

## White Privilege/White Complicity: Connecting “Benefiting From” to “Contributing To”

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In a 1945 program to denazify Germany, posters began to appear across occupied Germany illustrated with pictures of concentration camps and an accusatory finger pointed at the reader with the words, “You are guilty.”<sup>1</sup> Many ordinary citizens were forced to acknowledge (some for the first time) that the camps really did exist, though denial and indignation were common. “We are innocent! How can we be responsible for these terrible crimes when we did not know that they existed and even if we did know, we could not have done anything?” Can people be responsible for evil they did not directly perpetrate, might not have known about, or might not have been able to affect? Intention, understood as free will, and causality are the hallmarks of responsibility. Yet intention and causality were absent in the case of many ordinary Germans. Nevertheless, Hannah Arendt, who coined the piercing term “the banality of evil” to describe how evil is perpetrated by regular people who uncritically go about their daily lives, intimates that any German who even indirectly supported Nazi ideology was responsible for the Nazi regime’s evils.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, critical race theorists have insisted that white people are responsible for and complicit in systemic racism. At least two shifts in understanding race and racism contributed to this claim. First, race is commonly understood not as biologically based, but as a socially constructed category in which racial groups are mutually constituted through normalization processes where one group becomes the measure and all other groups are evaluated as “different” or “deviant.” Second, the understanding of racism has shifted from a focus on individual people and prejudiced attitudes to an awareness of institutional and cultural practices that generate and maintain it. Whiteness, as the racial norm, lies at the center of the U.S. problem of race.<sup>3</sup>

Within this framework, the claim that white people are racist is frequently asserted. White people, especially well-intentioned white people, often respond with indignant denials and resistance. In 2007, the discussion topic “all whites are racist” in a mandatory university residential life program led to charges of brain-washing and indoctrination, and the university abandoned its antiracist initiative.<sup>4</sup> It is clearly important to understand what people mean when they maintain the claim of white complicity.

One way to elucidate this is by reference to white people’s unconscious attitudes and beliefs that come from living in a racist society. Barbara Trepagnier contends that

No one is immune to the ideas that permeate the culture in which he or she is raised. Silent racism...refers to the unspoken negative thoughts, emotions, and assumptions about black

Americans that dwell in the minds of white Americans, including well-meaning whites that care about racial equality.<sup>5</sup>

Larry May connects unconscious racist beliefs to racially motivated harms enacted by others; he contends that even if one did not directly contribute to harms done through racially motivated crimes and discrimination, one can be responsible for them. Although only certain group members directly perpetrate racial violence, May insists that “seemingly innocent” group members are partially responsible if they share racist attitudes or if they fail to challenge these attitudes when exposed to them.<sup>6</sup>

Dwight Boyd, Iris Marion Young, and Peg O’Connor have critiqued May’s focus on individualistic factors, such as attitudes, to link people to responsibility for wrongs, thus underestimating the social structures that connect people to injustice.<sup>7</sup> Still, while May is exclusively concerned with negative attitudes and explains how whites are indirectly responsible for overt harms perpetrated by other whites, he neglects how power circulates through all white bodies in ways that make them directly complicit in perpetuating a system they did not, as individuals, create.

The complicity thesis need not be exclusively concerned with unconscious negative beliefs and attitudes toward nonwhite people since complicity is linked to white privilege. White people benefit from the group privileges of racism that simultaneously marginalize people of color. All whites are racist or complicit by virtue of benefiting from these privileges, even though these privileges cannot be voluntarily renounced through individual action.<sup>8</sup>

Sandra Bartky argues that

most white people in this country are complicit in an unjust system of race relations that bestows unearned advantages on them while denying these advantages to racial Others. Complicity in this system is neither chosen nor, typically, is it acknowledged, because there are both powerful ideological systems in place that serve to reassure whites that the suffering of darker-skinned Others is not of their doing and because the capacity of whites to live in denial of responsibility is very highly developed.<sup>9</sup>

As Bartky puts it, “I am guilty by virtue of simply being who and what I am: a white woman, born into an aspiring middle-class family in a racist and class-ridden society.”<sup>10</sup> How is it that well-meaning whites, even anti-racist people, contribute to systemic racism through privileges that adhere to them, even without their will?

