PECULIAR BENEFITS

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When I was young, my parents took our family to Haiti during the summers. For them, it was a homecoming. For my brothers and I it was an adventure, sometimes, a chore, and always a necessary education on privilege and the grace of an American passport. Until visiting Haiti, I had no idea what poverty really was or the difference between relative and absolute poverty. To see poverty so plainly and pervasively left a mark on me.

To this day, I remember my first visit, and how at every intersection, men and women, shiny with sweat, would mob our car, their skinny arms stretched out, hoping for a few *gourdes* or American dollars. I saw the sprawling slums, the shanties housing entire families, the trash piled in the streets, and then, the gorgeous beach, and the young men in uniforms who brought us Coca Cola in glass bottles and made us hats and boats out of palm fronds. It was hard for a child who grew up on cul-de-sacs, to begin to grasp the contrast between such inescapable poverty alongside almost repulsive luxury and then, the United States, a mere eight hundred miles away, with it’s gleaming cities rising out of the landscape, and the well-maintained interstates stretching across the country, the running water and the electricity. It wasn’t until many, many years later that I realized my education on privilege began long before I could appreciate it in any meaningful way.

Privilege is a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor.  There is racial privilege, gender (and identity) privilege, heterosexual privilege, economic privilege, able-bodied privilege, educational privilege, religious privilege and the list goes on and on. At some point, you have to surrender to the kinds of privilege you hold because everyone has something someone else doesn’t.

The problem is, we talk about privilege with such alarming frequency and in such empty ways, we have diluted the word’s meaning.When people wield the word *privilege* it tends to fall on deaf ears because we hear that word so damn much the word it has become white noise.

One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do is accept and acknowledge my privilege. This is something I am still working on. I’m a woman, a person of color, and the child of immigrants but I also grew up middle class and then upper middle class. My parents raised my siblings and I in a strict but loving environment. They were and are happily married so I didn’t have to deal with divorce or crappy intramarital dynamics. I attended elite schools. My master’s and doctoral degrees were funded. I got a tenure track position my first time out. My bills are paid. I have the time and resources for frivolity. I am reasonably well published. I have an agent so I have every reason to believe my novel will find a home. My life has been far from perfect but I have a whole lot of privilege. It’s somewhat embarrassing for me to accept just how much privilege I have.

It’s also really difficult for me to accept my privilege when I consider the ways in which I lack privilege or the ways in which my privilege hasn’t magically rescued me from a world of hurt. On my more difficult days, I’m not sure what’s more of a pain in my ass—being black or being a woman. I’m happy to be both of these things, but the world keeps intervening. There are all kinds of infuriating reminders of my place in the world—random people questioning me in the parking lot at work as if it is unfathomable that I’m a faculty member, whispers of Affirmative Action when I achieve a career milestone I’ve busted my ass for, the persistence of lawmakers trying to legislate the female body, street harassment, strangers wanting to touch my hair, you know how it is.

The ways in which I do not have privilege are significant, but I am lucky and successful. Any number of factors related to privilege have contributed to these circumstances.  What I remind myself, regularly, is this: the acknowledgment of my privilege is not a denial of the ways I have been and am marginalized, the ways I have suffered.

We tend to believe that accusations of privilege imply we have it easy and because life is hard for nearly everyone, we resent hearing that. Of course we do. Look at white men when they are accused of having privilege. They tend to be immediately defensive (and, at times, understandably so). They say, “It’s not my fault I am a white man.” They say, “I’m working class,” or “I’m [insert other condition that discounts their privilege],” instead of simply accepting that, in this regard, yes, they benefit from certain privileges others do not. To have privilege in one or more areas does not mean you are wholly privileged. To acknowledge privilege is not a denial of the ways you are marginalized, the ways you have suffered. Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult but it is really all that is expected.

At times we forget that accepting privilege is not a game. John Scalzi [recently wrote about](https://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/05/15/straight-white-male-the-lowest-difficulty-setting-there-is/) privilege without invoking the word privilege by using the difficulty levels of video games as a metaphor. His framework works well but his metaphor is only a starting point in understanding privilege and its effects. More than one commenter said something like, “I own my privilege, now what?” as if there is some unknown territory beyond the acknowledgment of privilege.

