



PART IV  
Personal Perspective

## My Class Didn't Trump My Race: Using Oppression to Face Privilege

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I grew up poor and White. Although my class oppression has been relatively visible to me, my race privilege has not. In my efforts to uncover how race has shaped my life, I have gained deeper insight by placing race in the center of my analysis and asking how each of my other group locations have socialized me to collude with racism. In so doing, I have been able to address in greater depth my multiple locations and how they function together to hold racism in place. Thus my exploration of what it means to be White starts with what it means to be poor, for my understanding of race is inextricably entwined with my class background. I now make the distinction that I grew up poor *and* White, for my experience of poverty would have been different had I not been White. For Whites that experience oppression in other areas of our lives (such as class, gender, religion, or sexual orientation), it can be difficult to center a location through which we experience privilege. When leading discussions in multicultural education courses, I find that White students often resist centering racism in their analysis, feeling that to do so invalidates their oppressions. These students also feel that these oppressions make them “less” racially privileged. However, rather than ameliorating my race privilege, my oppressed class location was a primary avenue through which I came to understand what being White meant. As I work to unravel my internalized racial dominance, I have found two key questions useful:

1. How does internalized dominance function collectively for Whites, regardless of our other social locations?
2. How did I learn racism *specifically through my class (or other) oppression?*

I was born to working class parents; my father was a construction worker and my mother was a switchboard operator. When I was 2, my parents divorced and my mother began to raise us on her own; at that point we entered into poverty. I have never understood people who say, “we were poor but we didn’t know it because we had lots of love.” Poverty hurts. It isn’t romantic, or some form of “living simply.” Poor people are not innocent and child-like. The lack of medical and dental care, the hunger, and the ostracization, are concrete. The stress of poverty made my household much more chaotic than loving.

We were evicted frequently, and moved four to five times a year. There were periods when oatmeal was the only food in our house. I had no health or dental care during my childhood, and today all of my front teeth are filled because by the time I was 10 they were rotten. If we got sick, my mother would beat us, screaming that we could not get sick because she could not afford to take us to the doctor. We occasionally had to live in our car, and I was left with relatives for 8 months while my mother tried to secure housing for us. My teacher once held my hands up to my fourth-grade class as an example of poor hygiene and with the class as her audience, told me to go home and tell my mother to wash me.

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I used to stare at the girls in my class and ache to be like them; to have a father, to wear pretty clothes, to go to camp, to be clean and get to sit with them. I knew we didn't have enough money and that meant that I couldn't join them in school or go to their houses or have the same things they had. But the moment the real meaning of poverty crystallized for me came when we were visiting another family. As we were leaving I heard one of their daughters ask her mother, "What is wrong with them?" I stopped, riveted. I too, wanted to know. Her mother held her finger to her lips and whispered, "Shhh, they're *poor*." This was a revelatory moment for me. The shock came not just in the knowledge that we were poor, but that it was exposed. There was something wrong with us, indeed, and it was something that was obvious to others and that we couldn't hide, something shameful that could be seen but should not be named. It took me many years to gain a structural analysis of class that would help shift this sense of shame.

I begin this narrative with my class background because it so deeply informs my understanding of race. From an early age I had the sense of being an outsider; I was acutely aware that I was poor, that I was dirty, that I was not normal, and that there was something "wrong" with me. But I also knew that I was *not* Black. We were at the lower rungs of society, but there was always someone on the periphery, just below us. I knew that "colored" people existed and that they should be avoided. I can remember many occasions when I reached for candy or uneaten food laying on the street and was admonished by my grandmother not to touch it because a "colored person" may have touched it. The message was clear to me; if a colored person touched something it became dirty. The irony here is that the marks of poverty were clearly visible on me: poor hygiene, torn clothes, homelessness, hunger. Yet through comments such as my grandmother's, a racial Other was formed in my consciousness, an Other through whom I became clean. Race was the one identity that aligned me with the other girls in my school.

I left home as a teenager and struggled to survive. As I looked at what lay ahead, I could see no path out of poverty other than education. The decision to take that path was frightening for me; I had never gotten the message that I was smart and academia was a completely foreign social context. But once I was in academia, I understood that a college degree is not conferred upon those who are smarter or who try harder than others, it comes through a complex web of intersecting systems of privileges that include internal expectations as well as external resources. In academia, racism, a key system that I benefit from, helped to mediate my class-based disadvantages.