This essay explores the link between “benefiting from” an unjust system and “contributing to” its perpetuation. How does being systemically privileged lead to collaboration within an unjust system? How can one be held responsible for such collusion, even when it is unintended or resisted? By expanding and developing the meaning of white privilege, I explore the unique conception of “benefit” presumed in such claims of complicity<sup>11</sup> and then identify systemic white ignorance as a form of privilege. Such ignorance protects the morality of whites and shields unjust systems from interrogation. Finally, I elucidate the link between benefiting from and contributing to, and clarify the ways that whites are responsible for racism. This analysis can help us to understand Fiona Probyn’s claim that complicity must be the starting point and the condition of ethics itself.<sup>12</sup>

## THE BENEFITS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

Peggy McIntosh's oft-quoted "knapsack" of privileges has powerfully exposed the ways that whites maneuver more comfortably than those who are not ascribed whiteness.<sup>13</sup> Yet the knapsack metaphor implies that privileges can be taken off or disowned at will and that a nonracial subject is behind the privileges. Also, the metaphor overlooks the unconscious habits and character traits that are manifestations of privileged experiences, and it disregards how experiencing privilege is constitutive of one's very being.<sup>14</sup>

Privilege is not only a matter of receiving benefits but consists also in traits of character, certain outlooks, and ways of moving. Sara Ahmed identifies a phenomenology of whiteness, and illustrates this by the tendency of white people to "take back the center," often without realizing it.<sup>15</sup> Shannon Sullivan also exemplifies white privilege as an unconscious habit of "white expansiveness" or the tendency of whites to assume that they can act and think as if all spaces are or should be at their disposal as they desire.<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Rich refers to "white solipsism" as whites' tendency "to speak, imagine and think as if whiteness described the world," and Alice McIntyre notes the "privileged affect" expressed in whites' exclusive focus on their own need to feel good.<sup>17</sup>

White solipsism is often implicated in white desire to do and be good. Even when well-intentioned whites decide not to live in all white neighborhoods, the very choice assumes and reinforces the "privileged choice" they have.<sup>18</sup> Privilege is something white people tend to assert even as they seek to challenge it. Ahmed draws attention to how white moral agency can be problematic and involves solipsism:

to respond to accounts of institutional whiteness with the question "what can white people do?" is not only to return to the place of the white subject, but it is also to locate agency in this place. It is also to re-position the white subject somewhere other than implicated in the critique.<sup>19</sup>

White moral agency may function to reinscribe rather than dismantle systems of privilege by presuming that white people are the central agents, and also by implying that the white moral agent's innocence can be preserved.

Benevolent white acts can also illuminate how white privilege and complicity protect systems of oppression from challenge. In some white feminism, for instance, white compassion for the suffering of black women has been self-serving and appropriating. Elizabeth Spelman asks, "At what point or under what conditions does compassion become parasitical upon its suffering host?" This hidden self-centeredness means that people who "enjoy being in the saddle of compassion may have disincentives to cancel the suffering that provides the ride."<sup>20</sup>

The ideology of color-blindness also illustrates how white privilege and complicity can be veiled under the cover of morality. "Black, white, red, purple — all that matters is that we appreciate and celebrate our difference and just get along." Ignoring race is considered to be a virtuous moral position, but in a context where the color of one's skin still makes a difference, this is not a virtue and functions to maintain the invisibility of injustice as well as to sanction white people's privilege

in not even having to consider how they might be contributing to the perpetuation of an unjust system.

Ahmed explains how the utterances of white critics of whiteness do something other than what they claim to do.<sup>21</sup> She is not saying that they do not mean what they say; her point is that such assertions do not do what they say. For instance, in declaring “I am racist” or “I am complicit,” the white critic of whiteness implies the opposite — “I am not racist” or “I am not complicit.” Whereas the person who declares “I am modest” is clearly not a modest person, the one who declares “I am racist” is not declaring his or her goodness directly. Ahmed cautions the white critic of whiteness that assertions that “I am a bad white” can imply that “I am really a good white.” Probyn contends that “a white studying whiteness trying not to reinscribe whiteness” is a paradox.<sup>22</sup> Whiteness is the object of the white critic’s inquiry but also the subject and the obstacle to his or her project, especially when it obstructs the difficult task of being skeptical of the need to have “arrived somewhere.”

