of us.

White power and privilege are inherited. They are passed down from generation to generation. Racism is a multigenerational conspiracy. This is one of the main reasons overcoming racism and its effects is so difficult. There is an enormous momentum that can be seen and felt behind the earlier statement that during 90 percent of U.S. history, every system and every institution in the United States was created originally and structured legally and intentionally to serve white people exclusively. The collective wealth and power of our nation has been passed on as a white inheritance from generation to generation. And each of us is a personal recipient of the benefits from this collective white wealth and power.

When we as white people are not aware of this inheritance, or are in denial of it, it creates strange and sometimes bizarre behavior among us. We claim credit, often with great nationalistic pride, for earning our ill-gotten inheritance. And the very slightest sense of loss of our white privilege is interpreted as an unjust attack on us by people of color. We use the term "reverse racism" to describe our having to forfeit a tiny piece of our white privilege.

This exercise is designed to help white people get in touch with the benefits and advantages we are still receiving as a result of the momentum of history. Chances are, whatever you and I have in life—our educational achievements, our economic class, our social position, our community status, our professional competence, our attitude toward life, and our self-esteem—are all tremendously influenced by our inheritance of white power and privilege.

For many people, this exercise is not overly difficult. There is a direct correspondence between what their parents and grandparents had and did and what they as the inheritors have received and what they have been able to do. For such people, white inheritance is easily seen.

Other people are not able to see this correspondence quite as directly. They have made great advancements in educational, economic, or societal achievements far beyond those of their parents and grandparents. For those people, it is easy to deny the white inheritance. They may say things like, "I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps," or "I earned everything I have in life by hard work and personal initiative." Even if such direct inheritance is not obvious, we need to see that collective power and privilege has made possible these great strides forward over the last generation.

There are three sets of questions in this exercise:

1. The first set of questions is based on your family's history and status in life. How far back can you trace your family history? Choose from the following scenarios the one that most fits your reality and answer the questions connected with it:

- You have inherited wealth and position because your forebearers arrived in this country as rich immigrants, or they became well-to-do long ago in past generations. If this describes your history, here are some questions: If they arrived rich, how did they use and pass down their wealth? If they arrived poor, how many generations did it take before their descendants achieved greater status in life? Did anyone in your family ever have slaves? Did they take advantage of westward expansion and homesteading on Indian lands? What other historical factors in their lives have brought you advantages in your life?
- Your family is relatively well-off, but it was only in this generation or in recent generations that they escaped from lower-class status or from poverty. If this describes your history, here are some questions for you: How did that escape take place? What advantage did being white play in these achievements? Did they get housing through the G.I. Bill? Did they move into white suburbs that were designed to exclude people of color legally? Did they enter professions that discriminated against people of color and in favor of white people? Are there other advantages designed primarily for white people that helped your family in this recent entrance into greater security and stability?
- You are among those white families in this country who are still either poor or relatively poor and whose lives are insecure and unstable. If your history fits this description, here are some questions for you to work on:

On whom does your family blame their condition? Who are the models that provide images for their aspirations to be other than poor or lower class? How do they relate to people of color who are also in struggle against the same forces of poverty and oppression? Even in their insecure setting, what advantages does your family have over families of color?

2. The second set of questions in this exercise is designed to trace your family's direct or indirect involvement in matters of racial conflict. Can you discover whether and where in your family history they took stands either for or against racism, or whether and how they avoided taking stands? If you can trace back that far, on whose side was your family in the Civil War? Were members of your family involved in struggles for women's suffrage or in the labor movement, and if so, did they object to the white exclusiveness of those movements? Did members of your family participate in the civil rights movement or in antiwar movements? It may be rare to find white relatives who participated in struggles against racism, but it is a rich treasure to discover. Remember, a positive response to these questions should not be seen as a means to deny white power and privilege in your family's history, but to discover other positive influences that you have also inherited.

3. The third set of questions is about your own personal history. Read again the earlier quote from Robert Jensen, describing his life of advantages as he grew up in Texas. With adjustments for time, place, and circumstances, write a description of your own advantages as a white person growing up in your family home, of your educational accomplishments, of your jobs and leisure life?

