

# **Race and Racism**

## *Illumination Project Curriculum Materials*

By

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### **INTRODUCTION**

There aren't too many Americans who want to claim to be racist, and most people would like to believe they are "colorblind" when it comes to matters of race. But race and racism are integral and inescapable parts of our culture and social history. Race consciousness is key to how we learn to perceive ourselves and the people around us (even if we don't always want to admit it); just think of how we describe people—"an elderly asian woman, about five foot three; a tall black man in his thirties, wearing a leather jacket". In these "identifying descriptions", race, along with gender, is essential, *especially if it is other than white*.

Given the importance of race to our society, it's remarkable how difficult it is to talk about and how complex the definitions of race and racism can be. In fact, the issues surrounding the definitions of race and racism are themselves a product of racism's long and conflicted history in our society. Any discussion of race and racism probably should begin with definitions of the concepts involved, especially since there tends to be confusion and overlap between a lot of the terms.

### **DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS**

**Race:** Race is a socially constructed artifact that categorizes people based on visual differences which are imputed to indicate invisible differences. These categorizations are amorphous and fluid over time which reflects their social rather than physical basis. Its significance arises out of the meanings we as societies assign to it, and the way we structure race in our societies. This structuring shapes what we refer to as "institutional racism" (defined below).

The idea that race has a biological basis is an old idea that still hasn't disappeared entirely and continues to be debated in academia [for a good example see the Nova website at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/first/race.html> for a discussion by anthropologists C. Loring Brace and George W. Gill] Any discussion of the "biology of race", however, needs to be contextualized within the history of *racism* as an institution in this country, and an awareness of how our interpretations of race are themselves reflections of our ideologies and our history.

**Ethnicity:** Ethnicity reflects cultural differences, and an ethnic group is a people who share a historical and cultural heritage (and frequently have a sense of group identity). It may or may not

overlap with race. However, there is nothing within the concept of a cultural group that excludes that group from being multiracial. For example, members of the U. S. society share a cultural identity. That cultural identity is their ethnicity.

**Racism:** Racism can be defined simply as any policy, belief, attitude, action or inaction, which subordinates individuals or groups based on their race. What this definition leaves out, however, is the specific historical formation of racism as an institution and an ideology over the last several hundred years. Taking into consideration the social and historical perspective, Paula Rothenberg offers this more pointed—and useful--definition of racism:

*"Racism involves the subordination of people of color by white people. While individual persons of color may well discriminate against a white person or another person of color because of their race, this does not qualify as racism according to our definition because that person of color cannot depend upon all the institutions of society to enforce or extend his or her personal dislike. Nor can he or she call upon the force of history to reflect and enforce that prejudice. . . . History provides us with a long record of white people holding and using power and privilege over people of color to subordinate them, not the reverse."*

(Paula Rothenberg. Defining Racism and Sexism)

**Institutionalized racism:** Because racism is an ideology that is entwined within the cultural ideology of this society, at some level, everyone who is a cultural member shares many aspects of the ideology of race. That belief system plays out in our day to day interactions with each other - whether we are blatantly (or consciously) racist or not. The system of race sets up certain hostilities and conflicts that are played out in our lives.

Institutionalized racism is the structuring of benefit for the group with power. Institutionalized processes carry multiple generational effects and are sometimes called "**past in present**" discrimination.

