

A strong, independent man was once a small, weak boy. He used to pull his hand-me-down shirt over his head, spot the hole, and think of the sharp words that would soon leave the mouths of his fellow classmates when they noticed this identifier of his economic standing. He would take a deep breath and lift his chin up; he would not let himself suffer at the hands of his ignorant, insecure classmates. His family would water down the soap and other hygiene products to make them last longer. They would patch up holes instead of replacing them with new clothes. They would not complain because there was no other alternative.

This boy turned into a teenager, who kept his body strong but only used the bite of his words to remain unscathed. He ended up being the third in class, specifically targeting this position, so he wouldn't have to speak in front of his graduating class, he would come to declare. This student worked hard, applied himself to his academics, math and science especially, and kept his nose out of other people's business. When envious kids tried to rile him up simply because of his apathy toward them, he turned the other cheek and walked away, but he got stronger. His older brother could no longer get the advantage over him, so they finally stopped fighting.

This teenager quickly turned into a young man, who dropped out of college because he could no longer afford tuition. His parents never approved of his trajectory with higher education because, "look at where they ended up without one!" He kept working and striving for something more, something beyond that small town west of Portland, Maine.

This young man grew up to become a fully grown man, first working as an engineer due to his intelligence and dedication to his work. He later went to school to become a police officer, then he owned a contracting and real estate business that got him a bar where he also worked as a cook. This man is now the Executive Director of the Florida Fishing Academy, a non-profit dedicated to helping under-privileged kids get out on the water and away from drugs and alcohol while teaching them about ethical angeling, marine life, and water safety. This man is my father, and he achieved the American dream by hard work and perseverance.

I was raised on this story, of how my dad was capable of pulling himself out of the poverty he grew up on by simply working hard. I've always been proud of being the daughter of someone who was the epitome of the American dream, where anything and everything is possible in this country as long as one has the drive to achieve it. This instilled a permanent sense of stubborn determination that has characterized my entire life and personality. When I played soccer, I was not the strongest or the fastest, but I frequently got recognition from coaches and teammates for putting 100% effort into every practice and game. When I read books, I force myself to finish the book, the series, because I can do it as long as I set my mind to it, even if it does not give me the same joy as before. When I decide on a topic for an art piece or research paper, I will execute *that* subject to the highest caliber because by deciding, I have committed myself to it. Throughout my entire life, I have been congratulated for this, teaching me that this was the correct course of action to continue with for my entire life. As the most influential factor for my determination, my dad became my biggest cheerleader. He further showed me through

facilitating my own persistence that if he could accomplish the American dream, then I also could reach even higher limits, having had a more stable financial standing than him during his childhood.

Through my research it became clear that my dad, however, didn't do this all by himself. Instead, he was aided by the toxic foundation of colonialism. This premise underlaid his accomplishments and has been continuously built upon generation after generation in order to further boost the prosperity of the white colonists. In reality, as he worked his way up the social ladder, he was given the benefit of the doubt *because* of his skin color; his only boundaries being his family's poverty and lack of a college degree. While both of those impacted his life for the worse, his charming, charismatic attitude was immediately accepted by his clients because he did not have a need to overcome racism. Without this bigotry slithering through their skin, this man was valued and characterized by his efforts alone, ignoring any harmful stereotypes.

My dad was somewhat aware of how his skin color helped him through his life, but not to the extent of understanding the massive boost he was given at birth. The hip hop artist Macklemore, however, wrote about this exact advantage in his song "White Privilege II," which explains that the "one thing the American dream fails to mention/ Is I was many steps ahead to begin with" [Macklemore]. As a white artist in a traditionally black-dominated music industry because of its roots to that community, Macklemore pays tribute to those who came before him, and sing among him, who have suffered and continue to suffer the consequences of those steps ahead he was given at birth. He is also showing how this veil of ambiguity that is placed over white people (and those seen as white and, therefore, reap the benefits of white privilege) is beginning to be cleared, revealing to those who have natural advantages what exactly that means for minorities and the concept of the American dream. This story I was raised on, of my father achieving the American dream by his will and his wits, was heavily influenced by his white skin. This same Dream is not as accessible, if not impossible, for other cultures and races because of the prejudice that plagues this country and creates a glass ceiling that stops their social ascension. While this veil of white privilege covers those who are ignorant to how they profit from others' degradation, it's abundantly clear to those who see the extra steps they must take to just catch up to our natural advantages. Through this awareness, a sense of confidence is leaked from them because they will always see the disparity in their achievements, having to work harder and look over their shoulders to question whether their race or blatant discrimination will allow them to continue onward. This allows for one of those natural advantages of white privilege to be an understanding that one can achieve anything because there is not a racial prejudice to hold them back. This was the subconscious understanding that founded my determination.