These three sets of questions may also stimulate a number of other questions about past generations in your family, your inheritance of white power and privilege, or a tradition of struggles for justice. This exercise is best carried out collectively with other members of your family, if they are open to it. Family history and memories are preserved in such a way that recall is better if it is not done individualistically. It is also helpful to have a genealogical chart of your family as far back as you can trace it. It can also be useful to create a family-history chart, showing influences of white power and privilege, as well as instances of familial participation in resistance to racism.

Exercise Two: Investigating Your Daily Environment

Every day each of us experiences white privilege in our daily lives, while we are at work, shopping in stores, watching television, going to church, or traveling. We may not be conscious of our receiving privileges, however, or know how

to interpret what is happening. This exercise provides two sets of activities to help us develop the skill of observing our personal white privilege in our daily lives.

1. Ask a friend of color to accompany you into various settings in your city, town, or neighborhood, and observe how similarly or differently you and your friend are treated. Be sure this friend has an understanding of racism that is compatible with this exercise and with the analysis of this book. Also, be sure you have talked about the exercise in depth and your friend is not feeling unfairly used by doing the exercise with you. Go to a restaurant together and watch how the waiter or waitress treats you. Go to a bank and observe in the background while each of you has separate conversations with a loan officer. Shop in a department store and watch how the clerk or store security officers relate to each of you. Shop separately for the same car in a car lot and see if you are offered the same price and the same terms of payment.

As you conduct these tests together, there are two things to watch for. First, compare attitude and human relationships in the way you are treated. Observe body language, demeanor, and things like eye contact. Watch who gets the most attention, who is addressed as the person in charge, who is expected to pay, who receives service first. Second, what are the final outcomes of your transactions? Who is offered a loan? Who gets the best price? Who is followed by security people? Who is the satisfied customer?

Be aware that this will not be a totally scientific experiment with guaranteed accuracy. When professional discrimination testers conduct their investigations, they are trained extensively, and they are always paired in such a way that the only difference between them is the color of their skin. They are of similar age, gender, and class, they dress similarly, and so forth. You and your friend will not likely have the same level of skills or be the same in all other ways. If you make allowance for these differences, however, you can also learn a great deal from such an experiential investigation.

It is also important to be clear that people of color are not always treated badly, and white people are not always treated better than people of color. Perhaps you will see or feel the contrast only once or twice out of every ten times you make an attempt to do the comparison. But ask yourself how it would feel if you were pretty certain that you would be treated badly 10 or 15 percent of the time. You would probably be tense all of the time and would not even be able to enjoy the times when you were treated well.

A word of caution: the purpose of this exercise is to observe behavior, not to change those persons whose behavior you are observing. If you give in to the temptation to confront the people you are observing, you may find out how difficult it is to change people, but you also will not have the

documentation that you are looking for. Also, it is important that you not place your partner or yourself in harm's way by challenging people who are not ready to be challenged. If you wish to attempt to do something about the behavior you observe, do that at another time after you have carefully planned to do so.

2. A second set of activities is for you and a friend of color to conduct a media survey. Read a newspaper together, watch the evening news together on television, or see a movie together. Our newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are constantly portraying or reporting about people of color, and especially about racial injustice. They are becoming increasingly fine-tuned and detailed in their stories and commentaries about situations and conditions in communities of color. Oftentimes the media give extremely distorted views of communities of color. However, increasingly the media are becoming more accurate and even quite sophisticated in uncovering and unveiling the continuation of increasingly subtle and sophisticated discrimination against people of color.

Even when they are doing their best, however, they usually report on Power¹ and avoid focusing on Power². The media's best pieces help us to learn about the way racism hurts people of color. But often, in very subtle ways, they also help us avoid looking at ourselves. They help us look at the manifestations of racism, but not at its end-purpose of providing power and privilege for the white society. By addressing issues of people of color and not revealing the results of white power and privilege, they are contributing to the cover-up of racism. Like almost everyone else, they may be intent upon ending racism, but they are exposing the conditions of the wrong people and trying to solve the wrong problem.

While you and your friend are reading or observing together, look for this contrasting approach. How much is portrayed or reported about Power¹, and what is said or avoided being said about Power²? There are literally thousands of ways in which the media leads us to understand the reality of racial injustice in the daily lives of people of color. It is very important to be able to turn their message around and to see white privilege operating behind their reports of racial injustice. We need to train our eyes and our ears to see and hear the media differently.

