

# The Weight of Whiteness

## A Feminist Engagement with Privilege, Race, and Ignorance

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## Introduction

### *Has the Weight of Whiteness Finally Come Up to Claim Us?*

I write this introduction from a liminal space: an all too familiar place that I don't fully recognize. Like all liminal spaces this one is ripe with fear, hope, anxiety, and possibility. The nation been thrown into liminal spaces before; but, this one feels different. Americans are standing at the precipice of an era that will only be named once the chaos settles and the contours of a brave new geography become tangible. No one event has brought us to this place. The deadly combination of a growing global pandemic, malignant presidency, aggressive public misinformation campaigns, accelerated environmental destruction, economic recession, and growing social resistance to centuries of social injustice has finally caught up with us. We've snapped again. There are fissures of lucidity in this chaos. Three months of sheltering in place have pushed many of us to hold space with the world that surrounds us—to slow down, be still, and attend to one another with greater care. The busy public world, with its endless diversions and distractions, has evaporated. We have been left to feel our vulnerability. For the longest time I could not find a precise language to capture this mixture of horror and hope I feel. Pandemics have historically pushed us to break with old ways of organizing the world and to imagine new ways of being. As Arundhati Roy observes, "This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And be ready to fight for it." I'm trying to walk forward lightly, attentively, and humbly because I do not want to lose touch with either the pain or the possibility the lies before us.

We have been entrusted with a chronic pain that has always surrounded us, and that we have been too numb to feel. It has forced us, once again, as a nation, to gaze deeply into James Baldwin's disagreeable mirror, and to attend to the violent colonial legacy we inherit. Are we finally becoming more sensitive to our own insensitivity? Are we finally feeling the weight of our history? Breonna Taylor is fatally shot in her own apartment by a three plainclothes Louisville Metro police officers executing a no knock warrant. George Floyd is murdered by a Minneapolis police officer in broad daylight before of crowd of bystanders. We've been here before, but this time feels different. White people (and the rest of the world) saw something that's been happening in America for centuries, and this time the weight has come up to claim more of us. This time it has broken open more of our hearts. Van Jones, believes that "a miracle has taken place. A continent of new common ground has emerged from beneath the waves. Where there are twenty, thirty, forty million white Americans saying—racism is real, more real than I thought. There is something wrong with our justice system, it's more broken than I knew. What can I do about it? As an African American man, it's a miracle . . . we're in the midst of some kind of an awakening. Somebody killed a Black man, and everybody cares."<sup>2</sup>

The sudden acceleration of these shifts offers unwelcome comfort. I've witnessed an entire parade of shifty moments over the past month. *Shift* . . . the confederate flag is banned at NASCAR races. Statues of confederate leaders and colonizers are being defaced, pulled down, or removed to storage. Businesses are flying Black Lives Matter flags. The city of Albuquerque removes the statute of conquistador Juan de Oñate, after an altercation between a local armed militia and protestors. One man was shot before the police arrived. *Shift* . . . Juneteenth magically appears on my Google calendar as U.S. public holiday. It wasn't there yesterday. Washington, D.C. Mayor Muriel E. Bowser renames a street in front of the White House "Black Lives Matter Plaza." She watches as local artists and city workers paint the slogan on the asphalt in massive letters with highly reflective yellow street paint. This inspires the New York City mayor to paint the slogan on the street in front of Trump Tower. *Shift* . . . concepts such as white fragility, white supremacy, systemic racism, intersectionality, and anti-black racism, which once circulated within the narrow confines of social justice movements, progressive social media sites, and academic conferences, now spring from the mouths of newscasters and late-night talk show hosts. *Super shift* . . . the Mississippi state legislature passes a bill to remove the confederate battle emblem from the state flag. Things have become heavier. Are we beginning to feel the weight? Has it come up to claim us? The future feels more hopeful. Senator Kamala Harris accepts the Democratic Party's nomination for vice president. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez evokes the sentiments

expressed by black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde about the power of poetry and social change during her brief speech at the democratic convention. Is the weight lifting? Maybe not. The protests in Portland, Oregon become more violent. The police shootings continue: Jacob Blake is shot seven times in the back, in front of his three young sons, by a white police officer. The small city of Kenosha, Wisconsin is now on fire. And, it's not just police violence anymore, Americans continue to drag the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred through the streets. We are shooting one another. I feel my fear and anxiety return. I'm not sure what it will finally take for us to imagine another world, but I'm certain that attending to the historical weight of whiteness figures into this somewhere.