Upon graduation, with my degree in sociology and a background in adult education, I answered a call for di-

versity trainers from a state department that had lost a civil rights lawsuit and been mandated to provide 16 hr of diversity training to all their employees. They needed 40 diversity trainers to train 3,000 people. Looking back from where I am now, I see how naïve I was when I started that contract. I thought that being "liberal" qualified me because after all, racists were people who didn't have an open mind. I had an open mind and was thus not a racist, my reasoning went; these employees just needed help opening their minds too. As happens all too often, those in the position to hire me (primarily other White people) did not have the ability to assess the qualifications of someone leading discussions on race, and I was hired, along with 39 other people from a range of backgrounds.

I was completely unprepared for the depth of hostility and the disconnection from racial realities that I encountered from White people in these trainings. It was unnerving to be in a room composed exclusively of White employees and hear them bitterly complain that because of Affirmative Action, White people could no longer get jobs. That White employees would feel free to express this hostility to my coleader of color (who was racially isolated in the room) was another piece of the puzzle I was yet to put together. Even more significantly, the training teams were always interracial, and the very dynamics that I sought to enlighten my participants on were actively manifesting between my cotrainers and myself. Over time, I began to see racial dynamics more clearly, and after many years in the field, along with much personal work and some very patient mentors, I became more grounded in the dynamics of racialized knowledge construction. These trainings provided an extraordinary opportunity to observe first hand the processes by which a White racial identity is socially constructed and privileged, and the mechanisms by which White people receive and protect that privilege. I also reflected on my own responses to the ways in which I was being racially challenged, for unlike the middle class culture of academia that I found foreign, the culture of Whiteness was so normalized for me that it was barely visible. I had my experience of marginalization to draw from in understanding racism, which helped tremendously, but as I became more conversant in the workings of racism, I came to understand that the oppression I experienced growing up poor didn't protect me from learning my place in the racial hierarchy.

Since those early days, I have led dialogues on race with police officers, social workers, teachers, and in both the private and government sectors. I recently completed my dissertation on how White student teachers reproduce racism in interracial dialogues about race. As I look at the world now, I see racism as ever-present and multidimensional. I realize that poor and working class White people don't necessarily have any less racism

than middle or upper class White people, our racism is just conveyed in different ways and we enact it from a different social location than the middle or upper classes.

As I reflect back on the early messages I received about being poor and being White, I now realize that my grandmother and I *needed* people of color to cleanse and realign us with the dominant White culture that our poverty had separated us from. I now ask myself how the classist messages I internalized growing up lead me to collude in racism. For example, as a child who grew up in poverty, I received constant reminders that I was stupid, lazy, dirty, and a drain on the resources of hard-working people. I internalized these messages, and they work to silence me. Unless I work to uproot them, I am less likely to trust my own perceptions or feel like I have a “right” to speak up. I may not attempt to interrupt racism because the social context in which it is occurring intimidates me. My fear on these occasions may be coming from a place of internalized class inferiority, but in practice my silence colludes with racism and ultimately benefits me by protecting my White privilege and maintaining racial solidarity with other White people. This solidarity connects and realigns me with White people across other lines of difference, such as the very class locations that have silenced me in the first place. I am also prone to use others to elevate me, as in the example with my grandmother. So although my specific class background mediated the way I learned racism and how I enact it, in the end it still socialized me to collude with the overall structure.

It is my observation that class dictates proximity between Whites and people of color. Poor Whites are most often in closest proximity to people of color because they tend to share poverty. I hear the term “White trash” frequently. It is not without significance that this is one of the few expressions in which race is named for Whites. I think the proximity of the people labeled as White trash to people of color is why; race becomes marked or “exposed” by virtue of a closeness to people of color. In a racist society, this closeness both highlights and pollutes Whiteness. Owning class people also have people of color near them because people of color are often their domestics and gardeners—their servants. But they do not interact socially with people of color in the same way that poor Whites do. Middle class Whites are generally the furthest away from people of color. They are the most likely to say that, “there were no people of color in my neighborhood or school. I didn’t meet a Black person until I went to college” (often adding, “so I was lucky because I didn’t learn anything about racism”). Looking specifically at how class shaped my racial identity has been very helpful to me in attempting to unravel the specific way I manifest my internalized racial superiority.

