

Seeking Redemption:  
Lessons for Confronting and Undoing Privilege

by

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## ABSTRACT

Privilege is unearned advantages, access, and power reserved for a select group of people. Those that benefit from privilege manifest their power consciously and subconsciously so as to maintain their exclusive control of the opportunities privilege affords them. The reach and power of one's privilege rises and falls as the different social identities that one possesses intersect. Ultimately, if a society built on justice and equity is to be achieved, those with privilege must take tangible steps to acknowledge their privilege and work to end the unequal advantages and oppression that are created in order to perpetuate privilege. This thesis unpacks privilege through an autoethnographic examination of the author's history. Through the use of creative nonfiction, personal stories become launching points to explore characteristics of privilege manifest in the author's life which are emblematic of larger social groups that share many of the author's social identities. The following characteristics of privilege are explored: merit, oppression, normalization, economic value, neutrality, blindness, and silence.

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## Introduction

I was born in Colorado in 1979, the first born son of Mike and Pat Black. My parents gave me the name Luke, a cowboy name fitting for the rolling plains and towering mountains of Colorado. I am white, as are my parents, and I am a third generation American. My mother's lineage draws from Italian, French, and German ancestry. My mother's grandparents immigrated to the United States in the 1910's and made their home in Cincinnati, Ohio.

My father's roots lie deep in Hungary. His grandparents came to New York in the late 1910's or early 1920's. They made their home in the Big Apple and raised their families. I fondly remember my grandmother's father. He fancied wooden models and as a small boy I enjoyed visiting his home and exploring the small wooden ships, early model cars, and horse drawn carts. Great-grandfather Vito mixed his English with Hungarian and barked orders to my great uncle and grandmother in his native tongue. I have no memories of my grandfather's parents. They died before I was born and my grandfather rarely spoke of them to me. There were no stories of his childhood in the 1920's and 30's in New York City. There were no stories of his parents except that Black was not our original family name. The story went that my great-grandparents arrived at Ellis Island and changed their family name from Fekete to Black. Fekete literally translates as Black from Hungarian. My grandfather believed that the name had been changed because Fekete was too difficult to pronounce and that was the end of it, but as I grew and studied world history, I suspected that the name meant something more.

Hungary was an axis power during World War I. They allied with Germany and Austria and fought against the Americans, the British, and the French. After the war,

many Hungarians left the motherland and began new lives in other countries. Many of those Hungarians left behind military posts and government positions where they held power before their defeat. Many left behind histories that they wished to not follow them. I envisioned my great-grandparents in this light. What did they leave behind that warranted a name change? What past did they sever by abandoning their Hungarian name? What darkness in my family's past did my great-grandparents bury at Ellis Island? I mused over a past that my family did not speak of, had no connection to, and could only explore with curiosity.

I was wrong to imagine my ancestors through such a suspicious lens. And in the fall of 2014, I stumbled on the likely truth of my family's lineage while reading Paul Kivel's *Uprooting Racism*. Kivel remarks:

It is not necessarily a privilege to be white, but it certainly has its benefits. That's why so many of our families gave up their unique histories, primary languages, accents, distinctive dress, family names and cultural expressions. It seemed like a small price to pay for acceptance in the circle of whiteness. Even with these sacrifices, it wasn't easy to pass as white if we were Italian, Greek, Irish, Jewish, Spanish, Hungarian, or Polish.<sup>1</sup>

There the truth lay. What if my great-grandparents did not give up their Hungarian name because they were running from their past? What if my great-grandparents gave up their Hungarian name because they were securing a future for themselves, for their children, and for their descendants? What if my great-grandparents gave up their Hungarian name for me?

Fekete does translate as Black. But the word Fekete connotes position. Fekete describes a worker—specifically a blacksmith. Yet, it goes deeper. Fekete is a

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism: How White People can Work for Racial Justice* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2011), 31.

Hungarian Jewish last name. My great-grandparents names were James and Julie. Julie translates as Julia in Hungarian and James translates as Jakob or Jacob—the namesake of Israel. My great-grandparents were Hungarian Jews. They left Hungary and when they walked through Ellis Island, they left their Jewish heritage behind them. They changed their names, they changed their religion to Orthodox Christian, and they never spoke of their Jewish lineage again.

Why did they give up their Jewish heritage? Jakob and Julia Fekete became James and Julie Black so that they could be white. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially Jews, were not considered white but instead were considered a distinct race.<sup>2</sup> And because they were not white, they faced racism and marginalization; they were quarantined into ethnic ghettos and denied jobs; their children were denied access to education; they were despised and their lives were threatened by American Nativists and the Klu Klux Klan.<sup>3</sup> Faced with this life, my great-grandparents chose a different path. They gave up everything—their culture, their religion, their history, and their names to be seen and to be known as white. They gave up everything so that their children and their grandchildren would be white. They gave up everything so that three generations later I would never be called a dirty Jew, would be assumed to speak English, and would never be seen as anything less than fully white. My

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<sup>2</sup> *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, produced by Larry Adelman (2003; San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2003), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> Joe Feagin, “Old Poison in New Bottles: The Deep Roots of Modern Nativism,” in *Immigrants Out!: The New Nativism and the Anti-immigrant Impulse in the United States*, ed. Juan F. Perea (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 21-23.



grandparents paid the full wages of whiteness<sup>4</sup> and they did it willingly so that their family and their descendants could reap the benefits of land, access, and wealth that were reserved only for whites then and continue to be held for whites today.

My great-grandparents' story is about assimilation. It is about giving up a history, a culture, and a way of life to become part of something else. My great-grandparents carried a vision of prosperity for their family, education for their children, and an easy future with many options for their descendants. Their vision was strong and it is a vision shared by many people across the globe and in the United States. Unfortunately, it is not a vision that is realistically accessible to most people. The world that we live in is not a flat, even playing field where all people have the same opportunities to see their visions for their families come to pass. Instead, our world is ruled by those with power. For centuries, those with power have molded our institutions and our systems to benefit themselves and reinforce the power that they possess so that they can control all of the resources, opportunities, and the future. But our collective history is much harsher. For centuries, those with power have wielded their power as a tool of destruction to colonize, rob, kill, enslave, torture, destroy, isolate, and deny humanity to millions of people. Those with power have embodied this evil to feed their greed, feed their fear, and remove all threats to their assumed right to control life as we know it.

This is often a hard truth for those of us who are white, who are male, who are heterosexual, and who grew up in the United States to accept because we have been taught throughout our whole lives by our movies, by our cultural stories, by our teachers, and by those whom we trust to govern us that we are a special people with a proud

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<sup>4</sup> Thandeka, *Learning to be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 1999), 77.

history. We have been sold the lie that we are a city on the hill<sup>5</sup> and a beacon of light for the rest of the world. We have been taught that America is the land of opportunity where those who work hard will succeed. We have mistakenly accepted the lie that this is a fair country where all people are treated equally and have equal access to a good life. Yet, when we wipe away all of the lies of our history and dig down to truth of how our country and our social systems work, we find that certain people are given advantages and others are not. This is the history of privilege and it is a history that has been researched, studied, confirmed, and reconfirmed again and again by activists, scholars, and social scientists, most of whom were people of color, women, or persons from marginalized groups.<sup>6</sup>

The vision that my great-grandparents forsook their past, their culture, and their religion in order to pursue was worth pursuing. Yet, the fact that they had to give us so much should tell us that as immigrants, non-whites, and Jews, they knew that door after door after door would be slammed in their faces and in their children's faces. They knew they would never achieve their vision unless they gained access to privilege. My great-grandparents knew that whatever the cost, it was worth paying because they would never get ahead without privilege. So they paid the great price to become white, Christian, and American.

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<sup>5</sup> John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," *Harvard Kennedy School*, accessed May 30, 2015, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/phall/03.%20winthrop,%20Christian%20Cha.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Paul C. Gorski, "Complicating 'White Privilege': Race, Poverty, and the Nature of the Knapsack," *www.edchange.org*, January 1, 2012, <http://www.edchange.org/publications/Complicating-White-Privilege.pdf>.

Equality, cooperation, and homeostasis are the natural patterns of the world.<sup>7</sup> When peoples seek equality, when they seek to cooperate with one another, when they seek to recognize the diversity all peoples, and when they seek a homeostasis in which each person is given space and resources to live fully and freely, we find that inequality and social problems begin to heal and destructive power structures that benefit the few at the cost of the many begin to level. The maintenance of privilege through the application of power does not exist as a natural pattern of the world. In order then to maintain privilege we must work against the grain of the world. In order to maintain privilege we must engage in practices that destroy others, so that we can continue to enjoy the comfort that being on the top provides.

For the cynic, a homeostasis world seems like a day dream and an unrealistic waste of time and resources. But for the visionary and for the activist, the goal of a world built on equality, fostered by our commitment to our collective well-being, and enriched by our promotion of the beauty of all genders, sexual orientations, races and ethnicities, languages, and faiths is what sustains us. We seek to bring out of the shadows those who have been beaten down, robbed, threatened, and denied the fullness of their humanity. And we seek to end the violent behaviors, marginalizing practices, unequal and oppressive systems, and parasitic institutions that have laid a trail of destruction five centuries wide and that are still at work today. Ultimately, we must end privilege and the false supremacy that privilege supports.

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<sup>7</sup> This principle is explored extensively in Margret J. Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*.

## Exploring Privilege

Interrogating, interrupting, and ultimately ending privilege, ending the false supremacy that privilege supports, and ending the oppression that privilege depends on will not be easy. It will require significant effort by all people. Those who benefit from privilege will have to commit to ending their privilege and they will have to take tangible steps to divest from participation in privilege. Those of us who benefit from privilege will need the support and guidance of those who have been marginalized and oppressed for our benefit. As we work together and as we hold one another accountable, we need to continuously revisit the concept of privilege to look for new manifestations, to review our history, and to expand and strengthen our understanding of how privilege works.

Because privilege affects each of us differently, we must continue to diversify, expand, and deepen our understanding of privilege so that we can better engage the work of undoing privilege. We need to encourage each new exploration of privilege and we need to critically engage those new explorations for lessons that those of us with privilege can employ to undo our privilege.

So what then is privilege? Simply put, privilege is unearned advantages, access, and power reserved for a select group of people. Peggy McIntosh describes privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day.”<sup>8</sup> Privilege is what guarantees that a select few have access to wealth, education, employment, and opportunity from one generation to the next while the vast majority of

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<sup>8</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “Examining Unearned Privilege,” *Liberal Education* 79, no. 1, (1993): 61.

others remain burdened with poverty, unemployment, poor education, and a lack of opportunities from one generation to the next. Privilege is what allows those with power to govern this world.

Privilege is far-reaching in its application while also manifesting in very nuanced terms. Every person that benefits from privilege will experience their privilege differently. Indeed, as I have unpacked my history and my privilege, I have come to understand my privilege in very real, very personal ways. However, because privilege exists to serve all of the members of the groups that benefit from privilege, there are certain characteristics of privilege that can be counted on to apply in almost all situations. The following characteristics of privilege reflect this duality: they are applicable to all members of the groups that benefit from privilege and they have played out in my life in personal ways.

First, privilege increases or decreases as the many social identities that we each hold come together. The intersection of the power and privilege associated with each of our social identities compounds the benefits those of us with greater privilege receive and compounds the oppression and marginalization that those with fewer privileges experience. For example, racial privilege benefits white people. In addition, gender privilege benefits males. I am not just white, I am also male. If I focus exclusively on my white privilege but ignore my male privilege, I will never fully confront and be able to undo my cumulative privilege. I could add many of my other privileges to this equation as well. The point is that if we simply pick one form of privilege and ignore the others, the full spectrum of our privilege will go unaddressed.

In addition, the intersection of social identities also occurs for those that experience marginalization and oppression. Using the same example of racial and gender privilege, Kimberle Crenshaw notes, “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.”<sup>9</sup> As a white male, I experience more privilege than white women; inversely, black women experience more oppression and marginalization than black men. The intersection of our social identities serves as the reason we cannot simply account for one form of privilege while negating the other forms of privilege. Instead, if we are to end privilege, we must individually and collectively divest from each form of privilege that each social identity possesses.

Second, privilege represents an “unequal distribution of materials, resources, rewards, knowledge, and opportunities” that creates an unfair “accumulation of power, resources, legitimacy, dignity, and recognition” for those who benefit from the unequal distribution.<sup>10</sup> In other words, privilege creates an unfair system that benefits some, open doors for others, and provides authority to some because of who they are and not because they earn it. Privilege negates merit. Those with privilege enjoy unequal access to a full spectrum of resources, power, and status and they in turn use their unequal access to further benefit themselves and those like them. Those that do not enjoy this access are

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140, (1989): 140.

<sup>10</sup> Brett G. Stoudt, Madeline Fox, and Michelle Fine, “Contesting Privilege with Critical Participatory Action Research,” *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 179.

marginalized; pushed to the edges of society. For the vast majority of those who are marginalized, it does not matter how hard they work or whether they make the right decisions, they will always face an uphill climb that predictably negates their hard work and good decision making. For the select few that benefit from privilege, their professional performance can remain lax, they can make poor decisions, and their privilege will continue to provide them with opportunity after opportunity. In our world, merit is an illusion, privilege is the reality.

Third, privilege not only assures that select people maintain access to an unequal distribution of resources and power and that those people benefit from the unequal distribution, but privilege also depends on those advantages being gained at the expense of those outside the select group.<sup>11</sup> In other words, in order for privilege to exist, in order for resources, power, and opportunities to accumulate for a select group, other peoples outside the select group must be exploited and oppressed.<sup>12</sup> This is an important distinction for those struggling to see why having privilege is problematic. Privilege is not a passive, natural occurrence that some of us unwittingly land in and benefit from while others simply and innocently go without. Privilege occurs because of intentional historic and on-going acts of oppression. Privilege is actively being shored up for many of us right now whether we are aware of it or not. Right now, privilege is robbing those outside the select group of their resources, power, and legitimacy for the sake of the select group. It may seem a silly analogy but if we think of ice cream cones, privilege is not simply the fact that I get to eat an ice cream cone and you do not. Instead, privilege is

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<sup>11</sup> Kivel, *Uprooting Racism*, 31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

that I enjoy my ice cream cone, take your ice cream cone, force you to make more ice cream, and then take all the credit for how good the ice cream tastes. The active, intentional manner in which privilege strips communities of their resources, power, and legitimacy is called oppression. Oppression is a loaded term that is experienced in unique ways individually and is also experienced in similar ways collectively. Privilege depends on the steady application of oppression against numerous peoples.

Fourth, privilege allows a select group to define what is considered normal and what is considered abnormal. The select group that defines normal is always the group that established itself as the dominant group through historic oppression and on-going marginalization. The dominant group employs an unspoken process of normalizing its characteristics, its practices, its culture, and its behaviors. This process of establishing and reinforcing norms happens at a cultural level, a political level, and an economic level and defines who gets to participate and whose values and priorities are given representation.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the process of normalizing establishes what will be considered the default position against which all other positions will be measured. For example, heterosexuality has been established as the privileged sexual orientation through centuries of marginalization and oppression of those that share other sexual orientations. Heterosexuality has been reinforced as the normal sexual orientation by society. As such, those who are heterosexual continue to benefit from the assumption that their sexual orientation is normal while those of other sexual orientations continue to find themselves marked out as abnormal, misguided, wrong, freakish, or an abomination.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 177.



Fifth, privilege has a distinct economic value. Privilege is not just about having one's beliefs represented on television or having one's language acknowledged in official government documents. Privilege is also about the maintenance of and access to wealth. As such, privilege is an economic asset that those who are privileged seek to protect.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the economic value of privilege is easy to see. For example, the Department of Labor monitors the wage gap between male and female workers. In 2014, the average full-time working woman only earned 78 cents for every dollar the average full-time working man earned and that amount drops further for women of color.<sup>15</sup> Being a man literally means that I stand to make more money than a women with identical qualifications simply because I am a man. That is the economic value of male privilege. Sometimes the economic value of privilege is hard to see but can be understood as economic doors that have historically been open for some groups and not others. This can manifest in the form of job interviews, access to better credit, access to neighborhoods with appreciating property values, and access to better education. To have privilege is to have a head start on securing financial prosperity.

Sixth, privilege creates a desire for neutrality. It is not easy to come to terms with one's privilege. Especially, when we consider the oppression that privilege perpetuates. It would be so much more convenient for those of us who want to work against our privilege if we did not have to consider the history of oppression that brought us our privilege. But we can't ignore that history. We have to own it just like we own the

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<sup>14</sup> Cheryl L. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1713.

<sup>15</sup> Latifa Lyles, "It's Time for Equal Pay Now" *U.S. Department of Labor Blog*, April 13, 2015, <https://blog.dol.gov/2015/04/13/its-time-for-equal-pay-now/>.

benefits of our privilege. Many of us inherit our privilege; many of us step into it because of the physical characteristics we have at birth. And many of us walk into privilege as throughout our lives as our social identities change. Because we reap the benefits of privilege, we are responsible for the historic and on-going oppression that privilege demands. When we seek neutrality, what we are really asking is not to be responsible for who we are. We do not want to change; we do not want to give up the advantages that we have; and we do not want to acknowledge our connection to oppression. Neutrality would provide these escapes and persons with privilege employ numerous tools in hopes of remaining neutral to the oppression that our privilege creates.

Seventh, to be privileged is to be blind to the reality of oppression that occurs daily for our benefit. Whether because we are ignorant of the suffering of others or because we have slowly conditioned ourselves to look away and not see the reality of so many people's lives, privilege allows us to continue to be blind. For the most part, those of us who are privileged are not meant to see our privilege. Our privilege is meant to be hidden from us and we are meant to see our privilege as just the way things are. We are meant to see the inequality in the world as unfortunate yet unavoidable because that is just the way life goes. We are not even supposed to know what the word privilege means. To begin to become educated and to begin to question whether we truly understand reality is to begin to unravel the threads that hold our privilege together. Once we go down the road of undoing our privilege, we come to learn that our privilege and the unearned benefits that we enjoy demand that others suffer. This fact is often too horrible, too overwhelming, and too inconvenient to address. So many of us turn back to

our blindness. We willingly look away; we find convenient excuses for oppression; we find quick justifications for why we deserve our privilege.

Eighth, when those of us with privilege cannot secure neutrality and when we cannot remain blind to oppression, we often respond with silence. We silently deny our privilege and we silently ignore oppression so that we can wash our hands clean of responsibility. When the call comes for us to acknowledge our privilege, when the call comes for us to acknowledge the suffering of others, we fill the space with the emptiness of silence. Silence and denial protects our privilege.<sup>16</sup> Silent, passive acceptance of privilege is also silent passive acceptance of oppression. The reasons that we fall silent are deeply personal. We naively hope things will just get better without our participation, we are ashamed of our history and our privilege, we are afraid, and we are not ready to take the step that is asked us and so we hide in silence. Yet, silence ultimately hurts us all. For those of us who remain silent in the face of our privilege, silence robs us of the strength to challenge the privilege that we benefit from. For those of us already doing this work and for those who are oppressed, silence is a betrayal where those we hope would join us fail us when it matters most.

The characteristics of privilege mentioned above can be found wherever privilege is at work to benefit a specific group of people. It is important to note that this is not the end-all list of the characteristics of privilege. Instead, these are the characteristics that have manifest in my own life and they are characteristics that I see at work every day, all around me. As a person of privilege, I have been blessed with many mentors of color and white mentors who have patiently prodded me, challenged me, and humbled me so that

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<sup>16</sup> McIntosh, "Examining Unearned Privilege," 61.

my understanding would grow. They have pointed out my privilege and they have called attention to ways that privilege manifests systemically for me. As a person of privilege, I am also blessed to have the time and space to analyze my history, look for significant lessons, and explore the many ways in which I reap the benefits of my privilege and have it reinforced for me.

In the pages that follow, I dive more fully into what privilege is and how I have seen it manifest in my life. First, I unpack many of my social identities and illustrate how they provide me with privilege. I then pair this unpacking with a deeper look at the first characteristic of privilege listed above—how privileges intersect. What follows next are seven vignettes that each tell one of my personal experiences. I pair each vignette with a more expansive exploration of the other seven characteristics of privilege listed above. I conclude with a challenge to all of us who benefit from privilege and I name why this work is so important to me. Following the conclusion is the appendix where I explain my thesis scope and research questions, research and writing process, audience, and methodologies.

### Unpacking My Knapsack

In the late 1980's Peggy McIntosh, spurred on by her research into male privilege, began publically exploring white privilege. McIntosh was not the first scholar to call attention to white privilege. Indeed “scores of people of color throughout the brutal history of European colonization had spoken and written about the concept of white privilege for generations before Peggy wrote about the power whiteness afforded her.”<sup>17</sup> Yet McIntosh gained traction because she was a white woman critiquing the racial

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<sup>17</sup> Gorski, “Complicating ‘White Privilege’”, 2.

privilege that benefited her and other white people. She compared white privilege to “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.”<sup>18</sup> For McIntosh, white privilege was an advantage that she could access at any time but of which she was meant to remain oblivious.<sup>19</sup> She was never meant to see that she had white privilege; she was never meant to recognize that her privilege came about because of the marginalization and oppression of others; she was meant to see her white privilege as natural. And equally important, she was meant to keep her mouth shut about her advantages.

In spite of whatever resistance we may harbor towards the notion of privilege, in spite of our ignorance or obliviousness of our privilege, and in spite of our unwillingness to talk about our privilege, privilege is a reality and the resulting inequality is widespread.<sup>20</sup> People of color have unrelentingly fought for centuries for their right to survive, for their right to justice, and for an end to the political, economic, and cultural exploitation that plagues them while those with privilege go about their days benefiting from oppressions they would rather not know about.<sup>21</sup> It is the nature of all privileges, not just white privilege, to remain hidden and it is to the advantage of those who wish to continue to benefit from their privileges to remain oblivious. Consequently, for those of us who

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<sup>18</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondence Through Work in Women’s Studies” (working paper, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, 1988) 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Dena R. Samuels, Abby L. Ferber, and Andrea O’Reilly, “Introducing the Concepts of Oppression & Privilege into the Classroom,” *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 4 (2003): 7.

<sup>21</sup> Kivel, *Uprooting Racism*, xiii.

recognize that our privilege contributes to the destruction of communities and the erosion of human life, one of the first action steps we can take to combat our privilege is to drag it out of the shadows and name it. We can publically unpack our knapsack of privilege.

