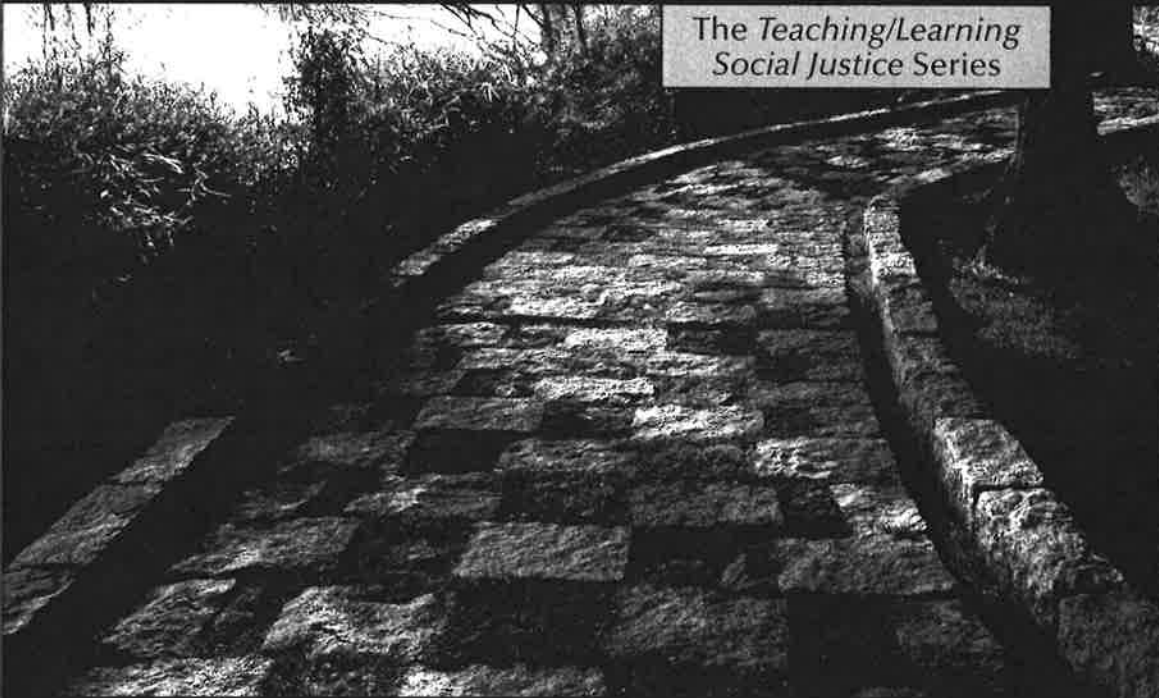


# Understanding White Privilege

Creating Pathways to Authentic  
Relationships Across Race

*The Teaching/Learning  
Social Justice Series*



FRANCES E. KENDALL

This book is dedicated to the women and men of color who have entered into authentic relationships with me because, as Adrienne Rich says, "we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us."

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## UNDERSTANDING WHITE PRIVILEGE

*Some years ago I was facilitating a two-day corporate diversity training session in Dallas. During the first day and a half I had talked a lot about institutionalized racism in terms of the differences in daily life experiences. The people of color in the room described situations in which they felt they had been treated differently than they would have been had they been white, for example, being followed around in stores by security guards and salespeople, being routinely stopped by police officers when they hadn't broken any laws, and so on. Most of the white participants were not buying it; some were more adamant than others that the stories were mere coincidence.*

*During the lunch break on the second day, two people—a white woman, Debbie, and a Latina, Josefina—both went shopping. By chance, they turned up in the kitchen department at the same store and bought similar rugs. The Latina got into the checkout line first; the white woman was two people behind her in line. The Latina took out her American Express card to pay. The salesperson took the card and asked for two additional pieces of identification. After the sale was rung up, she handed the woman the sales slip and said, “Be sure to keep this accessible because the guard will want to see it as you leave.” The Latina said, “Thank you,” and left to come back to the training. When we resumed after lunch, the white woman raised her hand. “Okay,” she said. “I got it. Josefina and I both happened to go to the store . . .” and she described the events. “After Josefina left, it was my turn. I handed the saleswoman my American Express card,*

*she rang up the sale, rolled the sales slip up in the rug, put it in a bag, handed it to me, and wished me a good day. She didn't ask me for any more identification, didn't warn me about the security guard, who didn't even notice as I left. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."*

Several things about this story make it a good beginning for our discussion of understanding white privilege. First, even though Debbie had been listening to employees of color talk about their painful experiences for a day and a half, she had essentially chosen not to believe what they said; she had continued to say that she thought the different experiences were individual, not race-based. She used her privilege of expecting to be educated about race by the people who were most affected—those of color—and then chose not to believe them. Often, unless the stories are undeniably horrendous, white people don't seem to be moved. We anesthetize ourselves so we won't have to feel the pain that people of color experience because of our behavior. Also, throughout the first part of the session Debbie and other whites had told the people of color that they were "too sensitive" and were "always looking for race." No matter how much the participants of color had tried to educate the white people, the white people had the privilege to belittle and dismiss their concerns. These examples of how white privilege plays out may look subtle to white people; they certainly are not to people of color.

