

# *The Problem with “Privilege”* AUGUST 14, 2013

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*[For a much longer and detailed version, see my essay in the book *Geographies of Privilege*]*

In my experience working with a multitude of anti-racist organizing projects over the years, I frequently found myself participating in various workshops in which participants were asked to reflect on their gender/race/sexuality/class/etc. privilege. These workshops had a bit of a self-help orientation to them: “I am so and so, and I have x privilege.” It was never quite clear what the point of these confessions were. It was not as if other participants did not know the confessor in question had her/his proclaimed privilege. It did not appear that these individual confessions actually led to any political projects to dismantle the structures of domination that enabled their privilege. Rather, the confessions became the political project themselves. The benefits of these confessions seemed to be ephemeral. For the instant the confession took place, those who do not have that privilege in daily life would have a temporary position of power as the hearer of the confession who could grant absolution and forgiveness. The sayer of the confession could then be granted temporary forgiveness for her/his abuses of power and relief from white/male/heterosexual/etc guilt. Because of the perceived benefits of this ritual, there was generally little critique of the fact that in the end, it primarily served to reconstitute the structures of domination it was supposed to resist. One of the reasons there was little critique of this practice is that it bestowed cultural capital to those who seemed to be the “most oppressed.” Those who had little privilege did not have to confess and were in the position to be the judge of those who did have privilege. Consequently, people aspired to be oppressed. Inevitably, those with more privilege would develop new heretofore unknown forms of oppression from which they suffered. “I may be white, but my best friend was a person of color, which caused me to be oppressed when we played together.” Consequently, the goal became not to actually end oppression but to be as oppressed as possible. These rituals often substituted confession for political movement-building. And despite the cultural capital that was, at least temporarily, bestowed to those who seemed to be the most oppressed, these rituals ultimately reconstituted the white majority subject as the subject capable of self-reflexivity and the colonized/racialized subject as the occasion for self-reflexivity.

These rituals around self-reflexivity in the academy and in activist circles are not without merit. They are informed by key insights into how the logics of domination that structure the world also constitute who we are as subjects. Political projects of transformation necessarily involve a fundamental reconstitution of ourselves as well. However, for this process to work, individual transformation must occur concurrently with social and political transformation. That is, the undoing of privilege occurs not by individuals confessing their privileges or trying to think themselves into a new subject position, but through the creation of collective structures that dismantle the systems that enable these privileges. The activist genealogies that produced this response to racism and settler colonialism were not initially focused on racism as a problem of individual prejudice. Rather, the purpose was for individuals to recognize how they were shaped by structural forms of oppression. However, the response to structural racism became an individual one – individual confession at the expense of collective action. Thus the question becomes, how would one collectivize individual transformation? Many organizing projects attempt and have attempted to do precisely this, such as Sisters in Action for Power, Sista II Sista, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, and Communities Against Rape and Abuse, among many others. Rather than focus simply on one’s individual privilege, they address privilege on an organizational level. For instance, they might assess – is everyone who is invited to speak a college graduate? Are certain peoples always in the limelight? Based on this assessment, they develop structures to address how privilege is exercised collectively. For instance, anytime a person with a college degree is invited to speak, they bring with them a co-speaker who does not have that education level. They might develop mentoring and skills-sharing programs within the group. To quote one of my activist mentors, Judy Vaughn, “You don’t think your way into a different way of acting; you act your way into a different way of thinking.” Essentially, the current social structure conditions us to exercise what privileges we may have. If we want to undermine those privileges, we must change the structures within which we live so that we become different peoples in the process.

This essay will explore the structuring logics of the politics of privilege. In particular, the logics of privilege rest on an individualized self that relies on the raw material of other beings to constitute

itself. Although the confessing of privilege is understood to be an anti-racist practice, it is ultimately a project premised on white supremacy. Thus, organizing and intellectual projects that are questioning these politics of privilege are shifting the question from what privileges does a particular subject have to what is the nature of the subject that claims to have privilege in the first place.

## The Confessing Subject

My analysis is informed the work of Denise DaSilva. She argues in *Toward a Global Idea of Race* that the western subject understands itself as self-determining through its ability to self-reflect, analyze and exercise power over others. The western subject knows that it is self-determining because it compares itself to ‘others’ who are not. In other words, I know who I am because I am not you. These ‘others’ of course are racialized. The western subject is a universal subject who determines itself without being determined by others; the racialized subject is particular, but is supposed to aspire to be universal and self-determining.

Silva’s analysis thus critiques the presumption that the problem facing racialized and colonized peoples is that they have been ‘dehumanized.’ Anti-racist intellectual and political projects are often premised on the notion that if people knew us better, we too would be granted humanity. But, according to Silva, the fundamental issue that does not get addressed, is that ‘the human’ is already a racial project. It is a project that aspires to universality, a project that can only exist over and against the particularity of ‘the other.’

