

**UNDERSTANDING WHITE PRIVILEGE**  
**Keynote Address, “Privilege, Power & Politics”**  
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**Jennifer J. Yanco**  
**Boston University**

Congratulations! You are at a really exciting time in your lives: the beginning of your college careers. You are embarking on a new adventure that will stretch your minds and provide not only information and skills, but new ways of looking at the world and the society we live in. It’s a scary time, too, as you open up to new ideas and entertain thoughts that might be quite foreign to you. But there are some very compelling reasons to do this.

Clearly, the old ideas are not working so well. While we live in an increasingly diverse and multicultural society by virtue of who is here, we must be careful not to confuse this **diversity** with **equity**. Our objective is not just diversity, but equity—a society in which all people have an equal shot at success. You are inheriting a society that is fraught with tensions and inequities. These fall out along lines of class, gender, sexual orientation, language, and a host of other things. If we are to effectively address the problems that face us as a society, we are going to need new ideas and people who are willing to fight for them. That’s where you come in. You are leaders—not only of tomorrow, but of today. As you go through your college careers, I urge you to keep this foremost in your mind. How you think about yourself is extremely important in life.

Before we get started, I’d like to do a little exercise to get you thinking about our topic. Turn to your neighbor – decide who will be *A*, and who will be *B*. You’ll each have one minute to respond to the question. When it’s your turn to listen, just listen, try to hear just what the other person is saying. Don’t interrupt, don’t chime in. Just listen.

Okay, here is the question:

*We’re at a very historic juncture now with Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate for president of the United States; some people have said that this is evidence that racism is a thing of the past. Do you agree or disagree? Why?*

Okay; do you each have a partner? As will go first. Listen carefully to what the other person is saying. You will each have one minute. I’ll let you know when it’s time to switch.

Open discussion for 5 minutes. Did you and your partner have differences of opinion? Did you learn anything you didn’t know before?

It’s true: times have changed. We are in a new era. Just a few decades ago it would have been unthinkable for an African American to be elected President of the United States; now it is a very real possibility. And there are other signs that things are changing—you are more likely to have works by authors who come from outside of the European/North American world on your course syllabi, your classmates may include students who come from a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds, you may even have professors who are of African, Asian, or native American descent. Perhaps some of your teachers in high school were people of color. We have become accustomed to seeing people of color as newscasters, doctors, and lawyers.

I would sound a note of caution, however, against taking these as signs that all is well, and letting this diversity blind us to the workings of a system which still confers the bulk of the privileges on those who it defines as white.

## **White Privilege**

We hear a lot about racism these days, but if you take a minute to reflect on this, you will notice that most of the discussion takes place among and focuses on people of color, who are assumed to be the locus of the problem. While there are more and more white people who are working to expose and dismantle racism, there are not nearly enough of us. Relatively speaking, we don't hear much from white folks. I hope in the future there will be more and more white voices, and my goal tonight is to enlist yours as some of these voices.

My topic tonight is **white privilege**, the not-much-talked-about underside of racism. My objective is to engage you in working to undo this system that has over time resulted in such stark inequities of opportunity in our country and to provide you with some tools for doing so.

**White privilege.** It is something we've inherited and something that, if we want our country to survive and flourish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are going to have to confront and dismantle. It is through the contributions of many different voices—yours included—that we will stand a chance of rebuilding our society, our country, in a way that is in keeping with what we would like to believe about ourselves: that we are a land of opportunity where everyone can, with hard work and dedication, have a fair shot at realizing their dreams.

I hope to engage each of you—each in your own particular way—in this struggle on which, I believe, our very lives depend.

How many of you are familiar with the term White Privilege?  
Invite ideas.

**White privilege** is another way of looking at racism. When we hear about racism, when we talk about racism, we usually focus on people of color—African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, people from Africa and, increasingly, Islamic people from the Middle East, and so on. The discussion tends to focus on the disadvantages faced by various groups, the barriers to success, and so on—it rarely focuses on the hidden advantages for those who are not people of color and the mechanisms that maintain these advantages. We also tend, when we think about racism, to focus on how individuals behave rather than on how institutions—banks, schools, libraries, airport security, courts, DSS, and so on—behave.