I am no longer poor. Although I still carry the marks of poverty, those marks are now only internal. But these marks limit me in more than what I believe I deserve or where I think I belong; they also interfere with my ability to stand up against injustice, for as long as I believe that I am not as smart or as valuable as other White people, I won’t challenge racism. I believe that in order for Whites to unravel our internalized racial dominance, we have two interwoven tasks. One is to work on our own internalized oppression—the ways in which we impose limitations on ourselves based on the societal messages we receive about the inferiority of the lower status groups we belong to. The other task is to face the internalized dominance that results from being socialized in a racist society—the ways in which we consciously or unconsciously believe that we are more important, more valuable, more intelligent, and more deserving than people of color. I cannot address the interwoven complexity of other White people’s social locations. However, after years facilitating dialogues on race with thousands of White people from a range of class positions (as well as varied gender, sexual orientation, religious, and ability positions), and bearing witness to countless stories and challenges from people of color about my own racism and that of other Whites, I have come to see some very common patterns of internalized dominance. These patterns are shared across other social positions due to the bottom line nature of racism: Regardless of one’s other locations, White people know on some level that being White in this society is “better” than being a person of color, and this, along with the very real doors Whiteness opens, serves to mediate the oppression experienced in those other social locations. In the next section of this article, I will identify several of these patterns of internalized dominance that are generally shared among Whites.

### **We Live Segregated Lives**

Growing up in segregated environments (schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, media images, historical perspectives, etc.), we are given the message that our experiences and perspectives are the only ones that matter. We receive this message day in and day out, and it is not limited to a single moment, it is a *relentless experience*. Virtually all of our teachers, history books, role models, movie and book characters, are White like us. Further, as White people, we are taught not to feel any loss about the absence of people of color in our lives. In fact, the absence of people of color is what defines our schools and neighborhoods as “good.” And we get this message regardless of where we are oppressed in other areas of our lives. Because we live primarily segregated lives in a White-dominated society, we receive little or no authen-

tic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think critically or complexly about it. Although segregation is often mediated somewhat for poor urban (and other) Whites who may live near and have friendships with people of color on the microlevel, segregation is still operating on the macrolevel and informing our collective perspectives and what is deemed the most valuable or “official” knowledge.

Whites from the lower classes who may have more integrated lives on the microlevel still receive the message that achievement means moving out of poverty and away from the neighborhoods and schools that define us. Upward mobility is the great class goal in the United States, and the social environment gets tangibly whiter the higher up one goes, whether it be in academia or management. Whiter environments, in turn, are marked as the most socially and economically valuable. Reaching towards the most valuable places in society thus entails leaving people of color behind.

### **We Are Taught in Our Culture to See Our Experience as Objective and Representative of Reality**

The belief in objectivity, coupled with setting White people up as *outside of culture* and thus the norm for humanity, allows us to see ourselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience. People of color can only represent their own racialized experience—that is, Robert Altman is a film director whose work is expected to relate to everyone, Spike Lee is a Black film director whose films are from “the Black” perspective. But there is no objective, neutral reality. Human objectivity is not actually possible, but as long as we construct the world as if it is, and then ascribe it only to ourselves, we keep White experience and people centered and people of color in the margins.

### **We Are Raised to Value the Individual and to See Ourselves as Individuals, Rather Than as Part of a Socialized Group**

Individuality allows us to present ourselves as having “just arrived on the scene,” unique and original, outside of socialization and unaffected by the relentless racial messages we receive. This also allows us to distance ourselves from the actions of our group and demand that we be granted the benefit of the doubt (because we are individuals) in all cases. Thus we get very irate when we are “accused” of racism, because as individuals, we are “different” from other White people and expect to be seen as such. We find intolerable any suggestion that our behavior or perspectives are typical of our group as a

whole, and this ensures that we cannot deepen our understanding of racism.