Consequently, two problems result. First, those who are put in the position of racialized and colonized others presume that liberation will ensue if they can become self-determining subjects – in other words, if they can become fully ‘human.’ However, the humanity to which we aspire still depends on the continued oppression of other racialized/colonized others. Thus, a liberation struggle that does not question the terms by which humanity is understood becomes a liberation struggle that depends on the oppression of others.

Silva’s analysis implies that ‘liberation’ would require different selves that understand themselves in radical relationality with all other peoples and things. The goal then becomes not the mastery of anti-racist/anti-colonialist lingo but a different self-understanding that sees one’s being as fundamentally constituted through other beings. An example of the political enactment of this critique of the western subject could be glimpsed at the 2008 World Social Forum that I attended. The indigenous peoples made a collective statement calling into question the issue of the nation-state. In addition to challenging capitalism, they called on participants to imagine new forms of governance not based on a nation-state model. They contended that the nation-state has not worked in the last 500 years, so they suspected that it was not going to start working now. Instead, they called for new forms of collectivities that were based on principles of interrelatedness, mutuality and global responsibility. These new collectivities (nations, if you will, for lack of a better word) would not be based on insular or exclusivist claims to a land base; indeed they would reject the contention that land is a commodity that any one group of people should be able to buy, control or own. Rather, these collectivities would be based on responsibility for and relationship with land.

But they suggested that these collectivities could not be formed without a radical change in what we perceived ourselves to be. That is, if we understand ourselves to be transparent, self-determining subjects, defining ourselves in opposition to who we are not, then the nations that will emerge from this sense of self will be exclusivist and insular. However, if we understand ourselves as being fundamentally constituted through our relations with other beings and the land, then the nations that emerge will also be inclusive and interconnected with each other.

Second, the assumption that we have about liberation is that we will be granted humanity if we can prove their worthiness. If people understood us better, they would see we are ‘human’ just like they are, and would grant us the status of humanity. As a result, anti-racist activist and scholarly projects often become trapped in ethnographic multiculturalism. Ironically, in order to prove our worthiness, we put ourselves in the position of being ethnographic objects so that the white subject to judge our claims for humanity.

Rey Chow notes that within this position of ethnographic entrapment, the only rhetorical position offered to the Native is that of the ‘protesting ethnic.’ The posture to be assumed under the politics of recognition is the posture of complaint. If we complain eloquently, the system will give us something. Building on Chow’s work, this essay will explore how another posture that is created within this economy is the self-reflexive settler/white subject. This self-reflexive subject is frequently on display at various anti-racist venues in

which the privileged subject explains how much s/he learned about her complicity in settler colonialism and/or white supremacy because of her exposure to Native peoples. A typical instance of this will involve non-Native peoples who make presentations based on what they “learned” while doing solidarity work with Native peoples in their field research/solidarity work, etc. Complete with videos and slide shows, the presenters will express the privilege with which they struggled. We will learn how they tried to address the power imbalances between them and the peoples with which they studied or worked. We will learn how they struggled to gain their trust. Invariably, the narrative begins with the presenters initially facing the distrust of the Natives because of their settler/white privilege. But through perseverance and good intentions, the researchers overcome this distrust and earn the friendship of their ethnographic objects. In these stories of course, to evoke Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern does not speak. We do not hear what their theoretical analysis of their relationship is. We do not hear about how they were organizing on their own before they were saved/studied by these presenters.

Native peoples are not positioned as those who can engage in self-reflection; they can only judge the worth of the confession. Consequently, the presenters of these narratives often present very nervously. Did they speak to all their privileges? Did they properly confess? Or will someone in the audience notice a mistake and question whether they have in fact become a fully-developed anti-racist subject? In that case, the subject would have to then engage in further acts of self-reflection that require new confessions in the future.

Thus, borrowing from the work of Scott Morgensen and Hiram Perez, the confession of privilege, while claiming to be anti-racist and anti-colonial, is actually a strategy that helps constitute the settler/white subject. In Morgensen’s analysis, the settler subject constitutes itself through incorporation. Through this logic of settlement, settlers become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous – land, resources, indigenous spirituality, or culture. Thus, indigeneity is not necessarily framed as antagonistic to the settler subject; rather the Native is supposed to disappear into the project of settlement. The settler becomes the “new and improved” version of the Native, thus legitimizing and naturalizing the settler’s claims to this land.