Tonight I'd like to flip the script, so to speak, and look at the other side of racism and the one we don't often talk about. This side concerns those of us whom society defines as white. Yes, there are lots of kinds of white people here—Italians, Irish, Eastern European, etc. Who is and isn't white changes over time. My father's family came to the US about 100 years ago from what is now the Slovak Republic. They were not considered white when they arrived, but over time 'became white.' I am keenly aware that my life chances have been heavily determined by this fact. My whiteness has opened many doors for me. When we talk about 'race issues' in this country, we rarely look at white

people and how this system—racism—affects us. We don't talk about the advantages conferred by the system to people who are defined as white—only the disadvantages to others.

### **Statistics reveal a system of 'racial' privilege**

I want to emphasize throughout that what I am talking about is a **system** that operates through its **institutions**. I'd like us to get away from the focus on individual niceness or individual meanness and look at where the problem is really located: in our institutions. It's about who gets that promotion at work, who gets into college, who gets a mortgage loan and on what terms, who gets healthcare, and so on.

It's a system that we are part of, whether we like it or not.

When we step way back and look at the aggregate data, that is, the statistics, we see some very clear patterns that show white people reaping significantly greater benefits from our society than others.

For example,

White people are half as likely to be unemployed as others

White people have a better chance of getting and keeping jobs

White people are less likely to be living in poverty

White people are more likely to finish high school

White people are more likely to go to college

White people who enroll in college are more likely to earn a BA or higher

White people are more likely to own their own homes

White people are more likely to stay out of jail—even when they commit crimes

White people are less likely to be in jail

White farmers are more likely to hold onto their land and get government support

White people are less likely to have their voting rights revoked

Bear in mind that, as of 2006 census data, whites made up just 2/3 (or 66.6%) of the US population (<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/010048.html>).

Yet, if we look at who occupies positions of power in our institutions, we see that:

82% of college and university teachers are white

89% of lawyers are white & 98% of prosecuting attorneys are white

79% of accountants and auditors are white

75% of doctors and surgeons are white

86% of non-profit board members are white

(data from *New York Sun*, April 17, 2007—US census data)

The Statistics reveal that **something** is going on—otherwise we would expect a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. You may not notice these disparities in your own experience, but when you look at the figures, this system of white advantage becomes striking. I have heard this referred to as 'opportunity hoarding' and think that's an apt way of putting it.

How is it then that white people so inordinately occupy positions of power? Well, it's a long story and has to do with our history, which I will not go into here but which, suffice it to say, is full of laws, policies, and practices explicitly designed to advantage white people. An excellent book on the topic is Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Another Kind of Whiteness*.

Another thing that the statistics show very clearly is that, taken as a group, people of African descent are in the worst straights of any ethnic/racial group in this country. So, we find ourselves on the verge (I hope) of electing this country's first Black president, while our prisons and jails are filling up with black men and women at an alarming rate, while more than 11 percent of black homeowners are facing foreclosure, where babies born to white high school dropouts are more likely to survive infancy than those born to Black college graduates, where the poverty rate among Black Americans is almost 3 times that of whites, where unemployment rates for Black Americans are almost twice that for White Americans, where Black kids are almost twice as likely to drop out of high school as white kids and where, even if they graduate from high school and enroll in college, are far less likely than their white counterparts to earn a BA or higher.

In comparing the life chances of whites and African descended persons, we find alarming and continuing disparities—something we ought not to lose sight of as we talk about electing a Black man to the presidency.

### **Everyday life experiences**

So, we've seen some of the statistics. Statistics can reveal patterns that we otherwise wouldn't see. But they feel a bit far removed from our daily experience.

Careful observation, however, can reveal that the forces of white privilege are at work even in our day-to-day lives. You may not have noticed this, but if you look closely, you may begin to see some signs. Peggy McIntosh, a scholar at Wellesley College in Massachusetts compiled a very interesting list of what she calls 'invisible privileges.' These are things that we as white people take for granted—we hardly even think of them. Yet, when she started to talk with her African American colleagues and reflect on her life, she came up with a whole list of things that she could take for granted, but that her colleagues of color could not. Let's take a look at some of these.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. The day I move into new housing that I have chosen, I can be pretty sure that my new neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to me.
3. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
4. I can stand behind another person at an ATM machine without being feared as a potential mugger.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
7. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
8. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
9. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
10. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color and have them more or less match my skin.

Were you surprised to think of these things? This is a partial list taken from an article by Peggy McIntosh called "The Invisible Knapsack." She tells us that compiling this list was not easy. "I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it 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.” And none of this has to do with the worthiness of the person, his or her accomplishments, or character. This suggests, too, that you and another student who is not white may live in the same dormitory, go to the same classes, and yet have very different experiences.

