

# White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

by Peggy McIntosh

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

## DAILY EFFECTS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

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

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person’s voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children’s teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others’ attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

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

22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my race.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.
31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.
47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.
48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.
49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.
50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

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# I CAN FIX IT!

## Volume 1. Racism: Part 1. White People

### 1. ADMIT IT.

*“The first step is admitting you have a race”*

#### **Be white.**

- Acknowledge that white is a color and a race. Learn how to say “white people.”
- Don’t play dumb. Don’t say “I don’t know what to say, do, think” or “I don’t really have a race.” Resist feelings of hopelessness and self pity. Do not invent white suffering. Lose the drama.

#### **Admit that racism exists.**

- Understand that it’s not all about slavery, that there have been many institutionalized racist practices in the history and present of the United States. Understand that all white people reap tremendous benefits from the legacy of slavery, segregation and the continuing effects of the racism it helped create. All white people benefit even if they were not alive during the time of US slavery or if their ancestors immigrated to this country after the Civil War.
- Acknowledge that a very real present-day racism arose from social and institutionalized racist practices/laws of the past. Notice where those practices continue, and where you participate in them.

#### **Take notice.**

- Observe how others are treated. When you walk into a room, bar, club, whatever notice the racial breakdown of the crowd. Getting in the habit of noticing who is around you (and who isn’t around you) is easy and promotes general awareness.
- See white people. If you are going to identify a person by their race, make sure you identify all people by their race. That means saying “I saw this white man.” Don’t let white be the default race. Spend a week identifying white people by their race, see how it affects you.
- Stop thinking of your opinions as objective or the “right way.” Instead acknowledge your perspective as coming from a white experience. Realize that people of color may see things differently than you for good reasons.
- Understand that reverse racism is an impossibility.
- Reflect on the prejudices you grew up with, and then get over them.

### 2. LISTEN.

*“I’ve found that really listening to people of color and believing their experience is eye-opening.”*

#### **Shut up, already.**

- Listen to a person of color. No really, just listen. When a person of color is sharing their experiences, resist any urge to jump in and minimize or excuse their feelings. Don’t make it about you or what you are feeling in reaction to them. Don’t talk too much or say predictable stupid nervous things, just listen. Don’t try to fix that person or change their mind.
- Understand that when a person of color talks to you about racism, they are trusting you. Treat that trust with the utmost respect.

#### **Honor Experience.**

- Remember that people of color are sharing their true experiences not merely voicing an opinion. Understand that experience trumps opinion. Remember that people of color have experience with racism than you will never have, but don’t use this as an excuse for asking “stupid questions” or not educating yourself.
- When a person of color tells you or another white person that something he or she has said is offensive don’t get defensive . If you find yourself getting defensive, listen to what that person is saying and try to change your way of thinking.
- Consider racism to be a form of violence or abuse.

#### **Honor Outrage.**

*“If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.”*

- When white people mislabel outrage as anger it scares other white people away from doing the work and gives ammunition to racists.
- Remember that talking about things or speaking out and being heard is a good way for people to heal from trauma. Don’t punish, dismiss, or demean any emotion that people of color express in response to racism. Don’t tell people of color that their outrage will scare white people or make people stop listening.
- Don’t tell people of color that they should educate white people or be gentle.
- Do not silence or stifle the voices of people of color.

### **Don't impose.**

- Think about what you say to people before you say it.
- Don't impose your views on people of color.
- Don't blame people of color for racism.
- Let people of color choose what they want to talk about. Don't make every conversation with a person of color all about what you want to share or what you want to learn about. Don't bring up racism just because you are talking to a person of color.
- If you do have a racial consciousness, don't be self-righteous about it. Don't brag. Seek to always deepen your understanding instead of striving to get to a "finished" place.

### **3. EDUCATE YOURSELF.**

*"Seriously. Read a book or get on the net."*

#### **Plan it out.**

- Make a list of questions you have about other races/cultural groups. Find the answers to your questions without asking any people of color to help you.
- Realize that for the most part white people don't have to care about or think about what it's like to be a person of color. Take 5 minutes to consider what it's like to be non-white, for 5 minutes choose to care about it. Read 5 novels by people of color. Go to 5 films which are made by people of color. Buy a magazine oriented toward people who are not white. What's it like to look through a magazine where 80% or more of the people are of color? How does the content differ—if at all? Genuinely explore a piece of artwork by a person of color.

