

13 The Will to Injustice

An Autoethnography of Learning to Hear Uncomfortable Truths*

Eevi Elisabeth Beck

What In/Justices Am I Willing to Face?

“We’ve braved the belly of the beast.
We’ve learnt that quiet isn’t always peace,
And the norms and notions of what ‘just is’
Isn’t always justice.”

Amanda Gorman 2021, 12

Prologue

Doubt.

First, joy at listening to Amanda Gorman’s poem. But then: Who am I to discuss such matters? Foucault who wrote about “the will to know”; have I not seen in myself the will to hide in the familiar comfort of “what just is?” A will to remain ignorant? Have I not partaken in delivering injustices to other beings human and non-human (“do I really have to go into all that...?”). I have. And these became drops of heart-blood for the core of this chapter. But also courage. Injustices I have received. Support of many kinds. My will to wake up shake up the all-too-comfortable in me, and invite others to join. Will to listen and learn. Determination to keep walking, despite legs shaky at times.

So I write

Privilege as an Injustice

A form of injustice is privilege. This chapter explores how I became more aware of how privilege conditions my life and the structural injustice on which it depends.¹ In recent years, I have gone from the comfortable position that “I’m not a Racist, Classist nor Climate Denier; and I believe in equal access to Higher Education” to accepting responsibility for benefiting from the current divisive relations between people, as well as between people and the Earth. My path to accepting this view has been rife with internal

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resistance and remains uncomfortable, as some of my ‘solutions’ to social ills gradually dissolve. Not through a gentle wash with water but by painful etching from strong acids which eroded and erode comfort, scarring me into feeling the beginner I am; a learner. *What is causing change?* This chapter charts some moments in this perpetual transition.

The main purpose is to understand how I am partaking in a social system that I do not wish for. The pained questions behind this are: How is my work life at the University of Oslo complicit in upholding a system I do not support? How come I continue? (How) can I change that? The approach of the chapter is to examine a process of change. Its structure is a spiral as I have found no way of introducing its purpose without recourse to ideas which were outcomes of the study.

Transcending Comfort: Three Moments of Insight

Transition, transformation, has been both gradual process and sudden revelations. In the following, I present three moments out of many. The running theme is an axis between comfort and discomfort. These are glimpses into a messy process where ‘progress’ is spiralling insight, and detailing the process deepens the argument. Similar experiences that, unrelated to their importance, did not produce a visible effect, nevertheless supported later insight. These include a moment in the late 1980s when listening to an interview of some young Sami adults who were pained to relay how in the 1970s, they had been ashamed of their parents wearing ‘kofta’, their traditional wear, in the village. Another such moment occurred in the 1990s when a friend shared relief that the news of his Jewish background did not shake me. His prior experiences that caused his relief did however shake me, as I learnt that anti-Semitism was alive in Oslo at a time I assumed it was long gone. Both news shocked me and had some effect on my understanding, but not on my actions: I was not sufficiently willing to step out of my comfort zone. Yet they did prepare the soil into which the following seeds fell.

Moment 1: Being in the Know: How (Not) to Get Admitted into the University

I have permission to share this story.

A man of 30-something, well trained in his craft, dreams of becoming a university student. Having moved to Norway, there are transition schemes – unthinkable in his home country, so he is thrilled. Under the national ‘Realkompetanse’ rule, someone aged from 23 years up and with 5 years of work-life experience has a simplified admissions requirement: Only one year of full-time Further Education (videregående, FE) rather than three years. Our friend quits his job on a construction site, enthusiastically invests his savings into private tuition at the FE level, embarks on the exams, and passes all of them. He submits his academic record with the exam results plus proof of five years of work to my university, the University of Oslo. There is some

confusing back and forth with having to prove a detail that the national rules already provide for,² then the university's Admissions Office confirms that he has submitted a correct application. There is a wait. Then, a standard letter arrives, stating admission rejected. Reason: Not qualified. Our friend is devastated: *I have wasted one-and-a-half years of my life! I knew I shouldn't have thought I could become a university student.*

My response is different: "But you **are** qualified, there must be a mistake. Surely the letter must say you can discuss this with them?" No. I ask to see the letter: At the top, a terse line announcing the decision in decontextualised, formal terms. Then, as I remember it, paragraphs of text referring to various generic laws in accordance with which the office has the legal right to make such decisions. At the bottom, a single line, equally devoid of context but which does seem to speak from and to humans: "If you have any questions, you can contact us on this number..." "You could call them?" I suggest. But I submitted my formal application, and they have given their formal response, he responded; I don't have a question.