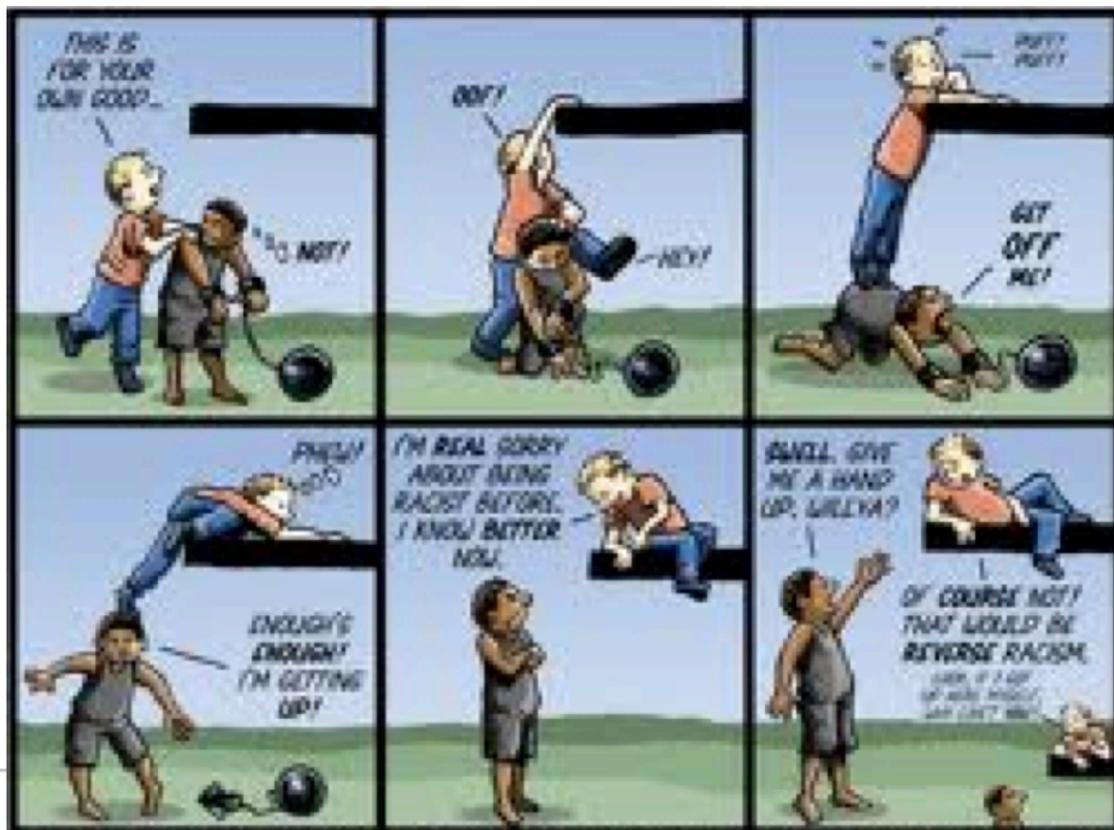
**Privilege:** The structures of racism work in two ways: to discriminate against and subordinate people of color, and to privilege white people. Privileges are unearned benefits from the structuring of inequality, and as such are intimately tied to discrimination. Privilege (unearned advantages) is sometimes difficult for those receiving them to see. This is particularly true in a societal environment such as the United States, when we think that we get things because we are nice people, or because we worked for them. Molly Ivins once alluded to privilege with the analogy of baseball - a person is born on third base, but thinks they hit a triple. A good introduction to privilege is the 1988 article by Peggy McIntosh [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#) , and Allen Johnson's book *Privilege, Power, and Difference* is more detailed and highly readable.

## EXAMPLES AND ILLUSTRATIONS

### *Institutionalized Racism: The Housing Market*

A good example of how institutional racism works is the housing market. The creation of the suburbs in the United States was driven by public policy and taxpayer money. The GI Bill through the VHA opened the opportunity to purchase a home to millions of veterans after World War II. However, of all the home loans made in those boom years, less than 2% went to non-whites. Meanwhile, the federal government set up lending standards and created "red lining." "Red" districts had low insurability **because** people of color lived in those areas. White communities were seen as "good risks," and hence lenders did not offer mortgages in red lined districts. These practices excluded people who were not white from the home ownership market.

The implication of this one set of policies has had (and still has) massive ramifications. For the majority of people in the United States, their home is their single most important form of wealth. The exclusion of people of color from the housing market meant that only whites had that access to this form of wealth. Getting and owning a home became a "privilege" of being white. Meanwhile, much school funding is still financed through local property taxes. Since people of color were concentrated in areas where they could not own homes (or the homes they owned were devalued) there was less money for schools - degrading educational opportunities. Meanwhile, for whites who had moved "out and up," their schools had more funding and were seen as better schools. Quality of education relates to economic opportunity, and those who were left behind ran even further behind. None of this has anything directly to do with individual bias. Rather it is the consequence of a social policy where whites, acting rationally in their own best interests, participated in increasing levels of inequality between the races.



*A CONCISE HISTORY OF BLACK-WHITE RELATIONS IN THE U.S.A.*

## **COMMON ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS**

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### **THE PURELY HUMANISTIC APPROACH aka “PEOPLE ARE JUST PEOPLE”**

Humanism is the first step towards understanding and appreciating human potential. However, it is a first step in need of further refinement. While humanism affirms the central core of our humanity, its ambivalence towards differences makes it unresponsive to the particular needs of specific populations. Managing diversity requires a balance between the generic and the unique. It is likened to gardening. The person with the “green thumb” who loves plants in general is the most responsive to the specific needs of particular plants. The assumption that all plants can thrive in the same environment under the exact same conditions results in a stunted growth for some.