Being the encouraging father he is, my dad used his experiences founded in a different cultural context to raise me in the same methods he used to get where he is today. As a result, my dad instilled in me the philosophy of the American dream, that I could achieve anything I set my mind to. This was taught and shown to me for so long, it became intrinsically a part of who I

was, directly promoting my perseverance. This obligated me to believe that I should never give up and always finish everything I started.

While that value has aided me profusely throughout my life, it also made me unwilling to drop the subject I initially had. For this particular research essay, I began with a topic that was tied to myself as a female, which was domestic violence. Upon further investigation, it became abundantly clear that there was staggering overrepresentation of Native American women as domestic violence victims [“Statistics”]. This inspired me to delve deeper to locate why exactly this was. It is extremely evident the entire occurrence behind the statistic is tightly tied to American history with the Indigenous population. While finding more resources about specifically the prejudices and consequences of these women, I discovered an abundant amount of information on the entire history as to why there is Native American overrepresentation in several statistics, including poverty, drop-out rates, and lowest life expectancy in reservations [Brown-Rice; Huey]. The same discrimination that devalues indigenous women degrades the entire community, from cities to reservations, and it’s all tied back to a history of terror that is concealed in history books. In school, students across the country are taught about the Trail of Tears, but that’s where the representation ends in the place where this population should be the most described. In each of the TedTalks I evaluated for research on Native Americans, every single one of the speakers discussed the lack of representation and misrepresentation that contaminates American history [Houska; Huey; Wilbur]. As someone who grew up trusting the American education system to give an unbiased analysis of life, even where we, as settlers, have been in the wrong, I felt more connected to this specific injustice. This connection I formulated and fostered associated me with this culture I was researching, so it became more valid to go outside my comfort zone and appraise and expand on another’s heritage and practices. With all of this research now at my disposal, I decided on Native American lack of representation and misrepresentation, and my stubbornness and determination forced me to finish what I started.

The further I dug into this topic, the more information I uncovered that should have been in schools’ history books, but I also continued to find proof that I needed to drop the subject because I did not have the right to take it. Still, I continued to push and find loopholes or alternatives so I could get around that pesky dilemma despite the overwhelming data that I was just continuously taking a people’s culture for my own gain after we as settlers have already stolen their land. I didn’t understand my discretion until a fellow Oxbow student asked me about my project at a point where I was distressed over finding an alternative to representing Native American culture that did not appropriate it. Being a minority, this student asked me if that was even possible, if, as a white person, I had the *right* to use someone else’s culture for my own benefit. This made me think back to the moment when my advisors asked me what exactly I would be contributing to the Indigenous people and their history in this art piece, and if, as a white person, it was appropriate to advocate for a group who never asked for it. During this conversation, I put my hands on my head and realized, as a white person, I was raised to think I could do anything, and that meant appropriating another culture to initiate compassion and

sympathy for my awareness and support of a marginalized group. I was raised with white privilege ready to stand by my side and help me along the way, no matter the path.

Privilege, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor” and through the lens of white privilege, that “right or immunity” is given at birth with white skin [“Privilege”]. While the term spans across the entire white population and those perceived to be white, many white people who live, or have lived, in poverty say this privilege does not exist [*BBC News*]. While economic standing is a clear effect of white privilege on both sides, financial privilege is not synonymous with white privilege because not every white person is rich and powerful. These white people, however, are still given the benefit of the doubt, can walk down the street and not fear those who are tasked with safety, and do not have to fight categorization of their characteristics that are based on their skin color. Privilege, in another sense, is described as “the flip side of oppression and discrimination” by Tim Wise, an activist and author [Handler]. Wise explains that when a group of people is socially relegated, then another must be socially exalted, profiting from that in one form or another, and neither of those positions is something an individual in that group can simply extract themselves from. This is clear in the case of my father, where he lived his childhood in poverty before working his way up through hard work. Financial standing is a position he could change, but the advantages he gained from his skin color were an innate part of his life that he could not diverge from, nor would he have wanted to or even noticed it. This is better visualized, Wise explains, with fish swimming in water that never notice the water, and if someone were to point it out, the fish would not have any idea what they were talking about [Handler]. This is something that needs to be recognized by the entire white community because we are continuing to benefit from the struggles and pains of those who have been degraded and discriminated against in a system created to let only white people prosper and has been built and strengthened for centuries.

