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The Great White Elephant A Reflection on Racial Privilege for White Anti-Racists

By Robin Parker

It has been almost twenty years since the writing of “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”¹ I am grateful for that article, because it cogently talks about white privilege, and gives a list of those privileges that both white people and people of color may discuss. For me in my work in anti-racism training, discussion of white privilege is a way to ensure that white people remain on the hook about racism. No longer can racism be seen as simply a problem for persons of color. It is also a force that shapes the experiences of white people: If I, as a man of color, have the frequent experience of being followed in stores because of my race, and often have to think about being followed, then white people have a simultaneous corollary experience—not having to worry about being followed in stores because of their race, and never having to think about being followed for racial reasons. That experience of racial privilege shapes personal disposition, ability to trust, confidence, self esteem and world view just as much as my experience of racial oppression.

I assumed that because white privilege is not a normative experience, but an experience that only some people share, an awareness of white privilege would move the discussion of racism forward. It would no longer be possible for white people to focus the problem of racism on what a few, usually marginal bigots—“the bad people”—do to hurt persons of color. Instead, white people would be compelled to focus on what they, the usually well-meaning majority—“the good people”—fail to do to address racism. In short, I thought that understanding white privilege would cause white people to act differently. Ironically, I had an encounter at the Sixth Annual White Privilege Conference that has given me a more complex picture of white privilege than I had before.

I traveled to the Six Annual White Privilege Conference in Pella, Iowa during the spring of 2005 to give three workshops with Pamela Smith Chambers, who is my colleague and the Training Director of the Beyond Diversity Resource Center (for which we both work). Because the White Privilege Conference brings together hundreds of students and professionals who are genuinely interested in discussing white privilege, I was full of expectation. Here would be both the big thinkers and the open minds that were working to change things for the better. Overarching my thoughts was the feeling that the subtleties of interactions with white people would be different. Usually, I give training about racism and white privilege to hostile or indifferent audiences, persons who are compelled to attend diversity training by their employers. Many of those training participants would rather have me fall into a yawning chasm than hear about the social responsibility white persons have in making a more inclusive society. But here I believed that not only would the audience be receptive, but white people would be talkative and engaging about white privilege in the informal conference venues: the breaks between presentations, meals, elevator conversations—all the places where stiff silence or nervous chatter about the weather substitutes for discussions about race.

Even more, I expected that white people, especially those who deeply understood white privilege, would be exemplifying what it means to be white anti-racists. There would be no being ignored, held in suspicion, distrusted, counted out, or dismissed. Here white people would not be letting the door swing back in my face as so often happens when I enter or leave a room. Instead, I would have glimpses of what it felt like to be in a truly inclusive, open, and understanding place where my racial experiences were uniquely valued, and I in turn could value the racial experiences of white people who actually believed they had racial experiences. So, I was especially curious to see what that behavior looked like from white people, and I “knew” I would see it there in Pella as I descended the stairs of the Country Inn and Suites in preparation for a full day of conference presentations.

I alighted onto the foyer, walked past the main desk, and paused in an adjoining room where guests were offered a continental breakfast. (I am not a morning person, so finding coffee and a quiet place to drink it is an important start for my day.) My quick survey of the room revealed several dining patrons, including a woman I recognized as a well-known writer about white

racial privilege. She was standing where I was headed, at the counter where cereal, milk, muffins and coffee were available as self-serve items. In fact, she was standing exactly where I was headed, at the coffee urn, which was set back farther on the counter than other items with liberal open space. (I am well-acquainted with the sometimes awkward preparation of coffee in these settings. Without a good setup, there is often too little space to open creamers and sugar packets, use stirrers or spoons, and dispose of the used items efficiently.) As I stood behind her and off to her right, she gave me a brief glance, and prepared her coffee. I watched her with unusual interest. “Here is a woman who really helped to set the record straight about white privilege,” I thought. And I’m standing just inches away from her and we’ve actually looked at each other.” I calmed myself, thinking that saying “Hi, I’m one of your biggest fans!” would be ridiculous even though we had exchanged at least some eye contact. Besides, the opportunity for starting a conversation quickly passed as she finished preparing her drink and walked over to a table where other persons were seated.