My belief is that we want a better world in which each of us can live. If that's the case, what can we do? The first step is to become clear about the basics of white privilege, what it is, and how it works. Since there will be a lot of information in the rest of the chapter, I thought it might be useful to include a list of assumptions about white privilege right up front. These fall into the "it (almost) goes without saying" category—things I so take for granted that too often, rather than state them, I talk as though everyone already understands them. My friend Pat Lowrie calls it the mortar between the bricks.

There is nothing magical about this list. It is simply a place to start. The superiority of whiteness is a social construct, created by some white men but in all our names. This construct informs both the past and the present and affects each of our lives daily. All of us who are white receive white privileges. They are bestowed on us impersonally and systemically, but they affect us personally. We can't not get them, and we can't give them back. Our choice is to use them in such a way as to dismantle the systems that keep the superiority of whiteness in place. One of the primary privileges is having greater influence, power, and resources. White people make decisions that affect everyone without consulting anyone else. As white people, we keep ourselves central, thereby silencing others.

We can include or exclude others at our whim. If we look at race in North America as only a Black-white construct, we miss the true purpose of the system. We must be aware of how the power holders oppressed all people of color to shape the country as they wanted it. Racism is one of several systems of oppression. Others are class, sexism, heterosexism, the institutionalized primacy of Christianity, and able-bodiedism. These systems work toward a common goal: to maintain power and control in the hands of wealthy, white, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied men. Examining the intersections is essential to understanding the intentional and finely crafted nature of the system. Finally, this system is brilliant but not impervious to change. We can dismantle it if we know it well and work together toward that goal.

White privilege is an institutional, rather than personal, set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who hold the power positions in our institutions. One of the primary privileges is having greater access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of our skin color doors are open to us that are not open to other people. For example, given the exact same financial history, white people in the United States are two and a third times more likely to get a housing loan than African Americans and one and a half times more likely than Latinos.<sup>1</sup> Further, the types of loans, prime (those at the best interest rates) and subprime (those at a much higher rate), vary dramatically by group. In 2002, only 7.5 percent of housing loans made to whites were subprime, while 26.4 percent of loans made to African Americans were subprime, as were 20 percent to Latinos. Over the last ten years, the use of these high interest loans has risen significantly, up from 1 percent to whites and 2 percent for African Americans and Latinos.<sup>2</sup>

All of us who are white have white privilege, although the extent to which we have it varies depending on our gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical ability, size and weight, and the like. For example, in 2004, women were 46.4 percent of the labor force and held 50.3 percent of managerial, professional, and related positions. This 50.3 percent includes roughly 37 percent white, 6 percent African Americans, 5 percent Latinas, and 2 percent Asian Americans.<sup>3</sup> In January 2005, *Black Enterprise* noted that in Fortune 1000 companies, while 18 African Americans are CEOs (15 are men, 3 are women), African Americans "still hold less than 1 percent of senior-level corporate posts."<sup>4</sup> Unless we believe that white people are inherently more capable than men and women of color, we have to acknowledge that our systems are treating us unequally.

White privilege has nothing to do with whether or not we are “good” people. We who are white can be jerks and still have white privileges; people of color can be wonderful individuals and not have them. Privileges are bestowed on us *solely because of our race* by the institutions with which we interact, not because we deserve them as individuals. We are sometimes granted opportunities because we, as individuals, deserve them; often we are granted them because we belong to one or more of the favored groups in our society. At some colleges and universities, for example, sons and daughters of alumnae and alumni may have lower grades and test scores than other applicants; they are accepted, however, because they are “legacies”—their parents graduated from the institution. That is a privilege that the sons and daughters did nothing to earn; because of where their parents had gone to school, they were put ahead of other applicants who had higher test scores and grades.

Bestowing privileges on white people was and is intentional, like its counterbalance, withholding privileges from people of color. In many instances the latter was also malicious. I have already mentioned several examples of control by brutal treatment, but there are lots of others. Breaking apart Black families during slavery, sending mothers one place, fathers another, and babies and children yet another; removing American Indian children from their homes, taking them far from anything they knew, and punishing them if they tried to speak in their own language; slaughtering tribal people rather than abiding by the treaties that we had entered into with them; using Chinese laborers to build the transcontinental railroad, paying them sixty cents on the dollar that white men were paid, and cutting off their food supply when they went on strike for better wages.<sup>5</sup> While painful to hold in our consciousness, it is important to remember this side of American history, so that we are dealing with an accurate picture.