Yet I press on. With his permission, I call the Admissions Office and discover that the problem is a technicality, but deeply Class related: The letters confirming a total of five years of employment he had enclosed did not state that the work had been full-time. It was for him now to resubmit his application, enclosing papers documenting full-time work. I relayed this to him, but he explained there is no such thing as part time in construction work; he would not contact his ex-employers to ask them to add this, as it makes no sense to specify it. Evidently, the logic by which Admissions operated was not attuned to the realities of the construction sector (whereas in Norway, e.g., office work or teaching would as a matter of course, have been described as full or part time).

Our friend saw no purpose in further arguing his case with the Admissions Office. My Middle Class and educationally privileged background, however, made me not accept the finality of the response despite its formality. With his renewed permission, I made a further call, argued with Admissions about the unreasonableness of going back to a series of employers from years ago for new, nonsensical letters, and was then – only then – told of a simple solution: The applicant could submit evidence of his taxable income for the years in question, which would sufficiently substantiate his claim to have been in full-time employment.

The news left me relieved and enraged. A solution existed! But why did they not inform of this right away (even beforehand)? And why was the formal response void of information which could help make sense of the Reject? The total effect was one of obscuring the problem and its solution, hiding it from anyone who did not have the confidence and 'cultural insider' understanding of when and how to protest.

This is a logic of privilege: The ways of the dominant group have been naturalised, in this case emerging through implicit assumptions about, first, what sectors of the labour market applicants might need to document prior work from; second, what can be taken for granted as culturally 'known' and what

needs to be made explicit and how; and third, how to handle a formal reject (his “I have no questions” vs. my “there is a mistake, I will challenge them”).

The no doubt unintended (from the university’s point of view) hurdle against his admission was a consequence of unexamined assumptions about Class. While on the surface all applicants were met by the same rules, their practical effects depended on what sector of the labour market your previous life had been in and your familiarity with the inner logics of the Norwegian governmental sector generally and Higher Education specifically. Note that this was (still) in operation within a transition scheme for people like our friend.

This was how I discovered the sting of the acid that social class still patrols the gates of the university. I was upset for a long time. To him, however, previous life experience left him unsurprised by the need for a link with an ‘insider’ to get in.³

In this case, I position myself among the privileged, literally a colleague of the problem. The pain was substantial of seeing close up how only some more diversity awareness could have sufficed to prevent this problem. Yet that awareness was not there, and will not be there as long as my institution experiences no need to see this as an opportunity to learn something.

For years, I have vaguely known of access barriers being an issue, and whenever I have been reminded, I have been comfortably indignant about the situation (“someone should fix this”). Yet, standing next to someone about to be rejected for precisely these reasons made me *sense* the devastation wreaked by the injustice of the Classist assumptions and of how small changes could have made this admission process more robust.

1st Ouch! This Hurt.

This acid made my position loosen from pointing my accusatory finger comfortably away from myself, to “we (at my university) should do something about it”. I started some awakening to responsibility... Yet, at the time of writing, I still have not done anything beyond mentioning the example whenever it may find an audience at my university. The educational injustice is the way in which the admissions procedure, while technically ‘fair’, in its details reproduces existing patterns of family Higher Education background strongly influencing degree attainment. Meanwhile, inside Higher Education, I am one of many who are not seeing those who are thus unadmitted:⁴ The issue does not arise in our class(es). Thus we unwittingly support Classism by perpetuating its invisibility.

As for our friend, an inner dynamic of silencing worked something like this:

‘You know you don’t matter, so in face of the obstacle either you give up and lower your social expectations. Or if you were to get in, you are busy learning to navigate substantial amounts of new, often deeply confusing, social codes of which the quirks of the admission process is only one. So why spend your energy reporting it?’

There is no accessible port for feedback back into the system (either its national or local parts) and no evidence visible to the system that one might be needed. Only personal upset exists (such as mine), and the disappointment and broken trust of our friend and other silenced voices.

Moment 2: Crooked Fingers: Opening My Eyes to Earth Justice

An itchy discomfort/*getting unstuck*: In 2019, the actions of Greta Thunberg and the school strikers helped me believe that everyone can and must do something (for a written account, see Thunberg, 2019). Travelling back from a meditation retreat, three days on a train, had me thinking. *They* – the retreat organisers – *should’ve done more*. More to arouse me and others. Yet, Greta Thunberg said, “if you feel disheartened, do something”. If I see that action is needed, *why don’t... I?*

2nd OUCH, it hurts again. (This is also the time when I start noticing my lack of action following the first Moment.)

–Me? But I don’t know how to! – Neither do the kids, but that didn’t stop them. My accusatory finger-pointing at others has three neighbours hooking back at me.

