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**On White Privilege and Anesthesia:
Why Does Peggy McIntosh's Knapsack Feel Weightless?¹**

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“Every social injustice demands that we silence our bodies.”

- Aurora Levins Morales (2019, 43)

The invitation to “check your privilege” almost always makes white people defensive. It asks those of us who benefit from the unearned advantages of white supremacy to remain still long enough to recognize what we have been socialized to ignore. It calls on white people to see what we’ve been taught not to see and to hear what we have been habitually encouraged to tune out. In short, it summons us to unsilence our bodies so that we can feel what we are uncomfortable feeling. The fact that most white people respond to these invitations with disdain, anger, despair, or indifference is not accidental. White privilege is designed to be check proof– it’s engineered to operate unnoticed by those who benefit directly from it.

Peggy McIntosh’s (1987) article comparing white privilege to an invisible weightless knapsack is required reading for most university courses with intersectional feminist content. Her essay invites students to unpack their own knapsacks by listing the privileges they enjoy as members of dominant groups. Listing privileges makes them tangible.¹ McIntosh famously describes privilege as an “invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in daily, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks” (66). Her knapsack metaphor helps readers articulate how these privileges differ from random perks and earned advantages. Privileges are a special class of unearned assets produced by intersecting systems of domination. Sara Ahmed (2017) describes privilege as, “an energy-saving device. Less effort is required to be or to do” (125). These special tools and provisions also function like wildcards. And, if you are a cardplayer, you know that wildcards have a broad-spectrum value– they work to a player’s advantage in any hand they are dealt. Whiteness strengthens every hand white people play. White privilege removes obstacles. It grants white-looking people the public trust. It puts bank tellers at ease. Whiteness gets people’s attention. It prompts academic advisors, physicians, and bus drivers to offer extra assistance. It calms police officers. It perfect fit for the new position. hances, warnings, and opportunities. It enhances the credibility of our testimonies. Whiteness signals honesty, reliability, leadership, and trustworthiness. It puts other white neighbors at ease. It makes employers believe you are the

¹ McIntosh’s frames her account of privilege in the language of visibility. This is understandable. Western ways of knowing routinely equate knowledge with visibility and knowing with seeing. I use the language of tangibility to signal the fact that knowledge comes from to many forms of perception– hearing, touch, affect, and sensations. Also, I want to avoid ableist language.

Why Doesn't McIntosh Fully Unpack the Weight?

The knapsack metaphor is a useful entry point into making white privilege visible, but McIntosh only unpacks it half way. Remember, white privilege as an invisible *and weightless* knapsack, but she never names the weight or explains why the knapsack feel weightless. What might account for this omission?

To be fair, unpacking the knapsack completely is a tall order for one article. You can't check your privilege if you can't spot privilege, so metaphors are a good place to begin. Checking your privilege is a form of political labor. It takes time. The very act of naming makes injustices tangible, real, and perhaps slightly less annoying. Feminists are really good at this. We have a long history of conjuring words for problems that had no names – mansplaining, transphobia, misogynoir, sexual harassment, femicide, or victim-blaming. As Ahmed (2017) remarks: “Having names for problems can make a difference. Before, you could not quite put your finger on it. With these words as tools, we revisit our own histories; we hammer away at the past. It took a long time for me to even describe how race and racism had structured my own world” (32-33).

Still, we need to name the weight. When we confine our conversations to making privilege *visible* we do the work of the head and not the heart. Again, I don't think this is accidental. It takes courage to name the weight and patience to feel what we've been taught not to feel. Humans, are hardwired to move toward safety and comfort. So, when racialized fears take over these basic instincts, even the most well-intended white people will be more comfortable thinking about what white supremacy/privilege *does for us*, than feeling what it *does to us*. Joy James (2015) said it best: white folks secretly want to have it both ways, they “want the benefits of whiteness, but they want them to come with no costs” (211). Visibility gets at the benefits. The weight gets at the costs and losses to our humanity. No wonder we stop unpacking! Holding the weight asks that white people become sensitive our own insensitivity.