I live a good life, far better than most I would wager. I own a nice house with a low interest rate in a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood where home values continue to rise. I drive a working, reliable vehicle that is paid off and allows me to travel freely to work and play without waiting for the bus or walking to the light rail station one mile away. I have a good, stable job that pays me much more than a living wage. I value my work and am honored to do it. At the end of the day, I believe that my job matters and that I am making the world a better place for all of us. I know that my work will live beyond me and this is very fulfilling. I have a salary and on that salary I can pay my bills, take care of my needs, and still have money to spend frivolously. I can save money for the undetermined future and if perchance I die in ten years that money will go to the persons of my choosing and I will pass on my financial privilege to them. I have money saved in the bank and I have paid off most my debts. The debts that I have accumulated over my lifetime were all taken in order to secure long-term advantages. My car loan, my student loans, and my home loan have all worked to return wealth to me. I have not needed to rely on predatory payday loans, pawnshops, auto title loans, and credit cards to keep me lights on and pay my rent. If I lost my job tomorrow, I would survive for several months. If an emergency arises and I need to buy an airplane ticket to visit an ailing family member in Guatemala, I can do it and not think twice. And I have the vacation days that allow me to miss work at a moment's notice, still get paid, and not lose my job.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The financial privileges that I enjoy and the work privileges that secure my financial well-being are not available to all peoples in the United States. Indeed, most people of color, women, and those who are challenged by poverty are all but guaranteed to navigate financial decisions and work opportunities not knowing if their skin color, gender, or socioeconomic status will work against them. Most people of color, women, and those who are challenged by poverty can tell of a myriad of experiences where their skin color, gender, and/or socio-economic status have worked against them. This status quo equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

I have been in good health my whole life. Because I have a job that meets my financial needs in 40 hours a week, I have extra time and resources to take care of my body through exercise and healthy eating. I can choose to shop at high-end grocery stores and buy organic foods. I can run, hike, and swim and I get to do this as an able-bodied person that does not have to worry about whether my gym has workout equipment adaptable for my physical abilities. I live in a neighborhood with parks, good sidewalks, and trails where I can spend time outside without worrying about sharing the road with aggressive drivers or breathing chemical fumes from factories located next to my residency. As a man, if I go for a jog in the evening, I do not usually have to worry about how serious a catcall is or whether it is safe to go down a street without street lights. I feel secure walking to my car in a parking garage without my finger on a can of pepper spray or my keys placed strategically between my fingers. If I get sick, I have good health insurance and the money to cover my deductible. I have regularly had vision and dental checkups my whole life. I need not disclose a chronic health issue to my human

resources department in order to protect my employment should I miss work unexpectedly because my chronic health issue does not manifest itself visibly.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The health and physical privileges that I enjoy and the gender privileges that secure my body's well-being are not available to all peoples in the United States. Indeed, most women, most transpersons, those with varying degrees of physical ability, and those who daily navigate chronic health issues are all but guaranteed to navigate health and physical decisions and work opportunities not knowing if their gender, physical ability, or health issues will work against them. Most women, most transpersons, those with varying degrees of physical ability, and those who daily navigate chronic health issues can tell of a myriad of experiences where their gender, physical ability, and/or health issues have worked against them. This status quo equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

I live in a country, in a state, and in a city where I feel comfortable taking for granted my freedoms. And while it may be a bit naïve, I need not think about the freedoms that I enjoy if I do not want to. I can expect the right to vote, the right to freedom of speech, the right to personal safety, the right to legal protection, and freedom of expression. I can set those rights on the shelf confidently knowing that they will be there for me to retrieve if and when I need them. I can get by with only a layperson's understanding of the law because as long as I stay beneath the radar I will probably never be asked to account for my actions. Even if my actions are called into question, I am guaranteed to be presumed innocent first and provided a public lawyer. Odds are though that I will not take advantage of that public lawyer because that lawyer is most likely



overworked and I know that the quality of my defense will suffer. I have the financial resources to hire a private lawyer, and if those resources fall short, my extended family can be counted on to help with the bill. Additionally, I know defense lawyers, inheritance lawyers, and family lawyers. I have connections I can trust to make recommendations of lawyers who will not take advantage of me and who will work diligently on my behalf whether or not I am guilty.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The legal privileges that I enjoy and the civil and human privileges that secure my well-being and legal protection are not available to all peoples in the United States. Indeed, many immigrants, children, transpersons, and those who are challenged by poverty are all but guaranteed to navigate legal decisions and civil and human rights challenges not knowing if their immigration status, age, gender, or socioeconomic status will work against them. Many immigrants, children, transpersons, and those who are challenged by poverty can tell of a myriad of experiences where their immigration status, age, gender, and/or socioeconomic status have worked against them. This equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

I have an American passport which allows me to travel to almost any country without getting a pre-approved visa. No one ever calls me an illegal or tells me to go back to my country. I have traveled extensively in the United States and globally. I can talk flippantly of travel by plane because it has become commonplace for me. I have made friends across the country and across the globe. As a result, I can travel in this country and abroad and find myself in this community of friends. I have a global network.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The citizenship privileges that I enjoy and the financial privileges that secure my ability to travel and network across the globe are not available to all peoples in the United States. Indeed, many immigrants, refugees, and those who are challenged by poverty are all but guaranteed to navigate citizenship challenges and financial barriers not knowing if their immigration status, refugee status, or socioeconomic status will work against them. Many immigrants, refugees, and those who are challenged by poverty can tell of a myriad of experiences where their immigration status, refugee status, and/or socioeconomic status have worked against them. This equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

I can pursue romantic relationships freely. I do not need to get married to avoid being torn from my children and loved ones because I am in this country without the correct documentation. I do not need to stay in a relationship because of fear for my children and fear for my life. I can have sex, using protection of course, and not have to explain my sexual history to potential partners because I acquired a sexually transmitted disease (STD) from a past partner. I can be seen in public with my romantic interests and not think twice about whether legislation is being passed to grant the restaurant I am frequenting the right to refuse service to me. I never have to worry that my gender will be confused or questioned.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The marriage privileges that I enjoy, the security and safety that accompanies my cisgender presentation, and the sexual health privileges I carry are not available to all peoples in the United States. Indeed, many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and asexual persons (LGBTQA), many

victims of sexual, physical, and domestic violence, and many persons impacted by STDs are all but guaranteed to navigate marriage and health decisions and safety challenges not knowing if their sexual orientation, gender, medical history, or physical safety needs will work against them. Many LGBTQA persons, many victims of sexual, physical, and domestic violence, and many persons impacted by STDs can tell of a myriad of experiences where their sexual orientation, gender, medical history, and/or physical safety needs have worked against them. This equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

I am well educated. Not only have I finished high school and finished college, I also have two graduate degrees. I have paid off all my college loan debt. I love to study, to read, and to learn and I have access and capacity of time, money, and space to continue to learn. If I want a book, I buy it. I need not think about whether I can find it written in English.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The education privileges that I enjoy and the access to learning that I benefit from are not available to everyone in the United States. Indeed, many of those impacted by poverty, immigrants, and people of color are all but guaranteed to pursue educational opportunities not knowing if their socio-economic status, their immigration status, or their skin color will work against them. Many of those impacted by poverty, immigrants, and people of color can tell of a myriad of experiences where their socio-economic status, their immigration status, and/or their skin color have worked against them. This equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

Because I am a male, I am perceived as strong and because I am white I am perceived as safe and this has opened up a number of doors beyond my capacity to count. I can talk back to superiors that I find inferior and disregard authority that I find inconvenient. I can be upset and rude and have it be dismissed as just a bad day. No one ever associates my mood with my skin color or whether I'm PMSing. Because I am confident and perceived as intelligent, I can dress casually in situations that warrant more professional attire. I do not have to worry about my body being objectified or animalized. I can cover my body in tattoos without fear that others will assume that I am of poor character because the skin that the tattoos cover is white.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The gender-based and racial privileges that I enjoy are not available to everyone in the United States. Indeed, many woman, transpersons, and persons of color are all but guaranteed to face these challenges listed above not knowing if their gender or skin color will work against them. Many women, transpersons, and people of color can tell of a myriad of experiences where their gender and/or their skin color have worked against them. This equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

I can go to bed tonight and leave the back door unlocked. If I hear a noise, I can call the police and am confident they will be at my house within five minutes. When I answer the door, they will not second guess me as the homeowner. I can be rude and lippy to police officers. I can wear my hood up and as soon as my hands go up I know that this will stop the police officer from pulling the trigger. I can be relatively sure that the police will be white and male just like me. I can walk in any neighborhood and not have a police car stop to question my intentions.

Each advantage listed above is rooted in privilege. The racial privileges that I enjoy are not available to everyone in the United States. Indeed, many persons of color are all but guaranteed to face the scenarios listed above not knowing if their skin color will work against them. Many people of color can tell of a myriad of experiences where their gender and/or their skin color have worked against them. This equates to privilege for me and marginalization and oppression for many of them.

The one area where I am slightly inconvenienced is my faith. I am not a Christian, which is the privileged faith tradition in the United States. But I am also not a Muslim or a Sikh or a Hindu. Nor do I engage directly in any indigenous spiritual practices or spiritual practices such as Wiccan, Buddhism, or Taoism. And I am not an atheist. But even here my privilege is only inconvenienced. Because my faith beliefs are not openly visible, I do not have to worry about whether my religious or spiritual practices will be discredited, dismissed, or vilified because they are not Christian. For those whose faith beliefs manifest visibly, living in an American culture saturated with Christian ideology often pushes them into the shadows. Or worse, they are spied on, mistrusted, and attacked. For the most part, if I keep my mouth shut, most people will just assume that I am a Christian. In other words, I can skate by because my faith does not require others to check their privileges, their stereotypes, and their hatred for me because my dress or my facial hair or my head covering is foreign to them. As a male, if I marry a woman who shares my faith, I do not have to worry that people will stop her in the street to question her current level of oppression because she covers her body in modest clothing and no one will jump to the conclusion that I am a male chauvinist

because my wife chooses to cover her head. These are privileges that work for me that others experience as marginalization and oppression.

I could fill these pages with more examples of the privileges that I enjoy every day. The older I get, the more I advance in my career and the more education and money I obtain, the more likely I am to find new privileges. I find these privileges waiting for me to arrive. They were set up by people with power to benefit other people with power and they manifest when the conditions are right for those who reach a certain economic or status level. George Lipsitz, in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, paints this picture clearly in regard to white privilege. He notes:

Whiteness has a cash value: it accounts for advantages that come to individuals through profits made from housing secured in discriminatory markets, through unequal educational opportunities available to children of different races, through insider networks that channel employment opportunities to the relatives and friends of those who have profited most from present and past racial discrimination, and especially through intergenerational transfers of inherited wealth that passes on the spoils of discrimination to succeeding generations.<sup>22</sup>

For example, years of solid, well-paying employment have garnered me steady income with which I have paid down my debt and from which I now have disposable income. With this disposable income I am able to take financial risks, such as investing in an IRA, which will yield benefits for me down the road. Disposable funding allows me to buy clothing, homes, and vehicles that complement my privilege and increase my social standing among those with more power than I currently possess. I can use this social standing to negotiate for better jobs that are not open to the public, receive free legal and financial advice, and influence my elected officials through campaign donations. In

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<sup>22</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006) vii.

essence, the more privilege I have the more I can use that privilege to reinforce my current privilege and foster new privilege.

Ultimately, privilege is about advantage instead of equality and throughout my life I have found myself given that advantage, even when I was not aware of it. And most often, when I became aware of my privilege I simply believed that it was my hard work or my right to possess that advantage. Tim Wise describes this as the essence of being privileged, “Wherever you are, it’s taken for granted that you must deserve to be there.”<sup>23</sup> For those of us with privilege, this misplaced belief in our own right to have an advantage, this benefit of the doubt in ourselves,<sup>24</sup> is a great place to begin asking questions about what it means to be privileged. We can start by asking: Do certain people deserve to be advantaged while others are marginalized and oppressed? If so, who gets to determine who is advantaged and who is marginalized and oppressed? What makes someone deserve to be advantaged while others suffer? If we can be honest with ourselves, if we can approach these questions with humility, we will find a very clear truth. Those of us with privilege do not deserve to be advantaged while other peoples are marginalized and oppressed. The truth for those of us with privilege is clear—we do not matter more than others. And if we believe that we do not matter more than others and if we believe that oppression and marginalization are not acceptable for our benefit, then we have work to do.

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<sup>23</sup> Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2008) 49.

<sup>24</sup> Liz Walz, “The Culture of White Privilege is to Remain Silent,” *Fellowship of Reconciliation*, accessed May 24, 2015, <http://forusa.org/fellowship/2008/winter/culture-white-privilege-remain-silent/11701>.

## Intersecting Privileges

Remember that privilege describes the unearned advantages and power that certain peoples possess while other people are simultaneously denied the same advantages and power. There is a spectrum of privilege and on one end of the spectrum sit those who benefit from privilege and on the other end of the spectrum sit those who are marginalized and oppressed. This spectrum applies to every social identity that we possess. It applies to race, gender and gender expression, sexual orientation, physical ability, age, body size, education, socio-economic status, and citizenship. Indeed, there are hundreds of other social identities and each of them carries this spectrum of privilege. Using education, we can concretely see what this spectrum of privilege looks like. Those who attend good schools, whether high schools or colleges, are educationally privileged over those that attend mediocre or poor schools. All of the students at all of the schools are getting an education, however those students that attend the good schools have access to more extracurricular activities, smaller class sizes, more attention from teachers, more funds to travel, more high-profile guest lecturers, more alumni support services, and more post-education job placement services than the students that attend the mediocre or poor schools. All of these extra perks provide the students that attend the good schools an advantage in the job market or in securing a good college or graduate school. Indeed the name of the school that a person graduates from carries privilege. Harvard and Arizona State University are both good schools. However, when a potential employer scans a resume, their reaction to seeing the name Harvard is going to be altogether different than seeing the name Arizona State University. Education privilege goes further to include what degrees a person possesses. Those with PhDs or law degrees are the elite, they are



the privileged. Those with Master's degrees follow and then those with Bachelor's degrees. Rounding out the bottom of the list are those with high school diplomas and GEDs. Those who have no formal education or those who did not finish their schooling are at the very bottom. They are the most marginalized; they are often the ones most at risk of homelessness or finding good paying jobs. It is amazing what a few simple words on a resume will get you and what it will help you avoid. This is education privilege.

Each of us carries hundreds of social identities. But our social identities are not isolated from one another. Instead they interact constantly. This interaction is known as intersectionality and intersectionality compounds the way privilege plays out. Indeed, because of the fact that social identities intersect, we cannot simply examine only one social identity and we cannot simply address the privilege inherent in only that one social identity. Abby Ferber explains, "Our failure to examine their [social identities] interconnections carries consequences and undermines our efforts to advance social justice. When we only interrogate this cultural storyline of privilege and oppression in terms of its implications for racial inequality, we leave the broader storyline in place."<sup>25</sup> To single out one form of privilege is to ignore what might be hundreds of other privileges at work in a person's life. For example, there is racial privilege and there is gender privilege, addressing them is appropriate, but "we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation."<sup>26</sup> If we are to undo

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<sup>25</sup> Abby L. Ferber, "The Culture of Privilege: Color-blindness, Postfeminism, and Christonormativity," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 74.

<sup>26</sup> McIntosh, "Examining Unearned Privilege," 61.

privilege, we need to work to undo all forms of privilege because it is how the different privileges from the different social identities work in concert that gives them their true social meaning.<sup>27</sup>

For example, I noted in the section above many of my privileges. If I were to consider them each as isolated privileges, I would miss out on the full magnitude that is my total privilege. We can use my race, my gender, and my sexual orientation to examine how they intersect to compound my privilege. I am white which means that I sit in the highest position of racial privilege. But I am also a man which, because of gender privilege, means that I sit higher than white women. I am heterosexual which, because of sexual orientation privilege, means that I sit higher than white men who are gay. I could add on several other social identities that would further move my seat up the ladder of power. As a result of all of these intersecting privileges, I find myself sitting quite high. My perch can lead to a sense of entitlement where I believe that I am owed rights, services, advantages, and resources because of who I am. All of my intersecting privileges contribute to how exceptional I see myself.<sup>28</sup>

Just as different social identities intersect to compound privilege, so also those same social identities intersect to compound marginalization and oppression. And while the ways in which the marginalization and oppression occur varies greatly based on the social identity, they are nevertheless connected. Peggy McIntosh elaborates:

Difficulties and dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects

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<sup>27</sup> Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 73.

<sup>28</sup> Kivel, *Uprooting Racism*, 51.

of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the members of the Combahee River Collective pointed out in their "Black Feminist Statement" of 1977.<sup>29</sup>

Using the same three social identities as above, race, gender, and sexual orientation, we can see how oppression and marginalization compound. To be a person of color is to bare a long legacy of oppression and marginalization. However, to be a woman or transperson of color is to add gender based oppression to the legacy of racial oppression. Furthermore, to be a gay woman or transperson of color is to add sexual orientation oppression to gender based and racial oppression. Oppression and marginalization continue to compound in this manner. Indeed, there are people who are so marginalized and oppressed that they pushed into the deepest shadows.

Intersectionality creates a complexity that should give us pause in how we approach not only our daily interactions with others, but also in how we do the work of ending privilege, oppression, and marginalization. Indeed as Paul Gorski notes, "Class or, more precisely, economic injustice is the real issue, but so is racism as well as sexism and heterosexism and ableism, and the many intersections of these and other oppressions."<sup>30</sup> We need to step carefully with a real sense of purpose because each step represents an opportunity to manifest privilege and perpetuate oppression and marginalization. As we work to untie the knots of privilege we have to do so in a way

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<sup>29</sup> Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Independent School* 49, no. 2 (1990): 31.

<sup>30</sup> Gorski, "Complicating 'White Privilege'," 5.

that takes into consideration all of the forms of oppression that are at work to create those knots and keep them tied. Undoing privilege ultimately takes time and we must be intentional in our work.

### Vignette One: The Price of Blood

The Midwest, especially Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan, is littered with the remains of towns built to support the unstoppable US automobile industry. Factories, foundries, and assembly plants rose following World War II and towns boomed around them. Convinced that it would never be overtaken by the Japanese or European automakers, the unstoppable US auto industry ran wild and sacrificed efficiency and quality for production and economic growth. General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler towns fed the unstoppable US automobile industry with labor, parts, and supplies. When times were good the towns boomed. But the unstoppable US automobile industry eventually stopped. As lighter, more compact, better built, and more fuel efficient Asian and European cars entered the US market, the great automobile towns of the Midwest began to die.

When I arrived in Anderson, Indiana in 1998 to attend college there were two operating factories left and Anderson was dying. The community was coming to terms with its lack of a stable future. And that lack of a future left many of the residents of Anderson in poverty. Anderson had poor whites that were struggling to find a future with the shrinking of the auto industry and poor blacks who were struggling to overcome years of structural racism.

Wherever there are poor folks, there are businesses and people who profit from their poverty. Payday lending and auto-title loans get all of the headlines for preying on

the poor. But pawn shops and rent-a-centers have been making money off of the backs of the poor for decades. Exploiting the poor in the shadows are the medical institutions that relay on having poor folks on whom to feed and extract profit. Pharmaceutical companies, medical research facilities, and universities depend on a steady stream of poor bodies that are willing to trade their bodies and allow themselves to be experimented on for cash.

During my freshman year, I worked part-time as a Lowe's cashier. This gave me enough money to cover my bills and make it through the first year. Over the summer I worked as a grunt for an air conditioning company. I did all the jobs no one else wanted to do. I dug ditches, hauled heavy air condition units up stairs, lathered joint sealer on duct work, and carried tools and ladders for the tradesmen. I was expendable—a piece of muscle. But the job paid well and I saved enough money to play soccer during the fall semester of my sophomore year without working part-time. By December though I was out of money and needed cash for bills and food. I had no job and no options.

When one of my dorm floor mates mentioned that he was headed down to give plasma, my only question was, “How much cash do they give you for that?”

“\$15 for the first draw and \$20 for the second, but you can only give twice a week.”

“Great, let me grab my coat.”

Walking into the plasma bank, I saw a few other students and a bunch of folks that looked down on their luck. I was handed a clip board.

No, I had not been in Niger, Africa in the last 10 years.

No, I had not had unprotected sex with a man.

No, I did not have any new tattoos.

These were only a few of the questions designed to bring attention to anyone that might be carrying a blood-borne disease or virus. After passing the initial screening, I was led into one of five small rooms. A woman in a white medical coat entered, asked me the exact same questions on the clip board, asked me when I had last donated, and then pricked my finger. The blood sample indicated that my platelet count was high enough to donate.

Having cleared that hurdle, I was led back into a larger room with about 50 donation beds. I lay down on a light blue, plastic bed while a gentleman in green scrubs began punching a few buttons on what looked like a small blender with several tubes running in various directions. One tube went to a collection bag and another tube went to the needle. The medical assistant wrapped my arm in a cloth vice that tightened and exposed the veins in my arms. With an indifferent gentleness, the medical assistant pierced the sharp tip of the needle through my skin and into my vein. Blood filled the line.

“There you go. Try to stay awake. Don’t move around. I’ll be back in an hour,” instructed the medical assistant as he turned on the blender and walked away. The machine began sucking my blood out of my body and I settled in with one of the wrinkled magazines I’d borrowed from the lobby.

Giving plasma became a regular thing for me that year as I struggled to find employment. I ended up getting a job at a Best Buy in Indianapolis, but I still needed to

give plasma to pay for the gas to drive the 50 miles round-trip to work. Eventually, I knew the medical assistants by name. Eventually, I knew the frequent donors by name. Eventually, giving plasma became a job.

I would take my homework and study while the machine spun the plasma out of my blood. Sometimes, having pulled an all-nighter writing a paper and then working all morning, I would fall asleep while donating. I got my weekly \$35 and it made all the difference—just as it did for all the folks who faithfully sat in those chairs.

When you are poor, you do what you have to do to make ends meet. Poor folks all over this country are doing things that are unimaginable to most affluent folks because they do not have any other options. Sadly, as social services are cut by politicians and wages are driven down by corporate executives hoping to shore up stock earnings, poor folks will continue to go to amazing, resourceful lengths to survive.

This country is full of folks for whom poverty inflicts a daily toll. Most of the rest of us have very little understanding of their lives and of the lengths they go to survive and to protect their families. Few of us engage in moments of empathy where we place ourselves in their shoes and wrestle with what we might do in order to survive. Few of us will visit their homes, play with their children, and share meals with them. And yet it seems that we all have strong opinions about poverty and those that must navigate its deadly reach.

When we demonize those who are challenged with poverty, critique their efforts, and question their character, we engage in a process of dehumanization that speaks volumes about our own understanding and lack of character. So often we speak as experts completely unaware that our social locations have blinded us to harsh realities

surrounding us. So often we believe we know what we are talking about because no one challenges us. So often we read only the information sources that reflect the information that we already know and are looking to reinforce. This process does not make us experts, it makes us ignorant.

Fortunately, when we are ignorant about the lives of others, the quickest way to check ourselves is to check in with those we find ourselves critiquing. But checking in with others and putting our own opinions and understandings up for critique requires a measure of humility. We have to be willing to listen and to be changed. We have to accept that we are limited beings that cannot possibly understand the lives of others without asking them. If we cannot accept our limitations it communicates an immaturity and a lack of depth of character. It communicates a fear of being challenged and proven wrong. If we are to grow, mature, and learn we must open ourselves to the voices of those who struggle with poverty and those who work on their behalf. We must sit with them and listen until we hear them.

#### Characteristic One: Merit

For many of us who call the United States home, we watch the news, we listen to the radio, and we read up on social media posts. Most of us recognize that the world we live in is plagued with social problems. We see poverty, we see crime, and we see children who lack basic security, food, shelter, and a solid education. We see families torn apart by domestic violence and we see racial tensions in our streets and on our televisions. We struggle to understand why these social problems continue to plague our country.



