

**WHITE MEN EXPOSE RACISM  
FOR UNEARNED PRIVILEGES  
& LINGERING EFFECTS**

**RACISMS UNEARNED BENEFITS  
& PRIVILEGES FOR WHITES**

**While Blacks & other Non-Whites suffer from Attacks,  
Exclusion & Depression; of Racism/White Supremacy. The  
System is Flawed by Deeply Rooted Racism in all Minds &  
Institutions. Racism Foundation is a Historical Legacy.**

: : : White People need to Acknowledge Benefits of Unearned Privilege  
By Robert Jensen

Note: This article in support of Reparations appeared in the Baltimore Sun Newspaper and was written by a Caucasian Professor of Journalism at the U of Texas. He shows how Racism/White Privilege is Injustice in Society

I'm sitting in my University of Texas office, talking to a very bright and very conservative white student about affirmative action in college admissions, which he opposes and I support. The student says he wants a level playing field with no unearned advantages for anyone. I ask him whether he thinks that being white has its advantages in the United States. Have either of us, I ask, ever benefited from being white in a world run mostly by white people? Yes, he concedes, there is something real and tangible we could call white privilege.

So, if we live in a world of white privilege - **unearned white privilege** - how does that affect your notion of a level playing field? I asked. He paused for a moment and said, "That really doesn't matter". That statement, I suggested to him, reveals the ultimate white privilege: The privilege to acknowledge that you have unearned privilege but to ignore what it means. That exchange led me to rethink the way I talk about **race and racism** with students. It drove home the importance of confronting the dirty secret that we white people carry around with us every day: in a world of white privilege, some of what we have is unearned. I think much of both the fear and anger that comes up around discussions of affirmative action has its roots in that secret. So, these days my goal is to talk openly and honestly about racism/white supremacy and white privilege.

White privilege, like any social phenomena, is complex. In a white supremacist culture, all white people have privileges, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves. There are general patterns, but such privileges play out differently depending on context and other aspects of one's identity, (in my case, being a white male gives me other kinds of privileges). Rather than tell others how white privilege has played out in their lives, I talk about how it has affected me.

I am as white as white gets in this country. I am of northern European heritage and I was raised in North Dakota, one of the whitest states in this country. I grew up in a virtually all-white world surrounded by racism, both personal and institutional. Because I didn't live near a reservation, I didn't have exposure to the states where only a significant nonwhite population exist of American Indians.

I have struggled to resist that racist training and the racism of my culture. I like to think I have changed, even though I routinely trip over the lingering effects of that internalized racism and the institutional racism around me. But no matter how much I "fix" myself, one thing never changes - I walk through the world with white privileges.

What does that mean? Perhaps most importantly, when I seek admission to a university, apply for a job, or hunt for an apartment or house, I don't look threatening. Almost all of the people evaluating me look like me they are white. I am one of them. I am not dangerous. Even when I voice critical opinions, I am cut some slack; After all, I'm white.

My flaws are also more easily forgiven because I'm white. Some complain that affirmative action has meant the university is straddled with mediocre minority professors. I have no doubt there are minority faculty who are mediocre, though I don't know very many. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. once pointed out, if affirmative action policies were in place for the next hundred years, it's possible that at the end of that time the university could have as many mediocre minority professors as it has mediocre white professors. That isn't meant as an insult to anyone, but it's a simple observation that white privilege has meant that scores of second-rate white professors have slid through the system, because their flaws were overlooked out of solidarity based on race, and gender, class and ideology.

Some people resist the assertions that the United States is still a hypocritical bitter racist society, and that racism has real effects on Black and white people. But white folks have long cut other white folks a break. I know, because I am one of them. I am not a genius - as I like to say, I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I have been teaching full time for six years and I've published a reasonable amount of scholarship. Some of it is the unexceptional stuff one churns out to get tenure, and some of it, I would argue, whether or not it is worth reading.