Further, it is essential to be conscious that the patterns set in history are continued today, not only in the systematic discrimination against people of color in housing, health care, education, and the judicial system, but also in the less obvious ways in which people of color are excluded from many white people’s day-to-day consciousness. Think, for example, of how rarely you see a positive story about a Native American or a Latina/o on the front page of the newspaper. Could you name ten women of color, other than people in sports, film, and music, who have made major contributions to our society? The freedom not to notice our lack of knowledge about people of color is another privilege that is afforded only to us. All of us, including students of color, study the history of white Western Europeans every day in our public schools.

White people can’t not get white privileges, and we can’t give them away, no matter how much we do not want them. For example, if I walk into any drugstore in the country that carries hair products, I can be sure to find something designed for my hair. Black hair products are much harder to find; often African Americans have to drive for miles to buy what they need. Further, I know that when a Band-Aid box says “flesh color,” it means my skin color, not those of my Asian or Latina friends. If, in an attempt to give back my privileges, I said to the drugstore clerk, “I don’t want the privilege of always being able to get shampoo for my hair when my Black friend can’t,” the clerk would think I was nuts. Even if she or he agreed with me, it wouldn’t change the general availability of Black hair products.

I used to say, rather glibly, that we white people receive our skin-color privileges prenatally, meaning that we get them from the beginning. Then, as I became more familiar with health care disparity, I realized that actually race is a significant variable in pre- and postnatal morbidity. In the United States in 2004, the infant mortality rate per 100,000 live births for African American babies was 13.3 percent and only 5.7 percent for white babies.<sup>6</sup> Even before birth and immediately after, there are disparities in health care solely based on the color of their skin that cause one child to live and another to die. We are more likely to attribute the differences to socioeconomic class, regardless of what the data show. I think that is because we don’t want to take the issues of racism seriously; many white people have difficulty accepting that our nation has a racial problem.

In a racial attitude survey published in *The Washington Post*, 13 percent of white people thought that African Americans had more economic opportunities than white people did, while only 1 percent of African Americans thought they had more opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Seventy-four percent of Blacks believed they had fewer economic opportunities, while only 27 percent of whites believed that. This survey reflects many others identifying the divided perceptions of racial inequality. While people of color understand the necessity of being able to read the white system and to know what life for white people is like, those of us who are white are able to live our lives knowing very little of the experiences of people of color. Remember from Chapter 3 the comment of a white college student who said she could tell someone all about her life and never talk about race? If we don’t know about our race, if our race is not consciously important to us, then it is difficult to understand why someone else’s race is so important to her or him. Understanding racism or whiteness is often an intellectual exercise for us, something we can work at for a while and then move on, rather than its being central to our survival.

Further, we have the privilege of not knowing how to deal with racial situations without looking incompetent. Almost always, when I ask a white senior administrator how she or he responded to a racial comment or situation, I get a shrug of the shoulders and the response, “I didn’t do anything. I didn’t know what to do.” Chapter 7, “Talking About Race,” focuses on what one might do. The shrug response shows that there is no consequence for the white administrator who didn’t know what to do; there is no expectation that she or he should know. However, had that administrator been of color, there would have been the assumption of incompetence and at least a look expressing disbelief and disappointment. “What do you mean, you didn’t do anything? You’re the one who is supposed to know what to do. This is your area.” And probably some of that would have been spoken.

Another white privilege is the ability to make decisions that affect everyone without taking others into account. This occurs at every level, from international to individual. The following story could look like an oversight: “Oops, I forgot to ask other people what they thought.” However, in my experience it is typical behavior for white women who want women of color to join them in their endeavors.

Another white woman, a librarian, and I began to plan a conference for librarians on racism that we named “Librarians as Colleagues: Working Together Across Racial Lines.” We talked and talked, making notes of good exercises to include, videos to use, materials that might prove helpful. It was clear that we needed a diverse committee to work with me, the facilitator, and we created one that would include all voices: two white women (one Jewish), a Latina, a Chinese American woman, straight women and lesbians, and several African Americans. By the end of our conversation, I was extremely excited and couldn’t wait to contact the women on the “planning committee.” At the first meeting with these women, I talked about my twenty-five-year history of working on issues of racism and particularly my own work on what it means to be white and Southern. Then I presented what my friend and I had thought up as the plan for the conference, and all of us talked about the particulars. In other words, I presented my credentials as a “good white person” and then proceeded to create a conference that was what my friend and I had planned without any input from people of color. At our second meeting, the women of color pointed out that I had fallen into the classic trap of white women: the come-be-part-of-what-we’re-doing syndrome. “If you truly want us to work with you to create a conference, we will. But it means starting over and building a plan together. If you want us to enter the planning process in the middle and add our ideas to yours, we’re not interested.”