*The Weight of Whiteness: A Feminist Engagement with Privilege, Race, and Ignorance* is framed as a series of invitations to wade slowly and mindfully into the weight of whiteness, and to attend to the ways white supremacy has misshapen our nation, our communities, and our humanity. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) feel the weight of whiteness every day. The systemic machinery of white privilege, however, is designed to anesthetize most white people to this unbearable weight. We can learn to feel our indifference, but the resistant habits of whiteness make this work difficult. Part of the problem is that white people, myself included, have spent too long trying to think our way out of our whiteness. When we rush from our hearts to our heads, however, we become insensitive and inattentive to the subtle ways that whiteness anesthetizes us to the damage it does to our collective humanity. White people are far more comfortable thinking about white supremacy in terms of what privilege does *for* us, than we are feeling what it does *to* us.

The invitations to the weighty conversation begin in the head and lumber slowly downward into the body toward the heart. People of color have repeatedly invited white people to attend to the weight, but most of us have failed to respond to their generous invitations. My first three chapters focus on the *overexposed side of white privilege*, the side that works to make the invisible and intangible structures of power more visible and tangible. The final two chapters invite white readers to explore the *underexposed side of white dominance*, the weightless side that is too painful for us to feel. Taken together these chapters are my deeply personal attempt to hold space with the weight of whiteness in my own being, and to consider the weight I've inherited from my settler colonial ancestors. The gravitational pull of white ignorance's comfort is stronger than the painful knowledge required for our collective liberation. It's easier to wrestle with white guilt and shame, than it is to confront the possibility that each of us carries the historical weight of whiteness in our bodies, and that we continue to blow the weight of our trauma through people of color's bodies and communities. I'm convinced that our collective survival on this planet depends on white people doing this work. And, I'm scared that

the majority of white people will find this work far too painful to even begin and that most of us will choose anesthesia over knowledge.

The first chapter invites readers to “check their privilege.” The invitation feels like a brisk and disorienting nudge. It’s not a request for a one-time favor. It asks those of us with privilege to consider what we have been socialized to ignore. It’s instructive to witness how white people habitually use silence and distraction to avoid the invitation. The nudge makes us defensive, anxious, and angry. Our defensiveness almost always relies on confused understandings of privilege. Stretchy definitions are a barrier to clarity. Answering this request then, presupposes a solid account of what privilege is and how it functions. We need to identify and define what we are invited to examine. But, here’s the catch: Privilege is designed to be check proof. The obstacles to accepting the invitation are part and parcel of privilege itself. This is not accidental. Ignorance about white privilege and white supremacy help to sustain the painful injustices they repeatedly reproduce.

Resisting white supremacy demands a stable point from which to wade into the weight of whiteness. Chapter 1 offers readers a stretch-resistant account of privilege: one that expands upon, problematizes, and clarifies Peggy McIntosh’s definition of privilege as an “unearned power conferred systemically.”<sup>3</sup> I begin with a rough taxonomy of advantages. Privilege is a distinct species of systemically conferred advantages, which are distinct from perks, earned benefits, and legal rights. Privileges are marked by four interrelated features. First, privileges are capriciously granted to particular groups based solely on their membership in those particular groups. Next, privileges are experienced as invisible and weightless to those who have them. Privileges also function like ‘wild cards’ that confer dominant group benefits in a wide variety of circumstances. Finally, privileges have positive and negative dimensions. Even the most stretch-resistant definition of privilege will spark resistance. Many of the objections and counterexamples raised in response to my definition of privilege can be addressed by circling back to a basic taxonomy of advantages, and explaining how objectors habitually confuse systemically conferred privileges with nonsystemic advantages. However, this doesn’t always work. Some objections always spring from within the parameters of the stretch-resistant definition. Answering them demands taking into account intersectional and historical understandings of the counterexamples that objectors put on the table. To illustrate this, I explore a few common ‘members-of-oppressed-groups-have-privileges-too’ objections, which objectors use to redirect our attention away from power. Remember, the invitation to check your privilege is disorienting. It evokes a discomfort strong enough to trigger a bottomless conversation.