I worked hard, and I like to think that I'm a fairly decent teacher. Every once in a while, I leave my office at the end of the day feeling like I really accomplished something. When I cash my paycheck, I don't feel guilty. But, all that said, I know I did not get where I am by merit alone. I benefited from among other things especially white privilege. That doesn't mean I don't deserve my job, or that if I weren't white, I would never have gotten the job. It simply means that all through my life, I have soaked up benefits for being White, and Blacks have been discriminated against and suffered dire consequences and damages based on the color of their skin for hundreds of years, and that should be rectified with reparations.

All my life I have been hired for jobs by white people. I was accepted for graduate school by white people. Then I was hired for a teaching position by the predominantly white University of Texas, headed by a white president, in a college headed by a white dean, and in a department with a white chairman, which at the time had one nonwhite tenured professor. I have worked hard to get where I am, and I work hard to stay there. But to feel good about myself, and my work, I do not have to believe that "merit" as defined by white people in a white country, alone got me here. I can acknowledge that in addition to all that hard work, I got a significant boost from white privilege. At one time in my life, I would not have been able to say that, because I needed to believe my success in life was due solely to my individual talent and effort. I saw myself as the heroic American, the rugged individualist. I was so deeply seduced by the culture's mythology and reality of racism/white supremacy, that I couldn't see the fear that was binding me to those ideals.

Like all White Americans, I was living with the fear that maybe I didn't really deserve my success, that maybe luck and privilege had more to do with it than brains and hard work. I was afraid I wasn't heroic or rugged, that I wasn't special. I let go of some of that fear when I realized that, indeed, I wasn't special but that I was still me. What I do well, I can still take pride in, even when I know the rules under which I work are still stacked to my benefit. Until we let go of the fiction that people have complete control over their fate - that we can will ourselves to be anything we choose - then we will live with that fear.

White privilege is not something I get to decide whether I want to keep. Every time I walk into the store at the same time as a Black man, and the security guard follows him and leaves me alone to shop, I am benefiting from white privilege. There is not space here to list all the ways in which white privilege plays out in our daily lives, but it is clear that I will carry this privilege with me until the day racism/white supremacy is erased from this society.

More Thoughts on why the System of Racism/White-Supremacy/Privilege is Wrong:

White privilege shapes the United States: By writing about the policies of white privilege, and listening to folks who responded to that article, I have had to face the facts that privilege runs deep in my life, and it makes me uncomfortable. The discomfort tells me I might be on the right track. As a result of that article, I find a variety of folks who want to talk about racism. I learned not only facts about my own privileges, but more facts about why many white folks can't come to terms with the truism I offer in that article: White people, whether overtly racist or not, benefit from living in a world mostly run by white people, that has been built on the land and the backs of Black people.

The reactions varied from racist rantings, to deeply felt expressions of pain and anger, to declarations of solidarity. But probably the most important response I got was from, Black people, who said something, like this: "Of course there is white privilege. I've been pointing it out to my white friends and co-workers for years. It is not funny that no one listens to me, but everyone takes notice when a white guy says it".

My voice gets heard in large part because I am a white man with a Ph.D. at the U of Texas who holds a professional job with status. In most settings, I speak with the assumption that people will not only listen, but will take me seriously. I speak with the assumption that my motive will not be challenged; I can rely on the perception of me as a neutral authority, someone whose observations can be trusted.

Every time I open my mouth, I draw on, and in some ways reinforce, my privilege, which is in large part tied to race. Right now, I want to use that privilege to acknowledge the many Black people who took time to tell me about the enduring realities of racism in the United States. Then I want to talk to white people who misunderstand my intentions, which are well and lean towards truth and reconciliation for African-American reparations.