As for a while I had considered leadership to be needed, I should step forward. I laid less a plan than a will to devote resources, trusting that what specifically was to be done would emerge. On the train, I decided to devote Fridays to the future (inspired by school strikers’ ‘Fridays for Future’ global climate strike movement). For six to seven months until the Covid-19 lockdown, I spent each Friday and more taking action and building community: I organised and led slow walking meditations ending in front of the Parliament in Oslo, vividly asking for slowing down consumption; I invited colleagues at my department to get in touch and see what we might do (resulting in young colleagues and myself presenting a conference poster on reducing our travel to conferences); I told my research collaborators that I would only work on environmentally relevant issues (resulting mostly in enthusiastically joining me, as well as a publication on academic travel: Schaffar and Beck (2022)). During the autumn of 2019, a group of employees campaigned with students for our university’s next ten-year Strategic Plan to focus on sustainability, and I had time to be one of the editors who compiled the many inputs and co-wrote our joint alternative proposal.

Such was my journey of getting unstuck from my comforting blaming of others. At this point, I felt mild shame at not having done anything effective earlier, but I was relieved to be taking action, considering myself to be strong. I subtly positioned myself as helping others to wake up.

At the time of writing (March 2022), I now raise sustainability issues in my Academic Development courses, as well as continue contributing to general developments at my university to incorporate sustainability issues, including social justice, in teaching. While this work has come to intertwine

with lessons from Moment 3 below, when engaging for the Earth I continue feeling highly comfortable raising the issue.

Moment 3: Skin Deep in Black Lives Matter. Loss of Innocence about My Position

This section I find the hardest to write. Unprocessed guilt. The weight of centuries of dominance by my ancestry. I consciously muster determination to keep writing, despite words shaky at times.

Any credit for this section is primarily due to conversations over years with friends with intimate knowledge about being racialised and who patiently have kept educating me. If you the reader find a good idea in the following, it may be one that people have been developing since the start of slavery. In terms of tracing my process, due to my early shock, deep disturbance, and doubt, only recently have I started noting down detailed sources. Yet, in terms of published non-fiction, major insights stem from Baldwin (1969a, 1969b), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983), M. L. King and Washington (1992), DuVernay (2016), Eddo-Lodge (2018), and R. King (2018).

One day in 2020, I am watching images from a US *Black Lives Matter* demo. I sympathise. I am a spectator, my resistance against taking responsibility is skilfully hidden from myself (“the problem is not ‘them,’ the Black and Brown people, but ‘us,’ the Whites⁵ – yet different Whites from me”). This intellectual camouflage works for weeks, months. But then. Another demo. Oslo. My. Home. City. There it is again, that placard with three simple words that I get confused by, insecure from, and my eyes want to avoid: “White Silence = Violence”. For days I ponder this before I surrender to truth: I am the problem. No escape. Not because of my hidden racist thoughts (though I have seen those roar their troll heads in my mind from time to time). Rather, the idea that “racist thought and action is what it is about” has been an effective smokescreen for seeing the deeper truth: Irrespective of whether or not I like it, I benefit from White privilege. My culturally condoned, conveniently structured non-racism has served to hide a painful truth: That having the choice is a mark of privilege. There is no escape.

The ‘problem’ moves from ‘those other Whites’ to ‘us’. **Me.**

3rd OUCH!!

The acid that taught the meaning of ‘institutional’ and ‘structural’ kept stinging. Where could I go from here? Shaken by realising that this had “passed under my radar”, I now wanted to learn. I turned to books; on racism, there would be many. Yet ... while at a distance I accepted protests to racism, I was sure I would switch off if someone got too angry.⁶ How best to make myself listen? I am an experienced meditator and a teacher of mindfulness; any writings about mindfulness and racism would better be able to get under my skin, so to speak. This landed me in the lap of Ruth King, an

experienced diversity awareness coach and meditation teacher. She writes directly to White-skinned people as well as People of Colour (PoC).⁷ And did I learn! “Racism is a heart disease, and it’s curable” (King, 2018, p. 1). First, I let go of any lingering resistance against mentioning skin colour, finally accepting that my stance of “better not mention race” was part of the problem.