The next two chapters highlight the relationships between privilege and willful ignorance. I invite white readers in particular, to hold space with two

forms of resistance: *white talk* and *privilege-preserving epistemic pushback*. Like stretchy definitions of privilege, these tactics are used to derail conversations on race and to maintain white silence and comfort.

Chapter 2 explores the many ways that white talk functions as a barrier to understanding the problem of whiteness. You've heard white talk before, it sounds like this—*But I was in the streets protesting after police killed Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. My ancestors came here after the Civil War, so we are neither responsible for nor benefitted from the horrors of slavery and indigenous genocide*. The chapter explains why the question 'How does it feel to be a white problem?' cannot be answered in the fluttering grammar of white talk. The language of fluttering comes from W. E. B. DuBois's description of white people's discomfort during conversations about race. White talk is what white fragility sounds like. We flutter when we feel vulnerable. We flutter to avoid feeling the weight of our whiteness. Drawing on the stretch-resistant definition of privilege, I explore the advantages and disadvantages of using white talk as a route into understanding and feeling the problem of whiteness. My argument expands Alice MacIntyre's analysis of white talk to include the racialized bodily scripts, emotional content, and vocal tones that choreograph these utterances. White talk persists because it has an enduring moral, ontological, and epistemic pay off for white people. It bolsters our sense of well-being by pulling uncomfortable conversations toward evidence of our individual goodness and innocence. Ontologically, it re-inscribes historically fictitious accounts of whiteness as valuable, pure, and unproblematic. White talk is also used to defend our epistemic home terrain against information that upsets our worldview. These detours and distractions promote epistemic closure. I address each of these payoffs by highlighting the many ways white talk functions to maintain the illusion of white invulnerability. White talk, cannot be used to answer the question, how does it *feel* to be a white problem, because white talk functions to prevent white people from feeling the weight of whiteness in the first place. I suggest that white people might work to reduce our fluttering, by replacing white talk with a discourse of vulnerability, where vulnerability is defined not as weakness, but as a condition for potential and growth.

Chapter 3 combines my observations about white talk's epistemic payoff, with the realization that epistemic injustice scholarship offers educators a powerful resource for identifying white resistance to classroom discussions about gender and race. Classrooms are *unlevel knowing fields*, contested terrains where knowledge and ignorance circulate with equal vigor. Patterns of resistance are actively at play in these spaces. Awkward silences, closed body language, denial, angry responses, and verbal posturing are artifacts of white discomfort. The phenomenon I call privilege-preserving epistemic pushback is a species of willful ignorance that dominant groups deploy habitually

during conversations that challenge their racialized worldviews. I want to work with, not against, this ground-holding reflex by offering a technique for tracking it productively. I focus on these ground-holding responses because they bear a strong resemblance to critical thinking practices.

Privilege-preserving epistemic pushback takes two forms. The first expression passes easily as critical thinking. The second expression is more sophisticated: it occurs when philosophical practices and critical concepts are enlisted in the service of strategic refusals to understand. I argue that this privilege-preserving form of ignorance counts neither as skepticism nor critical thinking. These performances of willful ignorance do a different kind of work. To make this tangible I treat these ground-holding gestures as ‘*shadow texts*,’ that is, as the spoken copy that runs alongside the readings in ways that prevent epistemic friction. The word “shadow” brings to mind something walking closely alongside another thing without engaging it. Detectives shadow their suspects. Shadows are regions of visual opacity. Shadow texts then, point to these regions of epistemic opacity. They are artifacts of ignorance. I argue that shadow texts are a helpful way to track the production of ignorance and the harms of epistemic violence in classrooms. Learning to spot shadow texts, however, does offer discussants a common point of epistemic friction: It gets them to attend to what shadow texts *do*, rather than on the content what is being *said*. I offer a technique for tracking shadow texts in classroom settings. This is not just an intellectual exercise. Treating privilege-preserving epistemic pushback as a form of healthy skepticism or critical thinking creates a hostile learning environment. Permitting privilege-preserving epistemic pushback to circulate uncritically does psychological harm and epistemic damage.

