

Beware the Whine of the Privileged

Jnan A. Blau and John T. Warren

Framing...

At the annual meeting of the National Communication Association in November of 2010, John and I presented a co-authored, performed script as part of a panel entitled “Complicating Performances of Privilege,” sponsored by the Performance Studies Division. We had conceived and proposed the panel ourselves. The panel, in fact, had come into being as a result of a series of conversations the two of us had been having, on and off, for a while, about matters of privilege. In and through our dialoguing, we were seeking to somehow balance the expression of our personal experiences (and frustrations) with the careful self-reflexivity that a commitment to critical theory and praxis calls forth in us as academics.

A lot of our exchanges centered around the fact that we were both parents of young children. As we discussed our lives and shared experiences with each other, we realized that we had complex, mixed emotions about the “privilege” of being parents—a privilege that was cast into further relief given the (f)act of our being in legal(ized) heterosexual marriages. We realized that while we enjoyed undeniable privilege(s)—social, economic, *and* political—given our (apparent) subject positions, our lived-embodied experiences revealed a disjunct between the supposed and the actual, a tension between the presumed and the lived. This tension, this performative gap, seemed important to us, and presented itself as something to explore and unpack.

Thus, the impetus and exigency behind our work. The problem is that this is work that, like a symphony by Schubert, is unfinished. Its promise is yet unmet. Its utopian potential remains undischarged. John’s tragic passing, of course, leaves a wide wake of unfinished business, of open ends. Our conversations about, and work on, matters of privilege occupy but a tiny fraction of that wake—a ripple in the larger trailing wave of John’s life. It is my sense, though, that it would be a bit of a shame for this work to fall into some state of languor in the drawer of unfinished projects.

Jnan A. Blau teaches performance studies and intercultural communication in the Communication Studies Department at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo, CA. He wishes to thank Deanna Fassett and the reviewers of this piece for their support and feedback, as well as his fellow panelists at NCA 2010: Bernadette Calafell, Stacy Holman Jones, Amy Kilgard, Keith Nainby, and the incomparable and still very sorely missed JTW, for their always accomplished, ever inspiring work. Jnan is happy to be reached at jablau@calpoly.edu. **John T. Warren** was Professor in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, until his death in April 2011.

Let me be forthright. I have not done much at all with the work John and I originally did. Quite simply, I have re-worked the script for issues of copy editing, clarity, and (re)formatting for publication. I have mostly, in other words, left our script as it was when John and I last worked on it. I have resisted the temptation (and I'm not at all sure that "temptation" is the right word to use in this case) to add to, delete, and/or change the content in any substantive way. As it turns out, I have come to realize that leaving the content alone serves at least two functions. For one, it preserves the "original" as a sort of tribute to John, as a sacralizing of his memory, in much the same way, I suppose, that the bereaved often leave untouched the room of a loved one taken too early, too quickly. I do not mean to overplay the analogy, but it is nevertheless true that I simply cannot bring myself to change anything in the metaphorical room—the space—of our work. Not now. Not yet. It hurts a bit too much to do so. As of this writing, less than a year from John's death, there's an emotional toll attached to working on our writing that I'm not prepared to pay. I feel compelled, still, to leave things as they were when John was still in this world. Grief and loss, after all, put forth a(n) (ir)rationality all their own. So, while it of course could and would make a lot of sense for me to do more with our work, I will not. Not now.

I have also realized, in re-visiting our work, that I want to resist making any substantive changes to the content because there is, interestingly enough, a measure of privilege entailed. While I know that this thinking may be a bit facile, it is nonetheless true that—at least at a more primal, affective level—I am very much haunted by the fact that I have the privilege of still being alive. John, simply put, cannot do more work on this piece. His voice, his wry input, his savvy eye, and his keen ear—they're missing, glaringly absent. Thus, my not working further with the content—even when doing so might make good sense and even serve as further tribute to John's legacy, contribution, and impact as a scholar—is indeed a refusal. It is a performative marking of an absence that very much troubles me—and (t)his unfinished work. Indeed, whatever holes or absences may be present in the work at an intellectual level exist in relation to the gaping vacuum left by John's not being here with me, with this work, with us. In this sense, then, I understand my refusal and inability (and the distinction between the two becomes quite muddled, really) "as a reflection of guilt over un-lived life but also as a *language* for making sense out of out of one's situation" (Becker 213). My grief and my scholarship, here, are entwined. For me, right now, the experiences of one inform and help define the other, for better *and* for worse.

I did want to share our script, though, and am both delighted and honored to have it included in this special issue of *Liminalities*. Our work has its merits. And it is my sincere hope that the reader will see it this way as well. It is for this reason that I have very willingly, bittersweet though the task has been, undertaken my re-visioning of this script. I share it, then, as a performative exploration of matters of privilege, our voices co-mingling, once more (one last time?!), in and as collaboration.