This strengthening has developed from a structure built upon a foundation of imperialism and colonialism of the European society. Darwin’s Theory of Evolution was misunderstood and misapplied to justify those ideas and actions with survival of the fittest when applied to society, claiming that those who are more capable of thriving have the right, essentially, to enact superiority over those who are less fit, being unable to help themselves or the progression of society [History.com Editors]. Not only did this progress discrimination and action against minorities, but it was also further built upon by Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden,” which demanded the superior, intelligent, white population to “civilize” those who still do not understand the workings of civilization [Brantlinger]. This is seen in the Manifest Destiny, where white settlers felt they had the right to own all of the land from the east to the west, forcibly extracting and degrading the Native Americans [Kendall]. This conceived power white settlers claimed and acted upon allowed for and justified numerous instances of terrorizing, destroying, and humiliating other peoples and cultures. This is seen throughout American history, from the clear value and permission placed upon slavery of black people in the Constitution to stealing

Indigenous children from their homes to place them into boarding schools that would hopefully assimilate them into the white ideal while completely disconnecting them from their native culture [Kendall]. Not only were these places enforced, but they were further strengthened by future legislation that restricted marginalized groups from their rights. With the Native Americans, laws prohibited them from persecuting non-Indians in the court, which isolated and restricting justice for brutality ["Ending Violence Against Native Women"]. Redlining, specifically targeting the black population but confining all minorities, separated those groups from education, health care, and economic prosperity [Collins]. Despite carefully work and progression to fight these injustices, these laws and institutionalized racist mentalities and policies are still present today through the lack of positive representation in the media, systematic discrimination in the economic market of housing and loans, access to good schools, and so many others. Despite these advantages that favor white settlers not being apparent in the eyes of those who swim in the same water for their entire lives, those who drown in it are very clear over what is suffocating them. Throughout history, white settlers degraded culture and communities of people with aggressive action and continued to justify their immoral philosophies by further accentuating their natural privileges over those populations.

White privilege, through a sense of confidence in being able to achieve anything, allowed me to believe that just because I was physically *capable* of doing something, also meant that I *should*. I eventually came to the conclusion that this is a complete fallacy on behalf of myself and the entire white population. Understanding that us, as white people, have barriers set in place, not by the hatred and discrimination that forces other groups of people into boxes, but by morals and values that limit what we *should* do. This specific aspect of white privilege is not often realized by those who have it because we gain our confidence by simply walking through life in our own skin because we've been white our entire lives; however, feeling any sense of security in our environment is a powerful thing because it gives us freedom, freedom that has characterized this race for its entire history in America while disappearing for all else. But what right do I have as a white person, to believe and continue to act on the belief that we can and should do anything as long as we are determined? How has what we've been taught about determination and persistence been a product of the natural privilege we have because of the color of our skin?

Stealing Indigenous culture as I previously wished to do by representing key aspects of their past and present in my art is a modern representation of the lands stolen by American settlers. In 1851, the first Treaty of Fort Laramie was created in order to protect the lands of the Lakota Nation by defining their land as their own, barring settlers and other types of infiltration [Huey]. In 1866, the United States government broke that treaty for the first time by shortcutting the Transcontinental Railroad through the Lakota Nation, where they were met with extreme backlash. In 1871, the Indian Appropriation Act made every Native American active prisoners of war by the entire population becoming wards of the state. Indigenous people were continuously promised peace then stabbed in the back by the American government and white settlers. From

that point on, the Lakota Nation was massacred in 1877 and 1890 on significant events that don't include the reduced life span and increased death rate in the reservations due to the terrible living conditions placed upon them. In 1980, the Supreme Court ruled in the court case *Sioux Nation v. US* that the Fort Laramie Treaty was violated and offered \$106 million for the land that was stolen, but Native Americans denied the money, saying that their land wasn't for sale. Money wasn't enough to exonerate settler crime, and neither is creating an art piece to rid myself of guilt as I reap the benefits of another culture's degradation, also known as a settler moving to innocence [Yang].