#### **Do it right.**

- Fight the urge to immediately tell a person of color that you have done the above, that's just weird.
- Learn about people of color because they are part of your country and society, not because they are "exotic." Do not view people of color as "different" as if white people are the "norm." Actively work against institutionalizing whiteness as the norm. Do not refer to people of color as "diverse peoples," this is racist and grammatically incorrect.
- Study the differences between racism, prejudice and discrimination.
- Educate yourself about the history of race and racism in the United States. Learn about the economic basis and effects of racism, and the institutional powers that perpetuate racism. Actively seek out the perspectives and insights of those who are doing "the

heavy lifting" with regards to fighting (eliminating) racism. Find scholars who work on this subject instead of turning your friends of color or strangers of color into your personal educational system. If you have questions after you've done some reading, read more.

#### **A new method.**

- Stop allowing yourself to be brainwashed into believing stereotypes. Acknowledge and examine our society's stereotypes about people of color. Assume you've been influenced by them. What are they? Make a list. Know what you are working to change.
- Don't assume that everyone is either a person of color or a white person.
- Change your thinking. Turn things around. Instead of asking why all the kids of color are sitting together in the lunchroom, ask why all of the white kids are sitting together. Instead of asking why something is all black, ask why something is all white. Instead of wondering why no people of color attend an event or join a group, ask why the group only attracts white people.
- Stop asking people of color about their hair. Realize this is a larger metaphor for treating people with respect and learning on your own. Don't use your learning process as an excuse for rude behavior.
- Deepen your understanding by using the pyramid of culture. At the top, is surface stuff like dance, food, dress, etc. At the bottom are all the deeper issues such as cultural history. Many persons not of that culture only get involved at the top.
- Teach your children, and allow them to teach you. Be willing to be uncomfortable. Allow your brain to hurt. Understand that race and racism presents complexities and contradictions. Do not try to reduce or simplify.

#### **Suggested reading**

- *Teaching Learning Anti-Racism* by Louise Derman Sparks and Carol Phillips
- *What if All the Children are White* by Sonia Nieto, Antonia Darder, Vivian Paley
- *White Awareness* by Judy Katz
- *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Tatum
- *Uprooting Racism* by Paul Kivel
- *White Lies* by Maurice Berger
- *White Like Me* by Tim Wise
- *How to Rent a Negro* by damali ayo

#### 4. BROADEN YOUR EXPERIENCE.

*“Caution: Please don’t do this until you’ve successfully completed steps 1–3.”*

##### **The obvious and the simple.**

- Learn about other cultures, not by asking questions but by spending time with people (without interrogating them).
- Hold a door for, or do some other small un-returnable kindness for a person of color. Smile at someone who is not white. Stop expecting things in return.

##### **Get out there.**

- Put yourself into environments predominantly attended by people of color, where you are likely to get to know more people of color. Whether it’s a professional organization, local political/cultural event, a community group or church, a friend’s birthday party, an art event, whatever. Go alone. Don’t bring your comforting posse, or some friend to share or analyze your exotic experience with. Do not treat this as an exotic experience. See it as living in the real world instead of the limited world you now live in. Observe without photos mental or actual. Don’t act like a tourist. Don’t stay till it is cleanup time. Don’t take more than you give.
- Donate and volunteer with racial justice groups that will put you in situations where you are the racial minority. Don’t then brag about this experience and say you know what it’s like to be “a minority” or a person of color. Never use the phrase “reverse racism” since there is no such thing.
- Make a commitment to participate in and develop an in-depth appreciation of an activity that helps you to shift your awareness into cultures of color from a mind-body perspective (music, food, dance, language, philosophy). Engage in something that helps you to develop a new vocabulary with which to relate to people.