Now let us shift from head to heart, remembering that white people are more comfortable discussing what white supremacy does *for* us, than we are feeling what it does *to* us. Peggy McIntosh has famously compared privilege to an invisible and weightless knapsack, but the majority of engagement with her famous article attends exclusively to the overexposed side of privilege; that is, to the task of making privilege’s unearned advantages visible. Chapters 4 and 5 invite white readers to wade into the underexposed side of privilege, and to hold space with the weight of whiteness until we are able to feel the pain we’d rather not feel. Privilege feels weightless because it anesthetizes us not only to the daily violence against BIPOC bodies, but also to what white people have been forced to surrender in the name of belonging. There is an abrupt shift in the style and tone of these two chapters. Holding space with the weight of whiteness is not intellectual work. The act of holding space is a weight bearing gesture. It is healing work. I use weighty language and gravitational metaphors to call attention to how the anesthesia of privilege constructs white ways of being. I invite white readers in particular

to hold space with white supremacy's gravitas long enough to feel how the weight of whiteness continues to misshape our humanity.

People of color have invited white folks to join the weighty conversation about what white supremacy does to our collective humanity for centuries. Chapter 4 invites you, dear reader, to begin opening those invitations. There is a deep wound in the white collective that people of color have witnessed for a very long time, but few white people have considered in a deep and sustained way. The weighty conversation is not about restoring white comfort. It's about touching and feeling the pain of the wound at the heart of whiteness long enough to move ourselves toward wholeness. I begin with a personal account of the racialized lessons my community instilled in me during the 1967 Newark Race Riots/Rebellion to illustrate how the layered messages about the value of whiteness took root in my young being. The daily gestures, unspoken scripts, and comments, which gradually introduced a fear of black and brown bodies into my being, were not installed painlessly. They damaged me, and to this day they remain in my flesh, my thoughts, and my nervous system. They have weight.

There are barriers to the weighty conversation. White ways of knowing contain a gravitas that shapes our conversations before they begin. Western epistemologies lean heavily on visual vocabularies to express what it means to know something. This makes it challenging to capture the untapped knowledge we touch when we mindfully attend to the weight of whiteness. The desire for perfection, comfort, mechanistic thinking, control, and other habits of whiteness also make responding to these invitations difficult. There is no painless way to open the weighty invitations, but open them we must. White supremacy relies on white people avoiding the weighty conversation. As long as we steer clear from the weight in our own being the violence will continue. In the absence of a weighty epistemology, I offer a heavy vocabulary. Learning to feel the weight of whiteness begins by sensitizing ourselves to the ways its gravity pulls us away from the weighty conversation. I offer an extended account of this gravitas. We can't force ourselves to feel what we've been taught not to feel, but we can become extremely curious about why white people continue to say that they don't feel anything at all. Anesthesia is part of the master's tool kit. What if white people treated our inability to feel the weight of whiteness in our bodies as evidence that white supremacy functions like anesthesia? The call to wade into the weight, is a call to cultivate a sensitivity to our own insensitivity, by attending carefully to the moments we feel the anesthesia pulling us under. The weight will only make itself known when the anesthesia lifts. Recovering our humanity requires that we remain still long enough to feel the damage.

I begin with a few raw personal examples of how the weight of whiteness has come up to claim me. These include: the psychological costs of

entitlement, fear, and hypervigilance; the social weight of strained friendships and alliances; the material weight of looting, hoarding, and the illusion of safety; historical and ancestral amnesia; and, the moral and epistemic costs of learning to see and judge the world wrongly. Naming the weight has allowed me to understand my brokenness; but, that brokenness still did not feel heavy to me. The habits I developed in response to the Newark lessons I learned as a child made the damage feel weightless. In looking back on these lessons I came to understand white identity as sedimented trauma numbed by white privilege. I'd long suspected that costs and losses of whiteness had a curious correspondence to the features of trauma response exposure. After all, trauma is about brokenness and we are wired to anesthetize ourselves to the pain of that brokenness. If the costs and losses of white supremacy share common features with trauma exposure, then the recent literature on trauma may offer a path toward healing. What if we treated the habits of white supremacy as the product of trauma exposure? My final section draws on the recent literature in polyvagal theory to explain why most white people choose to live our entire lives stuck in endless cycles of dirty pain and anesthesia. I rely on Resmaa Menakem's account of *white-body supremacy*, and the distinction between clean and dirty pain, to explain why white people continue to choose anesthesia over liberation. I sincerely believe that white people will never be able to feel the weight of whiteness until we make a conscious effort to metabolize the pain we inherit; only then can the healing begin. The weighty conversation can lead us down a path toward wholeness, connection, healing, reconciliation, and liberation, but only if we have the courage to walk into the places and parts of ourselves that feel most heavy.