Probyn challenges the prevailing focus in critical whiteness studies on unmasking whiteness, of unveiling it, and then proclaiming, “now I see” in “shocks of revelation.” She hopes that “it isn’t just these shocks that keep the patient alive.”<sup>23</sup> “Noble” declarations of whiteness, Probyn insists, must be probed for their desires for purity. Ahmed likewise cautions, “We need to consider the intimacy between privilege and the work we do, even in the work we do on privilege.”<sup>24</sup>

It should be clear that a unique type of benefit is connected to systemic privilege, and it involves more than material gains, and even psychological advantages. White privilege also protects a type of moral certainty and arrogance. White privilege is often addressed in terms of gain and considered from the viewpoint of the individual or aggregates of individuals. To understand how all white people are complicit in the perpetuation of systemic injustice, however, requires a shift from understanding benefit in individualist terms to understanding benefit collectively and macroscopically.<sup>25</sup>

Surveys continue to find large differences between the views of U.S. whites and blacks on key measures of race relations; in general, whites minimize the harmful effects of current racism.<sup>26</sup> This may reflect different understandings of harm. Alan David Freeman distinguishes between the harms of racism from the perspective of the victim rather than the perpetrator. From the victim’s perspective, racial discrimination involves “those conditions of actual social existence as a member of a perpetual underclass... (and) includes both the objective conditions of life... and the consciousness associated with those objective conditions.” This view involves more than asking an individual victim about what the harms consist of; it involves understanding harm within the framework of an unjust system. From the perpetrator’s perspective, in contrast, discrimination is understood individualistically, “not as conditions but as actions, or series of actions, inflicted on the victim by the perpetrator. The focus is more on what particular perpetrators have done or are doing to some victims than on the overall life situation of the victim class.”<sup>27</sup> Benefit, and not just harm, must be analyzed from the victims’ perspective. With this expanded notion of privilege and benefit, I next examine white ignorance.

## SYSTEMIC WHITE IGNORANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Cris Mayo argued that “Privilege... gives whites a way to not know that does not even fully recognize the extent to which they do not know that race matters or that their agency is closely connected with their status.”<sup>28</sup> Charles Mills asks, “How are white people able to consistently do the wrong thing while thinking that they are doing the right thing?”<sup>29</sup> Some recent research examines the epistemology of ignorance and, in particular, the dynamics of white ignorance.<sup>30</sup> Mills argues that it involves a systemically supported and socially induced pattern of (mis)understanding the world that functions to sustain systemic oppression and privilege.<sup>31</sup> Such ignorance mystifies the consequences of the unjust system so that those who benefit from it do not have to consider their complicity in perpetuating it. Vivian May notes, “there are many things those in dominant groups are taught not to know, encouraged not to see, and the privileged are rewarded for this state of not-knowing.”<sup>32</sup> Willful ignorance involves a pattern of assumptions or socially authorized “inscribed habits of (in)attention” that privileges the dominant group and gives license to members of that group “to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive,” all the while thinking of themselves “as good.”<sup>33</sup>

Well-intentioned whites are often surprised to encounter experiences that compel them to consider what they do not know about systemic racism. Tyron Foreman and Amanda Lewis underscore this in reference to the intense surprise of many U.S. whites after Hurricane Katrina revealed the reality of racial inequality in New Orleans; they attribute this astonishment to a racial apathy consequent to the white ignorance manifested in the ideology of color “ignore-ance.”<sup>34</sup> As Mills maintains, one’s social positionality influences the questions one believes are important to ask and the problems one believes are valuable to pursue. White ignorance involves not asking (having the privilege not to need to ask) certain questions, and it generates specific types of delusions — wrong ways of perceiving the world that are socially validated by dominant norms.

White ignorance involves not just “not knowing,” but also “not knowing what one does not know while believing that one knows.” This latter phenomenon, fueled by a refusal to consider one’s possible moral complicity, promotes a resistance to knowing. Consequently, concepts “necessary for accurately mapping these realities... will be absent.” Mills correctly notes that “the crucial conceptual innovation necessary to map nonideal realities has *not* come from the dominant group.”<sup>35</sup> While not only whites are susceptible to white ignorance, whites are particularly susceptible because they have the most to gain from remaining ignorant. Benefit, thus, is related to keeping ignorance in place.

Mills argues that the “recognition problems” that ensue from white ignorance must be acknowledged because “it becomes easier to do the right thing if one knows the wrong things that, to one’s group, will typically *seem* like the right thing.”<sup>36</sup> Yet it is not easy to get whites to consider their complicity. Scholars have shown that denials of complicity are a characteristic feature of white ignorance.<sup>37</sup> O’Connor offers a resonant illustration, discussing a white student who resists the possibility of a relation between race and securing a mortgage. Shown statistics that

demonstrate that people of color are refused mortgages significantly more often than whites, the white student offers a variety of explanations that elide race, focused perhaps on the person's credit history or the nature of the neighborhood and the business obligations of the bank.<sup>38</sup> The point here is not to deny the possibility of the validity of such explanations in particular cases, but rather to note that the white person rejects even considering that race might be a factor, and may even allege that blacks are always "playing the race card."