We then look around at our surroundings, our social status, and our history. We see our houses, we see our cars, we see the security of our careers, and we see the provision of our bank accounts and we wonder what distinguishes us from those who navigate our country's social problems. Many of us attribute our wealth and security to our hard work. Many of us attribute our jobs and our influence to good decision-making ability and morals. And still others of us see all that we have, all of our opulence, as a direct blessing from the divine.

For the most part, most of us rely primarily on our experiences as we look for answers. We ask, "How did I succeed?" And in our experiences we find an answer and we then apply that answer to the circumstances of others. The answer that we find is: Those who succeed in life earn their success. We turn to pundits, elected officials, leaders in our communities, or spiritual leaders for reassurance that our answer to social problems is correct. We hear those we turn to echo our beliefs about hard work, good decisions, and morals and we feel reassured. In doing so, we rarely consider whether those we turn to look like us, share our economic status, and share our ways of thinking.

We look for examples of merit-based success in our government, in our education system, and in our workforce and we cling to the examples we find as irrefutable proof. We trumpet the founding documents of the country as proof that this nation was designed for everyone who works hard to succeed, but in doing so we fail to acknowledge that the founding documents were written for white males by white males.<sup>31</sup> And so, because our knowledge stays in a closed circle, where no challenges or new information are

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<sup>31</sup> Blanche Jackson Glimps and Theron N. Ford, "White Power and Privilege: Barriers to Culturally Responsive Teaching," *International Journal of Educational Policies* 4, no. 1 (2010): 44.

introduced, our beliefs are never given the opportunity to evolve. We remain stuck in a place where we reassure ourselves strictly from our own experience and from the evidence we have gained that does not take into account larger worldviews and does not force us to consider the inherent biases we carry with us. Ultimately, we isolate ourselves, we do not talk to others that challenge us, and we never grow. We never mature beyond an infant's understanding of the reality of how the world functions.

Isolation is not the only way that our beliefs are stunted and kept from developing. We are all subject to 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, and 360 degrees of messaging from corporations, media sources, and institutions of control. We are taught by those we blindly place our faith in and they teach us what they learn from the endless bombardment of social messaging. Or they reach into their past and pull out lessons that they learned from their fathers and their mothers and their school principals. They draw on archaic prejudices, inaccurate science, and stories that were designed to demonize certain peoples and have been handed down from one generation to the next. And so we learn what we are told to learn. Unfortunately, most of us eat up what is fed to us without questioning.

We are taught that those who work hard succeed.<sup>32</sup> We are conditioned to view effort and sacrifice as the principle determinants for securing stability and a promising future. We are taught people get what they deserve. We are taught that anyone can succeed and that, while there may be a few bumps in the road, the application of a little elbow grease and “sucking it up” will get us through.

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<sup>32</sup> Abby L. Ferber, Andrea O'Reilly, and Dena R. Samuels, “The Matrix of Oppression and Privilege: Theory and Practice for the New Millennium,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 4 (2007): 522.

Many of us have experienced the rewards of our hard work and we have succeeded in the face of dire circumstances. Our personal success reinforces the beliefs that we hold. This reinforcement tells us that people should work harder and that they should stop being lazy; it tells us social problems such as racism, sexism, and classism are excuses for those who use them to cut corners and blame others for their inadequacies; it tells us that there is a shortage of good, god-fearing people in this world and that if those with different sexual orientations or religious beliefs would simply “get right with the Lord” their lives would get easier and they would be back on the right path.

The reinforcement of our beliefs also tells us that we are right and that those who disagree with us or who will not accept to our way of doing things or who want to pursue happiness in a way we disagree with are a threat to our lives and our stability. And so when we are challenged with facts and stories that undermine our belief in merit we feel assaulted and we feel our basic beliefs in our own worth questioned and so we strike out. As Abby Ferber puts it, “those with white privilege, or any form of privilege, often become angry when confronted by the fact of their privilege, having been taught to see their own accomplishments as based on their own efforts and hard work alone.”<sup>33</sup> In the long run, the endless circular reasoning that we employ to reinforce our own beliefs fills us with fear, fills us with mistrust, and enrages us.

There was a time in my life where I thought I knew it all. I had rich experiences to draw from and confidence in my understanding of world. I saw myself as intuitive and able to clearly see the big picture. I thought that I had my finger on the pulse of what it would take to be successful. I felt assured in my morality and in my education. I sought

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<sup>33</sup> Ferber, “The Culture of Privilege,” 65.

out those whose beliefs differed from mine and tried to convince them that I was right and if they would not budge, I dismissed them as ignorant. In my efforts to evangelize the world, I grew frustrated and I grew angry. Eventually, I found myself alone because I had burned all of the bridges that connected me to my friends, my community, and to any way of seeing the world beyond what I wanted to see. And in this moment of conversion, I began to see that I was wrong. I began to understand that what I knew was really quite limited. And I began to see that the world that I knew and believed was not actually the truth of things. In this moment, I began to see that other people, people that I had isolated myself from, were having experiences that were fundamentally different than mine but no less authentic. And if their experiences were authentic and if their way of seeing the world was true, then perhaps they could teach me. Perhaps, if I set my self-generated assurance in myself aside, I could learn from them and I could come to understand the world for what it truly is.

What I found is that it is privilege, not merit, which assures that some people get ahead and stay ahead. It is privilege that creates the foundation for hard work to bear fruit. And because privilege is historic, systemic, and deeply rooted in our institutions, it is privilege that underlies success in the United States.

Privilege creates a world of inequality because it is by definition the advantaging of certain groups and individuals over other groups and individuals. This definition may seem challenging if we believe that the world is fundamentally an unequal place, has always been an unequal place, and will continue to be an unequal place forever. And if the world is naturally an unequal place then privilege is unavoidable. A broad, overarching reading of history seems to confirm that there have always been those who

are rich and those who are poor, there have always been those with access to education and those without access to education, and there have always been those who ruled and those who were ruled. However, what this broad, overarching reading of history fails to see (and what only a detailed reading will reveal) is that it is privilege that creates inequality because privilege is built on the oppression and marginalization of others to shore up resources for the few. In other words, history is littered with inequality because throughout history there have been those who have hoarded resources, murdered and stolen from others, and enslaved other humans in order to control power.

It is this historic destruction of human life that gives those of us the advantage that we would so often rather see as merit. Sadly, it is this destruction of human life that handicaps, pushes down, and cages those who struggle to catch a break in this life. Privilege is like running a race with a jet pack while all the other runners are tied to the starting blocks. The sooner we let go of merit as the key to success, the sooner we will see that our belief in merit has been blinding us to our privilege all along. In truth, for those of us who are white, male, heterosexual, rich, or educated, we are meant to succeed, because the game is rigged for us to succeed. And for those who represent social identities that have been cast out and marginalized, they most often fall behind because they are meant to fail and meant to stay poor because the game is rigged against them.

#### Vignette Two: The Cage Called Home

The mall was bustling. Awkward teenagers, their clothing either too big or too small, moved in and out of one store and into the other. Dresses to the ankles and short mini-skirts adorned the full spectrum of girls that roamed in pairs and small packs through the food courts. The boys, some wearing yarmulkes and some wearing Justin

Bieber T-shirts, joked and pushed one another. Mothers pushed strollers and fathers carried toddlers. Old men sat on the benches outside of cooking stores and waited for their wives to emerge. Boutiques and baby stores were sprinkled throughout men's and women's fashion stores. Ice cream and peanut kiosks competed for shoppers alongside kiosks featuring sunglasses, cell phones, and make-up.

I leaned against the second-floor railing and watched as the mall scene unfolded all around me. Kurian, Karuna, Nathan, and I had ventured out to this mall in West Jerusalem to buy a pair of shoes for Nathan and to kill some time while Ivan, Nathan's older brother, played with his friends. At four years old, Nathan was growing fast enough that he was working through a new shoe size every 3-4 months. Karuna was having a hard time finding shoes in East Jerusalem and was extra frustrated by the inflated price of shoes in this mall.

"I can't justify paying this much for shoes that he is just going to grow out of in three months!" exclaimed Karuna as she emerged from the kids' clothing store. We strolled down the middle of the mall and headed for another shoe store.

"Do you think if I buy him a pair that is too big now that he'll notice before he grows into them?" She asked, the frustration starting to pick up a bit of exhausted humor.

"Well you don't have to get him shoes at all," I piped in. "I mean he's a kid. He'll love the idea of running around barefoot. He'll never even notice he doesn't have shoes."

Karuna looked at me and rolled her eyes. Karuna has never had anything but eye-rolls for my sarcasm.

Four days earlier, I sat in Kurian's office at World Vision's Jerusalem headquarters. I had returned to Palestine four years after my first trip to spend time with my old friends Kurian and Karuna and to volunteer with WorldVision.

"You're going to go up to Jenin for a couple of days," said Kurian as he hung up the phone. "I want you to talk with their program managers and I want you to give me an assessment of what you see as their challenges and what they are doing right."

"Sound's great!" I had been chomping at the bit to get out of Jerusalem and back into the West Bank. "What's the plan?"

"Rala will drive you up in the morning and drop you at the field office. You'll stay the night with them and then Rala will pick you up and bring you back. Rala lives in Ramallah and needs to visit some of those field offices anyways, so it will be good for both of you."

The next morning, I rode the green and white Palestinians-only bus down the Shoufat Road to the Qualindi Checkpoint where I met Rala on the Israeli side. I climbed into the passenger seat of her WorldVision marked SUV and off we went, stopping only briefly as the Israeli security guard checked her papers before waving us into the West Bank.

Going from Israel into the West Bank is like stepping through a gateway into another world. Everything changes—from the color of the houses to the road width to the smells to the languages of the street signs. There are more pedestrians and the noise level increases. There are pockets in Israel where the streets are quiet and where pedestrians scurry from one doorway to the next. But the atmosphere in the West Bank is entirely different.

There are also many more indications of the on-going Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian home land. There are piles of rubble—rocks from demolished homes and bulldozed areas. The 25 ft. high separation walls are covered with graffiti—an on-going act of civil resistance against a concrete noose. The atmosphere takes on an edged tension that rises and falls in proximity to Israel Defense Force soldiers, checkpoint guards, and Zionist settlers.

Rala drove us away from the wall, through Ramallah and into the Palestinian country-side. We talked of the challenges she faces as a Palestinian woman who must navigate living and working between Ramallah and Jerusalem. We talked of the challenges facing the Palestinian government and the role of women in the Palestinian future. Rala pointed out Zionist settlements on hilltops as we made our way into Jenin.

“I’ll leave you here with Amin and Karam. They’ll take care of you and show you around. I’ll pick you up tomorrow in the late morning and we’ll head up to Nablus,” Rala explained as she brought the SUV to a stop in front of the WorldVision field office.

“Will we get kanafeh?” I asked, always thinking with my stomach.

“But of course! It’s Nablus! They have the best kanafeh in all of Palestine!”

Rala drove off and left me in the company of Amin and Karam. The two field managers spent the next 24 hours with me, discussing their programs, brainstorming their internal and external challenges, and framing their work to improve the lives of their people all while surviving under a military occupation.

On the first day, Amin drove me to a public school to examine an expansion project. The workers, pouring and setting the concrete for the second story by hand, stopped and took tea with us and the school’s principal. The workers and the principal



explained to me the importance of the school for giving the children hope in a future and for preparing them for the challenges that lie ahead for Jenin and all of Palestine. The principal quietly lamented the lack of funding and the prospects for these rural, farming students in the face of the bleak future behind the separation wall. As I rode back with Amin, he explained the frustration he has with the prospects of the community of Jenin. Olives are their largest production. They face increasing difficulties getting the olive oil that they produce out of the Israeli blockade. This lowers the amount of fresh resources and money that come into Jenin, thus making it harder for families to survive.

Amin and Karam took me to dinner as their celebrated guest. Over plates of dolmades, roasted chicken, fresh cut vegetables, and glasses of carrot juice we discussed their lives in Jenin. They told me of their families. Amin and his wife had just had their first child—a baby boy. Karam’s children were older and were growing into a handful for him and his wife. Amin and Karam gently pushed me to share about the perception that Americans hold about Palestinians. I was sad and explained with difficulty the indifference towards the Palestinians and blind allegiance with Israel that most Americans hold. As we passed and shared the hookah, I hung my head in shame. I was ashamed of my country for our complacency in the suffering of the Palestinian people. I was ashamed that I could not do anything other than listen to the stories of these wonderful gentlemen. I was ashamed that I only had discouraging news for them about the future. And I was ashamed to know that I would leave this place tomorrow and my life would open up with possibilities on the other side of the wall and they would stay here and struggle to promote economic growth for their people while being economic strangled by the Israeli military occupation.

In the morning, before Rala arrived to collect me, Karam and Amin took me to visit a seed and agriculture project that World Vision was operating around Jenin. We arrived to find a local staff member counseling with an old farmer. Karam explained to me that the team had been challenged with the Zionist settlers in the area. Zionist settlers regularly engage in harassment and sabotage of Palestinian projects, often under the protection of IDF soldiers. Palestinians that defend themselves and their homes are labeled terrorists and arrested. Here in Jenin, Zionist settlers were releasing pigs into the old farmer's field at night. The pigs were trampling and eating his crops and he was panicked about having enough of a harvest to feed his family. The use of pigs to destroy his crops was a double insult to the farmer because pigs are considered unclean animals to Muslims and so the farmer had to navigate Islamic law in killing and disposing of the animals. The staff were discussing how to best prevent that assault without a direct confrontation with the settlers—a move that would have certainly resulted in Zionist violence against the farmer.

How do the vulnerable protect themselves against those that would harm them if all of the laws protect the aggressor?

Rala met us at the seed distribution center where I bid goodbye to Karam and Amin. Inshallah that they and their families are safe.

Rala took me to Nablus, where we did indeed enjoy the best kanafeh I had ever had. She then drove me back to Ramallah and dropped me off at the Qualindi checkpoint. Rala would stay in Ramallah that evening and so I joined the line of Palestinians filing into the checkpoint on their way out of the West Bank and into Israel.

Israeli checkpoints are designed to make you feel small, helpless, and to make you feel like an animal. The lines lead through grated cement and metal paneling. Above your head, barbed wire and chain link fence closes you in. The aisles, which reminded me of the corral fences that cowboys use to separate out cattle from the herd for branding, are narrow and often require that you turn slightly sideways to pass through them. The aisles are spaced with breakpoints where Israeli security forces can isolate a section of the line or hold the forward movement of any particular group if needed.

I had arrived at the checkpoint at 3:30pm. As the crowd flies, I needed to walk approximately 100 yards from where Rala dropped me off to the bus stop on the Israeli side of the checkpoint. It would take an hour and a half to walk those 100 yards.

The Palestinians and I slowly and steadily made our way through the narrow metal aisles and gates. The narrow aisles ended and in front of us were five stalls. Each stall was about 20 feet deep. Concrete walls separated the stalls so that you could only see into all five of them if you were standing at the end of the aisles. Once you were in a stall, you could not tell what was happening in the stall next to you. At the end of each stall was a single, thick revolving metal turnstile. Its horizontal metal pools only pushed in one direction and locked shut if you tried to go the other way.

There were no signs or ushers directing the crowd towards open stalls. Indeed it was impossible to tell if any stalls were open. Ten Palestinians and I entered and stood in one stall for ten minutes before we gave up on any assistance and moved to another stall. In the second stall, Palestinians were pushing in without forming a line. The stalls were about ten feet wide and 25 feet deep and people filled the whole space. As people got closer to the metal turnstile, a courteous process of jockeying for space ensued. No one

was rude or pushed for better position, but no one was graciously letting everyone else go ahead of them either. There were about 25 people ahead of me in the stall.

Getting through the metal turnstile was the goal. We knew it and the Israeli security forces knew it—which meant we were at the mercy of their whim. A half an hour passed, two people got through. Five minutes passed, five people got through. Ten minutes passed, no one got through.

As I got closer to the metal turnstile, I saw on to the other side. A metal detector, an x-ray machine, and a check-in station awaited us. There was no one working the metal detector or the x-ray machine. But the x-ray machine belt was clearly running. The check-in station was sealed off from the metal detector and x-ray machine by concrete and thick bulletproof glass. A small window with a microphone and retractable drawer, remarkably similar to a drive up banking teller, allowed the security forces to communicate. It was impossible to see into the check-in station until you were standing at the window. This was an added frustration because it was impossible to know if the security forces had gone on break or were listening to music while your frustration grew as you waited. If 100 people piled into a stall only to find it closed after 20 minutes that was tough luck—better get in line in another stall.

The metal turnstile was an amazingly effective device for dehumanizing those trying to get through. Only one person got through at a time and there was always one person trapped in the metal turnstile pinned between the locked metal bars. The security person would release the break on the gate long enough for one person to exit it and

another person to wedge their self into it and then the break would slam shut. And so for however long it took to get through the check-in station, someone remained trapped in the metal turnstile.

There was a family in front of me. The mother went into the metal turnstile with the baby. Caged. Break release. Exit. The older daughter went into the metal turnstile. Caged. Break release. Exit. The father went into the metal turnstile. Caged. Security would not let the father through to join the mother and children; only one adult at a time. The mother and the daughter pushed their belongings through the x-ray machine and the daughter collected them while the mother with the baby in her arms presented their papers to the security officers through the window. The father waited in the cage. The mother and children were cleared and they walked through the metal detector and onto the other side. The break released and the father exited.

I stepped into the metal turnstile. Caged. I am 6'1" and weigh 220 pounds. The cage was extremely tight on me and my head almost touched the ceiling. I looked back as I waited and saw several individuals taller than I and heavier set than I. The break released but as I exit it engaged before I am fully out of the cage. Caught off guard, I slammed into the metal bars. Frustrated but aware that any visible sign of annoyance would only cause delays and problems for those who came after me, I rubbed my bruised forehead and gently placed my bag in the x-ray machine and collected it on the far side. I stepped up to the window.

Inside the check-in station sat two dark haired, young ladies in IDF military uniforms. They did not look a day older than 18 to me. One leaned back in her chair with her military boots on the table. She absently scanned through her Facebook page

without looking up as the other girl texted on her phone. The girl on Facebook pointed to a picture on her timeline and the other girl smiled as she looked up from her phone.

Sensing my presence at the window but not looking up, she pushed a button that opened the retractable drawer and spoke at me in Hebrew. I guessed she wanted my passport, so I placed my blue United States of America passport in the drawer. The young lady sat her phone down, retracted the drawer, and pulled out my passport. I recognized her body language shift as her eyes realized that I was not a Palestinian through my passport. She opened the passport and scanned it. Still not making eye contact, she spoke at me again in Hebrew.

“I don’t speak Hebrew, only English.”

For the first time she looked at me. She was a child and in her eyes I saw her immaturity. In her eyes, I saw her exceptionalism. I saw fear in her eyes. She was paler than a girl her age should have been. In those quick moments I heard the lies that indoctrinated her heart.

“The Arabs all hate you!”

“The Palestinians want to drive us into the sea!”

“This is our land, stolen from us, and we have God’s blessing to take it back!”

In those quick moments, I saw the power she had assumed by pushing a button for hours on end to let people in and out of a cage. And I saw the indifference and subtle anger that accompanies being forced to do something that one would rather not do without an understanding of why it is important and when it will end.

I was filled with compassion for this security guard and I was enraged at the system which put a child in charge of dehumanizing hundreds of men, women, and children every day in this checkpoint.

Again she spoke to me in Hebrew as she pushed my passport through the drawer. She picked up her phone and she was lost once again to indifference. I walked through the metal detector and turned to look back at the 200 people waiting on the two girls in IDF uniforms. I saw the frustration on their faces. I saw the despair in their eyes. And I was saddened for them. I was saddened for the loss of their humanity in this prison checkpoint. And I was saddened at the dehumanizing practices of the two girls who wield so much power over the lives of others.

As Karuna and I strolled to the food court to meet up with Kurian and Nathan, I found myself surrounded by the blindness and complacency that allowed for the dehumanizing of the Palestinians to rage on only ten miles away. None of these families, casually shopping for knife sets, will be forced into cages on their way home today. None of these youth, flirting and wrestling with each other, will wonder if they will be held back and kept from their families tonight.

I grew silent as I grew overwhelmed. The tragic irony of the Jewish people caging and dehumanizing other human beings settled upon me.

### Characteristic Two: Oppression

It is hard to know where to begin when discussing the connection between privilege and oppression. The simple truth is that so much violence and destruction has been carried out against the peoples of this earth in order to preserve power and control for a small number of people. I cannot emphasize enough that privilege does not exist

without the oppression and marginalization of others. And privilege cannot be understood, it cannot be studied, unless we consider the oppression and marginalization that has occurred on behalf of the privileged.<sup>34</sup> This oppression and marginalization is historic and has been studied and documented for centuries by those struggling for survival under the boot of the oppressor and by those who have stood beside them against their exploitation. For those of us with privilege, coming to terms with the reality of oppression and marginalization is an important step in working to undo the destructive nature of our privilege.

Privilege is ultimately about having power and using that power to stay in control of all of the resources, access, and opportunity. To have privilege is to have power. Whether that privilege is understood and seen by me or oblivious to me does not neutralize the power that accompanies my privilege. That can be a really hard truth to grasp because it means that those of us that occupy positions of privilege and manifest our privilege are asserting power whether we know it and want to or not. It means that we are sitting at the top of the hierarchal ladder and we are reaping all the attention and benefits simply because we are on top.<sup>35</sup> To be a male is to occupy a position of privilege and whether I want the power that accompanies my maleness or not is irrelevant to its existence. It is impossible for me to not carry my maleness with me. I will never walk into a room and not have my gender considered. It is not that my gender follows me everywhere. In actuality it is my gender that goes ahead of me to assure that when I

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<sup>34</sup> Peggy McIntosh, "Reflections and Future Directions for Privilege Studies," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 195.

<sup>35</sup> Felicia Pratto and Andrew L. Stewart, "Group Dominance and the Half-Blindness of Privilege," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 30.



arrive I have power. For those of us who are male, we must come to terms with and accept that our gender is revered by society, not because it is endowed with any special characteristics that make it stronger or smarter or kinder, but because centuries of oppression have occurred in order to shore up this reverence and the power that it commands.

For every position of privilege there also exists a history in which people have been oppressed and have been forced into the shadows. Whole communities have been destroyed and countless peoples have been humiliated. This is the legacy of privilege. It is the fuel that feeds the fire of privilege. But let me stop here and make something crystal clear. Oppression is not just historic. Oppression is still happening. It is happening all around us all the time and it continues to happen so that those of who sit in positions of power can continue to sit in those places and reap all the benefits that come our way. Privilege means that for me to benefit someone else is being stripped of their humanity right now.

