

White Male Privilege: A Conversation

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Abstract

White male privilege exploded in the classroom. One was terrified; the other forgot. In this article, two White bodies, one female and the other male, discuss this event in an interrupted conversation that moves between personal/local and subject/global.

Keywords

ethnicity and race, Whiteness studies, masculinity studies, gender and sexuality

I.

I did not like him. Or perhaps, I did not like what I felt in his presence, attraction/repulsion of White male privilege.¹ He walked into my classroom at Georgia State University, pushing his bike, water bottle, and a large Starbucks in tow; tossing his head; throwing his long brown hair out of his eyes. He sat to my left, between me and the door, legs crossed at the ankles, stretched toward the middle of the circle of desks, slouched, so his butt was closer to the front than to the back of his chair.

He came in the same way each Tuesday evening to Educational Policy Research Studies (EPRS) 8500, Qualitative Research 1: push, swagger, flip, slouch, extend. He was heard in his silence and words, as he curved conversation to a telling of his skill teaching Black children in an apartheid school. I pushed his energy away. I moved two seats to the right.

He was smart, and I knew it, a smart, White man sucking power. One night he sucked a little too hard, and it exploded. Jay was sitting in a small group of students

discussing the assigned readings, articles, and chapters on some significant theory, which no longer seems to matter. Across the cluster, juxtaposed to Jay's toes, sat Adam, a tall, dark man, who was self-admittedly "a little unstable." Under the discussion, Jay's foot vibrated with a nervous twitch, tap, tap, tap it connected with Adam's leg. Standing with force, a jolt that startled, Adam focused his intensity on Jay and said, "You, outside." A hush crushed the small group and seeped through the class. Adam, fists clenched, body shaking, mumbled with tethered restraint something about the continued insult of Jay's tapping foot.

I looked to the pastor seated across the room and to my right, calling on one male power to protect me from another. Slowly, the moment passed; Adam sat down. Class and tension continued.

The rationale for the explosion was placed on Jay's foot, moments of disrespectful tapping. I agree it was a tapping, but not just of a foot. It was the continuous too big energy of power sucked and exhaled by one White male body who wanted more than his, while feeling not enough.

II.

I cannot help myself; reading Jodi's story, and before I can address the incident with Adam, I find myself nursing hurt feelings—wondering why all this focus on the way I sit, the way I keep my hair, the coffee I drink.

too narcissistic; perhaps it is the energy of too . . .)

(for me, it is not the way, but the how—too much, too big,

Aren't I free to speak of my apartheid school and the Black children I struggle to effectively teach? I was terrified of this doctoral class, the first theoretical course I had the opportunity to take. I was intimidated by the instructor, a sort of qualitative theory polymath;

(my ego is dancing . . . do people think, perhaps, that I am smart?)

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I remember
that first day feeling as if I followed so little of what she was saying,

(continually worried, I fear you are bored or worse yet, you think I am a little crazy; you shake your head like you understand, so I think you know, and I want not to say more, while simultaneously resisting the off-centered glance which I interpret as “she either does not know the real world or she does not know what she is talking about . . .”)

and this worried me to no end.

(is fear of each other, ourselves, creating a plane of resistance, a plane on which our lines of fear collide, breaking each other at unwanted joints?)

As a math major, I had never even taken an undergraduate philosophy class, and I lived with that lack during every discussion. I must ask: How could I in any way have swaggered

(I smile, do you own the swagger?)

into a room I was so academically unprepared to enter? How could I possibly suck power from a group of people who clearly knew so much more than me about the subject matter at hand?

(I let you suck my power, because I fear you . . .)

The answer to that question is in that last little clause—“the subject matter at hand.” I get it now, thousands of pages of reading on privilege and a soul-searching dissertation later. I might not have known more about qualitative research methodology than almost everyone else in that room, but just a smidge beneath the surface I believed that I probably knew more about almost everything else. That is what it is like to be a smart, White man—you are pretty certain almost de facto that you must be on par with the most intelligent person in the room. You may not know more about “the subject matter at hand,” but you most certainly believe you could if only you took the time to apply yourself.