##### **Make new friends.**

- Diversify your circle of friends. Reach out further than you have before. It’s much easier to make friends with people when you approach them from an already educated point of view. Remember that people of color have a shared historical experience and that we are also each individuals. Make it a point to cultivate friends from a range of backgrounds. Stereotypes become popular when we don’t get to know people as individuals. Don’t get lazy or give up. It takes time to get to know people.
- Befriend a person of color. No really, but not in that token, “Lets have lunch” way, but in that, “I know your birthday and know what you actually want for your birthday” way. Eat together, laugh together, cry together, dance together, love each other. Build the kind of friendship in that, “5 years from now, when you (or I) screw up a relationship, you (or I) can crash on the couch for a month” way. Expect nothing in return, not because they are a person of color, but because they are human, and it might just not work out.

##### **Raise smart kids.**

- Stop passing down racist prejudices to your children. Expose them to differences early on. Actively encourage your children and all children to develop relationships with people of color, both adults and children. Create opportunities for them to play and socialize in racially integrated environments. Break down segregation by going the extra step of providing rides for play/study dates to and from their friends’ homes.

## 5. TAKE ACTION.

*“Now where do I put my foot after I’ve taken it out of my mouth?”*

Don’t just talk about it. Be about it. Make an action plan. Include the following:

### Consider racism your problem to solve.

- *Always* confront racism, ignorance and inappropriate behavior/language when you see, hear, read, or experience it. If someone says something racist don’t laugh awkwardly or ignore it. Use the power of your voice. Interrupt/address racism no matter how uncomfortable it makes you, no matter who you are required to confront. Do not make exceptions for your family, your friends, or in the workplace because you fear the consequences.
- When speaking out against racism, be gentle but firm. Practice civility but also directness. Set that person straight. White people are more likely to listen to you than to the person that they are offending. Leave the over-niceness at home. Being overly-nice only makes a safe atmosphere for racism and an unsafe atmosphere for others (particularly people of color) to confront it head on.
- Challenge white people to talk about racism. Learning “what not to say” is not the point. Understanding how racism works and how it can be dismantled is the point. Help fellow white people to learn not just react.

## Be a visible person in the fight against racism.

In the media:

- When a racist incident occurs in the public eye, write a letter to the editor of your local paper condemning the behavior. Identify yourself as a white person in your letter.

At work:

- Whatever your place of profession, eliminate institutionalized practices that are discriminatory towards people of color or rewarding white privilege. Hire, retain, and promote people of color. Maintain a wide range of employees.

In the community:

- Become involved in an organization that is involved with communities of color, like a church, a school, a non-profit, a business or a reading group. Make your involvement more than financial. Involve your time, energy, participation and emotional connection. Stay committed to this organization for at least three years.

With your kids:

- Since people often live in mostly segregated parts of any city/town, send your kids to public schools if you live in a city, and demand that students of color are recruited into the advanced/honors/AP classes. Integrate the books and toys in your children’s school, and at home. Demand teachers of color for the sake of your kids not just for the kids of color. Promote that a racially integrated educational environment is the best for white kids as well as for kids of color. Fight for equal education for kids of all races. Expose movements that subtly privilege white children over children of color.

## ABOUT DAMALI AYO

Artist and author damali ayo first reached wide-ranging audiences with her satirical Web site “rent-a-negro.com.” The Web site expertly entices viewers into a service that allows them to rent a pleasing and friendly African American for social and business occasions. The project is a cunning exploration of race relations and the commodification of racial difference. ayo’s book, *How to Rent a Negro* expands this much needed dialogue on race. The book is acclaimed as “one of the most trenchant and amusing commentaries on contemporary race relations.”

damali’s work has been featured in *Harpers Magazine*, *The Nation*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The Independent UK*, *Radio Popolare Italy*, *The Tavis Smiley Radio Show*, *Public Radio International*, *The O’Reilly Factor*, *ABCNews.com*, *MSNBC.com*, *Nerve.com*, and *Salon.com*. damali ayo won a national federation of community broadcasters 2005 silver reel award for arts features and reporting.

To bring damali ayo to speak to your school, company or organization email [info@damaliayo.com](mailto:info@damaliayo.com) or call Jodi Solomon Speakers Bureau at 617-266-3450.

# The Fears of White People

by Robert Jensen

It may seem self-indulgent to talk about the fears of white people in a white-supremacist society. After all, what do white people really have to be afraid of in a world structured on white privilege? It may be self-indulgent, but it's critical to understand because these fears are part of what keeps many white people from confronting ourselves and the system.

