

# Biting the Hand that Feeds Me

## Notes on Privilege From a White Anti-Racist Feminist

By Nancy Chater

*Lauteure préconise une transformation complète des systèmes idéologiques et structurels qui re-produisent les privilèges des unes aux détriment des autres. Elle examine les contradictions*

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*Understanding our motivations to “bite the hand that feeds” privilege forms the foundation on which political alliances with women of colour can be built.*

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*auxquelles font face les féministes antiracistes de race blanche qui tentent de démanteler la suprématie de leur race. Reconnaître et nommer ces contradictions est déjà, en soi, un acte politique ainsi qu’une résistance à l’oppression qui se loge à l’intérieur du combat contre le racisme.*

It is a particular challenge when speaking from a position of privilege to advocate a complete transformation of the ideologies, structures and everyday practices which re/produce that very privilege. How does one account for the contradictions of one’s own location in the process? How do I, as an anti-racist white feminist writer and activist? I believe that those of us who identify as white anti-racist feminists must examine these contradictions as we name, and act on, our stake in dismantling white supremacy. Articulating our examination of these contradictions to other white women (and men) in a politicizing and mobilizing way is an important component of the contribution we can, indeed must, make to anti-oppression movement which necessarily includes anti-racist struggle.

White feminist writers and activists, myself among them, have to confront the ready potential of speaking or acting in ways that are based on or slide into arrogance, moralizing, self-congratulation, liberal politics, appropriation, careerism, or rhetoric when conceiving of and expressing our stake in fighting racism. Each of these unconsciously preserves power—in this case, white power—and none contributes to revolutionary change in terms of how access to and use of power are re-distributed.

Understanding and naming our motivations to “bite the hand that feeds” privilege also forms the foundation on which political alliances with women (and men) of colour and other anti-racist whites can be built. For this reason, they need to be rooted in a clear, strong and tenacious ethics and politics.

By the term “anti-racist feminist” I mean feminist theory which takes into account the interaction of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, imperialism and colonialism in capitalism. This analysis must be credited to the Asian, Black, First Nations, and Latina feminists, and self-named feminists of colour who have managed, despite barriers, to have their voices heard.<sup>1</sup> While feminism must be grounded in this integrative analysis, that is not always the case when gender-based feminism is taken as the norm. Therefore I consciously place an integrative, anti-racist feminist framework at the center of feminism.

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In response to the question, *why is fighting racism something white feminists need to do*, I want to summarize a few key feminist concepts, noting that it is feminists of colour who have put this question on the table. One answer is that racism is a form of oppression, and all oppression is wrong, unjust, brutal, deadly. A second reason is that feminism is defined as a collective struggle, open to all women, whose goal is the liberation of all women from all forms of oppression. It follows that because some women are oppressed by racism, while others are privileged by it, racism is a feminist issue. Related to this is the understanding that all forms of oppressions reinforce each other. A third reason is that in a racist society, all people are *racialized* and are located, with unequal power, in relation to each other. So racism involves and affects all women. A fourth reason is that the survival of all peoples and the earth itself are interdependent: the way a society is willing to exploit and waste those it has relegated to the bottom speaks of the future conditions for everyone except the few at the top, unless fundamental systemic and cultural transformations that benefit those with the least social power are fought for and won.

While each of these is plenty reason enough, the point has also been made, by both feminists of colour and white feminists, that a system built on relations of dominance impacts profoundly and destructively on those who also in other very real ways benefit. Reaping rewards is destructive to those who gain at the expense of others. This is a difficult but critical concept for anti-racist white feminists to address. I say “particularly white” because I think it is racist to look to feminists/people of colour to attend to the destructiveness of privilege *for white people*.<sup>2</sup> To speak of the personal and social distortions and loss of humanity for those who dominate is indeed a major cultural and political task. It is not easy to accomplish when social status, identity, and success are grounded in consumer capitalist values that are individualistic, materialistic, hierarchical, and competitive.

To convince those in, or those seeking, positions of power and privilege of the cost to them requires a fundamental cultural transformation. It requires a reclaiming and re-investing with meaning of concepts that to many in North America have come to sound lame and rhetorical. These concepts include genuine collectivity, respect, including self-respect, connectedness to all life, honesty, sharing, honour, and inter-dependence. Each of these terms has been used hypocritically for so long by spokespeople of the institutions of the dominant society that their meanings have been trivialized. This dilemma of language and meaning points to the need for cultural

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revolution which is absolutely vital to the transformation from a racist culture to a truly social democratic one.