Interpreting the Exercises. The goal of these two sets of activities is to learn by comparison and contrast. At first, this is the only way that many of us who are white can see our privileges, by contrasting them with the lack of privileges of others. These activities are aimed toward reinterpretation of what we experience every day. Our eyes and ears are trained to look and listen for Power¹, the

way racism hurts people of color. Our assignment in this exercise is see and hear what is happening to white people. Usually we can see Power¹, the ways in which people of color are treated badly, before we can see Power², the ways in which white people are treated well. By making these contrasts, however, we are able to see and feel our white privilege. Eventually, we need to be able to reach the point that we don't need the contrasting experience of Power¹ to know we are experiencing Power². Rather, we will become instinctively aware each time we are receiving rewards and services because we are white.

In the box below (fig. 3.1) is a sample list that suggests that for every experience of bias and discrimination by people of color, there is a comparable experience of privilege for white people. What we learn about Power¹ can be turned around into a new learning about Power².

Power ¹ : Disadvantage for People of Color	Power ² : Advantage/Privilege for White People
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor service and attention • Lack of respect and trust • No sense of welcomeness • Lied to • Physical and emotional danger • Limited availability of jobs • Limited availability of housing • Limited freedom of movement • Police control and suspicion • Financial disadvantage • Exclusion/segregation by race • Mistrust/disrespect based on race • Negative racial profiling • Made to feel uncomfortable • Loss of time and great stress • Financial/economic disadvantage • Limited access to products and services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instant service and attention • Respect and trust • Sense of welcomeness • Told the truth • Physical and emotional safety • Availability of jobs • Availability of housing • Freedom of movement • Police protect and serve • Financial advantage • Inclusion by race • Trust/respect based on race • Positive racial profiling • Made to feel comfortable • Save time and less stress • Financial/economic advantage • Access to products and services

Fig. 3.1.

Exercise Three: A Personal Inventory of Your Daily Life

The aim of this exercise is to help an individual white person to personalize the results of our systems and institutions being designed historically and presently to function in favor of all white people. Each of us needs to be clear that in a myriad of ways we receive a daily influx of white privilege in our lives.

This exercise is simply to make a list as long as possible of our white privileges that we can recognize, and to keep on adding to the list as often as possible. This exercise was originally created by Peggy McIntosh, whose research and articles on white privilege I referred to earlier. Although the following list of white privileges is derived from Crossroads Ministry workshops, it is based on the original model of such a list created by Dr. McIntosh.⁹ Study the following list, and then see how many other illustrations you can identify in your own personal life.

Power²: A Personal Inventory of White Privilege

As a White person,

- ... I am able to find positive role models depicted on TV, in the newspaper, and celebrated as heroes in most of our national holidays.
- ... in my college or professional school I find most professors look like me and talk like me, and most of the curriculum reflects my culture, history, and background.
- ... I am able to shop in most stores and not be followed by a security guard on suspicion that I might be shoplifting.
- ... when I am late for a meeting it is not attributed to my race.
- ... I can easily find artists' depictions of God, Jesus, and other biblical figures that match my skin color and facial characteristics.
- ... when I was looking for a house I did not have to worry that the realtor might not show me all available houses in my price range.
- ... no one thinks I got my job because of racial quotas.
- ... I will not be stopped by the police because of my race.

What else can you add?

Paradigm Shift: The Answer Is: "Everything." Perhaps your list will not be very long at first, but as you practice and develop your discernment skills, your personal list will grow longer and longer. It will become increasingly natural for you to perceive your privileges. Eventually, however, there is another realization, a paradigm shift that each of us needs to experience: that the question is far deeper than how long we can make our list of privileges. The answers are not, in fact, quantitative, but qualitative. The reality is that *everything* needs to be on the list. *Everything* goes better with whiteness.

When we have explored white power and privilege long enough and deeply enough, we will know and be aware that at any given moment of our lives racism is giving us something we neither earned nor deserve: white privilege. And we will know and be aware that in everything we do in our homes,

and in everything we do when we leave our homes to work and shop and play and pray, we are benefiting from white privilege.