Next, I gained new terminology. King (2018) argues that as the group contexts in which we live our lives vary, each person experiences a range of group identities. In one context we are primarily a parent; in another we are the only Brown-skinned student at a seminar; in yet another we are the teacher, etc. As structural inequity exists in multiple dimensions (King, 2018), most people will have varied experiences: Belonging at times to *subordinated* group identities, at other times to *dominant* group identities (a parallel argument in different terms grounds Star and Bowker, 2007). My specific privileges include being White in a White-dominant place; I have a parent who has Norwegian as their mother tongue; I am a full professor with tenure at a Norwegian university. I also suffer subordination in some contexts; primarily as an ageing female. This combination I refer to as my privileged position.⁸

Writers such as King (2018) and Eddo-Lodge (2018) provide clarity on the first task for the skin colour privileged, such as me, who “wants to do something”: Start speaking with other White people about White privilege. Eddo-Lodge’s blog post and book (2018) on how she “No Longer Talks to White People About Race”, makes vivid the burden on PoC when White people are expecting to get educated on racism by them. A new eye-opener for me: the action needed also gets transposed, to ‘us’ and ‘me’. The clarity and strength of her stance helped me see not just racism but all three problems more deeply. And it mattered that those insights build on hundreds of years of utmost suffering. As my interest turned towards my own responsibility, I stopped fearing it quite so much, instead starting acting on it (consistent with Thunberg quoted earlier).

I started pondering the several major crises taking place in parallel, affecting people differentially, and also, animals, plants, and the Earth. I had a need to make sense of them not as disjoint but as interlinked causes-and-consequences. Further, to bring them into dialogue with the positioning of scientific knowledge as such, to see what joint pictures might emerge. My yearning to “think the world together” with injustice initially manifested at a research seminar in 2020: The paper “A Covid Climate as If Black Lives Mattered” juxtaposed the concerted effort in Norway and internationally to contain the Covid-19 pandemic with the lack of effective action on the climate crisis and racism. (The present chapter is its continuation.)

Denting the Culture of No Culture?

The “culture of no culture” is one of Donna Haraway’s (e.g., 1997) characterisations of the dominant discourse of academic (primarily scientific) positionings of knowledges. The culture of no culture refers to a

perspective-without-a-perspective, or ‘objectivity’ if you like; the invisibility of the position of the speaker/observer (Haraway, 1997). Academic writing is rife with mirroring of cultures of no culture, including this sentence itself.

How are educators not least in Higher Education to respect and reform the contested traditions of scholarly inquiry, while making sense of a rapidly changing world and discussing this with our students to listen forth their understanding? This is a non-trivial issue. For example, one of the readers invited this chapter to explicitly link with educational theory, e.g., *Bildung*. While, e.g., Wolfgang Klafki included in his renewal of *Bildung* the notions of self-determination, co-determination, and solidarity (for an application of this in Higher Education, see Beck et al. 2015), he did not to my knowledge discuss the need for the teacher to study the blinkers in her own eyes in order to benefit the Earth and her students. Parker Palmer (2017) however, deconstructs with raw eloquence his own teaching failures in his quest for an honest and sensitive contact with his (in Class terms) less privileged college students. Klafki and Palmer differ widely in their approaches, yet both argue for truly inclusive education and both inspire my deeper thinking-and-acting. Interdisciplinary work such as O’Brien et al. (2013), details the need for a deep revolution of educational thinking to save humanity on a suffering Earth. Thus, the literature arguing for change exists.

The issue is therefore less what to do about the issues than how to arouse and sustain interest in it from more people. The three moments suggest the need to hear silenced voices, including feedback on how the university functions for students from less educationally privileged backgrounds (Moment 1). What would be needed for the university to act? Experimentation with post-Colonial Academic Development following widespread student protests in South Africa emphasises the centrality of this question:

In 2015, South African students disrupted the legacy of colonialism that permeated their experience of higher education in a series of protests that shook universities across the country. (...) This contestation resulted in an agreement that academics and students traditionally excluded from formal institutional structures and processes of curriculum oversight, would be included in a process of curriculum review.

Behari-Leak and Mokou (2019, p. 136)

I choose to consider all living beings and the non-living as deeply connected (Moment 2, and cf. *Nhật Hạnh*, 1998). What questions within our course/subject/discipline become relevant in such a context? How might they be part of disciplinary and interdisciplinary courses and research? Further, what new (non-scientific forms of) knowledge might be needed?

For/from Moment 3, Donna Haraway reminds us that vision is not neutral (e.g., 1992) and metaphors create worlds (1992, 1997). Combining this with injustice being experienced differentially, my (originally more naïve) question for this chapter becomes refined to: “What is it that my Whiteness

in an overwhelmingly (and dominantly) White society and workplace permits me not to see?” What suffering does it allow me not to experience? For example, non-fear of my young adult son being stopped by the police when travelling through the city centre. In late 2020, my son and I were acutely aware of such privilege because we had been taught, reminded, and reminded again by Black Lives Matter demonstrations across several countries. In early 2021, even though we are willing to remember, our life does not remind us much. In effect, we rest in the privilege of semi-forgetting – a further embodiment of the injustice of privilege. Waking up once is not enough.

Discussions of justice in, for, and through, education could risk perpetuating the core problem: Looking away from, rather than at, ourselves as a source of injustice. Such avoidance is endemic. It is also hard to find the terms in which to discuss it without becoming overly individual. Waking up alone is not enough.