So I stood alone at the coffee urn, and nothing of interest happened between the woman and me—except for one small thing: She left empty creamer pods there in the middle of the coffee preparation area. I didn’t think anything of it, and proceeded to get my own coffee as she had done. As I moved my hand over the pile of discards to the silver spigot, however, I felt a sense of vague irritation that I could not place at first. Yet, I had a flash of recollection of my father telling me, “Keep things neat. What you do reflects on all of us.” It was in fact a blurred series of recollections from my father, a former officer in the United States Air Force who spent decades negotiating military life. Always embedded in his chastisement was the wearying notion that even my smallest gestures were on trial. If we dined at the Officer’s Club, my table manners had to be impeccable; if we went to the public pool and I accidentally bumped into someone, an immediate and forceful apology on my part was required. I understood that part of his insistence on etiquette had to do with good child rearing, but especially good child rearing of a black child. Underlying his thinking was the notion that white folks would use even the smallest opportunity to pass a negative judgment on my actions. Being polite was more than just being conventional, it was a racial survival skill that helped ensure that my behavior did not play into the stereotypes about black folks as shiftless, lazy, and uncivilized. The list of possible petty indiscretions was

long and my father's wrath was mighty, so although I disliked it, I fervently internalized middle class etiquette.

I tossed my own trash into a nearby receptacle, glanced for another moment at the refuse, and left the room. Yet, throughout the day at the White Privilege Conference I could not escape a vague sense of annoyance. I kept trying to shake the feeling. Part of me thought that the whole affair was too petty for even my private attention. It was, after all, just a few bits of trash left on a counter—and leaving them there was understandable. In an unfamiliar venue the nearby trash can is sometimes hard to find. Also, the woman at the coffee urn and any other white persons who left the creamer pods and sweetener packets certainly were not responsible for my childhood rearing. Whatever overly fastidious “baggage” my father left me regarding etiquette was not their doing and not their responsibility to undo. Still the matter captured my attention, no doubt because I was attending the White Privilege Conference where the seemingly small things that happen around race or happen differently around race become important, and because I viewed the woman as an important figure.

At the end of the day the root of my discomfort emerged. I settled in at a local Pella, Iowa restaurant with Pamela and another colleague, Jorge Zeballos. The restaurant was a remarkable find because Pella has little ethnic and racial diversity; yet this restaurant not only offered Mexican food, but the staff and waiters were Latino/as. Except for the staff and the three of us, the persons in the restaurant were white. As we ate our main courses, a few college men watched a sporting event on a tv monitor. “Their” team was apparently winning because they kept getting louder and more raucous as the evening unfolded. They whooped, yelled, and banged their fists on the table as their excitement grew. Then someone in their party dropped a glass of beer on the floor, and their table erupted in laughter and shrieks.

Everyone in the restaurant, including the waiters, took all of this without any apparent sense of alarm. When the men finally made their way to depart, one of them yelled “Go Team!” at the otherwise quiet patrons. I kept thinking that I could not have gotten away with any of the antics of those men. Not only was I a stranger in Pella, I was a *black* man in Pella. I knew nothing about this town, yet I knew the risks of not “behaving” when I was away from home. My life

has been peppered with unexplained police stops, being exhorted to leave a neighborhood restaurant because “my kind” was not welcome, or standing outside a building and having a group of young persons yell “nigger” as they drove by. Any of these could turn from uncomfortable insult to life-threatening debacle if not handled deftly, so the idea that I could carry on far from home in drunken revelry was simply out of the question. For Pella, these men were just out having a good time. In the same situation I would have been out looking for trouble.

“Here I am at the White Privilege Conference,” I thought, “with a new item to add to the list of privileges I don’t enjoy: ‘White people can get loud and break glasses without having to worry about getting thrown out of a restaurant or arrested.’” And there was one more privilege that finally came to mind and answered my earlier feeling of resentment: “White people also don’t have to worry that not throwing away their empty creamer pods and sugar packets will be attributed to the bad manners or incivility of their race.”