Unpacking the Weightless Knapsack

I want to extend a weighty invitation to you. An invitation to complete the unpacking task McIntosh began– an invitation to feel those parts of yourself that you'd rather not feel. My invitation to ‘the weighty conversation’ is directed primarily at white readers (Bailey, 2021). People of color feel the weight of whiteness every day, so I understand if you don't want to take up my invitation today. White readers, however, are numb to the weight. Again, this is no accident. Most of us have a low tolerance for even the smallest amount of racial stress, a condition that Robin DiAngelo (2018) calls ‘white fragility.’ White fragility is an expression of white fear, a form of anxiety that makes us dangerous to people of color. So, my invitation will surely trigger a chorus of defensive responses from some readers, including anger, fear, guilt, shame, discomfort, anxiety, and silence. Others will offer reasons for why they personally don't need to open the invitation. *I'm a good ally, so this invitation doesn't apply to me. I have no idea what you are talking about! What weight? I don't feel any weight! Whiteness is not heavy. It allows me to move through the world with ease. It makes me feel lighter, it's an energy saving device, remember? If the weight is so heavy, then why can't I feel it?*

Exactly. Why *can't* you feel the weight if it's so heavy? Here's the short answer. Privilege is not only intended to be invisible; it's also designed to feel weightless. The knapsack is not weightless because it is empty. It's filled with wild cards, special tools, and provisions, remember? The knapsack only *feels* weightless because white people have become anesthetized us to our own brokenness. So, before you numb out again, please know this. White supremacy relies on white people's fear of the weighty conversation to keep functioning smoothly. As long as white people are numb to the damage white supremacy does to our humanity, then violence will continue (Bailey, 2021). Our failure to feel and hold space with the weight that breaks us means we will continue to blow our fear, discomfort, anxiety, and trauma through people of color's bodies and communities.

White fragility prevents most white people from taking up the weight of whiteness too quickly. If we want to feel the weight, then we need to wade into it gradually, like a swimmer moving into a still pool on a chilly day. I know this accommodates white fragility, but I don't think this is such a bad thing for the unpacking project: When we slow down the conversation, we create space to feel what we'd rather not feel. So, if you can't feel the weight at the moment don't worry. We'll wade into it gradually, first by attending to the heavy impact white supremacy has on people of color's lives. Next, I'll explain what I mean by the weight of whiteness and offer a few personal examples of how the weight shows up in my own body. It's difficult to name the weight because privilege works like anesthesia, this is why the knapsack feels weightless. The anesthesia of privilege prevents us from knowing and feeling the damage that whiteness does to our humanity. It's my hope that calling attention to the weight will motivate readers to remain still long enough to feel the anesthesia in their own bodies. Now, let's get to the unpacking.

People of Color Feel Weight of Whiteness Every Day

Let's begin by witnessing the weight's damage and tracing it back to the source. Here's a helpful metaphor to get us started. Picture yourself walking on a muddy rural road after a heavy thunderstorm and coming across a set of deep tire tracks. You may not have seen the vehicle that caused the damage, but you can infer that something heavy has been here. You might say to yourself, 'Something extremely heavy must have been through here to cause such damage.' So, if you can't feel the weight in your own bodies at this moment, then can you at least imagine whiteness as something heavy. Can you at least be mindful of its impact on people of color's lives and communities?

Black, indigenous, and people color carry the weight of white people's fears every single day. The weight shadows Black and Brown bodies as they move through their daily routines, wait for friends in coffeeshops, stand in line at the market, drive to work, or go running in their neighborhood. bell Hooks (1992) named the weight when she observed that, "To travel, I must always move through fear, confront terror" (49). Claudia Rankin (2020) felt the weight when white men repeatedly cut in front of her as she waited to board her flight. They assumed she was not a first class passenger (33). Nazreen Bachus felt the weight as she walked down West Fourth Street wearing her pink hijab. She smiled at white women who turned away and did not smile back. Breonna Taylor felt the weight when three Louisville police officers battered down her apartment door and shot her eight times. Jordan Rogers felt the weight when a white woman called the police to report an 8-year old Black girl selling water without a permit. The weight crushed Serena Williams as she

went into labor with her first child. Her celebrity status and the knowledge she had of her own body were not enough get the attention of the hospital staff when she told them something felt wrong. Rosalind Chou felt the weight as anti-Asian racism fed off the Covid-19 pandemic. She told a reporter, “My fear is coughing in public, coughing while Asian, and the reaction other people will have.”² Erika Martin felt the weight when she gave food to a homeless man outside of the local Safeway. The staff called 911 to report suspicious activity. Two police cars arrived and questioned her for an hour. Mary Annette Pember felt the weight when she and her autistic daughter, Rose, got pulled over as they were leaving the reservation after attending a late night ceremony near the tribal administration offices. When Rose reached for the glove box to get the insurance papers, the officer reached for his gun. She screamed.