The problem exists inside me and outside. In order to not only wake up but stay awake, I need community, yet can change only myself. Changing myself depends on my awareness, the resources I have access to, who can be supportive friends, and who can challenge me. To the extent that the cultures with which I identify support non-responsibility, taking responsibility becomes acts of resistance.

The three moments clarify three interlinked aspects of injustice manifesting through my privilege: First, uneven access to privileges such as academic forms of knowledge and how the inequity is structured to perpetuate itself, invisibly to those on the ‘inside’ (cf. mainly Moment 1/Access). Second, relating theory/insight and practice/action, injustice includes us academically privileged having the choice to focus solely on theory should we so wish (cf. M2/Earth Justice), yet it would often take a small change to expand our horizons and include subject-relevant Earth issues. Third (most visibly with M3/Skin Deep but touched in all three), the injustice of “what just is”, including hesitance to expand my capacity to take responsibility in several dimensions including time (historical/ancestry and future generations), across ingrained cultural boundaries (such as skin colours and levels of familiarity with signifiers of academic status), and across the human/non-human divide (animals, minerals, etc.).

For such work of growing my capacity to listen inwards and outwards, I need other people. Before probing the issue of community, I next explain why I write about myself.

A Note on Autoethnography

Svendby (2021) summarises the ‘what’ of autoethnography thus: “The aim of autoethnography is to use personal experience as a way to elucidate and purposefully comment on cultural practices. (...) [T]he language is deliberately accessible and experimental. Subjective experiences, including my understandings and feelings, are used as data” (p. 637, references omitted). Another dimension is how autoethnography borrows elements from (non-)

fiction which refuses to be only fiction or non-fiction (cf. Amanda Gorman's (2021) (non-)fiction poem quoted earlier, and Ellis' (2004) introduction to autoethnography, written as fictionalised academic teaching).

Mann et al. (2011) add a 'why' dimension: "the creativity of experimental methods is in their ability to configure reality in an original way. Rather than linking causes and effects so as to create predictability, ethnographic experiments generate unprecedented possibilities". (p. 239). That makes sense to me. Yet, at the time of writing, the question of originality ('original', 'unprecedented') looms as a gaping wound (– a parallel to Haraway's critical analysis of Boyle's 'Modest Witness', see below): Original to whom; in what ways? If the present chapter has originality, key parts of that are due to recycling insight from one context into another. The argument can claim no conceptual rest anywhere; it will carry only to the extent that readers deem this chapter worth reading.

For my part, insights from PoC/Black/Brown thinkers are gradually resolving many thorny conceptual issues. As I have transposed (in the sense of music theory) some of their hard-won insights into a White middle-class scholarly context, in what sense can I make claims for 'unprecedented' possibilities? Even if posing as a follow-up question "What parts of this chapter are original and in what ways", the apparent innocence of originality dissolves as the question presses issues of privileged perspective, (in)visibilities stratified by long-established lines of domination. (As this is the topic of this chapter, I have come full circle/full spiral. Conclusion: I have learnt to see something.)

In her book *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan@_Meets_OncoMouse™*, Haraway (1997) tells a story of the ousting of own experience (introspection) from Science following a power struggle within *The Royal Society* in the 17th century. Robert Boyle and his experimental approach won, including the need for some 'modest witness' for presumed detached observation – of male gender and of sufficient social standing. This paradigm has dominated Science ever since. Parcelled in is its culturally specific idea of having no culture (Haraway, 1992, 1997). To me, the main power of autoethnography is to challenge centuries of dominance of Boyle's approach (though not the entire history of Science).

In an autoethnography, I believe that some analytic insight needs to implicitly or explicitly emerge which is considered relevant in some academic research context. Mann et al. might well agree: "Early theorizing about 'situated knowledge' in feminism insisted on the situatedness of the researcher and her modes of knowing. What we seek to draw out here is that reality itself is situated too" (2011, p. 238).

For me, autoethnography is most interesting as a way of pushing at the boundaries of what aspects of researchers' activities are permitted in the public display of how we researchers come to know something. In this, I have been inspired by Laurel Richardson's (1997) analysis of academic culture and power struggles in her academic life. Autoethnography can highlight how such processes of boundary control not only operate within the disciplines but do so by working 'within us' (meaning me while writing, readers

while reading). Down to its core, the academic endeavour is multiple, unsettled, continually contested (for an experimental exploration of this, see Beck 2016).

In this chapter specifically, autoethnography serves me in exploring silences: First, I render myself vulnerable by challenging boundaries which it would be more comfortable not to challenge (“will the reviewers accept this chapter?”; “will i be considered not-a-proper-academic?”).