Historic oppression and on-going oppression underline all of my privileges. For example, I am a white American. The privileges that I possess are rooted in the historic oppression and domination of Black and indigenous peoples.<sup>36</sup> In the United States, Black peoples were enslaved for centuries and were legally segregated for yet another century. In the United States, indigenous peoples were pushed off their lands, murdered by the millions, and confined to reservations where they were left to starve in poverty. All of this evil happened so that my white ancestors could control land, resources, labor,

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<sup>36</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1714.

and the financial riches that accompany that control. Through racism, my ancestors set up a political system, a power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the unequal distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits, rights, and duties.<sup>37</sup> Yet my privilege is not just a thing of the past. Instead, my privilege continues to be reinforced by the on-going oppression of Black people in America's ghettos, in our courtrooms and prisons, in our shameful public school system, and in our job markets. My privilege also continues to be reinforced by the on-going oppression of indigenous peoples on reservations, in classrooms, in our courts and jails, through the theft of the resources on their land, through on-going cultural genocide, and through the on-going occupation of their lands and homes. As a white American, if there is any desire for me to realistically end my privilege and the oppression that it demands, I must accept the reality of the historic oppression against Black and indigenous peoples and I must accept that it is still happening on my behalf.

My trip into the West Bank with Rala, Karam, and Amin and my hour and a half crawl through the security checkpoint at the Qualindi checkpoint brought home to me the reality of oppression and privilege. There was so much opulence on the Israeli side of the separation wall. People went about their business, lived their lives, and stressed about the inconsequential without thinking about the millions of people living in the West Bank and Gaza who were starving, fighting to keep their land from being stolen, watching their children grow up without a certain future, and fearing for their family's safety. All of the atrocities committed against Palestine, all of the dehumanizing practices, exist to shore up security, power, and control of the land and resources for the Israeli people. For

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<sup>37</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) 3.

the Israeli people to continue to live as they do, in an apartheid state, the Palestinian peoples must continue to be oppressed and must continue to be subject to violence. There is no separating the privilege that the Israeli people possess from the atrocities that have historically been committed against the Palestinians and continue to be committed against the Palestinians. As I sat in the mall in East Jerusalem, I began mentally scrolling through all of the privileges that I possess. I began to reflect on what oppression had occurred in order to grant me that privilege. And I began to wonder what oppression was still happening that I was too blind to see. Learning to connect my privilege to the oppression of others has been a simple yet earth-shattering lesson that I have held onto as I have struggled to work to undo my privilege. And it remains one of the greatest challenges that all of us who are privileged must eventually face. It is not enough to simply want our privilege to end. It is not enough to actively acknowledge our privilege. If we are not simultaneously working to end oppression, all of our work to undo privilege is useless. We cannot separate our privilege from oppression and we cannot do the work of ending privilege unless we work to end oppression.

#### Vignette Three: Run

I was born the first son of Gerald Michael Black and Patricia Louise Black on May 22, 1979 in a small hospital in Englewood, Colorado and on December 31, 1980, my brother Bart joined our family. Where I share my brown hair and eye color with my mother, Bart was born with blonde hair and blue eyes—making him a closer resemblance to my father who has strawberry blonde hair and green eyes. As Bart and I have aged, we have both grown into the high Hungarian cheek bones of my father and the prominent Italian nose of my mother.

My father started college but quickly decided carpentry trade school was more to his liking. He built homes—he was a framer, a drywaller, a roofer, a painter, and a finisher. His building skills are in his hands. My mother earned her college degree from the University of Denver in History. She worked as a banker until my brother and I were born.

My parents became Christians shortly after I was born and spent their early Christian days as members of a Nazarene church. In the early 1980's my family spent a brief time in Tulsa, OK where my parents attended Rhema Bible College while I played with roly-polies in the yellow courtyard of the apartment complex. Rhema Bible College is a small school that prepares Christians to become ministers, pastors, and church workers.<sup>38</sup> My parents' time at Rhema Bible College earned them a church placement in Limon, Colorado and so back to Colorado our family moved.

Limon is a small farming community about two hours east of Denver off of US Interstate 70. Ranches and farms dominate the landscape and the town serves as a hub that supports the ranchers and farmers who cultivate the eastern Colorado plains. At 1,805 people, Limon was a small town where the majority of the residents are white<sup>39</sup>.

While my parents pastored, my brother and I played. We played on farms and grew up around livestock. We watched calves get branded and rode in combines during wheat harvests. We rode our bikes and watched the Disney movies *Old Yeller*, *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and *The Incredible Journey*. We loved dogs. Spot was our family dog

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<sup>38</sup> "About Us," *Rhema Bible Training College*, accessed May 31, 2015, <http://www.rbtc.org/about-us>.

<sup>39</sup> "Races in Limon, Colorado (CO) Detailed Stats," *City-Data.com*, accessed May 31, 2015, <http://www.city-data.com/races/races-Limon-Colorado.html>.

(an original name) and that dog raise all sorts of hell. My parents would chain Spot to an old tire, rim and all. That chain and tire must have weighed 50 lbs. but that dog still chased the garbage man with tire in tow every chance he got.

I remember church for the first time in Limon. Sunday school lessons of epic Bible adventures played out across a green felt board. Adam and Eve, Moses, Samson, David and Goliath, Daniel, and Jesus, the major characters of the Bible all made appearances as colorful cut-outs. All of the characters from Adam to Jesus were friendly and reassuring and they all looked like me and the adults that I knew. They were all white.

Every Sunday, my brother and I pulled up our khaki pants with the elastic waist band, tucked in our pale blue and light brown button downs and clipped on our little ties. We stood tall in the Sunday School line and sang songs about bullfrogs and butterflies. We learned that Jesus loved us because the Bible told us so and because we were special in His sight. My favorite song was *This Little Light of Mine*. I was always excited to let my light shine! *Jesus Loves the Little Children* assured me that Jesus loved me because I was a little child.

*Jesus loves the little children,  
All the children of the world.  
Red and Yellow, Black and White,  
They are precious in His sight.  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

The song also taught me my first lesson on race. Apparently, somewhere in the world, there existed red children, yellow children, and black children. And those children were also precious to Jesus just like me.

I went to kindergarten in Limon, CO. It is telling as an adult to reflect on what I valued as a five year old. I remember finger painting—red, yellow, blue and green colors on the paper and all over my hands. The school’s mascot was a badger and sometimes at sport events someone brought a live badger and walked the badger on a leash.

I remember running. There was a boy who was taller than me with brown hair. He was skinny and always wore a green t-shirt. He was the fastest boy in the class. He knew it and everyone else revered him. He won all the races on the playground and was always the first student back to the school door when the recess whistle blew. Being the fastest kid in the class was about as high a social status as anyone could hope for and he nailed it every time!

Kindergarten also gave me my first best friend. She was a girl. She had a blue pullover sweater and a brown bowl haircut. She was nice and always sat opposite me on the seesaw. Once a group of boys from an older grade mocked me because I was always spending time on the playground with a girl.

“How odd,” I thought. “What difference does it make that she’s a girl? She’s my friend.”

The culmination of my kindergarten year was the school track meet. And as a runner, this was my day. I had waited months for the three-legged race and the potato sack race. But these were the undercard events that just kept parents and teachers entertained in anticipation of the main event—the 100 yard dash. Our kindergarten class had been abuzz with predictions for the race for weeks. The boy with the green shirt was the hands down favorite. After all he had never been beaten.

I was hoping I could beat him. Just this one time, I knew I could be faster than him.

The eight runners took our places on the starting line. The boy with the green shirt was in lane 1 and I was right next to him in lane 2. I was nervous, sweating bullets. My parents were in the stands. First graders from the water balloon toss drifted over to see who was going to be the fastest kindergartener that they were going to have to look out for.

We took our positions. The crowd grew silent ready to burst in excitement.

Ready... Set...Go!

The world record for the 100 meter dash is 9.58 seconds and was set by Jamaican Usain Bolt in 2009 in Berlin<sup>40</sup>. Now, no kindergartener is running the 100 yard dash in under 10 seconds. I can only imagine that watching a gang of five year olds labor 100 yards must seem like an eternity. But for me, it sure felt like 10 seconds!

“Run Luke! Run!” I imagined the crowd screaming. “You can do it!”

I ran as hard as I had ever run. My legs were pumping, my lungs were gasping for air and my heart was racing. I saw the boy in the green shirt. He was ahead. Three paces. Two paces. I was breathing hard, almost out of breath but I was gaining!

One pace and now we were even! It was neck and neck and now I was ahead!

I was beating the boy in the green shirt! The finish line was in sight!

On my right a blur appeared. I was caught off guard and my intense focus on the approaching finish line weakened for a split second. What is this?

“How strange,” I pondered. “This surely cannot be.”

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Larsson, “All-time Men’s Best 100m,” *Track and Field All-time Performances Homepage*, last modified June 2, 2015, [http://www.alltime-athletics.com/m\\_100ok.htm](http://www.alltime-athletics.com/m_100ok.htm).

And then it was! My friend, the girl with the blue pullover sweater and the bowl haircut, my seesaw opposite, had passed me! And she crossed the finish line first!

“Second! No!” I threw my fists to the sky. “Why had no one told me girls could be so fast?!”

What an amazing lesson this was for me as a child. In my focus and determination to be faster than the boy in the green shirt, I had completely neglected the possibility that a girl could be faster than me. At five years old, I had begun to internalize the belief that boys were superior and that that world revolved around our male success. And whether it was a result of the shaming that I received from the boys in the higher grade about my being friends with a girl or whether it was the constant barrage of playground catch phrase about girls having cooties, there I was as a five year old blinded by my internalized male superiority. It was simply out of my vision of possibilities that a girl could be the fastest runner in our class. But yet there she stood with the blue first place ribbon and here I stood gnashing my teeth with the red second place ribbon.

As I walked with my head held low in defeat, my father came alongside me and threw his arm across my sunken shoulders.

“Well done, Luke! You ran so fast! Congratulations on winning second place!”

He reached down and put out his hand for a high-five. I slapped in reluctantly and then perked up and jogged over to my mother with my loss already beginning to fade.

No one said, “You lost to a girl.”

No one said, “Second place doesn’t count.”



There in the moment of child heartbreak and recovery were my parents subtly and probably sub-consciously avoiding conforming to gender narratives. There in that moment, when the roots of privilege had already begun to take hold, seeds were planted that would grow to confront the many privileges I find myself battling to tear down now.

### Characteristic Three: Normalizing

What is normal? What does normal look like? How does normal feel? How does normal sound? Who is normal? If you have never asked yourself any of these questions then you are most likely privileged. If you have never thought to check your clothing, your body type, your speech, or your physical affection, you are most likely privileged. Normalizing is the process wherein the norms of the privileged group are assigned the default position. In normalizing we see the customs of the privileged group, their clothing, their food choices, their love lives, their marital practices, their religions, their body types, their language, their skin color, and a host of other attributes given credence as acceptable or normal. All other attributes and forms of expression are marginalized or violently rejected.

Once a characteristic is normalized it will be cloaked in invisibility, it will be unnamed, it will be unsaid,<sup>41</sup> it will be viewed as natural, right, and just.<sup>42</sup> It will simply be accepted as the way it is. And for those that share that characteristic, they will unknowingly benefit from the privilege that that characteristic now bestows because it is seen as normal. But normalizing goes beyond just our characteristics and also includes

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<sup>41</sup> Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Jennifer L. Simpson, "The Color-Blind Double Bind: Whiteness and the (Im)possibility of Dialogue," *Communication Theory* 18, (2008) 147.

our experiences. The rules of normalizing apply here as well. Once an experience is normalized, it becomes invisible, and it becomes the default experience. The way that the privileged group experiences an event becomes the acceptable way to experience the event. As such, those with privilege go on seeing their experience portrayed as and understood as normal.<sup>43</sup> The characteristics and the experiences that do not mirror the characteristics and the experiences of the privileged groups will be seen as abnormal and those that manifest those abnormal characteristics and share those abnormal experiences will be approached with suspicion, dismissed, threatened, and often attacked.

Normalizing is all around us. But for those of us with privilege, we are mostly unaware of it because we do not need to know what is normal. Those of us with privilege are already considered normal. When I was a small boy running that race in Limon, I never thought that a girl could beat me. At five years old, I had already accepted as truth the notion that boys were faster than girls. I had normalized boys, normalized myself, as the fastest gender. I had seen cartoons, watched how men and women were treated differently in church, and seen how boys in my class were treated as masculine and sports-oriented and how girls were treated as feminine and delicate. So as a young boy I saw myself as strong and I saw my friend as weak. And so it was altogether a shock to me that she beat me in the race.

We can look almost everywhere to find examples of normalizing. With each one we find there will be two sides: there will be those of us that immediately relate to the example because it reflects our characteristics or experiences, and there will be those that are immediately marginalized because it does not reflect their characteristics or

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 151.

experiences. This is what makes normalizing a manifestation of privilege. Those that have their characteristics validated get to be normal and get to have their experiences validates all the time. Those that have their characteristics labeled as abnormal, or worse rejected, have their experiences invalidated all the time.

Here are some tests for you to see if your characteristics and experiences are normal. First, go to the magazine section of the grocery store, pick up three beauty/fashion magazines, and count in each magazine how many pages you turn before you see a person of color. Average the numbers. I will bet that you flipped anywhere between 10 and 30 pages. Whiteness is seen as normal and white beauty standards reigns supreme in fashion, in film, in clothing design, and in make-up. Whiteness is seen as normal. Those who are not white are seen as abnormal and are rarely represented. Cleonie White puts this norming in perspective, “Wherever their paths carry them, white Americans enter with a name. They are not the recipients of persistent, unbidden reminders that they are not white, in contrast to members of other cultures who remain nameless because they are Asian, or black, or Hispanic, or Native American, or special.”<sup>44</sup>

Second, write down the names of the last five romantic comedies that you saw. Now circle each one where the two characters that the love story revolves around are either gay or lesbian. If you circled one it is a miracle. If you circled more than one, you are probably either gay or lesbian and you probably went out of your way to finds those movies. Heterosexual relationships are seen as normal in institutions, from movies to

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<sup>44</sup> Cleonie White, “Culture, Influence, and the ‘I-ness’ of me: Commentary on papers by Susan Bodnar, Gary B. Walls, and Steven Botticelli,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 14, no. 5 (2004): 673.

books to billboards to wedding expos, broadcasting day and night what is normal love and what is abnormal love. Even my favorite romantic comedy, *Love Actually*, which has at least seven love stories playing out, has no love stories with a same sex couple. If you are heterosexual then your sexuality is seen as normal. If you are not homosexual, then your sexuality is seen as abnormal.

Third, think back to sports events, community meetings, and school events that you have attended in the last five years. How many of those events opened with a prayer? What religion was the prayer an articulation of? Christianity is seen as normal in the United States and those that chose to be Christian are laden with religious privilege. If you are a Christian, think about what your reaction would be if a sports event opened with a moment of meditation, a reading from the Talmud, or an incense burning to Mother Earth. What would your reaction be? What would your reaction be if all of the fans in the stadium were asked to turn towards Mecca and place their foreheads to the ground in humility before Allah? If your reaction is to be put off or worse to be angered, you are experiencing a reaction to your normalized privilege being challenged.

The process in which the norms of privileged groups are given precedent and representation and are subsequently replicated by other is called hegemony. Hegemony weaves through social and political practices, is represented in how law, philosophy, morality, and religion are celebrated, and underlies how the economy is manipulated to protect the position of the ruling class and those with privilege.<sup>45</sup> A good example of hegemony can be found in superhero movies. Superheroes are often represented as white

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<sup>45</sup> Lenny Flank, *Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony: Marxism, Capitalism and Their Relation to Sexism, Racism, Nationalism, and Authoritarianism* (St. Petersburg, FL: Red and Black Publishers, 2007) 12-13.

males who are strong, emotionally distant, a bit sexist, and heterosexual. Characters that do not fit these molds are seen as weak, secondary characters or are often the evil nemesis. This normalizing subtly communicates that white men who are strong, emotionally distant, a bit sexist, and heterosexual are the ideal. This ideal is then exported all over the world. People of color, queer folks, and women see themselves represented in these movies as less than ideal or as weak.

Those of us who are privileged must accept that we have internalized as normal the characteristics we possess and the experiences we share. Of course we are individuals, but we are also individuals located within larger systems in which we participate in culture. For those of us with privilege, we must learn that 1) we are not the center of the universe, 2) that who we are, and the experiences and beliefs we have, are not the gold standard against which all other should be judged, 3) there are multitudes of other characteristics, experiences, and beliefs that are equally as valid as our own, and 4) the more we seek to enforce our characteristics, experiences, and beliefs as normal, the more we hurt and marginalize others.

#### Vignette Four: Donuts and Hamburger

When I graduated from the Christian Academy of Guatemala in 1997, I was bored with school and lacked any clear direction on the path that I wanted to take. My grades were good enough and I had sufficient financial cover for college to be a possibility but I missed all of the deadlines for exploring college campuses, filling out applications, and making plans for my academic future during my senior year of high school. So when my high school days drew to a close, with no college plans and unable to work in Guatemala, I left home and moved to Florida to start my life as an adult. My parents helped me find

a car and an apartment and gave me enough money to pay the first month's rent then turned me loose. My parents were very supportive and were always available to help if I needed it. However, they lived in Guatemala and the arrangement was that I was going to take care of myself. However, I have no doubt that had the sky fallen in, they would have been there to help me.

I began this year between high school and college with \$150 to my name. I was poor. The money my parents left me to pay the first month's rent went quickly and my bank account dwindled. I hit the streets and applied everywhere I could—fast food restaurants, gas stations, car washes, and retail stores in the mall. As the month drew to a close I finally secured my first job. I worked my first two weeks with \$15 left. Three days before payday, I bought \$10 worth of gas. My grandmother lived in the same town and she gave me some bread, spaghetti and Ragu sauce that kept me going after my ramen noodles ran out. The bread grew mold by the end of the two weeks, but I broke those pieces off and ate the rest. I rationed the spaghetti and Ragu sauce and worked hungry.

Thank God that first job finally came. I made \$5.50 an hour pressing doughnuts and washing dishes at a Krispy Kreme Doughnut but I was excited to have my first paying job! I was also the lowest rung on the fast food ladder. I worked in the back of the store mixing batter from 50 lb. bags of flour, sugar, and other dry ingredients. I loaded the doughnut fryer with big 35 lb. blocks of Crisco. I sprayed down pots and trays and scrubbed and squeegeed the floor. I wore a green Krispy Kreme t-shirt and khaki pants as my uniform. I really had no idea how good or bad I had it. I got free doughnuts! I got free coffee and soda! And I got a paycheck! What else could a teenager want?

There were downsides to this illustrious job. I worked a lot of hours. My usual shift was from 3pm-11pm but sometimes fellow employees would call-in and no one would be available to run the doughnut maker overnight, and so I would work a second shift from 11pm-7am. I would then go home and sleep for five hours, take a shower, eat some sort of meal that could be cooked quickly and would save (I ate a lot of Rice-A-Roni and fried a lot of hamburger), run an errand or two, and then go right back to work at 3pm.

Eventually everything smelled like sugar and grease. I pretty much wore the same clothes all the time. And because my employer only gives me three shirts and because I didn't have a washer and dryer in my apartment, didn't have spare time to run to the laundry mat every three days, and didn't have extra cash to buy more shirts, I wore dirty clothes. My shoes were the worst and my feet were wet all the time from washing dishes. The dry mixes and grease adhered nicely to my wet shoes and formed a nice layer of grime on my shoes. My shoes were tricky when I got home. They were so coated with sugar that ants and roaches smelled me coming a mile away and so I didn't want them in my apartment. So I left them on the porch and hoped I would not awake in the morning to discover that the ants had carried one of my shoes off. With few exceptions, fast food workers shoes are always an indication of their power. Managers have nice, shiny shoes. Cashiers have clean shoes. Cooks, fryers, and dishwashers have dirty, greasy, unsightly shoes. And because they're only getting paid minimum wage and have rent to pay and possibly formula to buy for their baby, they aren't investing in new shoes.

By my sixth month on the job, I developed a nice set of grease burn scars and I'd learned how to suck it up and work sick. This happens a lot. Poor folks work sick because they cannot afford to not work. Mostly, I just prayed that I wouldn't get injured. Krispy Kreme did not offer insurance to its employees at the time. Tylenol and band aids were all I had and I could not afford a trip to the emergency room if the doughnut presser clipped my finger.

The minimum wage in 1997 was \$5.15 per hour and even though I brought in a healthy 35 cents more an hour, I still wasn't earning enough to pay all my bills. And so after working at Krispy Kreme for two months, I got a second job at Publix grocery store.

Guess what I did? Yep, I cooked doughnuts.

I woke up at 5:00am to be at work by 5:30am so that the doughnuts would be ready by 7:00am when the store opened and the faithful, retired, senior citizen Floridians wandered into the bakery to get an apple fritter before picking up a gallon of milk and some white bread. I finished my shift at noon, went home, ate lunch, took a quick nap, and changed from my Publix uniform into my Krispy Kreme uniform and sped off to my 3-11pm shift.

This life was brutal. I rarely slept. I gained weight. I didn't have time to watch TV nor could I afford cable. I avoided the mall because any spare cash I had went towards changing the oil on my car. I kept the heat off in the winter because heat cost money and an extra sweat shirt and blanket were free. My coworkers were my only friends. Going to church would have been nice but going to church cost gas and time and it wasn't going to pay my rent. If an extra shift opened up on Sunday mornings, I went to work.



I pulled a lot of all-nighters. On one particular 48 hour push with no sleep, I woke up in the deep freezer in the back of the Publix bakery kitchen. I don't know how I got in there or how long I had been standing asleep at 25 degrees. I shook it off, went home, and crashed for 10 hours and then got up and went to work again.

When all you do is look at doughnuts all day, your conversation skills take a hit. I'm guessing it's similar to staring at a monitor full of spreadsheets day in and day out. When you work fast food, you learn quickly that you can be replaced at any moment, but you need the job and so you keep your mouth shut and accept that your prospects aren't going to get much cheerier.

After working eight months at Krispy Kreme, I got a promotion to shift manager. I had power and responsibility. People reported to me. I also got a raise to \$7.25 per hour which gave me enough money to pay all my bills and save some money. Not hugely significant, but significant enough that the difference plus a few extra shifts here and there and I no longer needed to work at Publix. That extra \$1.75 changed my life. I was able to find spare time, read, and exercise. I also found the time to apply to college and get accepted.

One year after starting at Krispy Kreme, I bid my doughnut flipping and filling friends goodbye and left for college. The friends that I had at Krispy Kreme and at the Publix grocery store were genuine, giving people. None of us had much of anything and we were all working dead-end jobs. There was a sense that for most of us, this was it; this was what most of us were going to do for the next 40-50 years. And so we treated one another with respect. We covered for one another. We did our best to have fun and laugh while we glazed doughnuts, mopped floors, and put up with people's entitled

attitudes. God only knows where those people are today. I hope and pray that they have found opportunities and resources to create some space to breath. I hope that their lives are still full of laughter and that respect still comes their way wherever they find themselves.