The weight of whiteness accumulates in Black, Brown and Indigenous bodies weathering them and making their hearts and central nervous systems fragile. Aurora Levins Morales (2019) compares the weight to “a big back pack full of rocks we haul around on our backs. It slows us down, tires us out, and skews our aim” (13). The weight,” as Ahmed (2017) observes, gathers “like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight.... You are thrown... You begin to feel a pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body in touch with a world can become a body that fears the world” (23). There strong medical evidence that people of color’s higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are caused by repeated exposure to race-based stressors. Bell hooks (2014) refers to this as “white people fatigue syndrome (177). So, what is this weight? How does it show up in white bodies? What does it do to us? And, why can’t we feel it?

The Weight of Whiteness

The weight of an object can be measured in ounces, pounds, or tons. I measure the weight of whiteness in terms of the costs and losses to our humanity. The weight is a heaviness that breaks human connection. Broken connections feel heavy in our bodies. Consider the heaviness of a broken heart, the death of family member, a friendship that has gone off, the loss of a community, or the news of another mass shooting. That’s the quality of the weight I want us to feel. James Baldwin (1984) poetically captured the price privilege and the costs of belonging best when he wrote that “the price of the ticket, is our moral being, our humanity” (91). The word ‘humanity’ refers to those traits that make us human, such as our ability to love, to make ourselves emotionally present to one another. Empathy, kindness, sympathy, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness are what makes us human. Human beings are biologically wired for social connection. Our very survival depends upon it. So, anything we do that damages, contorts, or permanently severs our connections with one another, takes a chunk of our humanity with it. What kind of a personality or temperament do you have to cultivate to make such a heavy imprint on the world? What kind of person do you have to become?

Some white people’s responses the testimonies above are a telling measure of our humanity. One of the habits of whiteness is to push back against what we don’t want to feel. *Seriously, these events never happen to me. So, if they happens to you, then you must be either mistaken about what’s causing them, or maybe you did something to bring it on.* Listen carefully and you can hear the weight resting quietly in the indifferent tones of some white peoples responses. *Well, they did find drugs in his body, maybe that killed him. She’s being oversensitive! I mean how can you tell*

if someone's a first class passenger. The doctors probably knew what was best for her, after all, it's not like she had a medical degree. If you deepen your attention, you can almost hear the human connections snapping. She must have done something. Snap! Don't make the pandemic about race. Snap! Look, New Yorkers don't smile at anyone. Snap! Snap! The police were just doing their job. Sometimes they make mistakes. Snap, Snap, Snap! Yet I'm hopeful that cultivating a mindfulness around human connection might restore our humanity. Here's what happens when we chose to hold the weight. George Floyd felt the asphyxiating weight of Derek Chauvin's entire body during the last nine minutes of his life. Darnella Frazier, held that weight as she recorded the public execution on her cell phone. She did not know Floyd personally, but her humanity was intact enough to recognize that another human being was suffering. When our humanity is intact, we don't drop the weight and step back, we walk into it. The humane response to sexual or racial violence is not 'she should not have worn that short dress,' or 'he should not have been selling loose cigarettes on the street.' It's 'are you alright? Do you need anything from me?' Sit with that for a moment.

The Weight in White Bodies

I've spent a good part of my adult life trying to reason my way out of the racist lessons I absorbed as a child, only to realize that racism does not live exclusively in my thoughts. As Resmaa Menakem (2017) observes, white supremacy doesn't live in our heads, it lives and breathes in our bodies, so it might be better to call it *white-body supremacy* (5-6). White-body supremacy has been taken up by all American bodies regardless of race because we are constantly bombarded with messages about the value of whiteness. So, where does the weight of whiteness show up in my body, and what does it feel like? Sometimes I feel as if white supremacy has highjacked my heart, gut, and central nervous system. I grew up in New Jersey in the wake of the Newark Riots and as a child got many lessons about which communities and people were safe and which I should fear. Whiteness pulls white minds, hearts and bodies toward safety and comfort. These lessons are still in my body. They show up as hypervigilance, hoarding resources, entitlement, and a condition I call 'learning to perceive the world inaccurately.'

The whitely habit of hypervigilance taught me to keep an eye on strangers, but I've noticed that my gaze lingers much longer when Black and brown people walk through my neighborhood. There is the social weight: Racism drives an awkward wedge friends, family, community members, co-workers, and neighbors. It produces a social anxiety, causes many of us to self-segregate when we eat, work, worship, or gather as a community. I've noticed painful turns and awkward moments in my social interactions with friends of color that often surprise me. I've also felt the material weight of whiteness. The impulse to accumulate and hoard is a response to feeling empty and fragile. Feelings of emptiness and entitlement pull white people to take an unfair share of education dollars, healthcare resources, well-paying jobs, tax credits, second chances, government bailouts, homes in nice neighborhoods, clean water, healthy food, congressional seats, and people of color's time. Morales (2019) explains how systems of privilege,

are constructed on fear of scarcity an insatiable hunger for more wealth, more power, more imaginary guarantees, and they depend on the ability of the privileged to ignore the huge social consequences of inequality, to dehumanize or ignore the people destroyed by the pursuit of excess. They are built on the belief that no one else will look out for us, that

narrow self-interest is just common sense, that social equality and reciprocity will impoverish rather than enrich our lives (4).