Chapter 5 extends the weighty invitation. It invites people with white ancestries—especially those of us with settler colonial pedigrees—to hold space with the discomfort, pain, and messiness of the weight we inherit from our ancestors. The forces that disfigure our humanity also distort our family histories. If there is trauma in our bodies, and trauma in our families, then there is most certainly trauma in our pedigrees. I begin with a brief history of genealogy as a social practice and suggest that the white genealogical practices commonly produce anesthetized pedigrees. In Chapter 4 I described the anesthetized body as an artificially settled body, a body that chooses addiction to repeated numbing over the clean pain of liberation. The same can be said about the *anesthetized pedigree*. Whiteness has a strong gravitational pull on the ways white people construct our family histories. There are parts of our family trees that most of us are unwilling to feel. Family genealogists choose the dirty pain of denial when we prune our family trees into pleasing topiaries designed to fit comfortably into colonial master narratives. When robbed of their historical context and complexity our ancestries become barriers to our collective healing. I use Henry Louis Gates's interview with

Ben Affleck as cautionary tale about the price of the anesthetized pedigree. Affleck's request to have all references to his slave-holding ancestors deleted from an episode of the popular PBS *Finding Your Roots* series, offers a powerful example of how we inherit the anesthetic habits of whiteness from those who came before us. The weighty conversation can lead us down the path toward healing, reconciliation, and collective liberation, but we have to find the courage to occupy the uncomfortably heavy limbs of our family trees without anesthetizing ourselves to what we'd rather not find. We must summon the courage to do genealogy without anesthesia.

Medicinal genealogies offer an antidote to the anesthetized pedigree. Genealogy does more than excavate lost ancestors and place them into neatly organized pedigree charts. Genealogy can be used medicinally, in ways that recognize how our ancestral past may provide us with the stories we need to make ourselves whole. Aurora Levins Morales offers an inspiring account of history's healing power, which is easily extended to cover family histories. The medicinal value of genealogy lies in the courage to hold the family weight that reaches up to claim you. Practicing ancestry without anesthesia is an act of historical and psychological recovery. Genealogy has the power to make the historical personal. Joy DeGruy's scholarship is not specifically about genealogy, but it carefully attends to the importance of naming and feeling the pain black people inherit from the traumas of slavery and colonization. Genealogists of color are well aware of the weighty imprint of colonization on their family trees. Their narratives are ripe with the language of remembrance and healing. A handful of white genealogists have held space with the inconvenient truths in their ancestral trees long enough for the anesthesia to lift. I use the family histories written by Warren Read, Serene Jones, Edward Ball, Katrina Browne and the DeWolf family to illustrate some of the ways white people have chosen to hold space with their ancestors and to use that pain and knowledge in the service of collective healing. I've come to think of these offerings as *medicinal white genealogies*. These narratives have inspired me to hold space with my own ancestors long enough to affectively engage what my family has long forgotten. Researching my family history made the violence of colonization tangible to me in deeply personal ways. The success of colonial projects in general depended on colonizers learning to anesthetize themselves to the horrors of colonization. My family lines run through some of the more perceptible atrocities of North American colonization: I was astounded by how many stories had been lost, erased, forgotten, or buried. My eighth great-grandmother, Mary Barnes (1626–1663) was the last person in Connecticut to be publicly hung during the Wethersfield Witch Panic of 1662. Dozens of my ancestors participated in genocidal campaigns against indigenous peoples during the Pequot War, King Philip's War, and the Black Hawk War. My Dutch, Welsh, and English ancestors played a

central role in the colonization of New Jersey and lower Manhattan. But, for the purposes of this chapter, I've chosen to hold space with my Morgan and Van Wickle ancestors, who engineered a plan to sell over 137+ free, bonded, and enslaved people of African descent into permanent slavery in the south. My desire to hold space with them is rooted in a feeling I cannot seem to shake. The wound at the heart of whiteness is generations deep. It predates my childhood Newark lessons. And so, I feel called upon to hold space with the historical circumstances that gave rise to their deeds and to make the pain I feel sacred, so that we can mourn and heal together. Holding space is a collective endeavor. And, I was extremely fortunate to find a community that had already begun this healing work.

## NOTES

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