Because of the intense history associated with white settlers in America and the consequences enacted on other populations in order to boost white culture, modern white people try to eradicate our guilt for the past and for current white privilege [Yang]. This is seen in a variety of ways, from disconnecting oneself from the initial settler in order to create separation between what was done and who they are now to creating a connection with any Native American to show they aren't racist and are linked in some way or another. The latter includes claiming a distant relative on their grandmother's side (called the Grandmother Complex because the choice of male would instill the image of a native savage instead of caring grandmother) and having a settler "become without becoming," which entail claiming aspects of the culture and wanting acceptance by the people without having to face the consequences or struggles of actually being one of them. This expresses the type of degradation and appropriation I was representing by using their culture, trying to "help" them and raise awareness for their struggles, and, in turn, being accepted by them and their culture. This only serves me, the settler, by getting other people to regard me as compassionate while also allowing for the release of my own guilt as I constantly reap the benefits of their pain.

That same paper explained that while awareness and representation, without misrepresenting the Native Americans, in history books is imperative for the future of their culture and population, it often abates their true goal: decolonization, which would only be satisfied with repatriation of land [Yang]. This further exemplifies how I was epitomizing the white settler moving to innocence by placing myself in a position to facilitate their representation while I was never invited into the circle, nor was I going to take a step in the direction the Indigenous population desired. Yet, I thought I could jump this hurdle through determination and perseverance, without seeing how I was playing into the settler ideal. The philosophy that this was not only the correct thing to do but the fact that I was thoroughly encouraged to achieve this was ingrained into me because of my parents' experience and my own growing up in the safety of our skin.

Security that we will be able to accomplish any and everything we want to in addition to simply having assurance that we will be safe in life allows for white people to have confidence and pride in their capabilities that is not shared with other races and ethnicities. Being humanized as individuals by being seen as a person rather than a representation of the false reputation of a marginalized race or culture is a privilege that gives us this confidence and creates blindness for

white people because we know no different while the categorization of the colored people is apparent through all walks of life [Collins]. This generalization of an entire group of people due to discrimination and prejudices creates an overrepresentation in arrests with 40 percent of all inmates and 42 percent of all death sentences being black people (those whose race may identify as black but also may not culturally identify as African American), and while black people represent 13 percent of drug users, they are one-third of all drug-related arrests in 2010 [Costly]. White people, or those who are seen as white by others, may not fear the police, so they may continue with their actions with the guarantee for justice in the justice system. This is not shared by black individuals who are all too common with prejudices in the court system and on the streets. In 2017, the police killed 1,147 people with 25 percent being of African origin despite accounting for only 13 percent of the total population [Mapping Police Violence]. Even after the consequences of police brutality fall on the victims and minorities, they continue to lack justice with 99 percent of all cases not resulting in the conviction of the officer of a crime. For traffic stops in 2010, 72 percent of all cars stopped and arrested were for a black person when only 14 percent of all cars stopped had a black driver or occupant [Costly]. This is also seen economically, where people of color are less likely to receive loans or mortgages in addition to redlining stripping them of their ability to invest in high-value homes, creating an average household's net worth of only \$11,000 - \$13,700 compared to the white net worth of \$141,000 [Collins]. Not just historical consequences, but also modern mindsets and conscious or subconscious discrimination determine economic stability of the different communities. In an experiment where participants of varying races asked to board a bus without money, 72 percent of white people were allowed to ride while only 36 percent of black people were allowed [Costly]. These freedoms and luxuries afforded to white people let us feel safe and capable, in the sense of inside our own skin and also through confidence as walking through life without having to look over our shoulder for prejudice and discrimination.

These privileges and luxuries are given to us because of redlining and similar, current institutionalized racism occurrences, where the white population has better access to schools and education, therefore, setting the way for the rest of their lives. With redlining, the more expensive, private schools and better funded public schools were placed in locations that targeted white people, and because of their income, they were able to afford a better education for their children [Collins]. This is also reflected in Native American reservations, which have a 70 percent school drop-out rate [Huey] and 11 percent of the population receiving a Bachelor's degree compared to the United States average of 24 percent [Brown-Rice]. Since my personal education was, and continues to be, fulfilling, I felt personally impacted by the misrepresentation and lack of representation of the Native American culture and history because I felt it stole something from *me*. I am so privileged through my skin and the financials of my family that I became incredulous over what was *not* given to me through the education system. While I was aghast over how much of their history I was missing, I also think I felt personally allowed to symbolize and create art about this subject because in one way or another, I held some

connection to it, no matter how flimsy the bridge may be. This was part of me, a settler, moving to innocence through my false perception about a genuine relation to the Indigenous culture. I may not have realized this until I educated myself on what I was missing, but the epiphany was necessary for myself and for the white population moving forward.