The first, and perhaps most crucial, fear is that of facing the fact that some of what we white people have is unearned. It's a truism that we don't really make it on our own; we all have plenty of help to achieve whatever we achieve. That means that some of what we have is the product of the work of others, distributed unevenly across society, over which we may have little or no control individually. No matter how hard we work or how smart we are, we all know—when we are honest with ourselves—that we did not get where we are by merit alone. And many white people are afraid of that fact.

A second fear is crasser: White people's fear of losing what we have—literally the fear of losing things we own if at some point the economic, political, and social systems in which we live become more just and equitable. That fear is not completely irrational; if white privilege—along with the other kinds of privilege many of us have living in the middle class and above in an imperialist country that dominates much of the rest of the world—were to evaporate, the distribution of resources in the United States and in the world would change, and that would be a good thing. We would have less. That redistribution of wealth would be fairer and more just. But in a world in which people have become used to affluence and material comfort, that possibility can be scary.

A third fear involves a slightly different scenario—a world in which non-white people might someday gain the kind of power over whites that whites have long monopolized. One hears this constantly in the conversation about immigration, the lingering fear that somehow “they” (meaning not just Mexican-Americans and Latinos more generally, but any non-white immigrants) are going to keep moving to this country and at some point become the majority demographically. Even though whites likely can maintain a disproportionate share of wealth, those numbers will eventually translate into political, economic, and cultural power. And then what? Many whites fear that the result won't be a system that is more just, but a system in which white people become the minority and could be treated as whites have long treated non-whites. This is perhaps the deepest fear that lives in the heart of whiteness. It is not really a fear of non-white people. It's a fear of the depravity that lives in our own hearts: Are non-white people capable of doing to us the barbaric things we have done to them?

A final fear has probably always haunted white people but has become more powerful since the society has formally rejected overt racism: The fear of being seen, and seen-through, by non-white people. Virtually every white person I know, including white people fighting for racial justice and including myself, carries some level of racism in our minds and hearts and

bodies. In our heads, we can pretend to eliminate it, but most of us know it is there. And because we are all supposed to be appropriately anti-racist, we carry that lingering racism with a new kind of fear: What if non-white people look at us and can see it? What if they can see through us? What if they can look past our anti-racist vocabulary and sense that we still don't really know how to treat them as equals? What if they know about us what we don't dare know about ourselves? What if they can see what we can't even voice?

I work in a large university with a stated commitment to racial justice. All of my faculty colleagues, even the most reactionary, have a stated commitment to racial justice. And yet the fear is palpable.

It is a fear I have struggled with, and I remember the first time I ever articulated that fear in public. I was on a panel with several other professors at the University of Texas discussing race and politics in the O.J. Simpson case. Next to me was an African American professor. I was talking about media; he was talking about the culture's treatment of the sexuality of black men. As we talked, I paid attention to what was happening in me as I sat next to him.

I felt uneasy. I had no reason to be uncomfortable around him, but I wasn't completely comfortable. During the question-and-answer period—I don't remember what question sparked my comment—I turned to him and said something like, “It's important to talk about what really goes on between black and white people in this country. For instance, why am I feeling afraid of you? I know I have no reason to be afraid, but I am. Why is that?”

My reaction wasn't a crude physical fear, not some remnant of being taught that black men are dangerous (though I have had such reactions to black men on the street in certain circumstances). Instead, I think it was that fear of being seen through by non-white people, especially when we are talking about race. In that particular moment, for a white academic on an O.J. panel, my fear was of being exposed as a fraud or some kind of closet racist.

Even if I thought I knew what I was talking about and was being appropriately anti-racist in my analysis, I was afraid that some lingering trace of racism would show through, and that my black colleague would identify it for all in the room to see. After I publicly recognized the fear, I think I started to let go of some of it. Like anything, it's a struggle. I can see ways in which I have made progress. I can see that in many situations I speak more freely and honestly as I let go of the fear. I make mistakes, but as I become less terrified of making mistakes I find that I can trust my instincts more and be more open to critique when my instincts are wrong.

*This essay is excerpted from The Heart of Whiteness: Confronting Race, Racism and White Privilege (City Lights, September 2005). More information at: <http://www.citylights.com/CLpub4th.html#4499>*