Seeing ourselves as individuals erases our history and hides the way in which wealth has accumulated over generations and benefits us, *as a group*, today. Further, being an individual is a privilege only afforded to White people. By focusing on ourselves as individuals, Whites are able to conceptualize the racist patterns in our behavior as “just our personality” and not connected to intergroup dynamics. For example, I might be an extrovert and cut people off when I am engaged in a discussion. I can say, “that is just my personality, I do that to everyone. That is how we talked at the dinner table in my family.” But the moment I cut off a person of color, it becomes racism because the history and the impact of that behavior for both of us is different. The freedom to remain oblivious to that fact, with no sense that this obliviousness has any consequences of importance, is White privilege (racism).

If we use the line of reasoning that we are all individuals and social categories such as race, class, and gender don’t matter and are just “labels” that stereotype us, then it follows that we all end up in our own “natural” places. Those at the top are merely a collection of individuals who rose under their own individual merits, and those at the bottom are there due to individual lack. Group membership is thereby rendered inoperative and racial disparities are seen as essential rather than structural. Thus the discourse of individuality is not only connected to the discourse of meritocracy, but also with the Darwinism of the “bell curve.” It behooves those of us oppressed in other places to understand group membership, for the discourse of individuality may benefit us in terms of racial privilege but ultimately holds all of our oppressions in place.

### **In Our Dominant Positions We Are Almost Always Racially Comfortable and Expect to Remain So**

We can often choose if and when we will put ourselves into racially uncomfortable situations, and most of our lives have been advised not to do it because it is “dangerous.” Thus racial comfort becomes not only an expectation, but something to which we feel entitled. If racism is brought up and we become uncomfortable, then something is “wrong” and we blame the person who triggered our discomfort (usually a person of color). Because racism is necessarily uncomfortable, insisting that we remain comfortable guarantees we will never really face it or engage in authentic dialogue with others about it.

Whites often confuse comfort with safety and state that we don’t feel safe when what we really mean is that



we don't feel comfortable. This trivializes our history of savage brutality towards people of color and perverts the reality of that history. Because we don't think complexly about racism, we don't ask ourselves what safety means from a position of dominance, or the impact on people of color for Whites to complain about their safety when merely *talking* about racism.

### **We Feel That We Should Be Judged by Our Intentions Rather Than the Effects of Our Behavior**

A common White reasoning is that as long as we didn't intend to perpetuate racism, then our actions don't count as racism. We focus on our intentions and discount the impact, thereby invalidating people of color's experiences and communicating that the effects of our behavior on them are unimportant. We then spend great energy explaining to people of color why our behavior is not racism at all. This invalidates their perspectives while enabling us to deny responsibility for making the effort to understand enough about racism to see our behavior's impact in both the immediate interaction and the broader, historical context.

### **We Believe That if We Can't Feel Our Social Power, Then We Don't Have Any**

White social power is so normalized that it is outside of our conscious awareness. Yet we often expect that power is something that one can feel, rather than something one takes for granted. The issue of social power is where a lower class location often becomes confused with a lack of racial privilege. For example, in discussions on race I often hear White working class men protest that they don't have any social power. They work long and grueling hours, often in jobs in which they have no long-term security, and come home feeling beaten and quite disempowered. These men can often not relate to the concept of holding social power. But if being able to feel racial privilege is required before Whites can acknowledge its reality, we will not be able to see (and thus change) it. The key to recognizing power is in recognizing normalcy—what is not attended to or in need of constant navigation. These men are indeed struggling against social and economic barriers, but race is simply not one of them; in fact, race is a major social current running in their direction and not only moving them along, but helping them navigate their other social struggles. Not feeling power is not necessarily aligned with how others perceive or respond to us, or our relationship to social and institutional networks.

### **We Think It Is Important Not to Notice Race**

The underlying assumption of a colorblind discourse is that race is a defect and it is best to pretend that we don't notice it. But if we pretend we don't notice race, we cannot notice racism. If we don't notice racism, we can't understand or interrupt it in ourselves or others. We have to start being honest about the fact that we do notice race (when it isn't White) and then pay attention to what race means in our everyday lives. White people and people of color do not have the same racial experience, and this has profound and tangible consequences that need to be understood if we want to stop colluding with racism.