Responses of my white critics came in these four basic categories around the following thoughts:

1. White privilege doesn't exist because affirmative action has made being white a disadvantage. Response: Extremely limited attempts to combat racism, such as affirmative action, do virtually nothing to erase the white privilege built over 500 years that pervades our society. As a friend of mine says, the only disadvantage to being white is that it often prevents white people from being honest about unearned benefits from racism/white supremacy.
2. White privilege does exist, but it can't be changed because it is natural for any group to favor its own, and besides, the worst manifestations of racism are over. Response: This approach makes human choices appear outside of human control, which is a dodge to avoid moral and political responsibility to do something about the injustice of white privilege, inflicted upon Blacks.
3. White privilege does exist, and it is not good because Europeans claimed to have civilized the world. Along the way bad things have happened, and we should take care to be nice to Blacks to make up for that by awarding them reparations. Response: These folks often argued the curiously but familiar contradictory position that (1) Blacks and their culture are not inferior, but (2) white/European culture is superior. As for the claimed civilizing effect of Europe, we might consider five centuries of inhumane brutal colonialism, and World Wars I and II, and then ask what civilized means. White privilege has created a plethora of problems for Black people in the form of major and extensive damages, which requires reparations to repair that devastation and damage.
4. White Privilege exists, because whites are inherently superior, and I am a weakling and traitor for suggesting otherwise. Response: The Klan isn't dead and racism is alive and gaining ground. So, I cannot, and indeed should not, feel either guilty or proud about being white, because it is a state of being I have no control over. However, as a member of society-I have an obligation not simply to enjoy the privilege that comes with being white, but to study and understand it, and work towards a more just world in which such unearned privilege is eventually eliminated.

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Some of my critics said that such a goal is ridiculous; after all, people have unearned privileges of all kinds. Several people pointed that out, for example, tall people have unearned privilege in basketball, and we don't ask tall people to stop playing basketball nor do we eliminate their advantage. The obvious difference is that racial categories are invented; they carry real privileges for whites and serious disadvantages for Blacks, only because people of power create and maintain the privileges for themselves at the expense of others. The privileges are rooted in violence and maintained through racist institutions and systems, in addition to less dominant but hypocritical democracy.

It would be a drab and boring world if we eliminated individual differences, but we can work with others to change the world to erase the effects of differences, that have been created by one group to keep others down. So, I don't feel guilty about being white in a white supremacist society, but I feel an especially strong moral obligation to engage in collective political activity to try to change the society, because I benefit from the injustice that has developed in our nation. It takes only a bit of empathy to listen and a bit of courage to act.

## Exploring the Depths of Racism and Racist Socialization

By Tim Wise

Every now and then a lesson comes easy. Other times we learn things by accident, if at all. Yet, inevitably it seems, the lessons that matter most, often come from the least likely sources, and at the most inopportune moments. So much so, that if we aren't paying close attention, we'll miss them altogether. Such was the case last August when my paternal grandmother died, at the age of 78. Although the passing of a relative may seem hardly appropriate as the jumping off point for a political commentary, it is precisely the oddity of it, which makes it all the more poignant and valuable. But first, a slight preface to what I'm trying to explain.

In the past few years, I have had the good fortune to speak before nearly 60,000 people, in 40 states, on over 150 college campuses, and to dozens of community groups, labor unions, and government agencies about racism. Some audiences respond favorably, others not so much. But the message I deliver is always the same: those persons called "white" have a particular obligation to fight racism because it is our problem, created in its modern form by us, for the purpose of commanding power over resources, and opportunities at the expense of Black people. Furthermore, all whites, irrespective of their liberal attitudes, "tolerance" for others, and decent voting records, have to address the internalized beliefs about white supremacy which hurts whites and Blacks. No one is innocent. No one is unaffected by the daily socialization to which we are all subjected; specifically with regard to the way we are taught to think about African-Americans in society today: their behaviors, lifestyles, intelligence, beauty, and so on.

Without question, convincing white folks particularly those dear liberals who insist every other friend they have is Black; that they too have internalized racist beliefs, even of a most vicious kind, is the most difficult task in discussing racism. You can't prove the point with statistics, or poll numbers, or by pointing out the wide spread disparities in life chances that form the backdrop of American institutionalized racism excluding Blacks from equality. Convinced that they are free from the biases, stereotypes, and behaviors that characterize "real" racists, such persons inevitably seem the most resistant to the analysis offered here thus far.