#### Characteristic Four: The Value of Privilege

Looking back it is easy to mistakenly see the one year I spent among the working poor as nothing more than a glimpse into the difficulties and challenges that those who are poor face. In truth, this memory is laden with my privilege and it is to that privilege that my attention is drawn. After all, I only spent one year living in poverty. I applied to college and left poverty. And even while poor, I had financial security reserved for me in the form of my parents' bank account. I could have bypassed this year entirely if I had been motivated and hadn't been so lazy in applying for college while in high school. In essence, I chose to be poor, it was never meant for me. I was meant to go to college. My path to college was reserved for me because my skin color and my citizenship guaranteed me a spot in a solid school that prepared its students for college. I graduated 20<sup>th</sup> of 24 students in my class with a cumulative 3.71 GPA. All of my classmates graduated and almost all of them went to some form of college or university. When compared to US averages, only 81% of US high school students graduate<sup>46</sup> with only 68% of those going on to enroll in some form of college or university.<sup>47</sup> Of that 68%, only about 2/3 will

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<sup>46</sup> "U.S. High School Graduation Rate Hits New Record High," *U.S. Department of Education*, February 12, 2015, <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-high-school-graduation-rate-hits-new-record-high>.

<sup>47</sup> "College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2014 High School Graduates," *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, April 16, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/hsgec.nr0.htm>.

actually complete their studies<sup>48</sup> and of those who complete their studies almost all of them will be white. In 2008, Native American Indians accounted for less than 1% of those who earned a bachelor's degree, compared to 71.8% of whites, 9.8% of African Americans, 7.9% of Hispanics, and 7% of Asians and Pacific Islanders.<sup>49</sup> These disparities in education attainment illustrate how the race-based practices that allowed white homeowners to access easy credit in neighborhoods where their houses appreciated in value contributed to high property taxes which paid for better schools and more wealth to pay for tuition. The opposite experience has played out for homeowners of color who saw their property values decline, their schools have less money, and their wealth decline. Frankly, the education system in the United States is fundamentally structured to benefit white students. I was no exception to this rule. I had the privilege of my education in reserve even while I was struggling to pay the bills and working 80-hour weeks.

But my privilege goes deeper. While I worked two jobs to stay above the poverty line, I still had legal documentation and was able to rest assured that I would be paid for my work, that my employer would not try to blackmail me, and that I was not at risk of being separated from my family at any moment because of harsh, immigration laws designed without consideration for the lives of the families they tear apart. Additionally, I never had to worry that my sexual orientation, if known, would get me fired. I was seen as normal by those with power, and as such, I did not need protection from their bigotry.

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<sup>48</sup> "The Condition of Education," *National Center for Education Statistics*, updated May 2014, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_cva.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cva.asp).

<sup>49</sup> "Facts about American Indian Education," *American Indian College Fund*, accessed May 24, 2015, [http://www.collegefund.org/userfiles/2011\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.collegefund.org/userfiles/2011_FactSheet.pdf).

In truth, as hard as that year was, I was a privileged tourist amongst the poor. That sense of privilege carries on to the very writing of this memory. The fact that I have the space to explore this memory as a learning opportunity connotes that poverty is no longer my daily experience. It is distant to me and I go to it to learn. Poverty does not come to my door every 30<sup>th</sup> of the month to check to see if I have the full rent.

Privilege holds an economic value for those that possess it. Study after study has been done to illustrate that white people are paid more than people of color<sup>50</sup> and that men are paid more than women for the same work.<sup>51</sup> Studies even show that tall people are paid more than short people for the same work<sup>52</sup> and that heavy-set people are paid less than thin-set people.<sup>53</sup> To occupy a position of privilege is to have this economic value at your disposal all the time; it is also the assurance that you never have to wonder if you are being paid less than your co-worker because of your skin color, height, weight, or gender. To be privileged is to know that you are earning what you deserve. For those people that do not share the social identities that confer privilege, it can be a nonstop guessing game trying to figure out if you are being paid fairly and equitably for your work. I have a good friend who in 2013 left a position at a non-profit in Phoenix after

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<sup>50</sup> Deborah Ashton, "Does Race or Gender Matter More to Your Paycheck?," *Harvard Business Review*, June 10, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/06/does-race-or-gender-matter-more-to-your-paycheck/>.

<sup>51</sup> Claudia Goldin, "A Grand Gender Convergence: Its Last Chapter," *American Economic Review* 104, no. 4 (2014): 1101.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Roy Britt, "Taller People Earn More Money," *Live Science*, July 11, 2009, <http://www.livescience.com/5552-taller-people-earn-money.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Laura Shin, "Study: Women, Want Higher Pay? Lose Weight. Men, You're Fine as You Are," *Forbes*, October 31, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2014/10/31/study-women-want-higher-pay-lose-weight-men-youre-fine-as-you-are/>.

she discovered that a male co-worker with four years less non-profit experience and only an associate's degree, compared to her Master's degree, was hired to do the same job she was doing but was paid \$4,000 more in yearly salary. It was an insulting and humiliating experience to discover that she was valued less by her employer because she was a woman. Unfortunately, the insult and humiliation that arise when you discover that your co-worker, who has the exact same job responsibilities and the exact same credentials, makes more than you because they are white or male is all too common for people of color and women and transpersons. That economic advantaging plays out quickly in what that extra money can buy. Using my friend as an example, the extra \$4,000 could have helped her pay off her credit card debt, could have helped her find a safer apartment that was closer to public transportation, could have helped her take night classes to increase her skill set, or could have helped her attend more happy hours with her boss and the company executives. Having that \$4,000 to spend could have increased her likelihood of getting another promotion because her skill set increased and her social capital increased as a result. Instead, it was her male co-worker who was given that edge simply because of his gender privilege. Sadly, when my friend confronted the HR department of this non-profit about the discrepancy she was told that she was "ungrateful and should sell her house if she needed the extra money."

Sometimes the economic value of privilege is not as easy to see as higher salaries. In these cases it can be understood as economic doors that have historically been opened for some groups and not others. For example, federal guidelines for housing loans after World War II incorporated race-based assessment measure for prospective borrowers. These racist guidelines favored white borrowers while denying or hurting borrowers of

color. Borrowers of color were forced to take higher interest rate loans and were restricted in the housing markets that were open to them. Scholars estimated that these race-based practices cost borrowers of color \$10.5 billion in extra payments.<sup>54</sup> These race-based practices, now illegal, continue to hurt communities of color as houses and wealth are passed down from generation to generation. The current generation of black communities has lost \$82 billion collectively and the next generation is likely to lose \$93 billion.<sup>55</sup> The wealth taken from communities of color in the housing system was given to white homeowners in easy credit and open housing markets ready for investment. White families passed the wealth that they accumulated down to their children who used that wealth to access better education and, consequently, higher paying jobs. For those of us who are a generation or two removed from the race-based housing practices that favored our grandparents, it can seem shocking that we still continue to benefit from the economic doors that our grandparents walked through while others had those doors slammed in their faces. After all, we did not walk through those doors ourselves. Instead we were born into this privilege, we inherited this privilege, and just as wealth is passed down from one generation to the next, this privilege is passed from parents to children in the form of good schools, good jobs, college payments, safe, dependable vehicles, and any other financial needed that is met so that those children can succeed in life.

For individuals who share the characteristics of the groups who benefit from economic privilege but find themselves suffering from poverty this assessment of privilege will seem distant and false. When discussing race-based privileges for example,

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<sup>54</sup> Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 32.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

the question will be asked, “How can poor, white people have privilege?” The answer lies in how economic privilege benefits all persons within the select group even if that privilege is not manifest in dollar bills. In *Whiteness as Property*, Cheryl Harris describes how privilege, specifically white privilege in this case, manifests as intangible financial values which benefit all white people, rich and poor alike, and which are legally protected rights.<sup>56</sup> For Harris, whiteness is property and property encompasses “jobs, entitlements, occupational licenses, contracts, subsidies, and indeed a whole host of intangibles that are the product of labor, time, and creativity, such as intellectual property, business goodwill, and enhanced earning potential from graduate degrees.”<sup>57</sup> Using the example above, white persons who suffer from poverty may not see the economic value of their white privilege in the form of a robust savings account or a Bentley. However, the economic value manifests itself in hiring processes that favor white applicants over applicants of color (job applicants with “white” names are twice as likely to get interview callbacks as job applicants with “African-American” sounding names<sup>58</sup>) or manifests itself in interest rates and favorable lending practices (at the height of the real estate boom in the 2000s, black and Hispanic households making more than \$200,000 per year were more likely on average to be given a subprime loan than white

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<sup>56</sup> Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1726.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 1728.

<sup>58</sup> Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, “Are Emily and Greg More Employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market Discrimination,” *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, July 2003, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w9873.pdf>.

families making less than \$30,000 per year<sup>59</sup>). These manifestations of privilege create space for even poor white persons to get ahead while persons of color remain

marginalized. Harris compounds how poor white persons benefit from white privilege:

As whiteness is simultaneously an aspect of identity and a property interest, it is something that can both be experienced and deployed as a resource. Whiteness can move from being a passive characteristic as an aspect of identity to an active entity that—like other types of property—is used to fulfill the will and to exercise power.<sup>60</sup>

Thus poor white persons always hold the value of their whiteness in their back pocket.

This works to their advantage as they work to get out of poverty. As soon as an opportunity arises, even if that opportunity is unknown to them, their privilege goes to work for them. Poor people of color, on the other hand, do not have an economic privilege based on their skin color working behind the scene to help them get out of poverty. If you are a person of privilege, whether you like it or not, you can count on your privilege providing direct and indirect financial advantages that those who are marginalized and oppressed cannot take for granted.

#### Vignette Five: Zacapa

My family moved from Florida to Guatemala when I was eleven years old. My parents are Christian missionaries and have worked alongside the Guatemalan people for 25 years. My parents live out their faith by answering their calling of service in Guatemala. This calling led them to build a makeshift moving box on our family's GMC pickup, load up our lives, and trek from the United States, down the Mexican coast, and

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<sup>59</sup> Emily Badger, "The Dramatic Racial Bias of Subprime Lending During the Housing Boom," *Citylab*, August 16, 2013, <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2013/08/blacks-really-were-targeted-bogus-loans-during-housing-boom/6559/>.

<sup>60</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1734.



into Guatemala. Two adults, two kids, and one little dog named Sara made Guatemala our home.

Guatemala opened my worldview wide open. The moment our family crossed the border we unconsciously stepped in a position of power built steadily by centuries of European and American colonization. In 1954, the United States government through covert CIA operatives overthrew Guatemala's democratically elected government in order to preserve the land rights of American-owned United Fruit Company.<sup>61</sup> In essence, the US government violated the sovereignty of Guatemala to assure that low-priced bananas and pineapples continued to flow into United States. Following the CIA-organized coup, military dictatorships ruled Guatemala and a 36 year civil war ensued during which over 150,000 people, most of them Mayan Indians, were murdered by government-led military forces.<sup>62</sup> Refugee reports documented by Noam Chomsky detail the gruesome acts of the Guatemalan government against its own peoples. The report reads:

A few people succeeded in escaping from a village in Quiché province where the government came in, rounded up the population, and put them in the town building.

They took all the men out and decapitated them. Then they raped and killed the women. Then they took the children and killed them by bashing their heads with rocks.<sup>63</sup>

The United States government knew and supported these atrocities and funneled military

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<sup>61</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Chomsky Reader* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1987), 364.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

aid to the Guatemalan government, carried out napalm bomb raids, and even sent in Green Berets in a counterinsurgency campaign that left as many as 10,000 Guatemalans dead.<sup>64</sup>

We knew nothing of these atrocities and we knew nothing of the US government's hand in murdering Guatemalan people. We were innocent in our ignorance, a reality that speaks to our privilege of not needing to know the history of the evils our country had committed in Guatemala before going to Guatemala. Yet because we were white, and because we were Americans, we inherited a position of power born out of the United States' actions in Guatemala. That position of power allowed us to assume authority and it gave the perception that we were economically elite. In truth, we were not rich. But we had privilege that gave us access to authority in many of the circles our family frequented in Guatemala. We walked into this privilege whether we knew it or not. And even if we had known of it, there is nothing we could have done, save not go to Guatemala, to avoid this privilege.

While my parents worked with the Guatemalan people, my brother and I attended a school established for missionary kids. There were about 250 students in grades K-12. Almost all of the students were white. The few that were students of color usually were children with one white, American parent and one Guatemalan parent. We had an American curriculum and were taught by mostly white, English-speaking teachers. My school life and my family life existed in a duality where I spent my days in this small, white American bubble and then spent my time with my family interacting with the Guatemalans my family served alongside. In one moment my exclusive, American

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 327-328.

hierarchical position was actively reinforced and in another moment I was asked to set this hierarchy aside. This conflict produced confusion and often promoted a sense of entitlement in me.

Guatemala is an ecologically diverse country. Beaches, mountains, deserts, and rain forests are some of the ecosystems in the “land of eternal spring.” Each year, the middle school and high school grades of the Christian Academy of Guatemala organized week-long service trips to different parts of Guatemala. In my eighth grade year we went to Zacapa, Guatemala, a large town in the heart of the Guatemalan desert.

Our class had ridden by train to Zacapa from Guatemala City—a tiring 13 hour trip. But we were kids and it was an adventure. We spent the week in Zacapa digging a ditch along a dirt road. The ditch carried a waterline from the main road to a small house about 300 yards off the main road that served as a water pump for the surrounding community. It was grueling work ideal for energy-filled, growing adolescents. Each morning we rose, ate breakfast, had our Christian devotional, and then spent the next six hours swinging picks and shovels in the ditch. Each afternoon, we hopped aboard a local charter bus and rode over to a public swimming pool to cool down—our treat for our hard work.

We also spent time with Guatemalan youth from a local church. We planned several evening socials that involved playing basketball and doing church activities together. The socializing had not gone well. We mostly stuck with our own groups—the Americans had closed ranks and the Guatemalans had responded in return by closing their ranks. Our group’s efforts to build community were sabotaged by our adolescent immaturity, language barriers, and sense of superiority. The adults leading our group

were growing frustrated. They had not brought us out into the middle of the Guatemalan desert to just dig a ditch. The decision was made that we would forgo the next day's evening events for an afternoon of swimming together.

I did not receive this change of plans with delight. I did not want to swim with the Guatemalan youth. The pool was supposed to be our time together—just us missionary students. Yet there I was the next day on a bus with my group and the group of Guatemalan youth. The temperature was hot and the air was dry. The sun was bright and merciless. Sweat beaded on my upper lip. The uncomfortable stickiness set in. The vinyl bus seats stuck to my legs. The smell of bodies filled the already saturated air. Even with the windows down the temperature in the bus must have been 110 degrees.

“I don't want to be here,” I whined to my best friend Jake. “Why do we have to share the pool with them?”

Jake shrugged. “That's how it goes man. Hey, do you think Joy likes me?” Jake's priorities were always elsewhere.

“I don't know! Who cares?!” My annoyance was growing with each moment in the sweltering heat of the bus.

The bus turned into the swimming pool parking lot and 70 teenagers shuffled off. Boys filed to the left into the men's changing room and girls filed to the right into the women's changing room. Silently we changed into our suits—the American boys on one side of the changing room and the Guatemalan boys on the other side of the room. Looks were exchanged. Conversations started and died quickly. After changing we filed out and onto a bleacher that sat beside the pool.

Our group leaders and the group leaders from the Guatemalan youth group gave us a stern pep-talk, extolling us to talk with one another, bridge the gap, and play together. They led us in a quick team building exercise. Most of us, anxious to get into the water, begrudgingly complied. I refused to stand.

“This is a dumb cheer.” I muttered under my breath, my bottom firmly fixed to the bleacher. “Hey what are you doing?!” I called after Jake. Jake had Joy in his sights and if doing the cheer got him off of the bleacher and into the pool where he could flirt with Joy then he’d do the cheer.

The cheer done, American and Guatemalan teenagers made a mad dash for the pool. I slowly stood up and started lumbering off the bleachers.

“This is so dumb.” I said to myself.

“Excuse me, Mr. Black. What did you say?” inquired Mr. Bogart, one of our group leaders. Apparently I hadn’t been as quiet as I thought. “Do you have a problem with our activities today?”

I looked straight at Mr. Bogart and without any sense of shame blurted out, “I hate this! I hate being here. I hate that we have to share our pool time with them! This is our space!”

The bleacher had cleared and it was just Mr. Bogart and I. “That’s a strong opinion Luke. Why do you feel this way?” pressed Mr. Bogart.

“Because they don’t like us! They haven’t tried to be our friends! They hang out in their group and none of them talk to us. What’s the point?!”

“Have you reached out to them?”

“Man, they don’t want to talk to me.”

“Have you tired?”

“Why do I have to talk to them?! They’re not like us! We don’t even live in the same town. Who cares if we become friends!?”

“I care, Luke. And I want you to care as well.”

“This is ridiculous! I don’t care about them!” The words escaped my mouth before my brain had a chance to catch them.

“I’m sorry you feel that way Luke. But you’re not going in that pool with that attitude. You’re going to sit here on these bleachers and think about what you’ve said and your attitude.”

And so I sat on the bleachers by myself and thought about my attitude. I thought about the hatred that had come out of my mouth.

I was ashamed. I was embarrassed. What made me so much better than the Guatemalan youth? Why had I been so spiteful towards them?

In the pool my friends splashed and played games with the Guatemalan youth. The bleacher was lonely. The sun was hot. I sat and fumed at myself.

My poor attitude and my unwillingness to invest in getting to know the Guatemalan youth in Zacapa did not simply extend from youthful immaturity and jealousy. To be sure those elements were there. But the roots of my animosity towards the Guatemalan youth grew from my fundamental belief that I was superior to them. At my most basic level, I did not see them as my equals and as a result I concluded that they were not worth my time, energy, and, most importantly, respect.

Without a doubt, the isolation from Guatemalans that resulted from my schooling arrangement contributed to this lack of respect. But that isolation cannot be entirely

blamed for the dehumanization that manifested itself in me that day. After all, my parents assured that I spent time interacting with Guatemalans outside of school in our church and as a family. My lack of respect for the Guatemalan people and my belief that I was superior to them were in truth not unique to me nor were they original to me. My attitudes and beliefs reflected the American believe that Americans are special, that they are chosen by God, that they are exceptional, and that they have a right to carry this exceptionalism all over the world.

My teenage years in Guatemala were marked with an immense pride in America. The Fourth of July was my favorite holiday; I loved American sports, American TV and movies, and American history. I wholeheartedly believed that America was on the side of good in the Gulf War. I had an American flag on my wall for God's sake! America could do no wrong and America, above all, carried the banner of freedom, the good life, culture, and truth. For me, all other ways of seeing the world, all other ways of being, paled in existence and need to be pushed to adhere to the American ideal. And the fact that I was an American meant that I also carried the mantle of truth everywhere I went.

My isolation in Guatemala, surrounded by seas of people that I fundamentally saw as less than me, only reinforced my belief in America's exceptionalism and my exceptionalism. Looking back now, I see that I simply saw the Guatemalan people as inferior human beings. This is a haunting, shameful confession that gives me chills and fills me with regret.

As an adolescent boy, I was too immature, lacked a systemic understanding of America's dark, evil history in Guatemala, and lacked the language to ever express

myself in words and terms that would have clued others, including my parents, to the deep process of dehumanization I had bought into as I engaged the Guatemalan people.

But the red flags were there. The warning signs, like my temper tantrum at the swimming pool in Zacapa, all pointed to my sense of privilege. And that sense of privilege fundamentally destroyed my ability to live in community with Guatemalans and robbed me of a richer experience during the seven years that I called Guatemala home.

#### Characteristic Five: Neutrality

*If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.* –Archbishop Desmond Tutu<sup>65</sup>

The more that we unpack our privileges the more overwhelmed we can become. This is understandable, especially when we are first introduced to privilege. The unpacking can seem like a personal attack where we are each called to task for actions that we did, most often innocently, and advantages that we benefited from, most often unbeknownst to us. I have often seen many people of privilege, when faced with the reality of oppression and marginalization that has occurred to shore up their privilege, throw their hands in the air and exclaim, “This isn’t my problem! I wasn’t there! I didn’t do any of those evil things! It’s not my responsibility to deal with this!” The frustration expressed here is rooted in a desire for neutrality. It is rooted in a desire to be innocent and to not be held accountable. This is a natural reaction when presented with the full scope of privilege and the destruction that it has brought to so many people.

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<sup>65</sup> “Exhibitions,” *The Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation*, accessed June 2, 2015, <http://www.tutufoundation-usa.org/exhibitions.html>.



Unfortunately, there is no neutrality when it comes to privilege. Privilege is not just a single action. If it were, then absolution would be a reasonable expectation. We could just say that we are sorry, seek forgiveness, and then move on. In reality, privilege is systemic, it surrounds us, it preceded us, and it will most likely outlive us. For those of us with privilege, we benefit from that privilege simply because we exist. No amount of wishing our privilege away, ignoring our privilege, or claiming neutrality will set us free from the shackles of privilege.

When I was a boy, our family visited the Wet N' Wild water park in Orlando. My mom's favorite ride was the Lazy River. She would grab her inner tube and lazily relax as she coasted around the soft turns. The Lazy River was somewhat boring for me and so I would try to walk backwards against the current. This was fun but soon grew tiring. As soon as I lifted up my feet, I returned to lazily coasting along. For me, the river is a fantastic metaphor for privilege. The river lazily flows carrying a handful of individuals along. The river is tightly guarded and only a select few are given access to its smooth waters and peaceful pace. If you find yourself in the river, you benefit from privilege and as long as you remain in the river you will continue to benefit from privilege. If you go with the flow, if you conform to social arrangements that benefit you, it can be extremely difficult to see that you are in fact in a river of privilege.<sup>66</sup> The only way out of the river is to turn and walk upstream against the current. This action is entirely against the grain and will immediately cause a disruption. As soon as you put your foot down, the waters of the river begin to batter you. As you turn, you bump into another person and disrupt their peaceful enjoyment of privilege. As you start to step, fellow floaters take notice and

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<sup>66</sup> Wise, *White Like Me*, 45.

question your actions as they grow upset with your audacity. With each step upstream, you crowd other travelers; you disrupt and annoy others who would prefer to simply enjoy the ride. Eventually, your path upstream causes significant inconvenience for the others in the river. They become angry at you, they threaten you, and they act out violently towards you. The going gets tough and you must work doubly hard against the current and against those who threaten you and attack you. But the difficulty of moving upstream could be over immediately. All you have to do is rest. Lift your feet up and you immediately begin flowing downstream with the current back into privilege. So if you want to get out of the river, if you want to undo your privilege, you have to apply yourself daily for the rest of your life. You have to work against the river even though you did not create the river and you did not choose to be born into the river. You have to do all the work and cannot just be by yourself, in your inner tube, floating along as if you are not in the river.

For those of us that exist in privilege, we bear the responsibility for the oppression that created the privilege and the oppression that perpetuates the privilege. That is an ugly fact that should make each of us uncomfortable. It should challenge our beliefs about how the world works. James Cone highlights brilliantly the difficulty that those of us with privilege face in owning our privilege, specifically our white privilege. He notes:

Whites do not like to think of themselves as evil people or that their place in the world is due to the colonization of Indians, the enslavement of Blacks and the exploitation of people of color here and around the world. Whites like to think of themselves as hard working, honorable, decent and fair-minded people. They resent being labeled thieves, murders, slaveholders and racists....They claim to be colorblind and thus treat everybody alike. At an individual level, there is some common sense truth about that observation. But if you benefit from the past and

present injustices committed against Blacks, you are partly and indirectly accountable as an American citizen and as a member of the institutions that perpetuate racism.<sup>67</sup>

Ultimately, we cannot wash our hands clean of oppression. But that does not mean that we should not try.