### **We Confuse Not Understanding With Not Agreeing**

Because of the factors discussed previously, there is much about racism that Whites don't understand. Yet in our racial arrogance, we have no compunction about debating the knowledge of people who have lived, breathed, and studied these issues for many years. We feel free to dismiss these informed perspectives rather than have the humility to acknowledge that they are unfamiliar to us, reflect further on them, or seek more knowledge. We trivialize others' intelligence and expertise and counter with simplistic platitudes that often begin with, "People just need to . . ."

People from the lower classes often have the opportunity to learn more about the perspectives of people of color through their more likely proximity to them. Yet the conflicting messages we receive within our own families and the myriad messages we receive from the larger culture contradict these perspectives and do not support us in either seeking out, or valuing, them.

### **We Will Be the Judge of Whether or not Racism Has Occurred**

Because of our social, economic, and political power within a White supremacist culture, we are in the position to legitimize people of color's assertions of racism. Yet we are the least likely to see, understand, or be invested in validating those assertions and being honest about their consequences. We construct racism as specific acts that individuals either do or don't do, and think we can simply look at a specific incident and decide if "it" happened. But racism is infused in every part of our society, our beings, and our perspectives. It is reinforced everyday in countless and often subliminal ways. It cannot be pulled out into specific moments, and our inability to think complexly about racism, as well as our investment in its benefits, makes us the least qualified to assess its manifestations.

## Racism Has Been Constructed as Belonging to Extremists and Being Very Bad

Racism is a deeply embedded, multidimensional, and internalized system that all members of this society are shaped by. Yet dominant culture constructs racism as primarily in the past and only currently occurring as isolated acts relegated to individual bad people (usually living somewhere in the South, or “old”). Although many White people today sincerely believe that racism is a bad thing, our abhorrence of racism coupled with a superficial conceptualization of it causes us to be highly defensive about any suggestion that we perpetuate it. Many Whites (and liberal Whites in particular) think that we can deal with racism in our heads (and without ever interacting with people of color) by deciding that we have not been affected because we don’t want to have been affected.

A superficial understanding of racism coupled with a desire to distance ourselves from being perceived as “bad” is further complicated by resentments we may feel about places in our lives where we suffer from other forms of social injustice. It is often very difficult for Whites who have not been validated for the oppression they experience elsewhere to keep their attention on a form of oppression from which they benefit. But I have found that when I explore how classism and other oppressions I experience set me up to participate in racism, I am more able to interrupt the manifestation of both in my life. By placing racism in the center of my analysis, I have been able to begin to unravel my other group socializations and how they work together to support social hierarchies.

### Interrupting Internalized Dominance

I have found that a key to interrupting my internalized racial dominance is to defer to the knowledge of people whom I have been taught, in countless ways, are less knowledgeable and less valuable than I am. I must reach for humility and be willing to *not know*. I may never fully understand the workings of racism, as I have

been trained my entire life to perpetuate racism while denying its reality. I do not have to understand racism for it to be real, and my expectation that I could is part of my internalized dominance. Reaching for racial humility as a White person is not the same for me as being mired in class shame.

My class position is only one social location from which I learned to collude with racism. For example, I have also asked myself how I learned to collude with racism as a Catholic and a woman. How did it shape my sense of racial belonging, of racial *correctness*, to be presented with God, the ultimate and universal authority, as White? How did the active erasure of Jesus’ race and ethnicity shape my racial consciousness? How did the universalization of Catholicism as the true religion for all peoples of the world engender racial superiority within me when all the authorities within that religion were White like myself? At the same time, how did my conditioning under Catholicism not to question authority lead me to silently collude with the racism of other Whites?

As a White woman, how did I internalize racial superiority through the culture’s representation of White women as the embodiment of ultimate beauty? What has it meant for me to have a key signifier of female perfection—Whiteness—available to me? How have images of White women in the careers deemed valuable for woman shaped my goals? How has mainstream feminism’s articulation of White women’s issues as universal women’s issues shaped what I care about? At the same time, what has it meant to live under patriarchy and to be taught that as a woman I am less intelligent, that I should not speak up, that I should defer to others, and at all times be nice and polite? How have all of these messages ultimately set me up to collude in the oppression of people of color? By asking questions such as these I have been able to gain a much deeper and more useful analysis of racism, and rather than finding that centering racism denies my other oppressions, I find that centering racism has been a profound way to address the complexity of all my social locations.



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