Furthermore, a strictly humanistic approach runs the risk of ethnocentrism – projection of one’s own values onto others. The “people are just people” mindset usually translates into “everyone is just like me.” The pride that one takes in not noticing differences is easily misinterpreted by others as a protective emotional shield, unconscious use of privilege or the unwillingness to learn.

### **FAILURE TO SEPARATE INTENT AND IMPACT**

When an accusation of an Ism is hurled at an individual or a group of individuals, it is usually taken as a charge of deliberate foul play and is most often met with defensiveness. However, when an action is suspected of being racist, for example, what is under scrutiny is the net effect of the action, not its motive. This is especially true if the accusation is brought forth among colleagues or among people who have a good working relationship.

Being considered fair-minded is extremely important to most, especially those who identify with being progressive or liberal, which makes it extremely difficult for them to not to personalize such perceived criticism. One assumes that one's motives are under attack. Instead of exploring the merit of the observation of inequity, one is likely to provide a character resume in defense. At this moment there is a counter accusation of character assassination, followed by lengthy explanations of one's true motives.

However, intent and impact are not the same thing. Good intentions do not mitigate negative effects. In defense of the intent, the impact is rarely investigated, leaving the ones bringing forth the observation feeling frustrated. The one making the original accusation may not have been taking the net effect of the action in question personally. However, the sense of not being heard, silenced, or invalidated is taken personally. This only serves to escalate the situation.

If you are the one making the initial observation, it is helpful to preface your comments with the acknowledgement that there may not have been ill intention. This makes the listener less defensive. If you are the one hearing the information, before defending yourself, take a deep breath and inquire as to how the person reached this conclusion. Discuss the merits of the impact first. Afterwards you can explain your initial intention. Otherwise, the one who is already hurt has to manage your hurt feelings and never gets to say what is on his or her mind. This negatively impacts working relationships.

## **RESENTMENT OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS**

The significance of diversity issues is often trivialized by referring to it as political correctness. Over the past couple of decades, many policies have been initiated as remedies for inequities. A disdain for the policies should not lead to a wholesale discounting of the salient issues. In fact, to mire an issue in politics and bureaucracy is a sure way of making certain that the issues are never fully addressed.

This resistance often displays itself around the changing usage of language. Language creates images as it conveys information. Descriptive and definitive phrases are verbal portraits that shape our thinking. Regarding cultural diversity, language affects our perceptions of others, defines our relationship to them, and creates the context for our analysis of diversity issues. One of the first things that oppressed groups do as they start coming into their own is to rename themselves. Heretofore, the oppressed group typically had been “labeled” by the dominant group. The new name reflects a greater sense of empowerment. Language is the medium through which attitudes and behavior are influenced. The emphasis on language in cultural diversity is not for the purpose of political correctness, but for stimulating new ideas and new approaches.

## **THE UNWILLINGNESS TO TAKE RISKS / FEAR OF MAKING MISTAKES**

Fears of appearing to be insensitive or unaware of salient issues prevents some from reaching out and making honest contact with those they perceive to be different. Conscious of the importance of language and mindful of varying sensibilities, some elect to remain distant rather than inadvertently offend. However, such distancing and/or withdrawal have a counterproductive effect, producing a subtle form of invisibility. Invisibility and negative portrayals are flip sides of the same coin. Those experiencing such often feel that the responses of others towards them are full of discomforts around diversity. If you are distancing because you don't want to offend someone regarding their race, all they sense is that race has caused you to distance. Good intentions have a counter effect in this instance. There is no need to be overly self-consciousness. Be genuine in your interactions; be yourself.

## **White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**

### **Peggy McIntosh**

**"I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group"**

Through work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to women's statues, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there are most likely a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of while privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools , and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in women's studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are just seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow "them" to be more like "us."

Peggy McIntosh is associate director of the Wellesley Collage Center for Research on Women. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), by Peggy McIntosh; available for \$4.00 from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley MA 02181 The working paper contains a longer list of privileges. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of Independent School

## Daily effects of white privilege

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. 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.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
24. 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.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.

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31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.
45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
46. I can chose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.
47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.

48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.

49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.

50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

### **Elusive and fugitive**

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.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turn, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.

For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to over empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.

### **Earned strength, unearned power**

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage, which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. This paper results from a process of coming to see that some of the power that I originally say as attendant on being a human being in the United States consisted in unearned advantage and conferred dominance.

I have met very few men who truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance, and, if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Difficulties and angers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the members of the Combahee River Collective pointed out in their "Black Feminist Statement" of 1977.

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the system won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitude. But a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate but cannot end, these problems.

To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subject taboo. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that

democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

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