As I thought about the matter over the following weeks, it occurred to me that something more than unpacking the “invisible knapsack” of racial privilege was required for white people who want to progress. From my racial viewpoint, white racial privilege is not a knapsack. Knapsacks are tidy things, in which items are easily put away and hidden from view. For me, such privilege is instead a great white elephant; indeed, it is the proverbial “elephant in the room” that loudly trumpets over our conversations, knocks over all the furniture that would otherwise provide a comfortable place for us to meet, and sends people of color running for safety. Most important, white privilege is the elephant that white people have agreed to ignore and usually never mention although its effects on our cross-race interaction can be devastating.

For white anti-racists, the elephant of racial privilege should no longer be “invisible” because it is well understood. Yet there is still much work to be done in the effort for anti-racists to remain mindful of their *individual* racial privileges. That mindfulness, and the action that follows, is bound to reshape the interaction between white people and people of color, just as it might have reshaped my experience at the White Privilege Conference.

For my white colleagues who work for social justice and civil rights, the implications of remaining unmindful are significant. In this elephant-in-the-room/post-invisible-knapsack era, doing the work of social justice and civil rights enforcement can not exempt individuals from the personal responsibility to examine how racial privilege corrupts behavior and narrows awareness. Change the woman in my story to a social worker who, instead of leaving creamer pods behind, unknowingly impresses a patronizing attitude on his clients, or to a civil rights investigator who unwittingly favors the white persons she scrutinizes for claims of discrimination, and racism remains entrenched because putative anti-racist allies persist as adversaries—albeit oblivious, well-meaning ones.

My own struggle with privileges of a different sort, gender for example, informs me that keeping privilege in mind is a difficult task. Frequently, Pamela has reminded me of differential treatment that I get just because I am a man. That I have received constant eye contact from clients during business conversations, that waiters have asked me whether “the table” would like tap or bottled water, and that I have received numerous other small gestures of attention and respect are mostly things to which I have assumed entitlement. I have failed to recognize my “invisible,” gender-driven experiences, and consequently have failed to monitor my surroundings for what is happening to her because she is a woman.

I often lack the same mindfulness around ability privilege. As I have conducted interactive diversity training and have asked participants to stroll around the room, stand for several minutes, join hands, and walk up and down flights of stairs, I have forgotten that for some persons such actions are difficult or impossible. I have become so accustomed to having the ability to do these tasks that I frequently assume everyone else is like me, and I fail to inquire whether participants might need some type of accommodation, or fail to plan activities so everyone, regardless of physical ability, can be full participants. Usually, it is persons who do not have the privilege in question—women, persons with disabilities, persons who speak a language other than English, etc.—who have been my teachers.

Yet I know individuals who do a better job than I do at staying mindful about their privileges, and I have searched for some commonality among them, some factor that explains their ability to

keep their privileges in the forefront of their thinking and therefore part of their daily actions. Often, those persons can not precisely articulate how their thinking is different from others; indeed, many do not think that their way of thinking is in any way special. But I notice that there is one constant question that these individuals pose to themselves, and which occupies much of their day-to-day experience around race: “How do I live with my privilege?”

Once adapted to race, this Big Question, “How do I live with my racial privilege?” raises allied questions for white anti-racists:

- (1) What internal dialogue must flow from asking the question?
- (2) How does the anti-racist inquirer keep the Big Question in mind?
- (3) What action steps does the anti-racist take to address his or her racial privilege? and
- (4) How does the anti-racist develop mindfulness of the three previous questions?

I constructed a mental model of this process in the hope that it would offer an avenue for progress on white racial privilege. The model illuminates what might otherwise be automatic “dodges” to responsibility for racial privilege, and calls upon the practitioner to develop critical thinking and to formulate a series of actions. As the accompanying schematic shows, addressing racial privilege for white anti-racists is a process of self-reflection, decision and prompting. Reflection on the core question, “How do I live with my racial privilege?” prompts an internal dialogue that leads to action. Prompting with reminders helps to keep the core question visible.