Whites have a positive interest in remaining ignorant because this serves to sustain their moral self-image.<sup>39</sup> If one denies that race may be related to securing a mortgage, then one does not have to engage the possibility that one's own racial privilege helped one to receive a mortgage. Thus, white ignorance is not only about "not knowing what one does not know," but also involves a "passion for ignorance"<sup>40</sup> when it comes to learning "difficult knowledge" that challenges one's sense of moral self and compels one to seriously engage with one's complicity in systemic injustice.

One way, then, that whites contribute to the perpetuation of systemic racism is through experiencing privilege and a systemically induced ignorance that promote a relentless readiness to deny, ignore, and dismiss what victims of racism are saying, and that thereby enable whites to maintain their moral innocence. Understanding these dynamics helps to illuminate what white people must continually work toward challenging.

#### CONCLUSION

Connecting systemic privilege to practices of ignorance helps us to understand how systems of oppression are protected from critique and how white people deny their complicity to safeguard their self-understandings of moral goodness. In other words, "benefiting from" results in "contributing to" racism.

The link between "benefiting from" and "contributing to" racism is crucial for understanding the type of vigilance required of whites committed to social justice. White moral responsibility requires that white people be willing to explore the blocks that inhibit the acknowledgement and thoughtful analysis of white complicity. Even those who are committed to acknowledging complicity are not absolved from complicity. No white person is morally innocent. No white person can stand outside of the system.

To understand what this means, I return to what Ahmed writes when she discusses the white person who asks, "but what are white people to do?" She explains that this question is not totally misguided,

although it does re-center on white agency, as a hope premised on lack rather than presence....The impulse towards action is understandable and complicated: it can be both a defense against the "shock" of hearing about racism (and the shock of the complicity revealed by the very "shock"); it can be an impulse to reconciliation as a "re-covering" of the past (the desire to feel better); it can be about making public one's judgment ("what happened was wrong"); or it can be an expression of solidarity ("I am with you"). But the question, in all of these modes of utterance, can work to block hearing; in moving on from the present towards the future, it can also move away from the object of critique, or place the white subject "outside" that critique in the present of the hearing. In other words, the desire to act, to move, or even to move on, can stop the message getting through.<sup>41</sup>

I read Ahmed as recognizing that for whites to join with people of color in alliances to challenge systemic racism, they have to acknowledge white complicity. This means being vigilant about white moral agency, because it can ironically obstruct a genuine engagement with those who are victims of racial oppression. Ahmed cautions white people to examine their desire “to do something,” because it can function to protect one’s moral innocence and the social system on which it is based. “If we want to know how things can be different *too quickly*,” as she argues, “then we might not hear anything at all.”<sup>42</sup>

Audrey Thompson exhorts white people to acknowledge uncertainty and engage with what people of color tell them about their experiences in a way that does not just “come to say no.”<sup>43</sup> Whites must be willing to risk engaging in the difficult listening that leaves one open and vulnerable. An important insight about being open and vulnerable is suggested by Naomi Scheman when she explains how the privileged must learn from others whose “social locations on the borders of intelligibility equip them precisely for dismantling the structures we may deplore but cannot ourselves see beyond — since they are, for those of us who are intelligible in their terms, the ‘limits of our language.’”<sup>44</sup> In response to those who argue, “but how can one be open to everything and everybody?” Scheman astutely responds that how we choose what we give attention to is exactly the issue. She does not advocate “epistemic promiscuity,” or being open to every passing argument; she emphasizes that we must examine how we choose which arguments to seriously engage that challenge our beliefs, whose critique we try hard to understand, whom we read, and where we might look for ways that “might shake us up.”

Complicity, as Probyn insists, must be the starting point and the condition of ethics itself. This involves understanding what is meant by the benefits of white privilege, as well as the ways in which white ignorance distorts white perception of reality. Damien Riggs suggests that “rather than ‘solving racism’ by being better white people,” whites need “to recognize that belief in the ‘goodness’ of white people, values and ways of knowing is precisely the foundation of practices of oppression.”<sup>45</sup> Acknowledging rather than denying complicity is the first step in creating a shared language and a condition of dialogue.

It is by showing how we are stuck, attending to what is habitual and routine in “the what” of the world, that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes, without using that possibility to displace our attention to the present, and without simply wishing for new tricks.<sup>46</sup>

Not seeking so zealously to “get over” the discomforts of acknowledging complicity and being willing to remain engaged even in the midst of discomfort promotes the possibility of creating alliance identities and is a necessary step in working together to challenge and undermine the unjust system we are currently so deeply embedded in.

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