(I want that; the all too much that I know is dangerous—I attempt to pull in to a humility of human and fall to a resonance of a continually, reverberating line of insignificance)

And, in absence of the time or will to apply yourself, you can simply curve the conversation back to a subject in which you are more comfortable digressing. I feel naked writing this, almost as if I am letting some sort of cat out of another sort of bag; I worry that my readers (Jodi included) will clench and grit and curse to themselves. Jodi knows, though, I tell myself—she already knew when she instinctively felt that arrogance exuding from my entire mien the moment she met me. It’s why she moved desks. Just come clean now, finally, and say what you have always avoided: I think I am smarter than the rest of you.

(wielding theory, I analyzed her life, ignoring her soul for a knowing of body and subject . . . I did not think, nor care enough, what this did to her; the beautiful woman in front of me—I wanted in the club of academia, so I dropped my God, picked up a philosopher and pen, and curved the narrative to my knowing demand; am I different than you?)

The fact that I could cause a respected professor
around corners seeking confirmation . . .)

(another affirmation, my ego sings . . . I peek

to seek a physical distancing from me and my attitude was the part of the story that shocked me out of my defensiveness, I think.

(I had to move, for I am not strong enough not to get sucked into the game; my ego sings when I perceive others perceive me as intelligent, adrenaline is released, and I am worthy; I love that feeling; I had to move; I too easily fall into an abyss of narcissistic knowing)

On a second or maybe third reading, I managed to get my nose back into joint, and eventually I was able to see myself staring out through her words. As a matter of fact, I was even able to watch myself in a staff meeting just the other day, pushing my bike into the auditorium of the high school where I teach, taking out my thermos of

coffee, flipping my hair out of eyes as I leaned back as far as my chair would allow, tapping my feet as I slouched into my seat in what I once might have called an effort to disappear. I see it now for what it is, though: a sort of dare to the rest of the room. I am in control here, I say through my disengagement and body language; I may not know more about education than all of you, but I certainly could if only I were to apply myself. In other words: I have nothing to learn from you. I was shocked, and felt rather than remembered Jodi's words, eerily describing me in a space she had never seen. I sat up immediately.

III.

Walking to my office one cold February morning, I passed Adam. We said our salutations as he dabbed his nose with a small wad of Kleenex and held his coat collar closed under his chin. He apologized for his disruption in my class; "I am really quite mentally unstable," he said. "Quite mentally unstable . . ."

I forgot Adam in my last response to Jay. What privilege is in this forgetting? Easy to placate self with thoughts that Adam is a relationship gone, as so many other relations evaporated into memory. But I wonder if this is too easy, a veiling story covering a power I wield. Folded in a small, dark corner, I find I want to be mad at White, male privilege. It is a story that surges me with power. I am the David slaying the modern Goliath who is razing the planet. If I change this story, how would I narrate myself strong? In my construction of White, male privilege, Adam is a victim fabula—Black, male, eviscerated by racial structures and their individual ramifications. I feared and pitied Adam. What arrogance is in that pity? Was my story of Adam, Jay, and I, one in which I got my Goliath by sacrificing Adam, reifying White male privilege and Black male impotence/violence, and centering White, female liberal, victim/healer that I may perform my preferred role?

IV.

Jodi worries

(is that patronizing?)

that she has reified White male privilege in her momentary omission of Adam from our joint tale, and perhaps she wonders so correctly. I can equal this oversight, however,

(the too much seeps in subtle phrases . . . from "better" in the first draft to "equal" in the present . . . it swallows collaboration with a satin signifier as it simultaneously knocks me in the chest, pushing me to an edge incapable of being, sucking into itself a Black hole of too much)

and give a rather concrete example of White male privilege when I note that for more than 4 years I completely forgot that Adam even existed. Jodi told me a shell of the story that makes up the first part of this piece in a meeting recently—the part about Adam's explosion in a class she had taught some time previous—and I am not exaggerating when I say that for the bulk of her monologue I had no idea she was talking about a class I had taken with her, much less that I was the origin of the explosion.

(I cannot understand this forgetting—mowing the lawn, I shredded the grasshopper; I saw it cocked on a blade of grass, brown on green; I did not slow my pace . . . how often do I forget or refuse to alter the violence of my step?)