For those of us who are white women, too often we see ourselves only as women, believing that we are “sisters under the skin” all suffering under the same oppressor: the white man. That is part of our racial privilege, to be able to ignore our whiteness. Women of color generally don’t feel that way at all because, due to the supremacy of whiteness, race is viewed as their primary identity. This is one of the complexities in relationships between women of color and white women.

Being white enables me to decide whether I am going to listen to others, to hear them, or neither. I also silence people of color without intending to or even being aware of it, by talking over them, talking around them, not asking their opinions, or not considering the omnipresence of race as I view a situation. For example, a colleague of mine, an African American woman, attended a conference on dialogue. Of the forty-five people there, she was one of four who were not white. The whites were highly educated, bright, and, for the most part, liberal. As the meeting unfolded, it became increasingly clear that, if the women of color didn’t mention race, no one would. The white people were not conscious at all that race—their race—was an integral aspect of every conversation they were having. When the women of color did insert the issue into the dialogue, the white people felt accused of being “racist,” became defensive and hurt, and wanted reassurance from the Black and Latina and Asian women. In this instance, silencing occurred when the planners were not clear that race was an element in the conference even if no people of color had attended. The white participants didn’t include the reality of others in their plan, and, when my colleague raised the issue, she was made to feel that she was “causing trouble.”

White privilege allows us not to see race in ourselves and to be angry at those who do. I was asked to address a meeting of white women and women of color called together to create strategies for addressing issues of social justice in women’s health care. Each of the women had been working for years in her own community on a range of problems from health care to school reform. As I spoke about the work that is required for white women and women of color to collaborate authentically, the white women became nervous and then resistant. Why was race always such an issue for women of color? What did I mean when I said it was essential for white women to be conscious of how their race affects every hour of their lives, just as women of color are? They were all professionals, some said; why did it matter what color they were? The silencing of dialogue here occurred because the white women didn’t want to face being white or see the race of the women in the room as an issue. It did not occur to them that their daily experience was different from that of the African Americans, Latinas, and Asian

Americans in the room. Had I not been asked to raise the question, the responsibility of doing so would have been left to the women of color.

One of the most difficult groups of people I work with is white people who see themselves as “liberal” or “progressive.” The white people in the meeting I just described were definitely in that group. Often it is they who are most offended when I suggest that all of us who are white have personal work to do. They begin to talk defensively about their credentials: “I marched with Martin Luther King,” “I was in the Peace Corps in Africa,” and then the absurd cliché, “Some of my best friends are Black.” I believe there is an honest sense of “I get this. Why aren’t you talking to those people who are really the problem?” What they don’t realize is that they are the best hope, if only they can be moved beyond defensiveness and arrogance. I have long appreciated this passage from bell hooks’s book *Talking Back*:

When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white-supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.<sup>8</sup>

So, while they are my greatest challenge, I see them as an essential place to put my energy. They are often the ones in an organization who are aware that, theoretically, race is an issue. Frequently they have to be pushed to act but want to be seen as good people.

One of my biggest “hot buttons” is white people who are willing openly, often proudly and with attitude, to state that race is not “their issue.” During a break in a corporate diversity training I was leading, I was talking with one of the participants. He was twenty-something, white, Jewish, and openly gay. He told me that he had recently bought a house in an African American section of the city and that some of the families were not happy that he was there. They had let him know that in their comments about buying a house “out from under” an African American family. “But you know,” he said to me dismissively, “they are going to have to worry about that. Race is NMI.”

“NMI?” I asked.

“Yeah, you know, race is not my issue.”

I was stunned by what he had said and so distressed by his cavalier attitude that I knew it was best to walk away, take a deep breath, and drink some water. I wondered why the anti-Semitism and the antigay

bigotry he had probably experienced even in gay-friendly San Francisco hadn’t shaped an understanding that all issues of institutionalized hatred are connected. But, I reasoned with myself, being discriminated against as a lesbian has not necessarily forced me to be aware of or sensitive to other people’s pain, so why should he be different? Nothing I could say at that moment would help him understand the messages his comments were sending to other white people and to people of color, and so I waited to plant small seeds of change in his and other people’s minds. Luckily, this was a five-day training and the incident occurred on day one. Also, I was working with a good team of trainers so I didn’t have to figure out what to say to him by myself. Together we could provide lots of learning opportunities. By the end of the session, I think he had begun to see things a little differently.