Hiram Perez similarly analyzes how the white subject positions itself intellectually as a cosmopolitan subject capable of abstract theorizing through the use of the “raw material” provided by fixed, brown bodies. The white subject is capable of being “anti-“ or “post-identity,” but understands their post-identity only in relationship to brown subjects which are hopelessly fixed within identity. Brown peoples provide the “raw material” that enables the intellectual production of the white subject.

Thus, self-reflexivity enables the constitution of the white/settler subject. Anti-racist/colonial struggles have created a colonial dis-ease that the settler/white subject may not in fact be self-determining. As a result, the white/settler subject reasserts their power through self-reflection. In particular, indigenous peoples and people of color become the occasion by which the white subject can self-reflect on her/his privilege. If this person self-reflects effectively, s/he may be bestowed the title “ally” and build a career of her/his self-reflection. As many on the blogosphere have been commenting recently (see for instance @prisonculture and @ChiefElk), an entire ally industrial complex has developed around the professional confession of privilege.

Of course, this essay itself does not escape the logics of self-reflexivity either. Rhetorically, it simply sets me up as yet another judge of the inadequacies of the confessions of others. Thus, what is important in this discussion is not so much how particular individuals confess their privileges. If Native peoples are represented problematically even by peoples who espouse anti-racist or anti-settler politics, it is not an indication that the work of those peoples is particularly flawed or that their scholarship has less value. Similarly, those privileged “confessing” subjects in anti-racism workshops do so with a commitment to fighting settler colonialism or white supremacy and their solidarity work is critically needed. Furthermore, as women of color scholars and activists have noted, there is no sharp divide between those who are “oppressed” and those who are “oppressors.” Individuals may find themselves variously in the position of being the confessor or the judge of the confession depending on the context. Rather, the point of this analysis is to illustrate the larger dynamics by which racialized and colonized peoples are even seen and understood in the first place.

The presupposition is that Indigenous peoples are oppressed because they are not sufficiently known or understood. In fact, however, this desire to “know” the Native is itself part of the settler-colonial project to apprehend, contain and domesticate the potential power of indigenous peoples to subvert the settler state. As Mark Rifkin has argued, colonial logics attempt to transform Native peoples who are producers of intellectual theory and political insight into populations to be known and hence managed. Native struggles then simply become a project of Native peoples making their demands known so that their claims can be recognized the by

the settler state. Once these demands are known, they can they be more easily managed, co-opted and disciplined. Thus, the project of decolonization requires a practice of what Audra Simpson calls “ethnographic refusal” – the refusal to be known and the refusal to be infinitely knowable. The politics of decolonization requires the proliferation of theories, knowledge, ideas, and analyses that speak to a beyond settler colonialism and are hence unknowable.

### Alternatives to Self-Reflection

Based on this analysis then, our project becomes less of one based on self-improvement or even collective self-improvement, and more about the creation of new worlds and futurities for which we currently have no language.

There is no simple anti-oppression formula that we can follow; we are in a constant state of trial and error and radical experimentation. In that spirit then, I offer some possibilities that might speak to new ways of undoing privilege, not in the sense of offering the “correct” process for moving forward, but in the spirit of adding to our collective imagining of a “beyond.” These projects of decolonization can be contrasted with that of the projects of anti-racist or anti-colonialist self-reflexivity in that they are not based on the goal of “knowing” more about our privilege, but on creating that which we cannot now know.

As I have discussed elsewhere, many of these models are based on “taking power by making power” models particularly prevalent in Latin America. These models, which are deeply informed by indigenous peoples’ movements, have informed the landless movement, the factory movements, and other peoples’ struggles. Many of these models are also being used by a variety of social justice organization throughout the United States and elsewhere. The principle undergirding these models is to challenge capital and state power by actually creating the world we want to live in now. These groups develop alternative governance systems based on principles of horizontality, mutuality, and interrelatedness rather than hierarchy, domination, and control. In beginning to create this new world, subjects are transformed. These “autonomous zones” can be differentiated from the projects of many groups in the U.S. that create separatist communities based on egalitarian ideals in that people in these “making power” movements do not just create autonomous zones, but they *proliferate* them. These movements developed in reaction to the revolutionary vanguard model of organizing in Latin America that became criticized as “machismo-leninismo” models. These models were so hierarchical that in the effort to combat systems of oppression, they inadvertently re-created the same systems they were trying to replace. In addition, this model of organizing was inherently exclusivist because not everyone can take up guns and go the mountains to become revolutionaries. Women, who have to care for families, could particularly be excluded from such revolutionary movements. So, movements began to develop organizing models that are based on integrating the organizing into one’s everyday life so that all people can participate. For instance, a group might organize through communal cooking, but during the cooking process, which everyone needs to do anyway in order to eat, they might educate themselves on the nature of agribusiness.