You don’t necessarily *have* to do anything once you acknowledge your privilege. You don’t have to apologize for it. You don’t need to diminish your privilege or your accomplishments because of that privilege. You need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about. They might endure situations you can never know anything about. You could, however, use that privilege for the greater good–to try to level the playing field for everyone, to work for social justice, to bring attention to how those without certain privileges are disenfranchised. While you don’t have to do anything with your privilege, perhaps it should be an imperative of privilege to share the benefits of that privilege rather than hoard your good fortune. We’ve seen what the hoarding of privilege has done and the results are shameful.

When we talk about privilege, some people start to play a very pointless and dangerous game where they try to mix and match various demographic characteristics to determine who wins at the Game of Privilege. Who would win in a privilege battle between a wealthy black woman and a wealthy white man? Who would win a privilege battle between a queer white man and a queer Asian woman? Who would win in a privilege battle between a working class white man and a wealthy, differently abled, Mexican woman? We can play this game all day. We will never find a winner. Playing the Game of Privilege is mental masturbation—it only feels good to the players.

Privilege is relative and contextual. Few people in this world, and particularly in the United States, have no privilege at all. Among those of us who participate in intellectual communities, privilege runs rampant. We have disposable time and the ability to access the Internet regularly. We have the freedom to express our opinions without the threat of retaliation. We have smart phones and iProducts and desktops and laptops. If you are reading this essay, you have some kind of privilege. It may be hard to hear that, I know, but if you cannot recognize your privilege, you have a lot of work to do; get started.

President Barack Obama enjoys a great deal of privilege. He is wealthy, educated, young, and extraordinarily successful. He is in what appears to be a loving marriage. He has two healthy children. He is the president of the United States and, arguably, the most powerful man in the world. Even as he enjoys such immense privilege, Obama knows what all successful people of color know. All the wealth and power in the world won’t shield you from racial epithets, assumptions about how you’ve achieved your success, and resentment from people who feel that the trappings of privilege are their rightful due.

Given that even very privileged people can be marginalized, how do we measure privilege? What is the correct hierarchy? We can’t measure privilege. We shouldn’t even try. Our energies would be better directed to what truly matters.

Too many people have become self-appointed privilege police, patrolling the halls of discourse, ready to remind people of their privilege, whether those people have denied that privilege or not. In online discourse, in particular, the specter of privilege is always looming darkly. When someone writes from their experience, there is often someone else, at the ready, pointing a trembling finger, accusing that writer of having various kinds of privilege. How dare someone speak to a personal experience without accounting for every possible configuration of privilege or the lack thereof? We lose sight of this but we would live in a world of silence if the only people who were allowed to write or speak from experience or about difference were those absolutely without privilege.

When people wield accusations of privilege, more often than not, they want to he heard and seen. Their need is acute, if not desperate and that need rises out of the many historical and ongoing attempts to silence and render invisible marginalized groups. Must we satisfy our need to be heard and seen at the expense of not allowing anyone else to be heard and seen? Does privilege automatically negate any merits of what a privilege holder has to say?

We need to get to a place where we discuss privilege by way of observation and acknowledgment rather than accusation. We need to be able to argue beyond the threat of privilege. We need to stop playing Privilege or Oppression Olympics because we’ll never get anywhere until we find more effective ways of talking through difference. We should be able to say this is my truth and have that truth stand without a hundred clamoring voices shouting, giving the impression that multiple truths cannot coexist. At some point, doesn’t privilege become beside the point?

Roxane Gay’s writing appears in *Best American Mystery Stories 2014, Best American Short Stories 2012, Best Sex Writing 2012, A Public Space, McSweeney’s, Tin House, Oxford American, American Short Fiction, Virginia Quarterly Review*, and many others. She is a contributing opinion writer for the *New York Times*. She is the author of the books *Ayiti, An Untamed State*, the *New York Times* bestselling *Bad Feminist*, *Difficult Women*, and *Hunger*forthcoming in 2017. She is also the author of *World of Wakanda* for Marvel. Roxane was the founding Essays Editor and is a current Advisory Board member for The Rumpus. You can find her at  [roxanegay.com](http://www.roxanegay.com). [More from this author →](http://therumpus.net/author/roxane-gay)