Believing that race is “not my issue” and being members of one or more groups that also experience systemic discrimination, we use the privilege of emotionally and psychologically removing ourselves from the “white” group, which we see as composed either of racists or of white, straight, healthy males. For those of us who are white and women and/or lesbian or gay, our experience of being excluded from the mainstream hides us from the fact that we still benefit from our skin color. By seeing ourselves as removed from the privileged group, we are all the more oblivious to our silencing of people of color.

As white people, we have the privilege and ability to discount an individual of color, her or his comments and behavior, and to alter her or his future based on our assessments. One of the most frightening aspects of this privilege is that we are able to do enormous damage with a glib or offhand comment such as “I just don’t think she’s a good fit for our organization” or “I don’t think his research is up to our standards.” Promotions and tenure have been denied on the basis of such comments. Because they come from someone with privilege, they are given more weight. Potentially damaging remarks include speaking of those most affected by racism as “wounded” or “victims” and thus as defective. Identifying a member of an oppressed group as wounded is patronizing: “She is really one of the walking wounded because of racism and sexism.” Although it is absolutely true that racism and all the other -isms are damaging, by speaking of it in such a removed way, the responsibility is shifted from “the supremacy of whiteness” to “she/he who can’t cope.” Another example is rephrasing or translating for others, as if they cannot speak for themselves, without appearing rude to others like us “So what Mai is saying is . . .” Or “Pablo, do I understand what you’re saying? You are saying . . .” Or being allowed, by others like us, to take up most of the airtime, even without saying much of substance.

Often we suggest that people of color need to “lighten up” and not take things so seriously. It is all right for us to joke and criticize others for not seeing humor, but we’re offended when we’re told that our humor is not appropriate. I was at a staff meeting of a new client, and we were introducing ourselves when an African American man with dreadlocks came in. One of the white women said, “Here’s Dread Head,” and another said, “Oh, hi, Dread.” I was so startled by what seemed to be incredible racial insensitivity that I wasn’t sure what to do. I knew how I felt about what they had done, but I didn’t know how he felt.

I waited until I had eye contact with the man. “Hi,” I said, “I’m Francie Kendall. I bet you have a real name.”

“Yes, I do. Hi, my name is Jonathan.”

I didn’t want to belabor the point with Jonathan there, but I knew I had to say something. When I was alone with the white woman who had hired me I told her how taken aback I had been. I tried all kinds of ways to get her to see my point, but she continued to say that they meant nothing by it and that “Dread” didn’t mind. Not wanting to explore problematic behavior permeated their organization. I had been hired to facilitate a daylong retreat called by the staff; they wanted the president to hear their concerns, which they felt were not taken seriously. I couldn’t move him to pay attention, either. Race was only one of their problems; genuinely paying attention to those with less power, whether that was based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, all of which were involved, was what they faced. I don’t know that they had the motivation to do it.

Another way that we dismiss people is by saying or implying that, as a woman (or a gay person or a working-class person), you know what the person of color is going through. “I know just how you feel. When the children in the playground made fun of me because I was fat ... I am not suggesting that race is the only cause of pain and discrimination. I am pointing out one of the ways white people suggest that someone else’s experience can’t be any worse than what we ourselves have experienced or can understand. Or we ask why people of color always focus on the negative, as if life can’t be that bad. A similar way of discounting someone’s experience is to say, “You always focus on race. I remember at two meetings last year ...” And then commenting, “I know we have a way to go, but things have gotten better.” (The subtext of that is: “Stop whining. What do you want from me, anyway? Didn’t we fix everything in the ‘60s?” Or “I know what your reality is better than you do.”)

Another mechanism by which we dismiss others is seeing and keeping ourselves central. For some years, writers of color have been discussing

the experience of living in the margins while white people live in the center. In one of her early books, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks explains it:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. ... Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin.<sup>9</sup>

We have and regularly use the privilege of seeing white people as normal and all others as different-from-normal. In describing heterosexuals’ privilege, Allan G. Johnson also identifies a white privilege.

They have the privilege of being able to assume acceptance as “normal” members of society ... liv[ing] in a world full of cultural images that confer a sense of legitimacy and social desirability.<sup>10</sup>

We express this privilege in many ways: we use ourselves and our experiences as the reference point for everyone. “I’m not followed around in the store by a guard. What makes you think you are?” We change the subject if we feel it has drifted to focus on race. “I don’t think the issue is race as much as it is class.” We bring a critical mass with us wherever we go. Even if I am the only white person in a room of senior administrators and managers of color, I know that most of the other power holders and decision makers share my skin color. We believe that we have an automatic right to be heard when we speak because most leaders in most organizations look like us. (Obviously, this privilege in particular is significantly altered, though not eliminated, by the intersections of socioeconomic class, gender, and sexual orientation.)

