

SHALL WE TALK ABOUT PRIVILEGE

By Renee, September 12, 2008

<http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2008/09/12/shall-we-talk-about-privilege/>

Hey you in the back row with the unacknowledged privilege, I am talking to you. That's right, I am pointing my long black finger at you. It is time to listen up and learn. Privilege is an extremely loaded word. Many will not acknowledge it, preferring instead to focus on their good deeds. Privilege can come in many forms, you can have **race, class, gender, western, cis, ability**, etc, and it is important to recognize each and every single one of them, they are a part of your being and can not be halted at will any more than you can stop breathing.

I am black, western, straight, middle class, educated, and able bodied, all of these factors combined create who I am and colour how I view the world. Had I been born elsewhere, and were illiterate and poor all of the comfort that I view as everyday occurrences would not exist in my life. If I am hungry I walk into my kitchen. I can kiss my *unhusband* in public and know that the stares we receive are because of our racial differences, and not because of our sexuality. My education ensures that I will have a good chance at achieving and maintaining good paying employment, and it further empowers me to discuss ideas, concepts and ideologies from a *detached academic* point of view. **This is who I am, and I own all of it.**

Owning privilege is not about feeling ashamed, it is about acknowledging the benefits that one receives without having to work for them. It is about realizing that people born to different circumstances will not receive these benefits as a consequence of our skewed understanding of worth and value. It is further about realizing that no matter how many good and charitable works I perform, my body will always exist with privilege. No matter how often I donate my time to food banks or homeless shelters, I cannot undo the class privilege into which I was born. No matter how valiantly I advocate for fair trade, and an end to things like the western fuelled wars in Africa, I cannot undue the damage that my government has done in my name. As sickened as I am about the systemic inequalities that plague humanity, **I am privileged and I own it.**

It is not acceptable to say, I am not racist, sexist, homophobic etc and therefore any accusation of privilege is misplaced. These privileges are encoded to the body before birth simply because of the society we are all born into. We do not live outside of socialization we are the product of it.

To become defensive and immediately stammer, oh no not me, is a clear indicator of denial. It is this very state of denial that allows privilege to maintain its insidious grip on society. One cannot actively fight against interlocking isms while continuing to deny the effect that they personally have on you. How are you to convince anyone that inequality is systemic, if you as an individual continue to benefit without acknowledgement? It is dishonest and begins ally work from a false groundwork. It's like saying I'm not racist because my best friend as a kid was black. People see that kind of commentary for exactly what it is.

Understanding and owning privilege does not mean that you must live a life of shame or guilt, it does however mean that you owe a debt that must be repaid. For each advantage that you are given, you must at some point attempt to mitigate some of your unearned privilege. This will never absolve you of said privilege but over time, if enough people equally dedicate themselves to mitigation it will lessen privilege through the changing of ideas of what it means to exist as a specific body.

We spend far too much time saying oh no not me, or feeling shame for things that are out of our control. A dear friend once told me that she felt ashamed and guilty because of slavery. I was actually dumbstruck for a moment before I responded, "you have never personally enslaved anyone, the issue is not history, the issue is how you continue to be advantaged because of history." This is central to the point that I am trying to make. No one individual can bear the sins of the world, but each individual continually recreates these sins by failure to acknowledge the degree to which we are socialized to accept that certain bodies are somehow less than. There is no righteous person, only righteous thoughts, deed and emotions.