What do greed and accumulation do to our humanity?

Whiteness also has an epistemic weight. It has taught me make sense of what I perceive inaccurately. When we perceive the world wrongly, we feel the world wrongly, and respond to it wrongly. This makes us prone to misjudging people of color's actions and intentions. For example, white educators regularly perceive Black girls as more adult-like, sexually mature, and in need of less nurturing and protection. This phenomenon (called adultification, or age compression) leads Black girls to be more frequently and sever disciplined for small infractions. Age compression cost Tamir Rice his life. Tamir was twelve, but when the police arrived at the park they saw a twenty-one year old. I'm astounded at how often I have to reorient my own uncensored misperceptions. Muslim's running in airports are terrorists *No. They are late for their flight*. Latinx men waiting for the bus are a gang *No. They are going to work*. The Black women in the supermarket parking lot is breaking into a stranger's car. *No, she is locked out of her own car*.

I've gradually been able to feel the weight of whiteness in my own body by attending to these habitual movements. fragility can be a source of knowledge if we remain still long enough to own the fear behind it. I'm slowly working to become mindful of what's going on in my own body when I'm out of my racial comfort zones. Where, when and with whom does my body feel safe, at ease, and comfortable. Where, when, and with whom does my body feel tight, constricted, anxious, fearful or ill-at-ease. I wonder what weight you carry in your bodies?

The Anesthesia of Privilege

Let's wade in a bit further. White people can't really touch the damaging weight of whiteness until we understand why we can't feel the weight I've described in the first place. Anesthesia is indispensable part of the master's tool kit. "Anesthesia has its own gravitas— it pulls you under. It severs human connections. It blocks sensation. It pulls us apart" (Bailey, 2021). It's easier to name the weight if we can attend to those moments when the anesthesia lifts.

I did not quite fully understand the tight connections between privilege and anesthesia until I read Mab Segrest's (2002) account of the 'anesthesia of power,' which following W.E.B. DuBois, asks: how much do white people have to contort their basic humanity to maintain power? Segrest asks us consider how the 'the anesthesia of slavery,' permitted white southerners to block the basic sensory information, feelings, and emotions that would have allowed them empathize with the pain and suffering of the people they enslaved. "Necessary to the slave system," she observes, "was the master's blocked sensation of its pain, an aesthetic that left him insensible not only to the fellow human beings he enslaved, but to the testimony of his senses that might have contradicted ideologies of slavery" (165). The anesthesia took the form of stories. Enslaved Africans are animals not persons. They have a high tolerance for pain. They are like children. They are actually better off under slavery than they are on their own. Think of how much anesthesia you have inhale to explain away or justify the whipping, raping, branding, unbearable working conditions, or the raw cruelty of families being separated on auction blocks. How numb do you have to be to justify burning Pequot villages and shooting the people who tried to escape? How much anesthesia do

you have to inhale to override what your senses are telling you about another human beings suffering? What does it take to extinguish your empathy, sympathy, and basic decency?

What held slavery and native genocide in place, then was more than raw power. It required white people to override their humanity and to numb themselves to the horrors before them. Some the horrors are subtle and difficult to name, so we must attend to their broad features. The anesthesia of privilege then, can be broadly understood as anything that prompts white people to turn away, stop listening, disconnect, push back, dissociate, or distract ourselves in ways that break human connections. The everyday anesthetizing habits of white people show up as disinterest, inattention, or indifference to the lived experiences, needs, concerns, histories and feelings of people of color. When white people feel uncomfortable the anesthesia kicks in to restore our comfort.

If you dismiss Segrest's account of the 'anesthesia of slavery' as ancient history, then the anesthesia is still with you. Invitations to the weighty conversation encourage white people name the anesthesia of privilege in contemporary contexts by taking up *relational* understandings of how the violence done to communities of color relies on white people being psychologically, morally, materially, spiritually, and epistemically numb and disfigured enough to allow the violence to continue. Think about the relational part this way. What kind a person do you have to become to keep another person "in their place." Have you ever tried to control another person's choices, behavior, or movements? If you have, then think about what kind of a disposition do you have develop to force them to behave in ways that make *you* feel comfortable. Who do you become when you feel entitled to every opportunity? Who are you when your attention is constantly trained on what people of color are doing in your neighborhood, on your campus, in your store, or at your child's day camp? What does that do to you? If you hold still long enough, your body will tell you how this feels. Fearful. Anxious. Defensive. Entitled.