We use the experience of being deprived in our lives to lessen our responsibility for the privileges we receive as white people. The pain and sense of being less-than, often based in reality, may emanate both from our personal life experiences (for example, my father died when I was four) and from our membership in groups from which privileges are systemically withheld (being poor or Jewish or gay or deaf). In our minds, this somehow lessens our responsibility for receiving or colluding in systemic white privilege. For example, I often hear, “I don’t have white privilege because I’m working class.” White working-class people do not have the same socioeconomic privileges as white upper-middle class people. While class privileges are being withheld, working-class



whites are given the same race privileges as other white people get on the basis of skin color.<sup>11</sup> We shift the focus back to us, even when the conversation is not about us. A classic example of this is white women crying during conversations about racism because they feel guilty about being white and women of color having to put their pain aside to help the white women who are crying. African Americans and gays and lesbians, in particular, are expected to take responsibility for other people's responses to and discomfort with them.

One of the areas in which we have the greatest power and privilege is in shaping "appropriate" language for everyone. Since the early '90s on college campuses, I have watched politeness and "civility" become cardinal rules in predominantly white institutions. More times than I can count, I have observed the stated need for "civility" used to silence faculty, staff, and students of color, and white activists. We use our white privilege to define the parameters of conversation and communication, keeping our culture, manners, and language central. We do this by requesting a "safe" place to talk about race and racism. This often means "safe" from hearing the anger and pain of people of color while being able to say racist things without being held accountable for them. We set up informal rules for communicating in the organization, failing to share those rules with people who are different from us, and penalizing them publicly and heavily when they make mistakes. We create institutions that run by our culture's rules but we act as if the rules are universally held, such as what time meetings start, how people talk to one another, the "appropriate" language to use.

There are substantial costs to all concerned for holding the control of communication and potential conflict so tightly. I heard this story while presenting at the National Conference on Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE) in 2005. Actually, I heard it many times there; while there were different nuances, the stories were essentially the same, and the people sharing their experiences were all Black women. Lately the number of these experiences seems to have grown exponentially. The common threads are: an organizational culture in which politeness to white people is mandated at all costs; an inability to deal with conflict, particularly if African Americans are the ones raising issues; a lack of understanding of cultural differences in communication styles; a lack of commitment to having different racial and cultural voices at the decision-making table; an undervaluing of the perspectives of people of color; and double standards for addressing "bad" behavior.

Each story began with a meeting of upper-level administrators and special assistants, and in each case the African American woman was the only person of color in the group. The woman grew increasingly

frustrated with the assumptions being made about the surrounding community, the ability of the African American students to be successful and whether they "fit" with the school in the first place, and the glib and disingenuous "politically correct" verbiage of one of the most senior people. The people at the meeting were, as each of the storytellers told me, working their "last nerves." In every case, one assumption too many was made, and the Black woman "went off," telling the group exactly how she felt. One woman said that her "Shanana side"—her evil alter ego—had shown up, and she had spoken more plainly than she usually did about the racism in the institution and in the people at the meeting. What each woman did was regrettable and probably inappropriate. However, the penalties levied on each of them for the mistake were way out of proportion to the incident and far exceeded that given to the senior men in the group who acted out. Some women were forced to apologize, while others were severely chastised and spoken to as though they were children. One of the repercussions was that white people moved the women to the margins, not engaging them in conversation or allowing their insights to influence decision making. The responsibility for the situations and their outcomes was placed solely at the feet of the African American women. That caused them to question themselves, their self-control, and their ability to do their jobs. It was another step in the experience that Patricia Williams calls "spirit-murder":

... racism is as devastating, as costly, and as psychically obliterating as robbery and assault; indeed they are often the same. Racism resembles other offenses against humanity whose structures are so deeply embedded in culture as to prove extremely resistant to being recognized as forms of oppression. ... As in rape cases, victims of racism must prove that they did not distort the circumstances, misunderstand the intent, or even enjoy it.<sup>12</sup>

I can imagine many of the white people in these meetings reading this story and believing that the spirit-murdering has nothing to do with them. A white woman familiar with one of these situations said that, after having to apologize, the African American woman looked just as Patricia Williams had described: "She is here in body, but her spirit is not."