Second, such internalised boundaries delimit what matters could properly be investigated, such as: Can an investigation of the privileges of an Educational Scientist suffice for a proper Educational Sciences chapter? A third reason is ethical: With the subject matter being injustice and subtle privilege among academics and at the core of the academic endeavour, I do not need to ask colleagues about their failures, insecurities, and their shame; my own suffices.

In short, autoethnography allows me to examine closely one example of what we researchers do, without pointing a finger. Thus I can enact the insight I wish to cultivate.

Injustices of My Privileges

Dichotomisation of justice vs. injustice has a place. Blatant transgressions need to be named and stopped. For this, brave people risk their lives in campaigns for a justice worth the term, such as equality before the law (for some examples, see Ava DuVernay’s (2016) documentary *13th*, or cf. the right to speak your mother tongue with friends in school). Times do exist when I join others in saying about some situation that “this isn’t just, change it!” Yet, the present purpose is different: To see a quiet landscape in which the issue is brought back home to me. I examine subtle ways in which I take notions of ‘justice’ for granted through not examining how I benefit from them. What enables me to take them for granted? Due to my privileges, to challenge myself out of my comfort zone I need more subtle visions of justice than straight dichotomising.

What is just? In her poem performed at the Inauguration Ceremony of US President Biden and Vice-President Harris on 20 January 2021, Amanda Gorman (2021) reminded listeners that whatever ‘justice’ is, it is very much work-in-progress. Eddo-Lodge has a chapter “There Is No Justice, There’s Just Us” and writes, “We’re still in the hard bit” (2018, p. 231). Laws, constitutions, and institutions intended to promote justice have proven inadequate. I have learnt to ask: What gets in the way?

Activists and writers have highlighted as a *structural* problem that injustice is experienced differentially, not least that of privilege (e.g., Baldwin 1969a, 1969b; Eddo-Lodge, 2018; King, 2018). In the present investigation, the question of my will to injustice turned into an exploration of structural inequities⁹ that I silently benefit from, and what made and makes me allow that to continue.

James Baldwin and many others have lived and analysed structures that are deeply ingrained within the workings of injustice, explaining how “what just

is” can (differentially) camouflage as justice. Applying Walter Benjamin’s interest in deeper purposes¹⁰ to James Baldwin, I contend that the deeper purpose of privilege is to articulate the world differentially, in a manner that renders privilege invisible to those who benefit from it. The injustice of privilege is more visible to those at the receiving end, more palpable, has the worse consequences for them. Such distorted visibility is a necessary aspect of injustice – otherwise, it cannot exist – and further, is an *efficient* means of maintaining the status quo (for vivid examples, watch DuVernay, 2016). In the early 1960s, James Baldwin wrote to his beloved nephew (1969a, p. 22):

The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what White people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear.

Baldwin made the further point that the (in King’s terminology) dominator and the subordinated are interlinked: As part of the injustice, the dominators’ own problems are forced onto the subordinated. Therefore, real freedom must be for all: “You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free” (Baldwin 1969a, p. 24; also cf. interviews in DuVernay, 2016, towards the end).

Action and Non-action

One injustice from my racism privilege is that when I choose not to speak up, the consequences are felt elsewhere. To the extent that the pain of injustice is experienced primarily by those at the receiving end, Reni Eddo-Lodge (2018) argues powerfully that time and again, it gets left to the recipients to articulate the wrongdoing as such.

The task is arduous. As articulated by Eddo-Lodge (2018), this is its inner logic:

- Articulate your suffering
- Do so strongly enough to have a chance of being noted, yet not in a way that touches the sensitivities of the dominator (e.g., by displaying too strong anger)
- Do be willing to risk retraumatizing yourself in the process
- The other party has the privilege of heeding your words, or not, as they please

Non-acting then, leaving it for others to address, is not a neutral choice – it has consequences. My need to hear more truths although they are uncomfortable stems directly from the eye-opening encounter with the two “White silence = violence” placards. A need to learn what this is about and to gradually uncover some of the workings of racism specifically and domination

generally in my life. I found it painful at first to feel ‘generalised’ in Eddo-Lodge (2018), but against my own resistance, I gradually saw I had much to learn about the dominant culture and the opportunities I have for not acting it provides me. The discomfort then expanded to ethical responsibility and beyond, to broaden and prove intellectually interesting, as well as satisfying to my political heart and my connection-yearning soul. “Learning to hear uncomfortable truths” has been a process of growing beyond discomfort at the immediate level and towards something less known, less comfortable, but deeply more meaningful.

After the recounted insights and more, how well did the effects last? While there are positives, at the time of writing, I acknowledge that my daily awareness of my privileges has started receding.