It is with this in mind that I return to my grandmother. For her death and more to the point, her life, right up until she died; offers more in the way of proof that racist socialization affects us all more than anything we expected or experienced.

You see my grandmother was one of those good liberals. In fact, in many ways she was beyond liberal, particularly given the time and place in which she spent most of her life. Born in the Detroit area, she and her parents moved south in the 1920s. Her father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. A member that is, until the day in 1938 when his only daughter informed him that she had fallen in love with a non-white man, and that in addition to that, his hatred of Blacks was unacceptable and unconscionable to her.

She then handed him his KKK robes, and with her mother's approval, asked whether he was going to burn them, or if she was going to have to do it herself. She challenged him despite what must have been the palpable fear of standing up to a man who was none too gentle, and most certainly capable of violence. As it turns out, he would never attend another Klan meeting, and by all accounts changed his attitudes, changed his behaviors, indeed, changed his life to accept Blacks as equals.

Throughout her life she would stand up to racist bigotry on a number of other occasions: threatening to commit vehicular homicide on a real estate agent who sought to enforce restrictive covenants laws in her family's chosen Nashville neighborhood; standing up to racist comments whenever she heard them, from friends, family members, or total strangers. The fear which often paralyzes whites and makes us unwilling to challenge racism--described by James Baldwin as the fear of being "turned away from the welcome table" of white society--was something that played no part in her life. She was a woman of principle, and although not an activist, in her own way she nonetheless instilled in her children and grandchildren a sense of right and wrong which was unshakeable in this regard. She is in no small part responsible for who I am and what I do today. But enough of the praise. Heaping accolades on the dead is not my intention here. For there is another part of this story which is less heartwarming, and yet more instructive and important than anything written in this teaching. It is the part about my grandmother's death.

A few years ago, it became obvious that Maw Maw, as we knew her, was developing the Alzheimer's disease at a fairly rapid pace. Anyone who has watched a loved one suffer with this condition knows how difficult it is to witness the deterioration that takes place. The forgotten memories come first. Then the forgotten names. Then the unfamiliar faces. Then the terror and anger of feeling abandoned. And finally, a regression back to a virtual infant stage of development, complete with the sucking in of one's lips so typical of newborns. It is a fascinating disease, in that it renders otherwise healthy persons helpless, eventually causing not only a mental meltdown, but a physiological one as well. It renders its victims' incapable of reason or comprehensible thought. It saps the conscious mind of its energy, and therein lays the point of my story.

You see resisting the weight of one's socialization requires conscious thought. It requires the existence of the ability to choose. And near the end of my grandmother's life, as her body and mind began to shut down at an ever-increasing pace, this consciousness--the soundness of mind which had led her to fight the pressures to accept racism--began to vanish. Her awareness of who

she was and what she had stood for her entire life disappeared. Now as this process unfolded, culminating in the dementia ward of a local nursing home, an amazing and disturbing thing happened. She began to refer to her mostly Black nurses by the all-too common term, which forms the cornerstone of white America's racial thinking. The one Malcolm X said was the first word newcomers learned when they came to this country, Nigger. A word she would never have uttered from conscious thought, but one that remained locked away in her subconscious; despite her best intentions and lifelong commitment to standing strong against racism. A word that would have made her ill even to think it. A word that would make her violent if she heard it said. A word which, for her to utter herself, would have made her, well, another person altogether. But there it was, as ugly, and bitter, and fluently expressed as it probably ever had been by her father.

Think carefully about what I'm saying. And why it matters. Here was a woman who no longer could recognize her own children; a woman who had no idea who her husband had been; no clue where she was, what her name was, what year it was--and yet, knew what she had been taught at a very early age to call Black people. Once she was no longer capable of resisting this demon, tucked away like a ticking time bomb in the far corners of her mind, it reasserted itself, and exploded with a vengeance. She could not remember how to feed herself, for God's sake. She could not go to the bathroom by herself. She could not recognize a glass of water for what it was. But she could recognize a nigger. America had seen to that--and no disease was going to strip her of that memory. Indeed, it would be one of the last words she would say, before she finally stopped talking at all.