### **Taking Action**

This is a rather sorry state of affairs, and it’s natural to feel bad or guilty about it and to even search for ways to prove that it isn’t really the case (denial). These are common reactions but they are not **PRODUCTIVE** reactions. They are not productive personally and they are not productive in terms of society. They only serve to feed the status quo by keeping otherwise engaged people from taking action.

The good news is that you can do something to change this! Yes, you. You can actually make a very significant difference and play a part in replacing this system we’ve been talking about with one that is based on principles of justice and equity. You don’t have to be a hero, you don’t have to be a martyr . . . You can begin with some very simple steps like reflecting on your own life, where you are and how you got there; where you want to go and what kind of world you want to live in. You can hone your skills of observation—look deeply, analyze what you see, hear. Read the news, notice what is said, what is implied; What is covered and what isn’t; Notice where you are; who is there? Who isn’t? Why? What are the issues addressed in your courses? What issues are left out? Racism/white privilege is infused in all aspects of US society, it is just that as white people, we have been brought up not to notice so it takes practice to start to see.

*You are the ones; we are depending on you!* You can start talking about this idea of white privilege with your friends and classmates, with your families even—because talking about this, getting it out in the open is the first step. If you were surprised by some of the things I’ve mentioned, this is an indication of how ‘hidden’ white privilege is. We need to first get it out into the open if we are going to deal with it. And you can play a big role in this. College is a special time—among other things, it is a time when you can explore what it means to be a leader—not necessarily of the entire college, but a leader in your own circle of friends and acquaintances.

You are at the perfect time in your lives to take action. This is a time when not only you, but also your friends, dorm-mates, classmates, and so on are open to rethinking the society we live in and finding ways to improve it. We expect that of you!

I’m going to ask you to think about what you can do to change this system and provide you with a set of tools to help you. These are things you can do together with others, so you might want to form a group to work on this—it will be more interesting than doing it alone, and you’ll be about 100% more likely to stick with it.

A lot of people will pooh pooh your efforts, tell you that everything is fine and why are you worrying about it and what does it have to do with you anyway? Working against racism—even talking about it—is not terribly popular in white circles. So you will need allies, others who see the need for change and are exploring how they might be part of the solution. You can multiply your chances of success by working together with others who share an interest in exploring these issues and what they can do about them.

The first thing is to keep in mind that this is an **institutional** issue, not a personal one. [This doesn’t mean that being respectful, kind and thoughtful to others is unimportant—these things are ALWAYS

important—but they aren't the things that are going to eradicate racism.] Because racism/white privilege operates through institutions (banks, schools, libraries, churches, police and fire departments, etc.), we have to think institutionally.

Institutions are all around us, reproducing the racial order—often unwittingly. So, what can an individual do about something so big? I have an image of these large institutions stuck in their ways, and large numbers of individuals fanning out with little pins and poking them. Repeated and persistent jabs will lead to change. It just takes the will and lots of persistence and support.

The Tools I want to share with you have been developed over almost ten years of teaching the course *White People Challenging Racism: Moving from Talk to Action*—which is a course aimed at helping people take action in an institutional context. For this evening, I have grouped these tools into three large steps that spell **ACT**:

1. Assess (your situations)
2. Choose (your target)
3. Tackle (the problem)

## **1. ASSESS YOUR SITUATION**

### **Survey**

You can begin by assessing your own social position. We are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as individuals, acting individually. But we are all parts of communities and the institutions of our communities. I'd like to encourage you to think of this 'collective' self. What are the institutions in your world? The ones you interact with regularly? Name some of the institutions that you are part of. What high school did you graduate from? (you are now part of its alumni community) Do you have a bank account? In what jurisdiction do you live? What police & fire departments do you depend upon to protect you? At what stores do you shop? Do you eat at particular restaurants? Are you part of a faith community? Do you belong to any clubs or interest groups? And don't forget: the family is an institution, as well.

We don't often think of ourselves as having any control over these institutions. But the fact of the matter is that we are part of these institutions—if you eat in a particular restaurant, you are one of its customers, if several of you eat in a particular restaurant, your suggestions are likely to be taken quite seriously.

### **Analyze**

Once you have conducted this kind of personal survey, the next step is to observe how these institutions may further racism and white privilege—who is there? who is not? Who fills which positions? who serves and who is served (restaurants). Institutions reflect and reinforce the values of the society that they serve. How do these institutions reflect a society based on white privilege? How would the institution look if racism/white privilege were not at work?