What happened?

Nothing special: Nested in the comforts of my White middle-class privilege, no-one reminded me and other concerns took over.

...!

When I noticed, I resisted admitting to it. To overcome my unhelpful shame, I write it, am it, then turn to James Baldwin:

White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this – which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never – the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.
(Baldwin 1969b, p. 36)

What insight, what love! What depth of insight into the divisiveness of separation and its comfortable home among us Whites, and also how it resides in our cultures and we perpetuate it!

Yet. Learning to love myself is not enough. One reason is that since this was written 50-60 years ago, loving ourselves – White, Middle Class people – has become repackaged and served back as the solution to our discomforts. Baldwin’s statement demands much more than the glossy version of comforting White restlessness.

Wills to Change, Capacities to Grow in Community

To deepen my understanding of – befriending – that which draws me towards **un**questioning, I see that regardless of the intentions, my actions have perpetrated injustice. How, though, to change? Most of the contexts in which I live provide scant support for even asking the question, let alone addressing it. Yet, facing the apparently impossible could liberate not only others but me too. This landscape is however unfamiliar to me, its creatures shy, my dominant group identities (those in which I grew up and most of which I continue embodying) poor in relevant insight.

I am learning two ways of changing: First, tracing, making accountable, my journey towards greater insight (including specific experiences, reflections, and readings of literature) might inspire others to make journeys of their own. The other way is to *act* on the insight by helping break the silence among people who in various ways are ‘like me’. This could mean contributing to discussing ways in which we perpetuate the injustice of privilege (as in this chapter), how I respond to ordinary events on the street, or what voices I offer space for in the classrooms of my university.

While self-development has been a necessary step for me to wake up, this is in service of ‘thinking the world together’ (Parker Palmer, 2017, Ch. III, pp. 63–6; referring to teaching in higher education). One outcome is a sense of curiosity: What might a community, a city, a country, a world be like if we (re)constructed it with no domination? How could we, could I, start making a few steps?

Writing as a White, Middle Class academic in a predominantly White, Middle Class environment, I address my peers in asking if not the work we need to do includes *repeatedly and creatively uncovering ways in which we may be benefiting from various strands of privilege, actively looking for ways in which each of us benefits, regardless of whether or not we wish to.*

Eddo-Lodge reminds White people not to burden others with our problems, including that of not understanding racism. Ruth King (2018) provides a set of practical exercises for taking responsibility and reminds us Whites¹¹ to keep talking together about it, welcoming any shame, discomfort that may be touched.

Not-Two, Not-One: Collective Responsibilities/Actions/Awakenings

A way of approaching troubled times is to work towards collective healing – not in opposition to, but alongside trauma being experienced individually.¹² For the extraordinary, multiple, Earth-and-humans crises that define the times in which we are living; for the extraordinary pace of change needed, extraordinary connections may be needed.

This chapter has pain, insight, and joy in finally taking home responsibility which is mine. Such growth is beautifully un-ended, un-endable. Yet, seeing my pain and joy as purely individual would miss both Baldwin and Palmer’s points above about community. Seeing it as purely collective would miss the insight of Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) – a book protesting the White middle-class women’s movement, members of which in the 1970s believed they were speaking for all women.

I yearn for discussions: which encompass my privileges and the subordination I have experienced; with the power to combine sitting still with action and combine indigenous ways of knowing with national and international governance. Where a pandemic is not an excuse for business as usual. For this work, I need a more complex mathematics than ‘1’ or ‘2’, identity or separation. Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh speaks of “not exactly different”, and

of “not-one, not-two” but something between, thus facilitating a rich relation between individuality and collectivity as it permits conceptualising them as mutually constitutive.

Example: I heard the monk Palden Gyatso speak in Oslo, Norway, in the late 1990s. Though he did not make a major point of it, the public announcement included that he had been imprisoned for decades and tortured.¹³ Upon his release, he bought from those who had tortured him their instruments of torture. The gentle wisdom with which he spoke of his ordeal astounded me, as did giving money to his torturers when he could have just left. Then to carry those instruments with him as he embarked on life as a free person was incomprehensible: How could anyone be calm after such experiences, so aware of our (his future listeners’) need of evidence, and on top of that, be capable of acting on such insights? In my reading, there was a clarity about ‘I’ simultaneously with a capacity to transcend it: There was an individual I that suffered, and yet I could act from a collective perspective.