Responses to White Power and Privilege

As a white person, what are your immediate reactions to this chapter on white privilege, and especially to these exercises? What new awareness do you have? Is it beginning to make sense that instead of solving the problems of people of color that are caused by systemic racism, we need to be studying the systems of racism that are designed to favor white people, and to be strategizing how to change them? How does it feel to be "breaking the silence" of past generations and looking at ourselves in a mirror that reveals our white power and privilege? The following list of responses may serve to stimulate your own thinking and feeling about these questions.

We're Just Getting Started

The first response for many white people is that we have only scratched the surface, that this is only the beginning of digging into a part of our life we have not seen before. And if we have only just gotten started, then we need to plan carefully our next steps in order to keep on expanding on this important task. This is hard work, but it is also important work. Like any skill, we will only get good at it through constant practice.

The hoped-for long-term outcome of this work is that we will become more instinctively and automatically aware of our white power and privilege, that we will eventually be as aware of them as people of color are already aware of our receiving them, as well as of their not receiving them. It may be a little embarrassing to realize that people of color know us better than we know ourselves. But it is also important that we do not slip into the tempting trap of asking people of color to do our work for us. Although they can assist us in achieving a far more complete understanding of our white power and privilege, we dare not make that a substitute for the work we need to do ourselves. It is our responsibility to become clear about our white power and privilege.

A Good Start at Truth-Telling

A second response might be that although we are just getting started, it is a good start, and it feels good to be seeing and telling the truth about ourselves. It is not that we have been telling deliberate lies so much as that in our unawareness we have certainly been living with a lie. Many people of color believe we are telling outright lies when we say we do not see our white power and privilege. But that which we are facing here is something quite different

and far more destructive than an intentional lie; we really have not been able to see it. We have allowed the truth about ourselves to be covered up; our eyes have been blinded to our own reality, and we have been living in denial.

In the language of addiction recovery, our white power and privilege is the "elephant in the room." There is a big elephant in the room, and most of us are pretending it is not there. It is not a little, cute, and cuddly elephant; it is big and ugly and it stinks. You have to look around it to see or talk to the person on the other side of the room. You have to squeeze by it to come into and leave the room. And yet, we pretend it is not there.

This elephant of white power and privilege not only impedes our lives as white people. It also gets in the way of our relationships with people of color. Again and again I have heard from colleagues of color that it is impossible to have authentic cross-racial relationships so long as this elephant in the room is not recognized. It is probably an accurate assumption that white readers of this book deeply value the cross-racial relationships in their lives. Think of your deepest and most cherished cross-racial relationship with a person of color, and ask yourself whether white power and privilege is acknowledged as a reality within that relationship. If the white person in that relationship is in denial and does not acknowledge this elephant in the room, it is unlikely that the person of color will either, even though it is very painful for them. As long as we won't see it, believe it, or express a desire to do something about it, the person of color will not risk the inevitable rejection that comes from raising the issue.

On the other hand, authentic cross-racial relationships do become possible when the elephant of white power and privilege is acknowledged. Such relations can become deep and profound when the truth is finally told. There are, in fact, few human relationships more authentic and more powerful than when white people and people of color join together in the task of addressing and seeking to eliminate white power and privilege. We must be clear that it is not only for the sake of people of color, nor for the sake of our cross-racial relationships, but also and especially for our own sake, that this truth-telling is so valuable.

Not Shame, but Anger

A third response white people are likely to be feeling is one of guilt and shame. It is virtually impossible to explore our power and privilege without such feelings. However, it needs to be recognized and doubly emphasized that the reason for doing these exercises is not to take people on guilt trips. Guilt is the least useful and least effective motivation for working against racism. Ultimately, guilt is debilitating and incapacitating. Religious leaders and psychologists tell us that the only useful response to guilt is to go to

the forgiveness table and be restored, set free to struggle against that which caused us to feel guilty.

We need to exchange our guilt and shame for anger at racism, anger at the structures of systems and institutions that are set up to favor us. It is important to keep going back to our definition of racism. We are studying the misuse of power by systems and institutions. Our goal in studying *Power*¹ has been to explore the connection between our personal privileges and the systems and institutions of power that bestow these privileges on us. We must become absolutely clear that these privileges and rewards come to us automatically, whether we ask for them or not, whether we agree with having them or not. Our privileges are not individually generated by each of us, but come to us automatically from the systems and institutions in which we take part. The purpose of our becoming aware of our privileges is not to make us feel bad, but to become more aware of that which we are struggling to change. As we have been seeing with increasing clarity, the systems and institutions that bestow and control these privileges must be changed, and not simply our individual desire to receive them.