Please understand my point: Given this woman's entire life, and the circumstances surrounding her slow demise, her utterance of a word even as vicious as nigger says absolutely nothing about her. But it speaks volumes about her country. About the seeds of pure evil planted deep in every one of us by our American culture; seeds, which--so long as we are of sound mind and commitment--we can, choose not to water.

But also seeds that left untended sprouts of their own accord. It speaks volumes about the work white folks must do, individually and collectively to overcome that which is always beneath the surface; to overcome the tendency to cash in the chips which represent the perquisites of whiteness; to traffic in privileges--not the least of which is the privilege of feeling superior to others not because of what or who they are, but rather because of what you're not: in this case, not a nigger. In so many ways that's all racism ever meant, and all it needed to mean for those of European descent. To be white meant at least you were above them.

If you had not a pot to piss in, at least you had that. To call another man or woman a nigger and to treat them the way one is instructed to treat such an untouchable is to assert nothing less than a property right. It is to add value to what DuBois called the "psychological influence" of whiteness. When my grandmother was strong and vibrant, she had no need to take advantage of these influences, and indeed, often tried hard to resist them. But in weakness and confusion it became all to clear that her increasingly diseased mind had left. And she called in the racist chips.



Maybe all this is why I'm so tired of other white folks trying to sell me bullcrap like: "I don't have a racist bone in my body," or "I never notice color." See, Maw Maw would have said that too. And she would have meant well. But she would have been wrong.

The fact is that nigger is still the first word on most white people's mind when they see a Black man being taken off to jail on the evening news. The first thing we think when we see Mike Tyson, Louis Farrakhan, or O.J. Simpson (as in "that murdering nigger"). Think I'm exaggerating? Then come with me to America's airports and have a drink with me at the bar the next time an African-American other than Oprah, Michael Jordan, or Colin Powell makes the news. Take a cab ride with me anywhere in this country, and if the driver is white (or really anything but Black), and the trip takes more than 15 minutes, see how long it takes for the word or its modern-day coded equivalents to spew forth from their mouth, once they find out what I do.

Ask me what white folks yelled at Black students who occupied the basketball court during a Rutgers/U. Mass game a few years back to protest racist comments by the Rutgers' President. Fans who for mere seconds before had been wildly cheering for Black basketball players, and yet could and did turn on a dime as soon as they were reminded of the racial battle lines which trump NCAA inspired brotherhood every time. And then after that, tell me the once again about being colorblind. Let's go to Roxbury tonight, or Southcentral LA, or to the Forsaken housing projects in New Orleans, or to any MLK Boulevard in any city in America, and then let's see how hard it is to spot melanin. Color blind my foot.

Then once we're all through feeling bad for having been sucker-punched by racist conditioning just like everyone else, then please, for the love of God, let's learn to forgive ourselves. Our guilt is worthless, although, it should be said, far from meaningless. It has plenty of meaning: it means we aren't likely to do a dog gone thing constructive to end the system which took us in, conned us, and stole part of our humanity. And what those women at my grandmother's nursing home need and deserve--much more than a sniveling apology from embarrassed family members--is for me to say what I'm saying right now, and to encourage everyone to be brave enough to say the same thing. To put an end to this vicious system of racism, to spend every day resisting the temptations of white privilege, which ultimately weakens the communities on which we all depend. Those nurses knew, and so do I why my grandmother could no longer fight. For the rest of us, there is no similar excuse available. We can and should ask prominent Black, White, and Jewish Scholars to participate in AAIU Racism Dialogue to help slowly dissolve racism and white privilege in America, and the AAIU Truth and Reconciliation Process (T&R Process), to assess damages caused by racism/white supremacy, in order to produce a fair African-American Reparations Package to repair those damages.

Appreciating Honest White Scholars,  
Brotha Pruitt