At the 2005 World Social Forum in Brazil, activists from Chiapas reported that this movement began to realize that one cannot combat militarism with more militarism because the state always has more guns. However, if movements began to build their own autonomous zones and proliferated them until they reached a mass scale, eventually there would be nothing the state’s military could do. If mass-based peoples’ movements begin to live life using alternative governance structures and stop relying on the state, then what can the state do? Of course, during the process, there may be skirmishes with the state, but conflict is not the primary work of these movements. And as we see these movements literally take over entire countries in Latin America, it is clear that it is possible to do revolutionary work on a mass-scale in a manner based on radical participatory rather than representational democracy or through a revolutionary vanguard model.

Many leftists will argue that nation-states are necessary to check the power of multi-national corporations or will argue that nation-states are no longer important units of analysis. These groups, by contrast, recognize the importance of creating alternative forms of governance outside of a nation-state model based on principles of horizontalism. In addition, these groups are taking on multinational corporations directly. An example would be the factory movement in Argentina where workers have appropriated factories and seized the means of production themselves. They have also developed cooperative relationships with other appropriated factories. In addition, in many factories all of the work is collectivized. For instance, a participant from a group

I work with who recently had a child and was breastfeeding went to visit a factory. She tried to sign up for one of the collectively-organized tasks of the factory, and was told that breastfeeding was her task. The factory recognized breastfeeding as work on par with all the other work going on in the factory.

This kind of politics then challenges the notions of “safe space” often prevalent in many activist circles in the United States. The concept of safe space flows naturally from the logics of privilege. That is, once we have confessed our gender/race/settler/class privileges, we can then create a safe space where others will not be negatively impacted by these privileges. Of course because we have not dismantled heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, settler colonialism or capitalism, these confessed privileges never actually disappear in “safe spaces.” Consequently, when a person is found guilty of his/her privilege in these spaces, s/he is accused of making the space “unsafe.” This rhetorical strategy presumes that only certain privileged subjects can make the space “unsafe” as if everyone isn’t implicated in heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, settler colonialism and capitalism. Our focus is shifted from the larger systems that make the entire world unsafe, to interpersonal conduct. In addition, the accusation of “unsafe” is also levied against people of color who express anger about racism, only to find themselves accused of making the space “unsafe” because of their raised voices. The problem with safe space is the presumption that a safe space is even possible.

By contrast, instead of thinking of safe spaces as a refuge from colonialism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, Ruthie Gilmore suggests that safe space is not an escape from the real, but a place to practice the real we want to bring into being. “Making power” models follow this suggestion in that they do not purport to be free of oppression, only that they are trying to create the world they would like to live in now. To give one smaller example, when Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, organized, we questioned the assumption that “women of color” space is a safe space. In fact, participants began to articulate that women of color space may in fact be a very dangerous space. We realized that we could not assume alliances with each other, but we would actually have to create these alliances. One strategy that was helpful was rather than presume that we were acting “non-oppressively,” we built a structure that would presume that we were complicit in the structures of white supremacy/settler colonialism/heteropatriarchy etc. We then structured this presumption into our organizing by creating spaces where we would educate ourselves on issues in which our politics and praxis were particularly problematic. The issues we have covered include: disability, anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, Zionism and anti-Arab racism, transphobia, and many others. However, in this space, while we did not ignore our individual complicity in oppression, we developed action plans for how we would *collectively* try to transform our politics and praxis. Thus, this space did not create the dynamic of the confessor and the hearer of the confession. Instead, we presumed we are all implicated in these structures of oppression and that we would need to work together to undo them. Consequently, in my experience, this kind of space facilitated our ability to integrate personal and social transformation because no one had to anxiously worry about whether they were going to be targeted as a bad person with undue privilege who would need to publicly confess. The space became one that was based on principles of loving rather than punitive accountability.

## Conclusion

The politics of privilege have made the important contribution of signaling how the structures of oppression constitute who we are as persons. However, as the rituals of confessing privilege have evolved, they have shifted our focus from building social movements for global transformation to individual self-improvement. Furthermore, they rest on a white supremacist/colonialist notion of a subject that can constitute itself over and against others through self-reflexivity. While trying to keep the key insight made in activist/academic circles that personal and social transformation are interconnected, alternative projects have developed that focus less on privilege and more the structures that create privilege. These new models do not hold the “answer,” because the genealogy of the politics of privilege also demonstrates that our activist/intellectual projects of liberation must be constantly changing. Our imaginations are limited by white supremacy, settler colonialism, etc., so all ideas we have will not be “perfect.” The ideas we develop today also do not have to be based on the complete disavowal of what we did yesterday because what we did yesterday teaches what we might do tomorrow. Thus, as we think not only beyond privilege, but beyond the sense of self that claims privilege, we open ourselves to new possibilities that we cannot imagine now for the future.