What greater privilege is there than to be the primal cause

(ah, too, too much—from not me to all me; either way you are the center, sucking . . . is there a middle human, one in which we play and are played, but lick at drops of agency, reflectively repeating differently; Butler with a little more consciousness?)

of such an unsettling event, and yet to be able to forget that such a moment occurred?

If experience is "not the origin of our explanation, not the authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced" (Scott, 1991, pp. 779-780), what was my experience? Jodi and Adam each returned to their experience in her class, sought to explain it, attempted to produce some knowledge from this bellicose collision of power and privilege. I merely

(merely? an adjective to diminish?)

(I am wanting to be cranky to you here, a little pissy in fact, inflicting little stabs that sting . . . feeling guilty, I wonder if I am just to be grateful of the acknowledgment—the voice of my mother whispers: rewards come to the meek and kind—but I am angry that you forgot; you—and I understand this “you” a position, both personal and subject—so easily dismissed the violence you inflict on my body . . . as Adam and I tremble, you remain innocent)

They, through their discourse, are pushing into privilege; I, through my decision not to remember, am reifying it. *(No! the signifying excess that is cut and thrown into the abyss with the knife of too, too much, echoing in the denial of me/not me, is like the music that sent the Jews to the gas chamber [Adorno, 1966]—don't you get it? we are dying and the Gods are leaving . . . this is not about you; it is an energy on which we play, a reverberation of congealed lines singing across the globe . . . not all songs are beautiful.)*

V.

Dead: 2,996. What are 2,996 lives/dead bodies. A mother, father, sister, brother, daughter, son, friend, country person. Each counted, remembered, memorialized. A too, too much . . . I am angry, really, really angry, and too, too much scared too, with us/U.S. We have treated the Middle East badly. A few little taps of our foot: Over a 100,000 Iraqis dead, more or less, we cannot decide exactly how to count the dead body of the other. Iranian oil stolen, Mosaddegh assassinated, Shah Mohammed paid billions in cooperation fees (Keddie, 2006). We are not innocent. I/U.S. must take responsibility for the tapping foot that pushes others to explosion. Sad, angry, responsible, dying . . .

VI.

I find myself a little taken aback here, wondering at the turn this piece has taken, *(I do not think it a turn, but the folded trembling of the same congealed plateau)*

plead, do not diminish) amazed and a little *(begging, I*

ashamed that my act of forgetting has been conflated *(can we conflate that which is the same?)*

with September 11th and the Iraq War. Do our readers see the connection? Or are we *(do not patronized me with the sudden use of second person—I am not assuaged)*

befuddled by having written this piece in the early fall? as writers merely a bit

male/female, rational/irrational, sane/crazy, political/personal, you/me . . .) *(befuddled? the woman in the attic?)*

sense, strikes a small chord And yet, it makes a sort of

(no, don't you see, we are finished here—stop right there; let the chord ring . . . do not go on, attempting to conclude, pulling it back to you . . . you, my dear friend, as much as I cherish you, are not the center)

in me that resonates with what I already believe to be true: power, if unacknowledged or ignored, is far more than a corrupting influence; it is also an alienating one. At times I watch America on the world stage and shake my head in disbelief; now I think: is that how people see me? Do I swagger into staff meetings as if it were some sort of Middle Eastern world?

Again, I beg, do not go on. Delete the following ending² of you and your fantasy. You ask that I respond throughout Scene VII, stating my objections and fears. But (the word that turns all back on itself (Lacan, 1988); I cannot be complicit in this tale that chases its own.

Stop, become mute; cry tears of sorrow . . . we are dying here.

Appendix

VII.

I never smoked, but I can certainly relate to the thought of a compulsion drawing you inexorably toward something you know beyond a doubt is only serving you ill. Never having been a smoker, I also never had the experience of lighting up a series of cigarettes, night after night, every time telling my friends that this was going to be the last one, that this time I was really quitting. I can certainly find parallels of helplessness in my own life, however—the desire to assuage myself over and over again that this time things would finally be different, that this time I would be able to pull myself up by my mental bootstraps and do the right thing. It is how I feel right now as I write this sentence along the same lines, saying that as a result of working out this article with Jodi I am going to remember my privilege from now on, that I will never again walk into a room with swagger, never slouch into a seat and dare the occupants to address me and my power. I have made such a promise to myself before, however—many times—and in my current meta-mood I must know that I am all-but incapable of maintaining such an aggressive mental edge over my thoughts and actions. I feel out of control of my own body at times; I must know that in reality I am doomed only to fail. Like our Obama-led America in the ever-muddled Middle East, I say one thing even as I know I will be forced to do another.