Several years ago, Citibank in Chicago displayed an advertisement on the side of city buses. The advertisement said: "You were born pre-approved." When I saw that sign, it was clear to me who the audience was that Citibank was addressing. To be born white in our society is to be born preapproved. Our systems and institutions know quite well how to identify and provide services for select audiences, and one of the clearest and most consistent audience of our systems and institutions has always been white people. Studying white power and privilege will help us understand how we were born pre-approved.

Schizophrenia: We Hate It and Love It

A fourth response is one of which we may not be immediately aware. It is based on an underlying reality that is likely to be present deep in the hearts of any and all white people. If we are honest, I believe we will admit that there is something inside each one of us that really loves our white power and privilege. Even while we are learning to be aware of *Power*², learning to dislike it, and learning to be angry about receiving it, we need to be in touch with this other part of us that loves it and grieves the possibility of its passing.

It is a very human thing to want to gain status and use it as a crutch in life. It is normal for us to use those aspects of our identity that societal structures will favor—whiteness, maleness, middle- and upper-class status, and positions of power. And even while we are growing in understanding that using these crutches furthers societal oppression, we need to also be clear how much we are dependent on them, and how much this dependency keeps us from helping to change it. Even though our privileges are automatically provided for

us, we cooperate and either consciously or unconsciously accept this special treatment because we are white.

Conclusion: You Can't Take It Off

There is one final conclusion that needs to be stated before moving to the next step in chapter 4. This conclusion can also help lead us to through a door to explore in the next chapter the third level of racism, Power³, the worst and most serious expression of racism—racism's ultimate power to control and destroy everyone.

The final conclusion is this: if you are white, there is absolutely no way you can stop receiving your white privileges. So long as our systems and institutions are structured on the basis of white power, they will continue to provide white privileges for all white people automatically. It is impossible for anyone individually to decide to walk away.

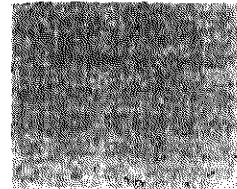
Remember Peggy McIntosh and her concept of an "invisible knapsack" that is placed on the back of every white person when they are born? In the language of addiction therapy, that knapsack is a "monkey on our backs." You can't take it off. It was placed there on the day you were born, and it will be there until the day you die. You can't just simply say, "I'm not going to be privileged anymore." As long as the institutions are designed to do so, they will give us our privileges. It is not a matter of choosing whether or not to be a part of the racist system that benefits all white people. If you are white, your privileges will keep on coming to you, whether you want them or not.

There is no private escape from racism, no individual walking away from white power and privilege. But please do not hear this as a message of despair; rather, it is a message that can equip us to deal with reality. Together there is a great deal we can do to change our institutions. Collectively, we can transform white power and privilege. But first, before getting to solutions, we still need to be even more deeply in touch with racism's hold on us. If you as a white person are beginning to be aware that white privilege is a monkey on your back, then you are ready to move to the next step of exploring our definition of racism—the devastating power of Power³ to take us all prisoner and to destroy us all.



INDIVIDUAL RACISM

THE MAKING OF A RACIST



The same fetters that bind the captive bind the captor.

—C. Eric Lincoln

As long as one person is not free, none of us are free.

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Every one of us is born with a clean heart. Our babies know nothing about hate or racism. But soon they begin to learn—and only from us. We keep racism alive. We pass it on to our children. We owe it to our children to help them keep their clean start.

—Ruby Bridges

Power³: Racism at Its Worst

Now we have reached the heart of the matter. The central issue of this book is that we who are white are prisoners of our own racism. We may hold the power of racism in our hands, but we are unable to let go. Not only do we receive power and privilege from racism, but in doing so, racism gains power and control over us. All the good will in the world and all the good intentions of not being racist do not change the reality that white power and privilege is a monkey on our backs, and each of us is made—willingly or unwillingly—into an instrument of the daily and ongoing construct of white racism.

Thus far, I have presented a description of racism as a systemic problem that harms people of color (Power¹) and benefits the white society (Power²). The third component of racism's system of power, which is designated Power³, now takes us to the very roots of racism. As we look at racism from