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I have already named a few of the potential pitfalls of challenging racism from a position privileged by it. There are certainly others. Minnie Bruce Pratt, for example, identifies four roles taught her as a white, Southern U.S., Christian-raised woman which she struggles not to fill in doing anti-racist work; judge, martyr, peacemaker and preacher (31). Another feminist activist with white-skin privilege, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, identifies two problematic models; the missionary and the crusader (277).

Being self-reflexive and engaged are two important elements. Pratt notes that there are "interior questions I have asked myself about my understanding of anti-Semitism and racism" and then "raise[ed], out loud, with other women" (31). In this way she engages herself in the issues about which she speaks, sharing her own process of *change*, and her stake in individual and societal change. I have taken a valuable lesson from Pratt and from African-American activist and writer June Jordan, who describes her self-reflexive strategy in the following way:

What I try to do in a political essay is, whatever the problem is, I try to show people how I am part of the problem. And then as I try to articulate how I'm working my way *out* of being part of the problem, I need to persuade people to join me. And I think this is a way of making allies, rather than making people feel a *we/they* formulation (Christakos 1992, 33).

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I want to raise three contradictions of white privilege that I confront in speaking or writing about racism and the social construction of whiteness to other white people.

One such contradiction emerges in the tendency of anti-racist whites to assume an edge of moral or intellectual superiority over and distance from other white people, especially those displaying a lack of politicized awareness of racism. This has been termed the "flight from white" (AWARE workshop). This position establishes a false separation between oneself and those with whom one actually continues to share access to inequitable benefits, regardless of divergent consciousnesses.

A second contradiction of white privilege arises if one unconsciously claims a speaking stance, or occupies a cultural space which is itself created by the privileged access to resources—white exclusion—which one at the same time critiques. Let me illustrate this from my own experience. In 1985 a co-worker and I sought to publicize the murder of a young Black woman in Toronto whose death, we argued, could have been avoided had the police taken seriously the previously assaultive behaviour (only the day before) of the man who killed her. At that time, I was not conscious of how my racialized white identity figured into my assumptions that I was "a woman speaking out for a woman who couldn't" (Chater 102). I meant "the woman who couldn't" because she was silenced by death. I have since reflected on my unequal power and unexamined racist attitudes toward the Black friend and co-worker with whom I worked on this publicity campaign. Because of her apparent "shyness" and seeming timidity in the face of authorities, I saw it as a matter "of course" that I did the interviews and public speaking at a (white feminist) rally we linked up with. We did not discuss the possibility of her taking up that public space and empowering herself and Black women in the process. Then, by publishing an account of this experience in a predominantly white feminist journal, my voice again occupied a cultural space organized by racism, i.e., white exclusivity. I am not saying that I should not have done or said anything as a white woman in white-dominated spaces. My point is that in the process of anti-racist transformation, decisions about who speaks, about whom, and how, and where, involve issues of privilege which need to be examined.

The third issue involves the times when I do *not* speak out or confront racism, yet am aware of wanting to. (This does not include the ways and times in which I unconsciously accommodate myself to white-skin privilege.) For me this involves instances with actual persons or groups, as well as (not) completing and seeking publication of writing that deals with racism. I have witnessed and heard about this occurrence of white women not speaking out when they were conscious of something wrong numerous times. This pattern is created by contradictions of power and powerlessness within individuals.

What stops me in such moments? A sense of powerlessness. Which then propels fear of conflict. This sense of powerlessness is a double impediment to my politics and my ethics. Not only does it silence and derail my capacity to fight back, but it also allows me to obscure the always-

relative power I do have as a white woman. Since part of white-skin privilege is the "freedom" not to be aware of it, conceding to feeling powerless in the face of actual confrontations with racism serves only to reproduce racism.