The situation is obviously complex. Each woman made a mistake and acted "unprofessionally" by white communication standards. However, several things disturb me about the story: First, the white people at the meeting had little understanding of their roles in creating difficult environments for honest, hard conversations. My hunch is that the white people didn't think they were having conversations about race. Second,

because they were in their own cultural reality, they were oblivious to the growing impact of their continued conversation on the lone African American. Third, they were also unconscious that, in a conversation filled with their assumptions, they were continuing to create a hostile environment for people of color. Fourth, going back to bell hooks's comment about liberal whites, while the assumptions being made about the campus and community climate and the "fit" of the Black students were not ill-intentioned, the perspectives of the white people at the meeting "embod[ied] white-supremacist values and beliefs."<sup>13</sup> Fifth and finally, in this organizational context, each woman was pushed to make an expensive mistake by speaking out. She gave the senior leaders the opportunity to discredit the ongoing institutional change initiatives for diversity and to blame the slowdown or shutdown on the "ineffectiveness" of the African American women. The cost to the school is huge: it loses the woman's valuable insight, a loss that could seriously hamper its ability to recruit and retain racially diverse students, faculty, and staff.

Like the privilege of determining what is "appropriate" language for everyone, the privilege of writing and teaching history only from the perspective of the colonizer has such profound implications that they are difficult to fathom. As white people we believe the stories we were taught are true, often failing to question and discrediting those who do. There are many privileges here. First, we are able to live in the absence of historical context. It is as if we are not forgetting our history, but acting as if it never happened. Or, if it did, it has nothing to do with us. For most of us who are white, our picture of the United States, both past and present, is sanitized to leave out or downplay any atrocities we might have committed. Our Disneyland version of history is that our white ancestors came here, had a hard time traveling west, finally conquered those terrible savages, and settled our country just as they were supposed to do—Manifest Destiny. Next, we are taught that we are the only ones in the picture. If there were others, they obviously weren't worth mentioning. An example of this is the white crosses at the Little Bighorn Battlefield indicating where white men died, as if no Native Americans had been killed there. (I've been told that markers have recently been added for American Indians.) Third, we are able to grow up without our racial supremacy being questioned. It is so taken for granted, such a foundation of all that we know, that we are able to be unconscious of it even though it permeates every aspect of our lives. Charles W. Mills describes this phenomenon in *The Racial Contract*:

... white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are ... psychically required for

conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way *accidental*, but *prescribed* by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity.<sup>14</sup> [Italics in original]

While we are deprived of critical thinking by being given such a rudimentary view of our heritage, our ignorance is not held against us. We are taught little complicated history to have to think about and question, and so we have few opportunities to learn to grapple with complexities. We end up with simplistic sentiments like "America—love it or leave it" because we have only been taught fragments of information. We're told that George Washington couldn't tell a lie about cutting down a cherry tree, but we aren't told that he owned African and African American slaves. We don't often have to wrestle with the fact that one of the biggest arguments in framing the Constitution was over maintaining slavery.

We have the privilege of determining how and if historical characters and events will be remembered. From Vietnam to the Japanese internment to the Alamo to the Philippine-American War, we retain an extremely tight hold on what is and is not admitted. We do this as a culture, and we do it as individuals. We control what others know about their own histories by presenting only parts of a story. Because similar textbooks are used across the country, everyone, regardless of color, is told the "white" story. Japanese Americans are told that their families' internment was purely a safety precaution, just as white children are. Native American students see Walt Disney's *Davy Crockett* alongside their white schoolmates, learning that their great-grandmothers were "squaws" and their ancestors were "savages." We all learn the "tomahawk chop" during baseball season. None of us sees a whole picture of our nation that includes the vast contributions of those who are not white.

We are able, almost always, to forget that everything that happens in our lives occurs in the context of the supremacy of whiteness. We are admitted to college, hired for jobs, given or denied loans, cared for by the medical profession, and walk down the street as white people, always in the context of white dominance. Part of the reason that doors open for us is our unearned racial privilege. But we act as if, and often believe that, we have earned everything we get. We then generalize from our notion of our deserving the opportunities we get to thinking that, if a person of color doesn't get a job or a loan, it's because she or he didn't earn it. We are able to delude ourselves into thinking that

people of all colors come to the table having been dealt the same hand of cards. We act as if there are no remnants of slavery that affect African Americans today, that Japanese Americans didn't have to give up their land, homes, and businesses, or that Latinos weren't brought back into what had been their country to do stoop labor. We can disconnect ourselves from any reality of people of color that makes us uncomfortable because our privilege allows us to believe that people basically get what they deserve or because we feel helpless to do anything about another group's pain. So we can be kind, good people who, because of race and class privilege, are so removed that we don't have to see or experience others. Without that personal experience, we have no understanding of or motivation to address others' lives.