Those who benefit from privilege but attempt to remain neutral employ a full tool box of techniques and ploys to avoid having to face the reality of their privilege and the oppression and marginalization of others that it demands. A tool that is exercised regularly is the demand that soft, neutral language and word choice be used anytime a situation seems to be veering into challenging their privilege. Words such as racism, prejudice, supremacy, oppression, and violence are accurate words that explain and judge patterns of privileged behaviors.<sup>68</sup> But they are also uncomfortable words that can seem accusatory especially when one would prefer to not face one's privileges.

Additionally, those who would attempt to maintain a sense of neutrality often demand that rules of politeness and civility be adhered to and that challenges to privilege be heard in public spaces. This demand supposes that rules of politeness and civility are universally neutral and public spaces are neutral spaces. Jennifer L. Simpson acutely unravels the argument for civility and neutral space. She argues:

The rules of politeness and niceties that fuse themselves connotatively to the metaphor of civility, however, may make it especially difficult for those whose voices are already least heard to find space in the public sphere.... The dilemma of a discourse of civility is that an imperative for civil, cordial speech favors those already in positions of power because those who wish to alter the status quo must regulate and mediate their speech to satisfy the powerful. This is particularly

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<sup>67</sup> James Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004): 146.

<sup>68</sup> Thandeka, *Learning to Be White*, 2.

problematic because those in positions of relative privilege and power can also decide when and with whom they choose to be civil.<sup>69</sup>

In truth, there are no neutral spaces and there are no neutral rules of politeness and civility. All space is controlled by those with power, and those with power dictate who can and who cannot occupy a space. Power also determines how spaces are structured and power assures that in all spaces those with power maintain the advantage while those without power struggle for recognition and often struggle to survive.

The neutrality tool that can be the hardest to work against and the hardest to give up is the charitable donation or volunteer time. For organizations that are struggling to survive as they carry out their missions of helping other and for community groups that are working for justice, donations and volunteer time are often a crucial, sustaining necessity. But these donations and volunteer time can also be a complete escape from any real need to address one's privilege. Donations can create a false sense of activism wherein the giver is absolved of the need to address their privilege and the oppression and marginalization that results. Donations also introduce power dynamics into spaces where the giver's privilege and connection to oppression are ignored for the sake of maintaining the financial or material gift. And when tax deductible status is added to a donation, the fullness of the privilege is realized in how the act of absolution returns to benefit the privileged.

Throughout my life, I have employed each of these tools and more in hopes of remaining neutral without having to address my privilege. I have made donations instead of going to marches for justice. I have volunteered at soup kitchens instead of working to assure that living wage policies were adopted that might have cost me part of my salary.

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<sup>69</sup> Simpson, "The Color-Blind Double Bind," 151-152.

I have wanted to be neutral for most of my life. It has been easy for me to reflect on my time in Guatemala and call out moments that I acted poorly or bought into a sense of superiority. For the longest time this was my response to the trip to Zacapa and my privileged, spiteful attitude. I thought that simply owning up to my entitled attitude was enough. I thought that asking for forgiveness gave me back my neutrality and created the space for me to go back to my relationships in Guatemala with a clean conscious. I hoped that making cash donations and volunteering with my parents' ministry was enough, and if anything, it gave me a leg up because at least I was doing something.

Unfortunately, even after I sought forgiveness for my attitude and after I donated and volunteered, I still remained responsible for the atrocities that my government perpetuated against the Guatemalan people because I am an American. These atrocities are part of the legacy of my country and I am not neutral and innocent of these atrocities just because I was not there and just because I did not pull the trigger or arm the Guatemalan government so that they could slaughter their own people. If, as an American, I rise to claim the freedoms that this nation purports then I must also claim the atrocities that this nation has carried out. I do not get to just claim the good without also claiming the bad.

I am blessed to have learned from Dr. Jeanette Rodriguez at Seattle University. Dr. Rodriguez served as an interpreter for the United Nations in the early 1980s in El Salvador and Guatemala. It was she that called me to task for my false sense of neutrality and taught me that because I benefit from the legacy of American imperialism, I also bear the responsibility for the evils that American imperialism carries across the globe. Neutrality is a myth and as long as I continue to benefit from privilege, I justify

marginalization and oppression. There is no way around that inconvenient truth. Dr. Rodriguez is fond of saying, “Nothing changes until it changes.” This is the seed of transformation. The oppression and marginalization occurring right now are today’s contribution to a legacy of oppression and marginalization centuries in the making. I can avoid that and hope for neutrality because it is inconvenient for me to own my role in that legacy. That is always a possibility. But if this is not acceptable to me, if I want change to happen, I have to change myself. I have to abandon my neutrality and start acting against the systems and institutions that continue to carry out oppression. I have to work against the US government, against the corporations that control the US government, and against the military arm that hammers US imperialism all over the globe. I do not get to be neutral.

#### Vignette Six: Slumlord

Sometimes I wonder if everyone has a job in their closet of which they are not proud or that they did because they needed the money. I worked for a slumlord for most of college. I had to pay rent, I had to pay car insurance, and I had to buy books for school. I was going to school full-time and playing soccer. That meant that I had about 20 hours a week that I could work. Anderson University was a Christian school that mandated all students attend two chapel sessions per week. Some kids took chapel pretty seriously and some kids saw it as an opportunity to sleep and do homework. For me, chapel was two hours a week that I was paying tuition to sit on my butt, not learn, and not work. I was losing money on chapel.

Working at the library paid minimum wage—\$5.15/hr. Working at the mall or Lowe’s or in the kitchen of a restaurant might have cleared me \$7/hr and then I had to

pay taxes. I needed a job that paid well, let me work a flexible schedule so that I could keep playing soccer, and got me a work release so I did not have to go to chapel.

A friend of a friend knew a guy that needed help doing “maintenance work.” There was enough work for two pairs of strong arms so my friend Brendan and I jumped at the opportunity. The work started great. We mowed a lot of yards and we drove around in a beat up, old Chevy Impala with a tape deck. We kept any cassette tapes we found cleaning out houses. Singles of TLC’s *Waterfalls*, Chris Isaac’s *Wicked Games*, and a full Backstreet Boys album made the regular rotation.

Sometime our boss asked us to prep his rental houses for new tenants. Those rental houses came in an array of disrepair. Brendan and I were not handymen, yet we learned to fix faucets, drywall, roofing, and electricity through trial and error and many trips to the hardware store. Sometimes prepping a house meant that we cleaned it up from the last tenants. Where vacuums, mops, and scrub brushes might have been the tools needed to clean up most rental houses, Brendan and I did our work with industrial trash cans and snow shovels. We would go into a home that was newly “available” and find it completely full of trash. We shoveled food, half-empty milk jugs, stuffed animals, porn, toothbrushes, and hand towels into black garbage bags and hauled them to the street. We loaded old car batteries, open bags of charcoal, and kiddie pools into the back of a beat-up old truck and hauled them to the dump. Windex was too fine an instrument for us. It was easier to paint over graffiti than it was to scrub it.

It did not take long for Brendan and I to realize the full picture of our employment. Our boss was a slumlord—a small-time housing king in a poor, dying town

in Middle America. He had a nice house with a pool and a yard. His was a quiet neighborhood with trees and garage doors. Yet he made his money off the backs of the poor.

His business plan was simple and straightforward. He bought properties that were in such disrepair that the city condemned them. He mowed the lawns, fixed a few outlets and added a new faucet, painted over the black mold, and changed the locks. The city declared the houses livable and he put them on the rental market for cheap. His business model hinged on tenants that he knew either would not or could not pay their rent and who were unstable and might skip town. He collected their security deposit and waited for them to fall behind. One month, two months, some tenants made it three months. But eventually they would fail. They often did not have jobs and their SSI or disability income just could not pay the bills. Once they fell behind and missed a month, the notices to vacate began.

“Luke, meet me at 654 S. 8th St. tomorrow evening at 7pm,” my boss ordered.

“What are we doing that late? It’ll be dark.”

”Bring your work gloves and a screw driver.”

I can change the locks on a door in my sleep. You need a long screw driver and a utility knife. The long screw driver makes reaching the screws around the doorknob easier and the utility knife works well to pop out bolts that have been harden in place by too many coats of paint. If you have a power drill you can do it in about three minutes. In the dark, in the cold, with the sheriff watching over my shoulder, I got really good at



changing locks. It's better to go when the tenants are not home. They cry a lot when they are there and the sheriff usually will not let them go back into the house to grab an armful of valuables.

“Why don't they just pay their rent?” I'd mumble as I removed the deadbolt.

When you go through a window at dusk in the winter and find the heat on and a pot of water boiling on the stove, you panic a little bit. Hopefully you did your homework and made sure no one was home. You turn off the stove and change the locks.

You do not ask what happens to people after they have been evicted. You do not ask where their kids go, how they get to school, or how they stay warm in the winter. You do not guess where they will sleep that night. You do the work, you get your pay in cash under the table, and you keep your head down.

You get callous towards folks when they live like slobs because you tell yourself that clean people do not end up in poverty. You convince yourself that they deserve it, that if they threw their trash in the trash can, and not on the god damn floor, maybe they could hold a job long enough to pay the rent. You get disgusted when you find porn in boxes under beds in children's rooms. You start to see people as animals. It fucks with your head; it confuses your heart. The compassion that you thought you had wears thin. You don't question the work or the boss and, for god's sake, you do not ask what is reasonable and what is exploitation.

You get your pay and you go home, shower the filth off, and go to class. You sit with fellow students, kids really, who never think twice about those who live around them in poverty. You laugh at the jokes of kids who agonize over their high priced jeans, designer t-shirts, car horsepower, and the latest episode of *Friends*. You do not tell them

that earlier in the morning you dried out a basement that had been flooded all winter and painted over the black mold that had grown in the spring so that a single mom, no more than 19, could move in with her baby. You keep your mouth shut and do not brag to your classmates about the basement where dogs had been chained up for god knows how long. You saw the blood on the floor. You know what dog fights are. You grow to envy and despise these affluent, scholarship-laden children because they do not hesitate to ask their parents for extra spending cash because they want to go to a Dave Matthews Band concert. You grow to hate them because they can remain oblivious to what is happening right under their noses.

You hate their privilege. You hate yourself because of what you do. You try to convince yourself that what you are doing is just the way life works out. You meet your boss's wife and the woman who does his books and you try to convince yourself that they are good people that are not taking a side in this exploitation. You want to believe that you are a good person that is just a cog in the wheel. Yet, you know in your heart that you aren't neutral. You know that what you are doing is wrong.

But you do it and you do not look back. You pay your rent, you get your degree, and you get out. You never go back to the town. You never talk about what you saw. You try not to wonder if that slumlord is still preying on the poor to earn his living and preying on the poor to do his dirty work.

#### Characteristic Six: Blindness

We are all surrounded by suffering and dehumanization and in most cases we are also surrounded by complacency and indifference. How does one ignore the suffering of others? How does a person become blind to their surroundings? How does a person

convince themselves that apathy and indifference are justifiable? How do we end the destruction of human life when we have been conditioned to focus on mundane, irrelevant trivialities instead of seeing the evil happening right under our noses?

How do we ignore the suffering of the poor around us? How are we blind to the exploitation that our government has wrought on indigenous communities, black communities, and the global poor? How do we blindly spend our money on products and at stores that depend on oppression in order to make a dollar? How have we convinced ourselves that apathy and indifference are acceptable?

Many of these questions go unasked and unanswered because we are afraid of what the answers might require of us. Without a doubt, it will require change and that change may be severe. But what should disturb us is the lack of willingness by most to take even the first step towards change. I am reminded of current conflict over efforts to remove Andrew Jackson, a known slave owner who oversaw the Indian Removal Act of 1830 in which thousands of indigenous people were forced of their land, slaughtered, and forced to relocate across the country, from the \$20 bill and replace him with Harriet Tubman, a known slave liberator.<sup>70</sup> That our country is not yet willing to see Andrew Jackson as a shameful representation of our ugly past speaks volumes of our collective willingness and inability to make social change happen. If we are to create serious social change, we are going to have to be uncomfortable and we are going to have to give up the narratives and the practices that we engage in that destroy and dehumanize our local and

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<sup>70</sup> Abby Ohleiser, "This Group Wants to Banish Andrew Jackson from the \$20 Bill," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/thewatchdog/wp/2015/03/03/this-group-wants-to-banish-andrew-jackson-from-the-20-and-replace-him-with-a-woman/>.

global sisters and brothers. There is no way forward without this step. The sooner we can come to terms with this uncomfortable reality the sooner we can start fixing our communities, our country, and this world.

Blindness to our own privilege and the privilege that surrounds us remains a key characteristic of those who benefit from privilege. Blindness manifests in multiple ways for each of us individually, but three principle manifestations stand out for the privileged community as a whole. First, there are those who are blind to their privilege and remain so because there is no incentive for them to become aware of their privilege. Speaking of white privilege and the racism that white privilege breeds, James Cone notes, “Most importantly, whites do not talk about racism because they do not have to talk about it. They have most of the power in the world—economic, political, social, cultural, intellectual and religious.”<sup>71</sup> As a person of privilege, I sit atop most hierarchal structures. I benefit from a full range of power. As such, I am rarely inconvenienced, rarely find myself in situations where my authority is questioned, rarely find myself marginalized, and have never been oppressed. Because there is no challenge to my privilege, there is no incentive for me to even consider changing a status quo that benefits me. This level of blindness fulfills the adage “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Why would I seek to become aware of another reality when the reality I inhabit serves me just fine? This blindness is a way of being in the world that is completely foreign to those who are frequently marginalized and oppressed. When you are marginalized and oppressed, you are often made hyper-aware of even the most subtle and unintended ways in which privilege manifests itself for others at your expense. For example, African Americans

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<sup>71</sup> Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin,” 144.

and Hispanic Americans reported more awareness of their ethnicity than European Americans, women reported more awareness of their gender than men, and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals reported more awareness of their sexual orientation than straight people.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, no person of color can ever be detached from their body of color. Therefore, there are no people of color that exist as individuals apart from their connection to their skin color.<sup>73</sup> When you are marginalized and oppressed, the characteristics and aspects about yourself that serve to justify your oppression become crystal clear and the blatant ignorance of those who do not see oppression can be an added insult to one's marginalization and oppression.

Second, there are those who are blind to their privilege because they choose, often through a series of elementary and seemingly innocent choices, to ignore the reality that swirls about them. Quite simply, none of us can take in all of the information from all of the sources that bombard us every day. And so, from the time we are children into adulthood we make conscious and sub-conscious choices to ignore certain stimuli and respond to other stimuli. Most of us choose the option in most decisions that place us in situations of comfort and reduces our stress and anxiety especially when we feel threatened.<sup>74</sup> As time goes on, we adapt and evolve and more closely align ourselves with select cultural values, with the social values that the media and our leaders employ,

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<sup>72</sup> Pratto and Stewart, "Group Dominance and the Half-Blindness of Privilege," 37-38.

<sup>73</sup> Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 52.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1985) 19.

and with the belief systems that give us a sense of fitting in and feeling normal.<sup>75</sup>

Ultimately, most of us direct our thoughts and our actions, align our lives and our priorities, and set boundaries on our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions in ways that bring us peace.<sup>76</sup>

There is nothing wrong with narrowing your focus. There is nothing inherently bad about choosing one priority over another. We all do it, all the time. We would never get anything done if we did not consciously learn what stimuli to respond to and what to ignore. This is healthy. However, the catch with privilege is that there is no neutral ground. Choosing to be blind to one's privilege is not the same as choosing to watch kitten videos on the internet or choosing to go mow the grass. Because privilege has a reciprocal side, every single time that I engage with or benefit from my privilege, someone else has been or is currently being marginalized and/or oppressed. Every single time. As such, whenever we are making decisions that call us to consider other people and the consequences that our actions will have on them, we should be hyperaware that we are being asked to check our privilege. When we do not check our privilege, when we allow ourselves to make decisions that do not take the perspectives and the voices of others into consideration, we engage in a steady process of blinding ourselves.

This may seem overwhelming in its sheer scope. After all, we make decisions everyday that call us to consider other people and the consequences that our actions will have on them. How in the world are we realistically expected to check our privilege with everyone? That is a sincere question that many people cannot see beyond. But here is

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<sup>75</sup> George Serban, *The Mask of Normalcy: Social Conformity and Its Ambiguities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2014) 11.

<sup>76</sup> Goleman, *Vital Lies, Simple Truths*, 131.

the catch for all of us—none of us just landed where we are right now, popped up, and were ready to go. We are not instant people. We take time, we grow, and we learn. None of us show up fully formed. So if we can learn and condition ourselves to be blind to our privilege, if we can learn and condition ourselves to be blind to the marginalization and oppression that result from the exercise of our privilege, then we can also unlearn and uncondition ourselves. We can even learn to check our privilege; we can condition ourselves to make every decision in light of the marginalization and oppression it may cause for others.

As an example of this process of blinding and unblinding, I offer our reactions to homeless individuals asking for change. Each one of us has a different reaction when we encounter homeless individuals asking for change. But I guarantee you that none of us simply woke up one day with our fully formed reaction to homeless individuals. Instead, we have each learned our reaction. Through a series of small, seemingly inconsequential decisions, we have each conditioned ourselves to believe something very specific about homeless individuals and we have trained ourselves to react accordingly. Many of us have never considered how our own privilege shapes our response to that individual. We have not considered the opportunities that we blindly took advantage of as we grew into adults and we continue to ignore the advantages that we reap the benefits from today. We do not consider that we are fortunate to have inheritances and steady employment as we look on a homeless individual and pronounce judgment over their circumstances. We do not consider how our efforts to reduce our federal income taxes, so that we can have more spending cash, erodes the government funding available to assure that all veterans receive adequate PTSD counseling, housing, and support services so that they do not end

up on the street. If we are willing to begin to exercise empathy, if we are willing to check our reactions as they are happening, we can begin to unlearn how we demonize those who are homeless. And slowly but surely, through steady, applied efforts to check our privilege and engage homeless individuals as fully human, we can learn new behaviors and we can learn to not take advantage of the privileges that marginalize and hurt them.

Third, there are those who are blind to their privilege and remain so knowing full well the oppression and marginalization others are experiencing but actively choosing to look away. Often those in the third stage hold dearly to belief that dominance of one group over another is normal.<sup>77</sup> Those in the third stage actively blind themselves because the reality of their privilege is too horrible, too overwhelming, and too inconvenient to address. In essence they engage in what Charles Mills call a willful “agreement to *misinterpret* the world.”<sup>78</sup> No one can take the full plunge into the depths of all of the oppression that has occurred over centuries to shore up the privileged benefit from. To do so would overwhelm anyone and cause significant damage. Yet that is not an excuse to turn away and never begin to explore the oppression that one benefits from. I have often heard folks struggling with their privilege lament, “I don’t even know where to begin!” This is an understandable reality. Undoing one’s privilege is a daunting task. But that does not mean it is an impossible task, nor does it give us an adequate excuse to turn away. When faced with the daunting task of beginning to address my privilege, I have found it helpful to remember the following riddle.

How does one eat an elephant? One bite at a time.

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<sup>77</sup> Pratto and Stewart, “Group Dominance and the Half-Blindness of Privilege,” 29.

<sup>78</sup> Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 18.



The sheer magnitude of the oppression that creates privilege and the sometimes overwhelming difficulty in taking a first step present reasonable challenges that produce fear and cause people to blindly turn away. However, for most, inconvenience dictates their willful blindness to their own privilege. In *The Mask of Normalcy*, George Serban illustrates that some of the resistance to programs, such as affirmative action, stems from the fact that these programs go beyond just awarding those who have historically been denied positions. Affirmative action programs require that all of society adjusts with some of those who have enjoyed benefits shifting those benefits away from themselves. This shift is not seen as fair but as reverse discrimination because those who formally enjoyed the benefits find themselves having to compete just like the rest of us.<sup>79</sup> Serban's point is that the privileged find themselves inconvenienced and therefore resist efforts to end oppression because they would rather not be put off. Privilege is always going to be defined through convenience. It is inconvenient for those with privilege to have to change or conform in order to acknowledge the full humanity of those minorities that have historically been denied access and power. As such, the privileged will always view the change and the required adjustment as an assault on their core being. From their position, it is illogical that the majority should change to accommodate the minority. Thus privilege is often less about values, and more about convenience. And blindness is often more about convenience, than it is sheer ignorance.

#### Vignette Seven: The Rebel Inside

The civil war was fought and brought to a bloody end 150 years ago. The war is seen as a watershed moment where America decided, once and for all, whether it was

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<sup>79</sup> Serban, *The Mask of Normalcy*, 89-90.

going to be one united country or split in two. The war is also now seen as a glorious Northern crusade to end Southern slavery. History however has a way of being rewritten to cover up ugliness and to whitewash atrocities. A careful reading of the history of the civil war shows that the war was fought to preserve the economic behemoth that southern agriculture and northern industrialism were birthing. The United States was a developing, rising nation. Our economy had begun to stretch across the globe. Slavery greased the wheels of the US economy and so its ending was seen as counterproductive to American growth.

The Gettysburg Address, one of the most important speeches ever given by a US president, delivered at the turning point of the Civil War, speaks volumes about the need to hold the United States together to prove that this experiment, a nation contrived in liberty, will survive. At the pinnacle moment, in the pinnacle speech, those who were enslaved were not mentioned and their plight was not reflected on. The liberation of slaves was only a tool employed by the North once it became imperative for the North to cripple the Southern economy in order to win the war. The importance of ending slavery cannot be understated when slavery is seen as immoral and an unacceptable evil that destroys human life. However, we err in ascribing righteousness and moral vision to the Northern leaders during the civil war.

Perhaps someday we will look back on the civil war and hang our heads in shame that we delayed so long in bringing an end to the evils of slavery in this country. Perhaps someday we will seek forgiveness for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of poor farmers, immigrants, and factory workers. And perhaps someday we will seek forgiveness from the hundreds of thousands of black women, men, and children who

were stolen from their homes, ripped from their family members, treated like animals, raped, tortured, and murdered so that white, affluent Americans could perch themselves atop a global economy. Sadly, that day has not yet come.

The civil war has a different taste in the South than in the North. And whether one finds oneself in Texas, Tennessee, or Florida, the taste is familiar and it is bitter. Growing up in Florida and returning to the Sunshine State for vacations from Guatemala, the civil war was talked about as a moment of pride. Many in the South hold on to a vision of southern ladies and southern gentlemen, lazy plantations nestled among the oaks and hanging moss, and a rugged individual spirit that rose up and survived in the sweltering heat of the Southern summers. The term is antebellum and those that use it, those that look dreamily back to this romantic era, hold on to a vision of a different time, a purer time, where life was simple, where people were courageous, and where manners and chivalry ruled the day.