I asked a colleague of mine, Jason Laker, Associate Vice Principal and Dean of Student Affairs at Queens University in Ontario, if he could bring real-life reflection to ideas in the schematic. Jason is a white man who I met when he was the Dean of Campus Life at St. John’s University in Minnesota. He brought a group of students from that school to a training on racial identity development called “Blacks, Whites, and Latino/as” that I co-facilitated in August 2004. What impressed me about Jason was his keen awareness of the racial privileges that are bestowed on him because he is white, and his ability to clearly articulate the internal and external struggles he

faced in owning those privileges. So I asked him to discuss with me the mental model in the schematic.

As our conversation began, Jason pointed out that one reason he constantly asked himself the Big Question was because he views white racial privilege as being “attached to (his) body,”—something that is an intimate part of the self that can not be removed or intellectually dismissed. He noted that in his own internal dialogue he emphasizes the *cumulative* benefits of white racial privilege like credibility, trust, physical safety, and perceived financial stability, and the ways the privileges mutually support each other. He thought the action steps were useful, and noted that he developed the habit of—and even learned to enjoy—putting himself in “uncomfortable” situations where he speaks up about racial privilege. He also thought the Reminders were useful so long as they served as a prompt for action. He confessed, however, that he was not much of a “joiner” when it came to using devices such as ribbons, bumper stickers, or (as suggested in the schematic) wristbands. His main objection was that these items alone do not constitute real work on an issue, although he agreed that they may have value as reminders to do such work.

Jason spoke of a friend of long duration with whom he often discussed white racial privilege. Both Jason and his friend, also a white man, immersed themselves professionally in the topic and their conversations were frank, frequent, and personal. The friend had a father who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, and Jason recounted a particular conversation when his friend had discussed the heavy burden the disease wrought on him as a primary caretaker. During that conversation, Jason’s friend said, “I realize I have (racial) privilege...I don’t mean to complain.” Jason replied that he wanted to give his friend “permission” to complain, however, because his friend was truly having a “hard time.”

Although I hid it, I have to confess that I was initially impatient with the story because I didn’t think it was relevant to the mental model. My own internal dialogue was something like this: “Alzheimer’s disease is a tragedy, and any person who is caring for a sick family member deserves support and sympathy. But who said there isn’t room for being privileged and being tired, or scared, or lonely, or anything else that is part of the human condition?” I am accustomed to challenging white folks who try to minimize their responsibility for racism by

pointing out that their lives have been tough. But Jason's friend was not using the old saw, "I have my problems too." He was presenting an allied, but different issue: "Is there enough space—enough humanity—left for a white anti-racist to feel hurt, tragedy and personal suffering?"

I missed the nuances of this matter when Jason first explained it, just as the woman at the coffee urn probably missed the nuances of our encounter. Certainly, white folks who do not want to address racism will never ask themselves the Big Question about racial privilege if they believe that "other" problems are always more important. Yet, white anti-racists will founder in guilt and shame if their commitment to attacking racism does not allow for living out the full range of human experiences, including day-to-day difficulties, some small, some large. The trick is not letting difficult personal experiences become an implacable excuse for inaction around racism.

I wager that in a model that seeks to address white racial privilege there are many other fine distinctions, exceptions, and corollaries that reflect the nuances of what it means to develop a wholly new and better course of interaction among persons of color and white people. This is no easy task. As Lillian Smith, the noted white author of *Killers of the Dream* (1949) and *Strange Fruit* (1944) put it:

There are complexities in every racial situation. Never are such matters neat and simple. They can't be. For they reach deep into history, memory, beliefs, values—or into the hollow place where values should be.

But I believe that developing this new course of interaction is certainly worth the trouble, and I invite my white anti-racist allies to join me. In struggling with the nuances—the invisible parts of the great white elephant of racial privilege—I think we will begin to transform our society into one that has a genuine multicultural center, and one which reflects our best attempts to positively reshape the ways we think about and interact with one another.

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About the Author

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Parker has for many years facilitated anti-racism/anti-oppression training, which has emphasized racial, gender, ability, and sexual orientation privileges and their impacts on individuals and society.