In March 2002, Franklin D. Raines, then the chairman and CEO of Fannie Mae, gave the Charter Day address at Howard University. The title of his speech was "40 Acres and a Mortgage," referring to the promise made in 1865 to newly freed slaves that each family could have 40 acres of tillable land on the coast of Georgia and the islands off that coast, which are now called Hilton Head and Kiawah. Obviously, we reneged on that promise, as on many others. In response to the studies that report that the great majority of Americans believe we have achieved racial equality, Raines decided to look at how it would be different if there were no racial gaps.

If America had racial equality in education and jobs, African Americans would have two million more high school degrees ... two million more college degrees ... nearly two million more professional and managerial jobs ... and nearly \$200 billion more income.

If America had racial equality in housing, three million more African Americans would own their homes.

And if America had racial equality in wealth, African Americans would have \$760 billion more in home equity value. Two hundred billion dollars more in the stock market. One hundred twenty billion dollars more in their retirement funds. And \$80 billion more in the bank. And that alone would total more than \$1 trillion more in wealth.<sup>15</sup>

The data in Raines's speech are examples of the phenomenon that Cheryl Harris talks about in "Whiteness as Property."<sup>16</sup> We have the privilege of having our race serve as a financial asset for us. We are the beneficiaries of a system that was set up by people like us for people like us so that we can control the financial aspects of our lives more than

people of color are able to. There is much research that shows that race, when isolated as a variable, overrides the variables of class and gender in influencing institutions' financial decisions. I am able to count on my race as a financial asset, even if I have nothing else to offer as collateral. I can take my whiteness to the bank.

We have the privilege of being able to determine inclusion or exclusion (of ourselves and others) in a group. We can include or exclude at our whim. We say about a Latina who is a prospective faculty member, "She would be great here, but her research doesn't focus enough on Mexican Americans." And, moments later, "She would add a lot to our department, but she is just too Chicana!" Patricia Williams speaks to this pattern in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*.<sup>17</sup> She tells a story of a man first telling her she makes too much of race and that he doesn't even think of her as Black. Then he tells her that he wished they could find more African Americans like her. "I felt myself slip in and out of shadow, as I became nonblack for purposes of inclusion and black for purposes of exclusion; I felt the boundaries of my very body manipulated, casually inscribed by definitional demarcations that did not refer to me."<sup>18</sup>

We have the ability as white women to focus on gender and commiserate with other *women* about men if we don't want to be aligned with other whites. We are able to slip in and out of conversations about race without being questioned about our loyalty or called an "Oreo" or a "Banana" or a "Coconut." We can speak up about racism without being seen as self-serving. We can even see ourselves as good at standing up for others and mentally pat ourselves on the back. We expect and often receive appreciation for showing up at "their" functions—the multicultural fair, the NAACP annual fund-raising event, the Asian Women Warriors awards celebration—as if they don't really pertain to us. If we aren't thanked profusely by people of color, we can give up because we feel unappreciated.

For those of us who are committed to the continued "hard work of excavating honesty," the intentional crafting of the systemic supremacy of whiteness is one of the most difficult and painful realities to hold.<sup>19</sup> It would be more comfortable to believe that racism somehow sprang up full-blown without our having had anything to do with it. We would rather remain unconscious of decisions that reinforce white privilege and that are made by a few on behalf of all white people.

However, if we are to understand the racial context of the twenty-first century, we have to grapple with Charles Mills's statement of the racial contract "requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity."<sup>20</sup> We must ask how we participate in not seeing the experiences of people of

color that are so very different from those of white people. We should question our resolve to identify class rather than race as the primary determinant of opportunity and experience, particularly when there is so much evidence to the contrary. In short, white people can continue to use unearned privilege to remain ignorant, or we can determine to see clearly and live differently.

# 5

## BARRIERS TO CLARITY

### *What Keeps White People from Being Able to See Our Whiteness and, Therefore, Our Privilege?*

*At a workshop I was conducting, a white man said he was glad he was white and male and that he wouldn't choose to be anything else. In the next moment, he asked why we were even talking about race; it was not important—he was simply a human being. He grasped what it meant to be white and privileged, and that insight was stored in one file. In a completely different file was the insistence that race isn't important to anyone and that there is no reason to discuss it.*

One of the psychological tools that we white people use to protect ourselves from seeing the pain and injustice we regularly inflict, whether we want to or not, is to keep our thoughts compartmentalized. I was reminded of Andrew Hacker's experience, related in his book *Two Nations*, in which his white students at Queens College said repeatedly that race wasn't important. However, when he asked them how much money they would need to be compensated for being changed from white to Black and living the rest of their lives as Black people, they answered that being Black was so much harder they would need millions of dollars. What tricks must we play on ourselves to hold two such contradictory pieces of information at one time? What can we do to make the connections that are essential to the understanding and therefore to the dismantling of systemic racism?