My sense of powerlessness is real and painful. It arises from the emotional and physical violence to which I have been subjected as a child, a woman, growing up and still being working class, and as bisexual. It stems from the ways in which I am objectified and silenced. However, after reflecting on areas of both power *and* powerlessness in my life, I have realized that when what drives my powerlessness is allowed to take the front seat and determine the course

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of my actions, it keeps me from figuring out how to use the always-relative power I do have to fight back, to resist. It renders me speechless and compliant to my privilege, which also includes being university educated, English speaking, Canadian born, Anglo Saxon, not visibly disabled, young, Christian-raised, born in and residing in a capitalist centre in the west/global north. So, my battles against being rendered powerless and my striving toward empowerment are motivated partly by my commitment to be *accountable to my access to power*.

Of course, there are many external barriers to speaking out and being heard, such as access to public space and the power to determine meaning. Before, or while, confronting those one needs first to overcome many internalized blocks.

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What is privilege? How is it defined or measured? Privilege can be a problematic term, it seems to me, because material conditions that all peoples inherently deserve, have a right to, when not available to all, become a privilege. Food, housing, health care, education, bodily autonomy, love, respect, and self-determination as peoples can be termed privileges because of their inequitable distribution. Having access to them, however, is not necessarily experienced as a privilege. Nor would I advocate that basic human and civil rights and responsibilities be understood as privileges. Privilege, like power, is relational and so constantly shifting. Although privilege and power have historically sedimented along lines mediated by class, caste, nation, race, gender, sexuality and so on, many, if not most, people have a complex and contradictory relationship to power and powerlessness, to privilege and oppression.

Given the relational nature of privilege, from one social context to another, and over a lifetime, balances can shift.

For example, in my paid work as a waitress the balance of power differs in each of the following: when I eject a white homeless man from the restaurant, when I take an order from a customer who dehumanizes me through their gaze and manner, yet I am coerced by the economic relations into being "polite," when I go into the kitchen and make a request of a young male working-class Tamil dishwasher, when I am ordered around by a ten-year old child who is already familiar with authority over service workers, when I train a new staff member with less "seniority," and so on.

As well, we all move from being children to adults. Often this entails early experience of being dominated and of wide-spread neglect and abuse. Many, especially women, encounter blocks when it comes to exercising their power as an adult in situations of conflict because early-instilled patterns of feeling paralyzed in the face of fear are triggered and take center stage. This can create a sense of powerlessness that overshadows awareness of access to social power.

I raise the question of these fluctuations because I think they are important to consider when asking for individuals or groups to "acknowledge privilege" and "give up privilege." In the context of sometimes-contradictory relations to privilege, what does that really mean; and how will it be done? I am aware that revolutionary change occurs primarily through subjugated groups *taking* and exercising power, not through those who have it "giving it up." To the extent that privilege can be consciously given up, what strategies are workable? Nobody wants to give up what they experience as subsistence or even as necessary. The question then arises as to whose definition of "necessary" counts, individually or between groups and nations.

Regarding questions of necessity, the problem is not, for example, that some have food but rather that some do not. Of course, we all need food. The degree of the *disparities* between people, between groups, and between nations with regards to access to resources—where some throw vast amounts of food away while others starve or barely survive picking through and consuming garbage—is a function of unequal patterns of distribution. The political economy of resource distribution is a critical framework within which to analyze the disparities that create "privilege," and then determine courses of action to change inequitable distribution.

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More than one white feminist writer has argued that white women need to understand the struggle against racism as *our own fight*. In fact, this is something which most of the still-small number of white feminists (see Kay/Kantrowitz, Pratt, Ramazanoglu, Rich, Spelman, Warland, Ware, Christakos, 1991) taking up racism and the construction of whiteness/white supremacy have grappled with. Adrienne Rich writes that "our stake as women in making those connections is not abstract justice; it is integrity and survival" (304). Kaye/Kantrowitz critiques the shortage of this understanding and finds evidence to "suggest...how little the [gender-based feminist] movement has taught [white women] to see struggles against

racism as life-giving, nourishing; as our own" (277). Vron Ware points out that, historically the alliances white gender-based feminists have made with various groups, including Black people, have often "emerged or disappeared depending on whether or not they were very useful to the women making them at the time" (239). This illustrates the need for lasting and ethical grounds on which white feminists attempt to build alliances with peoples of colour. Otherwise, tokenism, exploitation, and expediency can be, and are, practiced by white feminists.