His written works include the following:

The Anti-Racist Cookbook: A Recipe Guide for Conversations About Race That Goes Beyond Covered Dishes and "Kum-Bah-Ya" (2005)

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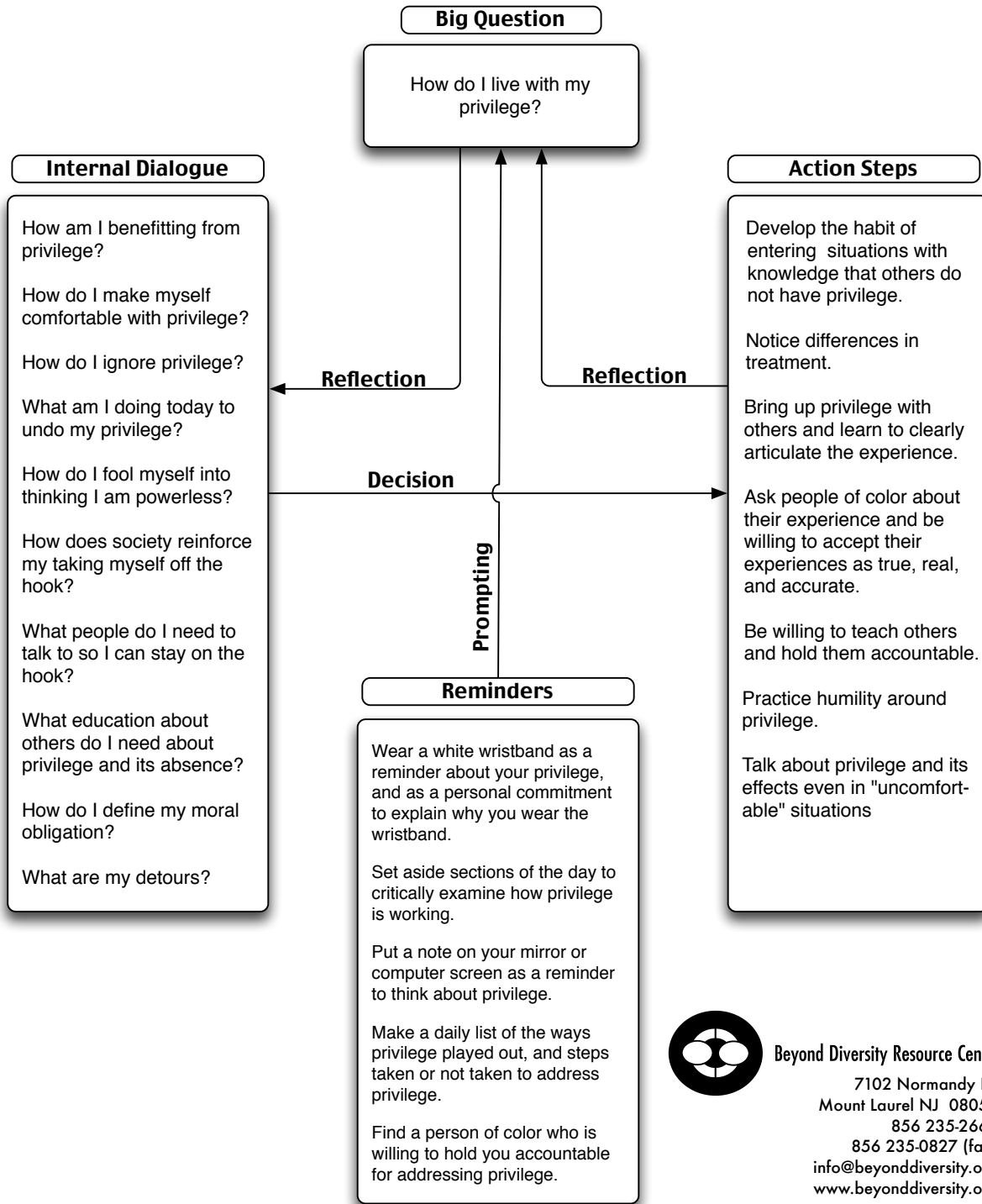
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This article is a project of the Beyond Diversity Resource Center. Although the article specifically addresses racial privilege, the themes and ideas conveyed have application to other societal privileges as well.

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