Again, what the reader is about to encounter is a script that was once performed, by John and me sitting side by side behind a skirted table in some random conference hotel room, at the 2010 NCA Convention in San Francisco, California. It is worth

pausing to explicitly note a few things about the script itself. The script, obviously, is everything after the “...Our Script” heading just below. The section breaks within the script are/were part of the original script, meant to mark shifts or pauses or transitions in the content and its unfolding. Also, I have removed our two character names from the original version. Even as we worked on the script, we were interested in the playful, and we hoped productive, blurring and blending of our voices. Thus, in the script’s preparation and performance, we actually assigned and delivered lines that were not (necessarily) our own (our co-writing took place as a series of back-and-forths over several months, with each of us adding, and responding to, each other’s content). Our two voices are there, evident mainly in the use of italicized and non-italicized font type. The blurring of the voices, of course, is an aesthetic device, designed to highlight the connections not just between the particularities of John’s and my experiences, but also, by also extension, between our experiences and those of others in our in culture(s). This purposive choice, then, is very much in keeping with the aims and practices of performative autoethnography. As Tami Spry notes in her recent *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*, a good portion of the power and exigency of performative autoethnography resides in the “ontological tension between its epistemological potential and its aesthetic imperative” (109).

Perhaps most importantly, it is my hope that, in publishing our script, the work that John and I have done—and the insights and understandings that we have set forth—might spur further work. I do know that it bears acknowledging that the script, even as it raises its points and posits its insights, does at the same time lay bare some unanswered questions, leaves some critical matters more or less underdeveloped. We knew this when we performed the script. And, in fact, we were very much interested in—and oriented toward—our performance as only the start of a needed, ongoing dialogue, as a jumping-off point for more, and more fully nuanced and unpacked, scholarly-theoretical work around matters of privilege. The reader, then, will surely note these holes-as-openings; and may, as well, recognize them as generative opportunities. Again, unfinished business. From my present vantage, these were then, and are here now, the three main, and more or less implicit questions: How and why does an understanding, an accounting, of one’s own privilege always already entail the Other? What really is the “burden” of privilege, and how and why is it relevant in/to a world with far more violent and destructive manifestations of power relations than the ones we cite? How do we reconcile the impulse to call out, to challenge, to resist, to disrupt, to subvert, or even to overthrow power with the inescapable—and crucial—understanding that power is, in the Foucauldian and Certeauian sense, not a top-down, isolatable phenomenon—that power, rather, is shared, is distributive, and is inescapably endemic to the human condition, to everyday life itself?

Matters of privilege are, really, at the heart of human communication. The vicissitudes of the social, cultural, and political contexts within which we live our lives are such that, unfortunately—and inevitably, it seems—the lived experiences of some are better and easier than others.⁷ Our ability to proceed—to be agents of our own lives, to put forth our best version of what it means to live—under equitable and just con-

ditions rises and falls on how we are, always and already, (dis)privileged. It is thus vital that we consider our daily performances, our situated performing-in-relation-to-others, in this light.

John put it quite well, as he so often did, in his own work on whiteness (work which, in addition to being very influential to my own intellectual development, is of course very much aligned with our digging into matters of privilege herein). Paraphrasing a bit, I will thus let him provide what might nicely serve as guiding epigraphs:

[. . .] the central characteristic of [privilege] is to continually surface in ways that elide detection. That is, the everyday manifestation of [privilege] strategically works to erase its own tracks, to be the blank sheet of paper that holds the image, to be that which we fail to notice. In the everyday maintenance of [privilege] as normative, [we, as privileged beings, are] not meant to see. The [seeming] impossibility of making sense of these instances is precisely how [privilege] gains its strength as the dominant cultural ideal. (86)

Indeed:

It [is] the power of performance that allow[s] for the gaps in the machinery to become apparent. And while the heightened nature of performance [can make] the constructedness of cultural privilege more visible, the everyday, routinized actions work to do the opposite. These performances are obscured, hidden, and less apparent [. . .]. (86)

And, lastly:

[. . .] if we can combine the magic of performance with the critical insight gained by this performative way of seeing human action, then we might find hope. (161)

... Our Script

Privilege has attached to it a sense of burden. It has an edge that cuts two ways. For all it confers, privilege can also be experienced in a negative fashion. At the outset, though, we realize that an examination of privilege qua burden can be a tricky proposition. It can be met with a “oh, poor you, how hard it must be to be burdened by your privilege” response...

Our tendency is to name our privileges as some sort of prelude to any auto/critical project. We name our “isms.”