Do this institution by institution. There may be some where you feel you just can't think of anything, and others where you have lots of ideas.

## **2. CHOOSE A TARGET & AN ACTION**

Of all the institutions you are part of, is there one that you feel most strongly about? That you feel you have a greater stake in than some of the others? This might take quite a bit of discussion and thinking; others can help you out by asking you questions, challenging you.

### **Analyze**

Once you have settled on an institution, do a really thorough analysis of it—this will be easier if you do it with others. How does racism manifest itself in this institution? What might you do to move it towards changing?

### **Brainstorm possible actions and decide on one**

Imagine what steps or actions you might take to move this institution towards being more equitable. In imagining possible actions, I suggest that you be as bold as you can. Don't be timid! Let the sky be the limit. Think big. Only by entertaining a full range of possibilities will you be able to come up with some real doable ones.

Go over each one, sorting them into the yes and no piles. Discuss them with others. Settle on one.

## **3. TACKLE THE PROBLEM**

### **Break it down**

Now that you know what institution you would like to address and what you would like to change, it's time to think about how you will go about it. What are the first steps? Do you need to do some research? What kind of a time line can you establish?

### **Predict barriers**

Once you have narrowed down your list of possible actions to one that you want to focus on, it's a good idea to try to predict what might keep you from accomplishing your goal. For each barrier that you foresee, come up with a strategy for dealing with it. This process will help you better understand what you are up against (not the least of which may be internal factors!). It may lead you to go back to the drawing board.

**Enlist support/identify your allies.** If you reach out to others, they may be able to help you figure out how to deal with barriers you have predicted. They may also see things you haven't thought of. They may have suggestions for you, someone may have a good contact, or offer to help in any one of a number of ways. Even something as simple as committing to calling you up in a week/month so see how you are doing and offer help and encouragement.

### **Set Measures of Success**

This may sound crazy, but how will you know when you have accomplished your goal? Having some clear idea will help you stick with it. Keep it modest; you can always go on to more ambitious plans.

*Here are some examples of actions people have taken:*

- A Spanish interpreter organized a meeting to address racial discrimination in hospitals
- A journalist challenged local newspaper on gratuitous racial identifications in crime reports
- A worker took the initiative to get to know new hires who are people of color so as to know their issues and concerns
- A teacher developed a program to help students stop racist comments in school halls
- An employee at a publishing company worked to make having a racially diverse staff a company priority.
- One person made herself aware of African American, Asian American and Latino cultures by reading more authors from these cultures.
- A member of a church spoke with the minister of his family's church about what the church can do to become welcoming to people of color.

- A museum staff member organized a brown bag lunch to discuss racism and white privilege and how it affects the museum
- A medical resident formed a group among colleagues of color to provide support to one another and discuss issues of racism confronted in their work
- A mother initiated an ongoing discussion with her sons about white privilege
- An employee lead a staff discussion on strategies for recruiting candidates of color
- One person started a film/discussion group that met monthly for a number of years

There are lots of things to do and each of you is ideally placed to do something that is very specific to you. Working together, you CAN change the world you live in.

Here on campus, you might start with a discussion group—you could watch films together and have discussions about the ways in which white privilege plays out in them, or do the same for selected books, or current events. You will appreciate having this kind of a forum to discuss your ideas and what you are learning.

As I noted at the beginning of this talk, we live in an increasingly diverse society by virtue of who is here. But we must be careful not to jump to the conclusion that we are all enjoying the same privileges. Looking at the statistics and reflecting on our own lives tells us that one's 'race' can make a huge difference in one's life experiences and opportunities in this country.

This is a national problem, not a problem of people of color. Transforming the institutions that perpetuate racism and white privilege requires the participation of white people.

If we want to live in harmony and enjoy the immense riches of a diverse society, the interplay of different ideas and values, a range of esthetics and beliefs, we need to make every effort to see that the resources of our society are equitably distributed. A system that is so skewed in terms of opportunity can't survive. Moreover, what good, finally, is it to have all the advantages if you have no peace? If you live in fear? If you cannot face half the population? If you cannot face yourself?

You are the leaders of today—and tomorrow. What kind of a world do you want to live in, do you want to bequeath to your children? These are the serious questions you need to think about as you prepare to take your place in American society. We're counting on you.

Thank you.