Holding the Weight of Whiteness

Most of white people are so hooked into our whiteness that we don't know how to live in our bodies without anesthesia. Collectively, the heavy habits of whiteness make us move through the world on a dull emotional register, half-awake, uncurious, and oblivious to the fact that our numbness contributes to people of color's continued suffering. Touching that weight means leaving the comforts of whiteness long enough to feel the damage. Still, I know that well-meaning white readers will push back. *I would never respond in those ways. I know I benefit from white privilege. I've unpacked my knapsack. I believe people of color's testimony and I empathize with their pain. My humanity is intact!* If you went there, I'm inviting you wade into the weight more deeply. Well-meaning white folks can be really good at spotting and attending to the ways that people of color suffer under white supremacy, but we are extremely reluctant to feel the collateral damage in our own bodies and take time to consider our how the habits of whiteness contribute to the weight.

Our bodies can teach us a great deal about whiteness, but these lessons won't sink in unless white people sensitize ourselves to the weight. I've tried to make tangible a few of the whitely habits that, in my own experience, continue to break my connections with people of color and their communities. Cultivating a sensitivity to our own insensitivity means that we must learn to *feel*

and hold the weight without yielding to the desire to numb out, drop it, or explain it away. So, in the spirit of McIntosh's list of privileges, I invite all readers to wade more deeply into the weight of whiteness by naming those whitely habits that break human connections. Here are a few to get you started.

- The myth of meritocracy is a form of anesthesia because deadens white people to the reality that people of color work three times as hard to get half as far.
- Segregation and redlining are forms of anesthesia because they break human connections geographically and spatially by dividing up public spaces and neighborhoods along racial lines.
- White talk (e.g., "My ancestors never owned slaves," "I have Asian friends") is anesthesia because it signals that speakers are more interested in being perceived as good and innocent than listening to what people of color are saying.
- Silence can be anesthesia when it's being driven by fear of having difficult conversations.
- Narratives of racial progress (e.g., "Race relations are better today than they were during Jim Crow"), are anesthesia when they stop conversations so that we can avoid feeling contemporary racial violence.

These are just a few general ways that anesthesia shows up in our lives. If you identify as white, I invite you to make these examples of the anesthesia more personal. This will help you to train your attention toward what triggers you and makes you numb out. I anesthetize myself to the weight when...

- I confine my daily routines to white spaces to avoid the discomfort of moving through spaces where our whiteness feels raw and exposed.
- I fail to show up and be fully emotionally present for people of color when we are in one another's company.
- I hold tight to only the comfortable parts of American history or my ancestral histories in order to avoid feeling the weight we inherit from the past.
- I frame my social justice activism in terms of helping or saving people of color, rather than healing the damage whiteness does to me.
- I say... "Oh it was just a joke," or "I didn't mean that" when someone calls me in on a microaggression. This is a comfort restoring move not a sincere apology.

I'm hopeful that white readers (in particular) will use these examples as a springboard to expand their collective understanding of privilege as anesthesia. This is important because feeling the weight in our own bodies is an essential part of our collective liberation. The sad part about living in an anesthetized body, is that you can't selectively numb the emotions you don't want to feel. Neurologically speaking, there is no local anesthesia. When you anesthetize pain and anxiety, you also anesthetize love and joy. And, here's the tragic part—white people have become so comfortable living in our anesthetized bodies that we have come to equate numbness with comfort and safety. Anything that stirs us from our comfortably numb existence feels like a threat.

So, you see, I don't think that we can ever deeply engage and dismantle white supremacy and privilege by bracketing the question of why McIntosh's knapsack feels weightless. If we want to be free, then we must fully unpack the knapsack. White folks' fear of the weight signals our

ongoing failure to heal from the damage that white supremacy does to our collective humanity. Audre Lorde (1984) understood the tight connection between our human capacity for sensitivity and liberation, when she remarked: “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The black goddess within each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (33). The anesthesia of privilege may serve the need for temporary comfort, but it will never serve our liberatory goals. The anesthesia of privilege makes it impossible to stand in genuine solidarity with people of color. We need to feel to be free. Remember, anesthesia is essential component of the master’s tool kit. Cultivating a sensitivity to our own insensitivity then will be an essential to our collective liberation.

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¹ This chapter is based material from my recent book, *The Weight of Whiteness: A Feminist Engagement with Privilege, Race and Ignorance*.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/24/coronavirus-us-asian-americans-racism>