I am acutely aware of the many of the privileges I enjoy: white, tall, heterosexual, highly-educated, upper middle-class, male. I *am* aware of my privilege. And I am aware of the status I have relative to others; others differently positioned by/in our society.

A sure way to protect power is to place it in a binary—that is, to locate it in opposition to something else.

It's a tricky proposition, to complicate privilege. Some of what I think needs to be said runs the risk of coming across as whiny or troublesome—especially to those who may not have some of the privileges that I enjoy; who are not *positioned* by privilege in the ways that I am.

Our tendency is to name our privileges as some sort of prelude to any auto/critical project. We name our “isms,” or we name our characteristics (race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic level...) and assume that such naming does the work of: 1) locating the speaking subject in some sort of meaningful way, and 2) enabling us to then proceed to the point of the work—to what we really want to say. Naming is powerful, but it is not, by itself, sufficient. Nor does it undermine how power actually works. In this way, the naming of privilege as privilege does some labor: “look at me, the privileged soul who is writing this essay, experiencing this moment, engaging in this communicative act.” Yet, the naming is also, as it becomes more and more a trope, a dangerous elision of accountability.

Naming means I can move on? That my work is done? That, even though this zero-sum game is afoot, I can now rest easy, all while claiming that I've actually done something?

Since when did such refusals to engage become critical, scholarly, analytical work? It is a cop out, both academically as well as politically, not to mention morally.



This script is, fundamentally, a work in progress. It is our first attempt to put on paper what has been brewing between us for some time. We have both felt that we would do well, as a discipline, to speak of privilege and power in more complicated terms than we have tended to.

Unfortunately, some of the words we use as critical/cultural performance scholars too often go without comment, without critique or question.

We value “reflexivity” and rarely talk about what that really means or whether we really do it—how we do it, and with what consequence.

We value “democracy” without much talk about its cultural values.

We think “oppression” and “privilege” are bad, and rarely talk much about these terms outside of our work, in order to undermine their influence and help promote “social justice,” another term we rarely explore fully.



The starting point for the two of us comes largely from our roles as fathers.

We are fathers who each take a great deal of time and effort in raising our children. We try very hard to avoid being the kinds of fathers who “help.” We see our role as one that is integral to our kids' lives, and we try very much to avoid the stereo-

type of the father who avoids, or rejects, the hard work of taking care of his children in all the small and big ways that kids do need caring for, tending to.

As fathers—and as partners in committed, monogamous relationships—we refuse to exercise our male privilege. And we believe that home and family and work are not, by nature, gendered spaces and activities.

About a year ago, in sharing our commitment over a bottle of pinot noir, we discussed how we sometimes find that our “progressive” friends, in an effort to mark our privilege—as seemingly straight, as legally married, as tax-deducted and schedule-enabled parents, as privileged people—cut us down in an effort to locate how our roles and identities as parents gives us access to special status. And certainly, in many cases, this is true. We do get access to things that are based solely on our accompanying responsibilities as parents.

We shared stories of occasions where we felt as if our (assumed) privilege was used as a weapon against us.

We agreed that, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, the comments of friends and colleagues can imply guilt, and betray a sort of uncritical resentment.

Or function as an erasure, as a facile and problematic re-balancing of subject positions and (supposed) experiences. Our privilege, in other words, is (un)productively marked and (mis)used in communicative interaction.

For instance, we spoke of an interaction with a colleague wherein a pet was being discussed, with a surgery coming up that was (rightly) worrying to the owner. “My dog is like your son—she is my baby. You must know what I’m talking about.”

Of course, it is certainly understandable that one would be worried and concerned about a beloved pet.

Yet, this is nothing like a child.

Given that one of us has a son who was born five-and-a-half weeks premature—and was in a neonatal intensive care unit for weeks, suffered brain bleeds that left him on a heart monitor and a lifetime of cerebral palsy—

—the comparison was not only ridiculous on its face, but it was also rather insulting and hurtful.

But, in attempting to respond to such an interaction, to this sort of communication choice, one feels somehow held back.

Hampered by our own privilege?

Yes, hampered by my own privilege.

Committed to (our) self-reflexivity...

... and constrained by it.

It is certainly true that in many ways, being a parent has enabled us to learn quite a lot about privilege. We have come to know our own selves in nuanced ways that complicate, everyday, how we see the world and how we are granted special rights that are not afforded to all.

Given our experiences and our self-reflexive insights, we thus strive to be careful, sensitive communicators.

Yet, our roles as parents have also demonstrated to us that one's identity is (probably) not easily sliced into discrete parts. That is, the binary of "oppressed" and "privileged" so easily reduces who we are that we can fail to see how one's privilege is (probably) not a zero-sum matter.