This new-found lens I can now see through allows me to identify where I went wrong in my own actions and to further examine, discover, and illustrate those fallacies I learned about through research and my own experience, by finding it myself. The lens suddenly snapped into place when discussing and contemplating how I could represent Native Americans in art without stealing and appropriating their culture, and I realized that was an impossibility. I may still feel determined to meet goals and to never give up, but I also now understand that there are certain areas where, as a white person, I cannot touch. Because of the privilege given to be at birth because of the color of my skin, I was given permission to do anything I could dream of, so one of my continuous goals became to never give up. This will still hold true to my future ambitions and endeavors, but those I strive for will not further infiltrate and degrade another person's culture through some manufactured, dishonest connection with their people. I never applied my white privilege in the mindset of personal capability, physically and figuratively, but it is luckily extremely apparent now that I have gone through a particular experience that enabled me to see which rules *I* was breaking instead of distancing myself through others' participation in white privilege. In order to truly realize and understand the position I was in, actively practicing my white privilege, I had to be called out about it and questioned over my actions. While having this rude awakening, I accepted my abuse of white privilege and those who suffer because of it in order to finally allow myself to contemplate my discretion as a perpetrator, past and present. This infinitesimal difference of skin color blinds the "superior" white class of our boost in life and how those consequences fall on those who are already struggling. Our actions and benefits we reap from those who continually suffer in our regard remain ambiguous to us, the white community, because we are taught that determination is how we can be successful despite it and a history of prejudices pushing others down so we may rise. One may not realize how they participate in this in every facet of life, but the water we swim in is very abundant and habitable, but only for those born drowning in it. We, as white people, must become more aware of how we, too, have glass ceilings stopping our path, but only ones made and strengthened by morals and the acceptance of other peoples and cultures.

We all enter this world as humans,
But are quickly valued upon appearance.
We are told that simply through perseverance
Anyone can achieve their goals,
But that is false for those whose skin does not shine
With the rich and powerful white bloodline.

My skin is not armour to protect my insides.
Instead, it is a projection of my power,
Where I can be free and confident at every hour.
I do not have to cower in the skin I despise
Because of how it has plagued my reputation,
For I am a product of a disastrous narration.

White settlers brazenly came to this land
And pried it from the hands of its people
While saying everyone is equal.
We continuously break the treaties
Because we are the ones in control
As we bury them and their culture with the dirt we stole.

The “White Man’s Burden” demanded action
But only for white people to go out and civilize,
Where the Native Americans’ labor and resources were the prize.
Kipling considered them to be “half devil, half child”
And disregarded their culture and land,
While white people vigorously took command.

The white population has always been at the top
And the consequences litter the floor beneath our feet
As minorities continue to take the heat.
We say we’re making advancements as a society,
But at whose sacrifice?
Who will next pour the sand of white paradise?

Forcing people into districts with redlining
Reduced their access to investments on homes
So now their hardship is a part of their culture’s bones.
Twenty one percent of African Americans live in poverty
With twenty six percent of Native Americans leading the line
Because of the populations we forced into decline.

This is also seen through safety in the streets
Where police brutality targets the black community
And allows for white immunity.
African Americans are one-third of violent crime arrests

Despite accounting for twelve percent of the population
Where discrimination is the foundation.

Minorities are more likely to be followed and interrogated
Because they are categorized as one group
Where our perceptions travel in a loop.
We fight against prejudice but then discriminate
As we continue to see the consequences
Only to ignore minorities' expenses.

White people can stand strong and confident
Because of historical white superiority,
Where we have degraded other into further inferiority.
The socio-economic impacts are boundless,
Yet we ignore them because we are disconnected
And don't stop for them to be corrected.

White privilege is a white person problem
That with further deteriorate the oppressed prosperity
Until we solve this issue with sincerity.
Just because one may not notice
The water they swim in,
Doesn't mean it's not up to their chin.

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