Many in the South also hold on to a vision of what the South's rebellion from the Union represented. The confederacy is a model to be studied and its lessons are worth learning and putting into practice for anyone or any community who believes in checking government overreach or who believes in the rights of citizens to do what they want while only being accountable to themselves. For many, the confederacy was about rebellion against an oppressive power. Rebellion is a soul word in the South. Many white parents raise their children to see rebellion as part of their legacy. They raise their children to see the civil war as a glorious example of people fighting against a government that was hell bent on taking away their God-given rights. White children in

the South are taught to see the Confederate soldiers as heroes to be emulated and they are taught to hold on to the vision of the antebellum South as the ideal towards which we should aspire.

As a child who grew up with palmetto bugs under the Florida palm trees, I was surrounded by reminders of the South's glory. My parents did not trumpet the South; they did not call my attention to its ostensible merits. If anything, their position on the South was the opposite. They recognized the evils of slavery and how the South was built, not on gloriously individualism and courage, but on rape and destruction of black women and men. A fuller account of the civil war, the antebellum South, and the ugliness of America's history were taken for granted in our home. Yet, because I had friends whose families reveled in the rebellious nature of the South, because I saw the Confederacy glorified in the institutions, businesses, and media of the South, I was exposed to, and in turn influenced by, the rebellious vision of the glorious South. My best friend's older brother had a Confederate flag pinned to his bedroom wall.

And so as a kid, I sub-consciously separated the Confederacy and, specifically, the idea of the rebellion from the evils of slavery that were its foundation. Looking back, I find it mind-boggling that I was able to hold these two concepts apart. And yet I know that it is possible to do so because I still see it articulated in the extreme positions many on the far Right trumpet. The ability to separate a belief from the evil that belief is built on and perpetuates is a startlingly easy reality for those that want to hold on to beliefs but do not want to own up to the challenge of examining the evils created and perpetuated by those beliefs.

When I was in high school in Guatemala, it was fashionable for teenage boys to wear bandanas on their heads. If you folded the bandana into a triangle, you could tie it around your forehead and pull the bandana over your head and tuck it into the knot at the back. Your whole head would be covered by the bandana. We called them doo-rags. They kept the sweat out of our eyes when we were playing basketball and, as teenage boys, we saw them as a cool fashion statement. As a teenage boy, I was not immune to the desire to stand out and to be seen as cool. Having a unique doo-rag provided me with the opportunity to be envied.

I bought the confederate flag bandana while home in Florida over the summer. The case in the souvenir shop had bandanas of numerous colors and many bandanas with recognizable designs. There was an American flag bandana. There were sports bandanas—the Orlando Magic and Florida Gators were displayed in the front. Yet it was to the crimson Stars and Bars that I was drawn.

The clerk removed it from the case and placed it in my outreached hand. I held it, considered its weight, considered its size, and felt the material.

Yes, this was big enough to fit on my head. Yes, this was a soft material that would absorb my sweat and not itch or leave my forehead covered in lint. It was the right price, too.

Yet, I hesitated. It didn't feel right.

I was old enough. I knew. I'd studied history and read books. I knew about slavery. I knew what the flag represented. The flag was a symbol behind which millions of black women, men, and children died and were enslaved to build wealth in the hands of white plantation owners and white, northern industrialists.

I knew.

But I didn't want it to mean that. I wanted it to feel right. I wanted the slavery part of the symbol to just go away. I wanted the rebel spirit. It said fuck you to authority. It was edgy. It pushed and said that I wasn't to be messed with. If I had the courage to wear this, everyone would respect me and everyone would see how tough I was.

But I knew. When I handed over the \$5, I knew what I was buying. I knew the rebel argument might fly with white folks. But as I stuffed it deep into my pocket, as I buried the bandana in my dresser drawer at home, I knew that I'd better be careful not to wear it around any black folks.

When I was home in Guatemala and back in high school, I wore the bandana to gym class. I stretched, joked with my friends, played basketball, and walked around the school campus after school with it on my head. I wore it to soccer practice. I wore it home.

No one said a word. No one.

Not a single teacher, fellow student, parent, or administrator said a single word. My parents saw it. Not a word.

I wore it again. I stood next to the gym teacher. I talked in the hall after class to the principal. I joked with the parents of my friends who had come to pick them up after soccer practice. Everyone remained silent.

Once it became obvious that I was not going to be challenged for wearing the rebel flag, the thrill of being rebellious faded away. I had not gotten any accolades from

my friends and so the need to be cool just was not there anymore. I wore the bandana probably five more times and then I tossed it in a drawer and never wore it again.

That bandana sat in my drawer for two years. I fold it and stack it neatly back in the drawer with each load of fresh laundry. That bandana got packed and taken to Florida with me once I graduated and moved back to the United States. I could not bring myself to wear that bandana but I also could not bring myself to throw it away. It was a powerful symbol that I could not let go off.

I never threw the bandana away. I put it in a pile of clothes and took it to Goodwill. I passed the responsibility of that bandana, of that symbol, and of what that symbol meant on to someone else. I was not brave enough to own it and deal with it. I was not ready to face what the symbol represented. I did not want to acknowledge my arrogance in wearing the flag and I did not want to own my insensitivity towards black men and women. I just wanted to forget it and act like it had never been. But in my heart I knew. I had always known what I was doing and I did it anyways because being perceived as cool and rebellious was more important to me than rooting out evil. So I let the symbol pass out of my hands. And I hoped the responsibility of owning up to the evils of slavery that I benefited from would pass out of my hands as well. But that responsibility still remains.

In the time that I owned that bandana, no one ever talked with me about it. No one challenged the audacity with which I wore it. No one pulled me aside and said, “Luke, that’s not appropriate. You are being disrespectful. Take it off.” No one asked, “Luke, do you know what that flag represents?”

Where there should have been a reprimand and a lesson, there was simply silence. Where my privilege should have been challenged, there was simply acquiescence.

Looking back now it is the silence that haunts me. I wore the bandana and it was wrong to wear it. Yet I wore it and I tested the waters to see if it would be tolerated and when no one challenged me, it affirmed my choice to buy the bandana and to wear it. Because my arrogance was never challenged, the arrogance that the symbol represents was also never challenged. In my eyes it remained a powerful, important symbol of rebellion. It should have been torn down and shown for the evil and disgrace that it truly represents. But it was not.

There were no black students at my school. I knew that I could wear it and there would not be anyone who would be directly offended by it. And I suppose that the adults that I interacted with all knew this too. Whether they thought it was a teenage phase or that it was none of their business, they must have also known that there was not any immediate harm being done to a fellow student or to a parent. And as such, this may have made their silence acceptable in their eyes. As a growing, difficult teenager, I was lectured for my attitude often, I was taken to task for showing disrespect to my teachers and to my parents because my attitude did not reflect the Christian morals I had been taught. I was held accountable every time I was caught lying or cheating or mouthing off. Yet in this one moment, when I clearly wore a symbol that represented tremendous disrespect and evil for multitudes of people, those Christian morals hid themselves and remained silent.

As I have grown and as I have watched adults, Christians and non-Christians alike, trumpet value systems and morals that they do not actually apply in their personal



lives, I see more clearly how subtly hypocrisy can find its way into a person's life. And so as I look back, I understand now that it is more likely that I am holding the adult figures of my youth to a moral standard many of them were not living by. It seems much more likely to me now that some of their silence actually stemmed from their agreement with the flag and support for the history and horror behind it. I suppose it is possible that there were racists who were also teachers and administrators and parents that got a sense of satisfaction when they saw me strutting across campus wearing the confederate flag on my head.

As an adult I also now understand privilege. As a white man, I recognize how difficult it is to acknowledge privilege and I understand how easy it is to allow behavior that is offense to others but not personally off-putting to continue. I confess that I have laughed at racist jokes that I knew were wrong, I have remained silent when black women and men were demonized by the media, and I have allowed dehumanizing practices which did not affect my power and position to continue, even as I watched them silence the voices of people of color. I understand more than ever how easy it is to turn a blind eye and keep my mouth shut. I understand that standing up and challenging evil, whether that evil manifests on the head of a 16 year old boy or in the corporate board room, requires courage and that courage must be taught and practiced. As so when I look back, I see parents and teachers and soccer coaches that had a moment where courage was called for and they failed. As someone who has also failed to be courageous, I empathize with them. But that empathy does not excuse them, nor does it excuse me. We should have been better; we can still do better.

I suppose it is possible that there were a handful of adults that did not know what the flag was or what it represented. But these adults truly would be the exceptions to the rule. After all, I knew it was wrong and I was 16 years old. And if I knew, then they knew. The argument that we are ignorant is simply no longer an acceptable argument (if it ever was an acceptable argument) as justification for our on-going participation in practices that dehumanize others and rob them of their lives. We each have a moral obligation to get educated on what practices occur from which we benefit and in which we participate. To choose to turn away from our responsibility to educate ourselves when we can clearly witness suffering occurring around us is an incredible evil. We can see poverty. We can see children without homes and without food. We can see war and violence across this globe and in our own communities. We can see families struggling to make ends meet while other families live in unquantifiable wealth. We should know that suffering abounds. If we choose to ignore it, if we choose to look out only for ourselves, and if we choose to avoid the responsibility of giving a damn then we are as guilty of the evil as those who directly perpetuate it.

To be a person of privilege carries great weight. It is not easy for us to undo our privilege. But it also means that we have to own up to some hard realities and hard truths. We must start seeing our duty to undo privilege as a moral imperative. Privilege is an evil that we must root out, whether it is the right fly a confederate flag or whether it is right to deny education to those who are poor.

#### Characteristic Seven: Silence is Not Golden

When presented with our privilege, when challenged by others who have been denied access, voice, and resources, those of us with privilege often respond with silence.

Silence is our most affective ploy for avoiding our responsibility to acknowledge our advantages and work against them and the evil they perpetuate. Our silence is deafening in its ability to quiet any challenge to the mantle of superiority that we have taken upon ourselves. Tim Wise notes, “Silence is how [those with privilege] so often greet any evidence that the world as we have long perceived it might not be the world as perceived and experience by others.”<sup>80</sup> Our silence, more often than not, clearly communicates what we would be ashamed to verbalize. Silence demonstrates fear, lack of empathy, indifference, and, many times, passive acceptance.

For those of us working to undo our privilege and for those of us working to end marginalization and oppression, silence challenges us the most. Ignorance can be remedied with education. And decisions to turn away from realities that scare us can be rectified by slow, willful choices to check our privileges. Even blatant denial, hate, and active participation in oppression and marginalization are preferable to silence, because at least those of us doing the work know who our allies are and who is working against us. Silence leaves us with empty bodies, blank stares, and people who should be our allies but instead close their mouths and allow oppression and marginalization to carry on.

Silent, passive acceptance of privilege is the most evil of responses. To recognize the many evils being carried out against our fellow human beings and the planet, and to do nothing, is to willfully accept the benefits of the privilege and therefore the horrors that must exist in order for the privilege to be manifest. As Paul Kivel accurately

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<sup>80</sup> Wise, *White Like Me*, 59.

describes, “Doing nothing is tacit approval and collusion with abuse. There is no neutral stance. If someone is being attacked, even by a joke or teasing, there are no innocent bystanders.”<sup>81</sup>

Those with privilege who employ silence often do so for at least four reasons. First, they harbor a naïve hope in their hearts that all of these uncomfortable conflicts will simply go away and that the world will be nice if we just all agree to get along and focused on the good and happy things in life. All this talk of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and the like remains off-putting, and frankly can be upsetting. This group walks on eggshells and remains silent in hopes of keeping the peace, not inconveniencing anyone, and making sure that everyone leaves happy. Many of them choose to live in isolation and hope that the horrors of the world never come to their doorstep all while knowing that the horrors of the world are at their neighbor’s doorstep.

Second, those with privilege employ silence to avoid dealing with deep shame and deep guilt.<sup>82</sup> This is not uncommon. Thandeka describes shame as “an emotional display of a hidden civil war. It is a pitched battle by a self against itself in order to stop feeling what it is not supposed to feel.”<sup>83</sup> As I have frequented men’s group, white caucus meetings, and dialogue sessions for those who are aware of their privilege and want to do something about it, stories of guilt and stories of shame are shared by all. It is a humbling experience to learn that one has been unconsciously benefiting from privileges that directly result in the suffering of others. The more we meet and come to

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<sup>81</sup> Kivel, *Uprooting Racism*, 130.

<sup>82</sup> Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin,” 139.

<sup>83</sup> Thandeka, *Learning to be White*, 12.

know those who have suffered so that we can get ahead, the more we are likely to grow ashamed of what we have done and feel overwhelmed with guilt for who we are. Often when we are raising children and we learn how we are shaping our children to benefit from privilege, we can feel doubly guilty as we are now unknowingly engaging an innocent child in oppression and marginalization. In my memory of the confederate flag bandana, the guiltier I felt for buying it and wearing it the more ashamed I felt. I just wanted it to go away and I never wanted to see or talk about it ever again. Shame and guilt drove me to silence so that I, just like all of us that benefit from privilege, would not have to publically deal with my actions and the privileges I had enjoyed. Often our shame grows deeper as we come to recognize all of the ways we have actively worked to reinforce our privilege. We recognize what we have given, the price that we have paid, and the cost that has been demanded of us to continue to remain privileged.<sup>84</sup> Silence seems the safest response.

Fear is the third reason those with privilege stay silent. Fear of consequences, fear of those how have been hurt, fear of seeming weak—whatever the fear is, it can cripple our feet and hands to action and bind our tongues into silence. Liz Walz, reflecting on white privilege in her article “The Culture of White People is to Remain Silent”, adds, “It is the fear of losing privilege that keeps me and other whites silent in the face of the violence of racism: in our homes and families, faith communities, schools, workplaces, in the media and legal systems...and in our own hearts.”<sup>85</sup> We do not want to lose the advantages we have because we are afraid of the great unknown without the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>85</sup> Walz, “The Culture of White People is to Remain Silent”.

assurance that systems shore up for us now. Sometimes we are afraid that those who have been oppressed and marginalized will take revenge on us financially, emotionally, or, most significantly, physically because of what has been done to them in our names.<sup>86</sup> We are afraid of retribution and we fear for our safety. We have distorted views and have bought into cultural lies that tell us the black and brown people, immigrants, and LGBTQA folks will hurt us because they are inherently violent. Our media reinforces these narratives and confirms our fear every time a person of color is portrayed as a criminal or a terrorist or by only reporting on crime that happens in neighborhoods predominated populated by people of color.<sup>87</sup> And so, much as the child who fears to confess his misdeed to his parent, we fear a punishment which we have created in our own minds.

Fourth, people with privilege remain silent because they are not prepared to take the step that justice is calling them to take. For those who remain silent, the next step represents a sacrifice, it represents an upheaval, or it represents a change that is unwelcome. Whether that change means owning one's privilege, giving up one's advantages, sacrificing a promotion or a job, or redistributing wealth and power<sup>88</sup>, that change is better kept in the dark. Silence then fills the void where the commitment should be. Often the step that is called for is acknowledging the past. For those with privilege, acknowledging and rectifying oppressions that occurred hundreds of years ago

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<sup>86</sup> Cone, "Theology's Great Sin" 139.

<sup>87</sup> Stoudt, Fox, and Fine, "Contesting Privilege," 186.

<sup>88</sup> Cone, "Theology's Great Sin" 139.

seems like ridiculous overkill that people cannot be reasonably expected to do.<sup>89</sup> Often the step is financial and material accountability. Once again, those with privilege see the past as the past and cannot imagine that contemporaries should either be asked to feel guilty or asked to account for what occurred long ago.<sup>90</sup> Sadly, those with privilege often do break their silence on history. However, they do so in a way that is greatly insulting to those who have been oppressed and marginalized. Tim Wise sums this insult up well in

*White Like Me:*

We want folks of color to move past the past, even as we very much seek to dwell in that place a while. We dwell there every July 4, every Columbus Day...we love the past as long as it venerates us.... It is only when those who were targets for slaughter and destruction in that past insist on having their voices heard that suddenly the past becomes conveniently irrelevant.<sup>91</sup>

Whatever the step is that is called for, those with privilege will continue to remain silent if the step they must take will stop them from benefiting from privilege. And so an irony arises where those with privilege do not want to be held accountable for history, but do want to keep benefiting from the privileges created in the past.

As a recent example of the silence of those with privilege, I turn to the religious freedom bill in Indiana. Having spent a significant amount of my young adult years in the Hoosier state, I was saddened to see their legislature pass and their governor sign a bill that was clearly intended to create a legal framework that allowed discrimination

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<sup>89</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1774.

<sup>90</sup> Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, 21.

<sup>91</sup> Wise, *White Like Me*, 68-69.

against LGBTQA peoples.<sup>92</sup> The response from some business owners, activists, and the media was swift in condemning the bill. As the debacle unfolded, Indiana became the focus point of the country. It would have been near impossible for anyone living in Indiana, especially if those persons were on social media, to remain ignorant of what was happening. And yet as I watched the media rage and as I watched activists and friends from outside of Indiana call for justice, I heard, with remarkably few exceptions, only silence from those I know in Indiana. It was as if everyone was just going about their lives and nothing was amiss. This was a needed moment for those in Indiana who want an inclusive state and who want a diverse, thriving state to step up and take a stand, but most of them remained silent. Sadly, their silence spoke volumes about their disregard for the lives and safety of LGBTQA folks. As they sat in silence, they also sat in their own heteronormative, gender binary privilege. Whether they truly were naïve to what was happening, whether they were ashamed of their past actions and beliefs towards LGBTQA folks, whether they were afraid of the consequences they might face in their families or in their churches, or whether they were in denial of the step that was being asked of them, their silence was crystal clear in communicating where they stood.

### Conclusion

Peggy McIntosh notes, “The pressure to avoid it [acknowledging our privilege] is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own. These perceptions mean also that my moral

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<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Cohn, “Why Indiana’s Religious Freedom Law is Such a Big Deal,” *Huffington Post*, April 1, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/01/indiana-religious-freedom\\_n\\_6984156.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/01/indiana-religious-freedom_n_6984156.html).



condition is not what I had been led to believe.”<sup>93</sup> This gets down to the heart of the matter for those of us with privilege. We either choose to acknowledge our privilege, choose to accept what it means for us personally, for society as a whole, and for countless persons who are oppressed and marginalized or we chose to ignore our privilege and hope to go blindly about our way. Either way, we are making a choice. And if we choose to ignore our privilege, if we choose to look away while others suffer so that we can have access, resources, and opportunities, we really should start asking ourselves about our own moral integrity. If we can continue to allow evil to happen so that we can remain comfortable, what does this really say about who we are as people?

Instead, if we choose to face our privilege, if we choose to acknowledge that it exists, and if we choose to do something about the evils that creates, then we have begun to move in a direction of peace. Acknowledgement is the first step and believe me it is a big step. By choosing to acknowledge your privilege you will immediately join a very small minority of privileged people with the courage to face the truth. But it does not stop there. Those of us who are privileged must commit to undoing our privilege and we must step into action to undo our privilege. I can tell you from personal experience that this is not an easy road to walk. Privilege shapes how we think, how we act, how we are treated, how we get ahead, and how we recover from setbacks. Because we experience privilege at a personal, systemic and institutional, and cultural level, we are always surrounded by privilege and we are always engaging our privilege. Privilege contributes to who we are and all of us interact with privilege every moment of every day. Privilege, marginalization, and oppression shape our chances in life, the set the rules that govern the

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<sup>93</sup> McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” 9.

impressions we will make on others, and finally, they shape our identities and our senses of ourselves.<sup>94</sup> As such, the work of undoing privilege is long, it is difficult, and it is fraught with peril and missteps that quickly lead us back to relying on our privilege.

But the work of undoing privilege is worth it. I have blessed to discover that I am a person of privilege at a relatively young age. I have been blessed to be surrounded by a community of mentors and fellow travelers. Together we have begun to walk the road of undoing our privilege. We have a long way to go, but we have started and that cannot be taken lightly.

When I broach the subject of my privilege with others, I consistently am asked one question. Why am I working against what benefits me? I offer three reasons. First, it is not acceptable to me, no matter how much it benefits me, that I exist because a system steals life from others so that I may have more. It is not acceptable to me that others suffer so that I can have abundance. Second, in order to maintain the privileges and power that I have, I must cut myself off for a richness of culture and experience. I must shield myself from any other way of being that directly challenges who I am and the power that I have. I must remove any threat to that which serves me. In doing so, I rob myself of a richer, more pure, more vibrant, and life-giving existence in community with a multitude of diverse people from all manners of background. And third, the current system we have, the one that benefits the few while starving the many, isn't working. We are destroying the planet and we are destroying our communities so that those of us with privilege can keep having privilege. This way of living isn't sustainable.

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<sup>94</sup> Ferber, O'Reilly, and Samuels, "The Matrix of Oppression and Privilege", 523.

Obviously, I am passionate about making this change. I want us all to live in a world that is sustainable and I want us all to have lives free of violence and suffering. I believe that it can happen. And I believe that it first starts with the choices that we each make. Many of those choices require us to reexamine what we think and what we believe. Many of those choices require us to expand our vision beyond seeing ourselves, our families, our communities, and our country as the center of the universe. Many of the choices come with a cost and that cost can be financial, it can be access, it can be security, and, for some, that cost may literally be our physical well-being and our lives. But there is no way around the choices that we must make if we truly want to live in a better world. There is no magic bullet, no secret science, and no amount of prayer that will change the destructive trajectory we are on, end violence and oppression, and bring healing to our planet, if we are not willing to do the work that these hard choices requires of us. We must act for ourselves, for one another, and for our collective future.

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APPENDIX A  
THESIS BACKGROUND

The impetus for *Seeking Redemption* began in the fall of 2010. While working at the YWCA in Seattle, I became involved in their work to end racism. At this point in my life, my understanding of historic, system racism was limited; I had only an elementary understanding of white privilege; I lacked a community from which to gain support, guidance, and mentorship; I failed to truly see all of my other privileges as connected with my white privilege; and I lacked the tools to begin working against my inherited privilege. Fellow staff members and mentors, Martin Friedman, Jeanice Hardy, and Patricia Hayden, patiently sat with me, instructed me, and taught me how to recognize my white privilege. They rooted me in the history of racial oppression and opened my eyes to the systemic nature of racism. They also took me to task numerous times when, in spite of my best efforts, I stepped into my privilege.

Simultaneously to my employment at the YWCA, I finished a Masters of Arts in Social Transformation through the School of Theology and Ministry at Seattle University. This degree focused on how to create institutional and systemic change. Dr. Jeanette Rodriguez, Dr. Sharon Callahan, Dr. Linda Smith, and Sharon Daloz Parks taught me to how to connect the personal to the structural and they rooted my understanding in social analysis, peacebuilding, and social justice. Like those at the YWCA who invested in me, my Seattle University professors did not let me lazily coast by in my privilege and they did not let me get away with adopting a false sense of comfort in my intentionality when I was in fact failing to act.

When I moved to Arizona and enrolled in the Justice Studies program at Arizona State University, I sought a deeper grounding in the history of oppression, theories of oppression, and theories of social change. I sought news ways to begin to articulate my

privilege and ways to work against it. In the fall of 2013 and the spring of 2014, Dr. Pat Lauderdale and Dr. Vicenti Carpio introduced me to indigenous decolonization.