And yet, some people actually smoke that last cigarette. My father, for instance—he quit smoking at some point in my childhood after being addicted to nicotine for 15 years or so. How many times did he tell himself that this particular cigarette would be his last, how many times did he let himself down by buying just one more pack? And yet, he did in fact finally quit, managed to put down his cigarettes once and for all. I think about that last night for him, and it seems possible that he knew at the time that this particular last cigarette was different, that his diachronic act of quitting smoking was over at last. Possibly, he was filled with optimistic certitude. Maybe, though, he found himself overwhelmed with despair the morning after his last cigarette, maybe as the nicotine cravings coursed through his blood he in no way believed himself that he would be able to maintain a hold on his tenuous hope of letting go. Maybe he doesn't even remember his actual last cigarette because it came at the end of a seemingly never-ending string of “last cigarettes” and he had no real faith in himself that this particular one could ever in fact be so. I can take hope in this, I think, draw some sort of analogy: I may not know for sure when any particular last time might come, but for any individual habit there just might be a last time out there for me. In other words, despite all of my previous inability to hold on to an awareness of my seemingly limitless ability to forget about power and privilege, this time might just be different. I might finally be able to remember.

I forgot about Adam once, to my regret, but Jodi's telling of her tale provides me with the chance to remember, an opportunity to try again. Butler (1993) writes, “The production of texts can be one way of reconfiguring what will count as the world. Because texts do not reflect the entirety of their authors or their worlds, they enter a field of reading as partial provocations” (p. 19) and in this quotation I catch a glimpse of a way forward. We cannot hope to capture the entirety of what happened that day in class, but if I can hold this text up as a sort of partial provocation to myself, use it as a mirror with which I can watch myself sitting in some meeting tomorrow or whenever, then this (co)production of a text might in some small way be a reconfiguration of what I can count as my world. In other words, I might be able to apologize to Adam here, to say I'm sorry for my too big energy of power sucked and exhaled, and to attempt to become the kind of White male body who both learns from happenings such as this as well as constitutes a kind of new identity through the discourse of them. This piece cannot fix me—far less, in Jodi's words, us/U.S.—but it can be some sort of step. As a White man, an American, who has finally come to see himself, dimly, in the mirror or privilege and power, I am desperate for some sort of step. Like my father's last cigarette ended one chapter for him while beginning another, maybe this step for me, however small, can serve as a similar sort of chapter break. Maybe I can change, after all.

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Notes

1. This story is an alternative critical, social justice project, one that is not the same for me, Jodi, an associate professor at Georgia State University, as it is for Jay, a White, male student at the time of the incident and now Dr. Wamsted. For Jay, it was a working to own his White male privilege. I admire Jay for seeing this project through with me, for I was cranky with him—pushing hard and not kindly. That pushing was not comfortable, and I believe, not all Jay. It is my anger too. For me, this article began as a pushing and outing White male privilege in one White male. But it transformed in the writing, moving from it is you to it is me too. To dissipate this all too much energy, I believe I must pull its shards out of my own female body. I began to more consciously see this energy as not one constituted by one subject position, but one picked up by many bodies and wielded in minute ways—the use of an adjective that turns the focus back to self, a kind word with little barbs. I, too, see this same energy as one in which we as a nation are too

involved, barbarous acts veiled under innocence. This social justice project is an attempt to continue to unwrap White male privilege in the personal and non-subjective, the local and the global, and the micro and macro.

2. See the appendix for the deleted Scene VII.

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Jodi Kaufmann is an associate professor at Georgia State University. Her interests are fluid, sometimes here and sometimes there. As a qualitative researcher, she plays with poststructural inquiry and the possibilities of making a better world to come.

John O. Wamsted has his PhD in mathematics education. He works at an apartheid school in Atlanta, Georgia. He is interested in the intersection of storytelling and identity, especially regarding race.