The shortage of gender-based feminist commitment to anti-racism is particularly significant in light of the fact

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that the abolitionist movement of the 1830s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s gave rise to and deeply influenced the first and second wave of the North American women's movement (see Ware 30-35, 239-241, Davis 148). Involvement in these two movements led many white women "from an awareness of injustice against [B]lack people to a sense of their own struggle for equality" (Ware 32). Yet it is clear that making the links in what can be described as the reverse direction, from gender-based feminism to anti-racism (feminism), continues to meet with much resistance from many contemporary white feminists. This can be attributed to the erasure of histories of resistance in North American education and culture, and the extent to which gender-based feminism replicates this; to the basic denial of racism which, "is so central to the way in which modern racism works" (Razack 148); to the way whiteness itself is rendered invisible to white people as a racialized identity; and to the euro-and white-centrism that gender-based feminist discourse has continually reinscribed. There continues to be a need, therefore, for white feminists to produce work that intentionally addresses why and how struggle against racism is indeed life-giving and ours, too.

At the same time, it is crucial for those of us who are white anti-racist feminists to uncover the long tradition of white women challenging racism (see Pratt, Rich), and being, as Adrienne Rich puts it, "disloyal to civilization." Though small in numbers, it is an important source of knowledge and strength for white anti-racist feminists today.

A culture founded on racism means that for white people "a part of ourselves will remain forever unknown to us" (Rich 308). Salish-First Nations writer Lee Maracle asserts that acquiescence to racism "condemns white folks to being half-smart, half human" (172). Racism impacts

white people such that we do not usually feel, identify or desire the missing "half" of our smarts and our humanity. The apparent disconnection from yet dependence on privilege is a major barrier to working towards our own critically conscious wholeness.

While on the one hand, speaking of a need for "wholeness" of white people pales in relation to the ongoing brutality marshaled by racist imperialism against peoples of colour in Canada and everywhere, on the other hand white feminists committed to "biting the hand that feeds" us the bitter pill of supremacy must attend to such fracturing contradictions of privilege. By doing so we can forge and sustain the ethical grounds on which we can and must contribute to revolutionary feminist change.

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<sup>1</sup>To cite some of the writers who have critically informed my thinking since my exposure, then active seeking, began in 1987: Audre Lorde, bell hooks, June Jordan, Patricia Hill Collins, Beth Brant, Lee Maracle, Paula Gunn Allen, Chrystos, Linda Hogan, Linda Carty, Dionne Brand, Himani Bannerji, Nourbese Philip, Chandra Mohanty, Swasti Mitter, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Gloria Anzaldua, Sky Lee, anthologies such as Gloria Anzaldua, ed., *Haciendo Caras: Making Face, Making Soul*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990; Makeda Silvera, ed., *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology*, Toronto, Sister Vision Press, 1991; Shabnam Grewal et al., eds, *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, London, Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988; Beth Brant, ed., *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women*, Toronto: Women's Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>Even though it is a painful irony that most of what I have learned to date about this effect has come from writers of colour.

<sup>3</sup>Both Minnie Bruce Pratt and Adrienne Rich make this point and provide examples.

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MARG YEO

**pour all over you like rain**

when i get my  
 arms about you when i  
 fold you and hold  
 you right up tight and you are kissing my  
 earlobe of the back of my  
 neck in a discrete and  
 neighbourly sort of spirit and my knees  
 buckle a bit and my heart's going  
 whump whump and kicking  
 my breath out

what can i  
 say  
 don't  
 do this to me maybe just for a few  
 minutes while i learn to stop  
 grieving and get back to being in  
 here and alive

what's in  
 me is so much love and no  
 place to put it so much  
 love no one could stand up  
 under if i were handing it  
 out i keep  
 hold of myself

and still our eyes  
 meet over the table and right  
 away my heart's off  
 again with me just rag  
 tagging along after it it's a kind of  
 disco beat a little  
 latin i wish for  
 you i could be twenty  
 one again and relatively  
 harmless but i'm forty  
 five and think when a car backfires in the next  
 street they're killing  
 children my hands are so  
 angry they would talk to you in  
 flames

*Marg Yeo has published six volumes of poetry. Her most recent collection, Getting Wise, was published by gynergy books in 1990.*

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