Decolonization is an indigenous methodology for “meaningful and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands. Decolonization is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial structure and realizing Indigenous liberation.”<sup>95</sup> Michael Yellow Bird

conceptualizes decolonization in two parts:

As an event, decolonization concerns reaching a level of critical consciousness, an active understanding that you are (or have been) colonized and are thus responding to life circumstances in ways that are limited, destructive, and externally controlled.

As a process, decolonization means engaging in the activities of creating, restoring, and birthing. It means creating and consciously using various strategies to liberate oneself, adapt to or survive oppressive conditions; it means restoring cultural practices, think, beliefs, and values that were taken away or abandoned but are still relevant and necessary to survival; and it means the birthing of new ideas, thinking, technologies, and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>96</sup>

While decolonization is a methodology centered with indigenous peoples and designed for indigenous liberation, I saw the methodology as relevant for people with privilege to work against their privilege. I was specifically drawn to decolonization as 1) an event of realization where I as a person of privilege recognize my privilege personally, institutionally, and systemically, recognize the oppression that occurs to perpetuate my privilege, and recognize that I am robbed of a fuller life in community with others

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<sup>95</sup> Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird, “Introduction: Decolonizing Our Minds and Actions,” in *For Indigenous Minds Only: A Decolonization Handbook 2012*, eds. Waziyatawin and Michael Yellow Bird (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

because of privilege; and 2) a process where I begin to liberate myself from my privilege, restore my humanity, work against the oppression of others, and actively engage in practices that redeem our collective wholeness with one another and with nature.

Decolonization gave me a two-part framework from which to model a methodology for people of privilege to learn about and work against their privilege.

## APPENDIX B

### THESIS SCOPE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis began as a two-part project wherein I would explore the nature of privilege in the first half and explore practical methods for working against and undoing privilege in the second half. I recognized early on in the research process that the scope of this thesis was large and, as such, I explored the possibility of limiting my research. Initially, I struggled with whether or not to narrow the focus of this thesis to one or two manifestations of privilege. I considered limiting the research to only racial and gender privilege. However, this proposal presented two problems. First, I was not able to draw a sufficient number of succulent narratives from my history to write a robust thesis focused solely on racial and gender privilege. Second, as I explored my history, I continued to find Kimberle Crenshaw's principles of intersectionality at work.<sup>97</sup> In my research, my privilege presented as multifaceted and I could not draw narratives from my history that focused solely on racial and gender privilege without negating how other privileges also emerged in each narrative.

I also struggled with how deeply to explore privilege. The spectrum of research is quite large and I recognized that it would not be feasible for me to fully engage the full spectrum in writing this thesis. Yet, I also did not want to leave this thesis's exploration of privilege anemic. As a solution, I decided to focus solely on the characteristics of privilege that I was able to draw from my history. If a characteristic of privilege did not present in my history, and if I could not explore that characteristic of privilege through a narrative, I did not include it.

In spite of my efforts to narrow my focus, when I began writing the thesis it quickly became apparent that the two-part goal of exploring the nature of privilege and

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<sup>97</sup> Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex."

exploring methods to work against privilege was still too large for a thesis and was appropriately suited for a dissertation. As such, following the advice of my thesis chair, I limited the writing of this thesis to an exploration of the nature of privilege as manifest in my history. The intended second half of this thesis on methods to work against privilege will be explored in further writings beyond this thesis, including the possibility of a book.

Given the limited scope for this thesis, I focused on three research questions. First, what is privilege and how do I manifest privilege? Second, what narratives from my personal history illustrate my privilege? What lessons about privilege can be drawn from my personal experiences?



APPENDIX C  
RESEARCH AND WRITING PROCESS

The research for this thesis began with a substantial review of scholarly work on privilege and power. This canon of work included explorations into racial, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural privileges. I also explored scholarly work on oppression. This canon of work focused on racism, slavery, United States-based indigenous genocide, global colonization, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and sexual violence. This was an important first step as it increased my theoretical sensitivity to power and privilege. Strauss and Corbin note, “Theoretical sensitivity refers to a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. One can come to the research situation with varying degrees of sensitivity depending upon previous reading and experience with or relevant to an area.”<sup>98</sup> Increasing my theoretical sensitivity gave me the foundation from which to critique my memories and experiences for examples of manifest privilege.

Next, through the advice of my committee, I selected autoethnography and creative nonfiction as my research and writing methodologies. I then engaged a robust review of literature on the merits of autoethnography and creative nonfiction and how to apply autoethnography and creative nonfiction methods to draw out personal narratives which could then be mined for lessons on privilege.

I began the writing process for this thesis by drafting a 98-page autobiography. I needed a body of work from which to draw relevant narratives. In writing my autobiography, I aimed to write historically and tried to minimize any editorializing or any exploration of my experiences. I simply wrote my memories chronologically. The

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<sup>98</sup> Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998) 41.

autobiography encompassed my earliest memories until as recently as five years ago. The writing process for the autobiography was specific at times and highly fluid at other times. Often, as I saw particular relevancy for my exploration of privilege arise, I explored those memories in greater detail. At other times, I explored only the highlights of memories with little perceived relevancy to my research.

Once the autobiography was done, I began pulling out memories that specifically connected to my research on privilege. I extracted 15 memories for further exploration and for adaption into personal narratives. I then converted each memory into a short narrative using creative nonfiction as my writing methodology and redrafted each narrative at least twice. Once the narrative writing was finished, I divided the narratives into four categories based on how I felt each narrative explored privilege. The categories were:

- **Personal Manifestations:** These narratives explore times when I personally manifested my privilege.
- **Oppression and Marginalization:** These narratives explore times when I personally witnessed the oppression and marginalization of others.
- **Systemic Manifestations:** These narratives explore times when I saw myself benefitting from systemic privilege or oppression.
- **Lessons for the Future:** These narratives explore lessons I have learned for undoing privilege.

With the narratives separated, I put the narratives in dialogue with the scholarly work of other the authors that I had explored in preparing to write this thesis. Through this process, and the elimination of the second half of the writing project as noted above, I selected seven narratives that I felt 1) best modeled the lessons gathered from the

scholarly work I explored and 2) would best connect with the project’s audience. Lastly, I redrafted the seven narratives and wrote out the accompanying lesson on privilege for each narrative.

Finally, I intentionally used inviting, non-academic language whenever possible in the drafting of the thesis. The language choice reflects my desire to speak clearly using language that will be familiar to the audiences for which this thesis was written. Additionally, I chose to present this thesis using Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) formatting. CMS places citations in the footnotes and provides a crisper, flowing reading experience for non-academic audiences.

Table 1

Narratives divided by category

<b>Personal Manifestations</b>	<b>Oppression &amp; Marginalization</b>	<b>Systemic Manifestations</b>	<b>Lessons for the Future</b>
<i>Run</i>	Fear	<i>Donuts and Hamburger</i>	The Brother with the Broken Leg
Breaking and Entering	The Future Does Not Sing	<i>The Price of Blood</i>	Darkness
<i>Zacapa</i>	<i>The Cage Called Home</i>	<i>Slumlord</i>	Karuna Insists
<i>The Rebel in Me</i>	Violence in the Shadows		The Water that Baptizes

Note: Narratives selected for the final draft are italicized

APPENDIX D

AUDIENCE

There are three intended audiences for this thesis. First, I wrote this thesis for myself. I saw this as an opportunity to explore my past and reconsider my experiences and my history through the lens of privilege. As I wrote my autobiography and the narratives of this thesis, I discovered some aspects of my past that I either was not aware of or I had glossed over in process of selectively creating memories. For example, the discovery of my Hungarian Jewish roots directly resulted from my exploration of the cost of whiteness as presented by Thandeka in *Learning to be White*. In addition, because I placed my experiences in dialogue with the canon of research and writings on privilege, I was able to better articulate my experiences through a historic lens that was meant to remain invisible to me.<sup>99</sup> And finally, in writing this thesis for myself, I backed into the opportunity to shed light into some experiences that I had not made peace with. Specifically, “Slumlord” and “The Rebel in Me” were both narratives I had pushed into the recesses of my memory and most likely would not have brought to the surface if I had not seen their telling as a first step towards redemption.

I also wrote this thesis for my fellow people of privilege. The second audience is a specific subset of people of privilege. This subset is conservative and predominately white. As I wrote I held a specific friend of my family in mind who embodies intelligence and compassion but who also manifests his privilege vocally in ways that marginalize others. I see him as on the edge of understanding. He possesses the capacity to open his eyes and see his privilege. The question is can he be reached through the fog of neutrality and willful blindness that surrounds him? The hope of this thesis is to

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<sup>99</sup> Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 92.

engage him and other conservatives who are within reach, inform them, and challenge them to see beyond the blinders that hinder their participation in working for equity and justice.

The third audience is also a subset of those persons of privilege. I wrote this thesis for passive liberals who regularly benefit from privilege yet seek to absolve themselves of any responsibility to work against their privilege because they actively champion their ostensible liberalism. As passive liberals, their relationship with their privilege is often lip service because they either consciously or sub-consciously recognize that that they are complicit in the oppression of others and also wish to continue to benefit from their privileged positions.

For the second and third audiences, I hope that this thesis can serve as encouragement to begin to explore their privilege more deeply. And as an encouragement that privilege is a real social contributor that must be considered in all decisions and social situations because it manifests in all decisions and social situations.

APPENDIX E

METHODOLOGIES: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND CREATIVE NONFICTION



*The “new social movements” of the last twenty years—for example, gay rights, women’s rights, and civil rights—emphasize identity and cultural change rather than concentrating solely on political action and gain, changing laws, resource mobilization, and macro-change. Polletta (1997), Melucci (1995), and others argue that movement resources should encompass compelling narratives and that success should be judged by transformations in culture, collective self-definitions, and meanings that influence and shape everyday life. Increased self-understanding may provide a quicker and more successful route to social change than changing laws or other macro-political structures.—Carolyn Ellis<sup>100</sup>*

The goal of this thesis is to explore and interrogate my memories and history for lessons on privilege and then share these lessons with fellow persons of privilege. I employ two methodologies to accomplish this task. First, I use autoethnography to mine my memories and history. Autoethnography connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political while considering personal experience an important source of insight into cultural experiences.<sup>101</sup> Second, I use creative nonfiction to convert my memories and history into engaging narratives that carry lessons on privilege that can be unpacked and explored. Creative nonfiction is a methodology and a literary technique that presents nonfiction in a compelling, vivid, and dramatic fashion in order to enthrall readers.<sup>102</sup>

As a researcher and activist, I chose autoethnography because as I continue to explore the canon of social justice work I continue to find a vacuum of scholarship written by people of privilege that explores their personal privilege and connects it back

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<sup>100</sup> Carolyn Ellis, “Being Real: Moving Inward Towards Social Change,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 15, no. 4, (2002): 402.

<sup>101</sup> Carolyn Ellis and Tony E. Adams, “The Purpose, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 254.

<sup>102</sup> Lee Gutkind, “What is Creative Nonfiction?,” *Creative Nonfiction*, accessed June 17, 2015, <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/what-is-creative-nonfiction>.

to systemic oppression and to others who share those privileges. Ellis and Adams contend that this is a good starting place for autoethnography, “Some autoethnographies begin when a researcher recognizes critical silences and crucial voids in the existing research on particular topics, and as such uses personal experience to fill in these silences.”<sup>103</sup> I have found a significant amount of theory and research on historic oppression. However, I have also found a thick veil where scholars of privilege do not personally connect themselves to the privilege and oppression that they are studying. Methodologically, autoethnography provided the tools to bring my research into this void.

First, autoethnography holds value in its ability to explore how the personal is political. Indeed, making the connection between the personal and the political is at the heart of autoethnography and it is this bridge between the personal and the political that separates autoethnography from autobiography. As people, we do not experience our lives in a neutral setting. In truth, all of our memories and experiences are cultural artifacts that are organized into shared cultural categories.<sup>104</sup> All of our memories and all of our experiences happen in connection to history. Because the history of the North American continent over the last 500 years is oppression and marginalization for the sake of shoring up power for selected privileged groups, all of our history happens in connection to this privilege, oppression, and marginalization. Additionally, because we are each political beings, all of our experiences are politicized. Autoethnography

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<sup>103</sup> Ellis and Adams, “The Purpose, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research,” 265.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Atkinson, “Performing Ethnography and the Ethnography Performance,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25, no. 1 (2004): 111.

provides a tool for us to draw out the political significance of our experiences and how our history is constructed.<sup>105</sup> In this sense, because autoethnography is personal, it represents experimental research in which the author gives up neutrality and the distinction between the observer and the observed is weakened or obliterated.<sup>106</sup> As the author, I acknowledge that I am a part of the data, that I am influenced by the research, and that my responses and how I am changed by the research are worth studying.<sup>107</sup> As a person of privilege, this personal connection wherein I am the subject of the research serves as I tool that I can use to help work against my own privilege and work towards my own liberation. As such, autoethnography becomes a reciprocal process.<sup>108</sup>

Second, autoethnography recognizes that significant research can be found in the epiphanies of our lives. As Denzin elaborates, “Epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people’s lives. In them, personal character is manifested.... They alter the fundamental meaning structure in a person’s life.”<sup>109</sup> However, autoethnography does not limit significance to grandiose moments of clarity but instead includes the ordinary and the mundane as sources of complexity and

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<sup>105</sup> Satoshi Toyosaki, Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway, Nathan A. Wendt, and Kyle Leathers, “Community Autoethnography: Compiling the Personal and Resituating Whiteness,” *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies* 9, no. 1 (2009): 56.

<sup>106</sup> Atkinson, “Performing Ethnography and the Ethnography Performance,” 108.

<sup>107</sup> Arthur P. Bochner, “Perspectives on Inquiry III: The Moral of Stories,” in *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, eds. M.L. Knapp and J. A. Daly (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2002), 76.

<sup>108</sup> bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 12 (1991): 2.

<sup>109</sup> Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretative Autoethnography* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2014) 54.

significance.<sup>110</sup> The mundane is full of assumptions and status quos that we often accept to such a degree that we no longer see them as significant or exceptional. The question that autoethnography asks of the mundane is what have we accepted as so normal that we overlook how abnormal it truly is? What autoethnography then does is re-imagine how epiphanies occur and then mines both the grandiose and the mundane for richness of experience.

Third, autoethnography challenges hegemonic research practices by creating space for our personal voices to enter the conversation. As researchers, we often act as if our research is neutral or we act as if we can negate how our personal histories and biases influence our work. At some point we became convinced that showing the personal was a sign of inferiority and that it would be seen as unscientific or unscholarly.<sup>111</sup>

Additionally, we often imagine that our research can maintain a distance perspective high above without getting tangled in the thick of things on the ground.<sup>112</sup> By hiding ourselves behind our methodologies and lexicons, we have convinced ourselves that we have created neutrality. In truth, we have simply failed to examine the impact that we personally have on our research. Autoethnography moves away from this façade by actively embracing the notion that we always bring ourselves to our work.

Autoethnography asks that as researchers we critique not only the data but also the lens

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<sup>110</sup> Walter R. Fisher, "Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument," *Communication Monographs* 52, (1984): 3.

<sup>111</sup> Arthur P. Bochner, "Criteria Against Ourselves," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 267.

<sup>112</sup> Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *The Drama Review* 46, no. 2 (2002): 146.

through which we explore the data. Autoethnography also encourages new voices to enter the fray and challenge the established hegemonic research practices. These new voices challenge the highly abstract, jargonistic, and obscure methodologies of the intellectual class hierarchy of the academy by grounding knowledge in accessible styles and languages.<sup>113</sup> In doing so autoethnography gives notice to those who are often denied voice and denied the opportunity to tell their story.<sup>114</sup>

Fourth, autoethnography connects the researcher with the audience. Because autoethnography explores the personal, it creates a reciprocal relationship wherein the author writes intentionally with the hope of connecting with an audience and the audience then reads the author's narratives and explores their own personal histories for similar experiences and memories. As Carolyn Ellis notes, "Good autoethnography works toward a *communitas*, where we might speak together of our experiences, find commonality of spirit, companionship in our sorrow, balm for our wounds, and solace in reaching out to those in need as well (Ellis, 1998)."<sup>115</sup> Because we experience privilege, oppression, and marginalization institutionally and systemically, we are all carrying memories and experiences that are deeply connected and often quite similar. As Denzin highlights:

No self or personal-experience story is ever an individual production. It derives from larger group, cultural, ideological, and historical contexts.... To understand a life, the epiphanies and the personal-experience and self-stories that represent and shape that life, one must penetrate and understand these larger structures.

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<sup>113</sup> hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," 4.

<sup>114</sup> Denzin, *Interpretative Autoethnography*, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Ellis, "Being Real: Moving Inward Towards Social Change," 401.

They provide the languages, emotions, ideologies, taken-for-granted understandings, and shared experiences from which the stories flow.<sup>116</sup>

Additionally, through the connective power of narratives, autoethnography can bring new knowledge to audiences that may not have access to traditional academic writing or who may be marginalized because of academic language or research presentation techniques.<sup>117</sup> If as a researcher I can bring new knowledge of larger systems and institutions and I can set the stage for the audience through my language and storytelling then hopefully the audience will run with my findings and use them to explore the contexts of their own lives.<sup>118</sup>

And fifth, not only does autoethnography make the personal political, but it also makes the personal pedagogical. As a researcher, I look back into my experiences and memories through the new lenses that theoretical sensitivity creates for lessons and understandings that I can apply personally. As I share these lessons and understandings with my audiences, I provide learning opportunities for them as well. Through my writing I enact the worlds I study. These performances instruct my readers about this world and how I see it and this in turn challenges, contests, or endorses the official ways of seeing and representing the other.<sup>119</sup> The pedagogical nature of autoethnography is

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<sup>116</sup> Denzin, *Interpretative Autoethnography*, 56.

<sup>117</sup> Ellis and Adams, "The Purpose, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research," 263.

<sup>118</sup> Stacy Holman Jones, "Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2005) 765.

<sup>119</sup> Norman K. Denzin, "Pedagogy, Performance, and Autoethnography," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2006): 333.

ontological in that as a researcher I draw lessons from my past on how to be in the world now.<sup>120</sup> The pedagogical nature of autoethnography is also epistemological in that as researcher I am challenged to consider new ways of knowing that may have been blind to me previously but have now come to light as I engage other research as a tool for mining my own history.

In writing this thesis, I chose creative nonfiction as my second methodology. Lee Gutkind explains creative nonfiction:

Creative nonfiction is a concept that offers great flexibility and freedom, while adhering to the basic tenets of nonfiction writing and/or reporting.... Creative nonfiction writers are encouraged to utilize fictional (literary) techniques in their prose - from scene to dialogue to description to point-of-view - and be cinematic at the same time. Creative nonfiction writers write about themselves and/or capture real people and real life in ways that can and have changed the world. What is most important and enjoyable about creative nonfiction is that it not only allows, but encourages the writer to become a part of the story or essay being written. The personal involvement creates a special magic that alleviates the suffering and anxiety of the writing experience; it provides many outlets for satisfaction and self-discovery, flexibility and freedom.<sup>121</sup>

As a writer, I wanted to employ a methodology that took my memories and the observations that I wanted to communicate and transformed them into a succulent presentation that would read less like an academic piece and more like a work of fiction.

Creative nonfiction was ideal for this thesis for two reasons. First, creative nonfiction uses writing techniques, such as dialogue and plot development, that help explore memories and experiences more deeply. As such, creative nonfiction pairs well with autoethnography. Creative nonfiction encourages the writer “to remember and

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<sup>120</sup> Ellis and Adams, “The Purpose, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research,” 271.

<sup>121</sup> Lee Gutkind, “What’s the Story #6,” *Creative Nonfiction*, accessed June 21, 2015, <https://www.creativenonfiction.org/online-reading/whats-story-6>.

consider social context as they write.”<sup>122</sup> As I write the narratives that I have drawn from my memories and experiences using autoethnography, creative nonfiction allows me to step back from the narrative and see it in its entirety; it allows me to reposition and highlight key elements of the narrative in a manner that reveals truths that are hidden in a strict chronological presentation; it allows me to add dialogue that draws out the significance of the narrative; and it allows me to contextualize and enhance the narrative using my theoretical sensitivity. Creative nonfiction allows me to show my research to my audience in a dramatic style that is wholly different from the traditional academic model of summarizing one’s findings.<sup>123</sup>

Second, creative nonfiction is a useful tool for communicating information, research, and lessons in an engaging fashion that draws the reader into the work and connects the reader with the author. Creative nonfiction is audience-oriented and requires that the author decide how she or he would like to be placed in relationship to the reader.<sup>124</sup> For me, because I hope that this thesis will reach the audiences identified above, I actively used creative nonfiction because it is an effective methodology for reaching my audience in a disarming and inviting manner. I hope that as I arrive at epiphanies, I can communicate those epiphanies in such a way that the reader moves with

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<sup>122</sup> Megan Brown, “The Memoir as Provocation: A Case for “Me Studies” in Undergraduate Classes,” *College Literature* 37, no. 3 (2010): 126.

<sup>123</sup> Darrel N. Caulley, “Making Qualitative Research Reports Less Boring: The Techniques of Writing Creative Nonfiction,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (2008): 427.

<sup>124</sup> Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola, *Tell it Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction* (New York, NY: McGraw Hill, 2005), lx.



me and arrives at a similar epiphany.<sup>125</sup> This use of creative nonfiction should be seen as intentionally straying away from neutrality. As a creative nonfiction writer, I took a side because I wanted to clearly interact with the reader.<sup>126</sup> I did not want to remain hidden.

In terms of creative nonfiction format and style, I consistently employed a narrative/summary format wherein I presented my experience and then used this narrative to transition into a summary of the lesson inherent in the narrative. I drew this format from Theodore Rees Cheney's *Writing Creative Nonfiction*.<sup>127</sup> This format tied each narrative to a specific lesson that can stand alone while also contributing to the overall richness of the thesis. Additionally, I chose to write my narratives using the first person. This style, while not mandatory in creative nonfiction, boded well with my use of autoethnography. Throughout my thesis I tried to personalize my narratives, and thus my privilege, so that the reader would also personalize their narratives and privilege. I wanted to position myself close to the reader.<sup>128</sup> And finally, I often styled my narratives using the vernacular, swear words, sentence fragments, and incorrect grammar. This

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<sup>125</sup> Curtis W. Hart, "Creative Nonfiction: Narrative and Revelation," *Journal of Religious Health* 48, (2009): 218.

<sup>126</sup> Lee Gutkind, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction—From Memoir to Literacy Journalism and Everything in Between* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>127</sup> Theodore A. Rees Cheney, *Writing Creative Nonfiction: Fiction Techniques for Crafting Great Nonfiction* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

style preserves the authenticity with which I experienced the narrative and it connects to the style with which the reader lives and navigates their everyday life.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Tatjana Marjanović, “The (In)visibility of Academic Prose Writers: A Story of Scholarship Turning Human,” *Changing English* 18, no. 4, (2011): 439.