Viewing individual and collective as mutually constitutive provides a rich context for discussing responsibility for participating in cultures that sanction privilege, and for developing connectedness with the Earth and other living beings. Such perspectives can become a part of daily life. For example, in my spiritual practice, I have committed to training myself to “not possess anything that should belong to others” (Nhật Hạnh, 1998, p. 21). This exercise and the 14 it is part of intentionally open more questions than they answer.¹⁴ For example, I do not have the need to steal to avoid hunger, nor for other reasons. But as a Norwegian with a secure income, I have an unsustainably affluent lifestyle. What should belong to others – where to draw the line? Questions such as these I regularly discuss with others who are similarly committed. This provides for sharing and growth without the need for reductive answers, as we support each other in (in Rilke’s terms) *living the questions*. Could educationalists form similar groups to discuss our own personal and group privileges and suffering?

A question would be how such ‘dominant group’ processes might nourish self-love without falling into impoverished self-development which supports “what just is”. In other words, can members of various dominant groups, such as myself, nourish transformative love with the power to help set, in Baldwin’s terms, all free? Including dominators and their/our lack of self-love? King (2018) and Eddo-Lodge (2018) are clear:¹⁵ For transformation of dominators (e.g., as White people, men, or highly educated Middle Class), create community in which to study, accept, and grieve our history as dominators. King (2018) depicts how such work includes observing and asking questions about what (in enacting our individual contributions to the group identity as dominators), perhaps unwittingly, we damaged in our own children and students so that they would successfully grow into enacting the dominance? That is, how do we pass on misogyny/racism/overconsumption of the Earth’s resources/etc., to our children, including by quiet conditioning which permits it to continue? King (2018) points out subtle these processes can be such as learning when we were children not to

ask certain kinds of questions. She mentions examples of White people who, even as adults, felt they could not raise racism for discussion in their families of origin even when they themselves felt seriously troubled by how their family spoke of race.

There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity.

Baldwin (1969a, pp. 22–3); italics in original

Taking Baldwin home, I wonder: When will Norway's young start learning about the Vikings in a way which balances their/our feats with their/our atrocities against other peoples? Or the suffering of Sami and other minorities under harsh dominance camouflaged as equity?

I am learning that my part in supporting change includes: owning up to my privilege as White, middle-class, and a professor from a highly educated family background; that as an educator in Higher Education, to educate myself first; receiving what is offered from helpers along the way; when I perceive injustice to not just react, but act; and last but not least, patience.

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Declaration

There are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

- 1 After writing most of this chapter, I discovered a rapidly growing literature on critical Whiteness research in the USA. Two seminal works are Robin DiAngelo's book and term *White Fragility*, and Jacqueline Battalora's history of Whiteness in US law from the 17th century to the 2010s: DiAngelo, R. 2018. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press. Battalora, J. 2021. *Birth of a White Nation. The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.
- 2 Foreigners are automatically exempt from exams in the Nynorsk language, but by a quirk of the system, he had to formally apply to the office that issued his exam results for them to state this in the correct way.
- 3 This difference between the two of us is typical of dominant-subordinated group experiences, cf. King (2018) as discussed below.
- 4 There is an extensive literature on such issues; my interest here is to document effects.
- 5 I refer to myself and others with low levels of melanine in our skin as Whites. The intention is to help equalise treatment of people (at my university, I hear terms such as Indian professor, but never White or European professor). I felt initial discomfort at using the term, which I take as evidence of its need.
- 6 Thus I reacted exactly as Eddo-Lodge (2018) depicts, as I discovered six months later when I got her book and learnt how my typical response causes burdens on PoC.
- 7 E.g., Chapter 15, "What White People Can Do with Privilege".
- 8 In this chapter, I am exploring privilege which I have been comfortably ignoring and I want to grab myself unawares. Thus I skip experiences of subordination, though they fed my initial interest in privilege.
- 9 Structural inequities are to me acts (of the body, of the mind, and of institutionalisations) that serve to uphold difference such as the unequal distribution of privilege. There are many facets of structural inequity and a number of terms – including institutionalised racism, classism, sexism, able-ism, and exploitation of the Earth and non-human species.
- 10 Inspired by Walter Benjamin's comment (1999) on the deeper purpose of translation.
- 11 Especially Chapter 15, "What White People Can Do with Privilege".
- 12 For clarity about the body-culture injury from racism and the possibility of healing individually and collectively, see Resmaa Menakem's *Somatic Abolitionism*. For example, blog post for white bodies: <https://www.resmaa.com/somatic-learnings/whiteness-white-allyship-and-respect> (visited 3.3.2022).
- 13 Slotnik, D.E. (2018). Palden Gyatso, 85, Monk Who Suffered 3 Decades of Torment for a Free Tibet, *New York Times* obituary, 9 December 2018, p. 26.
- 14 Schaffar and Beck (2022) briefly discuss some of its conceptual basis.
- 15 The inclusion of other dimensions of domination than racism is mine.

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