And if our roles as parents suggest this is true, then we begin to wonder about how we might complicate privilege more generally, how we might engage the issue of power in a manner that might acknowledge—in richer, more complex ways—the multiplicity of ways we experience multiple contexts, and are situated in/ by them.

The conversations would most certainly be risky. But necessary, if we really wish to undermine oppressive relations of power.

Here, then, we present an opening gesture, a dialogic and performative approach to the issue of privilege—in both content and in form.

In undertaking this, we have tried to hold in tension the genuine ways we gain and access to power because of who we are:

from the U.S. professor in South America...

...to the bisexual, but straight-appearing, man.

We try here to own our privilege even as we ask questions of it.

We try to ask questions about how we might trouble the simplicity of our conceptions of power vis-à-vis these positionalities. We hope for further dialogue on how we, as a discipline, talk about privilege.



I *am* aware of the privileges I enjoy. While teaching in Peru during the summer of 2010, I became acutely aware of many of the privileges I enjoy. As a heterosexual white male, there as a professor from a U.S. university, it was evident to me that I enjoyed no shortage of power and freedom. The different-yet-related subject positions of mine are cast into sharp relief when moving around in Peru, in that particular cultural-historical context—which is a place/space where issues of race and class and heteronormativity permeate, in a very real way, all aspects of daily life in that society.

I'm aware of the privilege I enjoy when I can claim—easily and as a matter of course—the front seat in every bus ride on our expeditions. My students must heed what pass for my needs, no questions asked, no explanation necessary. I'm aware of the status I'm conferred by being, simply *and* impressively, "el profesor." Whether it's telling the tour guides what my needs are or getting an entire classroom's chairs moved from one room to another for teaching purposes, in Peru even more so than in the U.S., I have the power to ask for things and get them done. And to get them done with a very-real sense of deference and respect. With a status that I don't mind, to be sure; but which also seems strange and foreign to me—amusing and at the same time somehow troubling, unsettling, uncomfortable.

You note being heterosexual. And, I presume, you note this as a self-aware acknowledgment of how, within heteronormativity, you are privileged. My partner, Gina, and I appear on every count to fall within this camp as well.

It is there, the heteronormative privilege.

When we go to the movies, to dinner, and to the store, it is there. Especially when we're with our kids. The assumption is made—and we benefit as a result. We benefit in multiple small and not-so-small ways.

It is there, the heteronormative privilege.

Yet, I don't identify that way.

When in Peru (a place where the socioeconomics are such that privilege and dis-possession mark just about everything), I'm aware of my privilege every time I pass a beggar on the street. This beggar is always non-white, and almost certainly quite undereducated, in many cases illiterate. That person's chances at success, whatever else they may or may not have going on with them, are literally worlds away from being the same as mine. And yet, as much as my heart goes out to each one of these people, I quickly develop the thick skin that all tourists—us/U.S. tourists there as a direct result of socioeconomic privilege—develop when sojourning in developing countries.

So, I learn to manage the interaction.

I learn to manage eye contact.

I learn to manage my thinking. I learn to manage my feelings.

I manage to not give my money—or my time or, most importantly, my energy—every time I come across someone in need. I have the privilege of choosing not to give, and of concocting a rationale for such a decision.

I manage.

But, really, I walk away from each of those encounters feeling a sense of burden. A sense of heaviness and sadness. An awareness of the gaps that can and do separate worlds of experience. A gap that feels so absolutely ineluctable.

Recently, I chose to go out after attending a performance—it was a nice evening and I went back to a good friend's place and had some wine. There I was, my 36-year-old body sitting at my friend's table drinking wine and talking past 1 a.m. It was, in many ways, a sinful stealing of time in a life where I feel very little ability to "be out." That following morning, my alarm went off after only 4 hours of sleep. My 2 a.m. arrival at home and my 6 a.m. alarm served as a painful reminder that while I "can" play, I really "can't" expect to enjoy it—not for very long. The kids had to get breakfast and they had to get to daycare.

There were obligations to attend to.

These are not the same burdens that anyone else at that late night wine and talk party had to face.

Yet I face them.

I face them every time I try to pretend to be young and carefree. I am up at 6 a.m. because my kids are up at 6 a.m. Sure, in some cases Gina might let me sleep in, but in general, this is not an option on a Friday morning when she has to be at work and, quite frankly, it is my job to do mornings.

This is not to discount the ways I am an agent in this scene.

I could have left earlier.

I could have given the beggar a few soles.

This is not to discount the ways I am an agent in this scene.

There were obligations to attend to.

This is not to discount the many privileges I receive, daily, based on my having kids: tax breaks, potential special consideration for course schedules, a society where raising children is held up as a hetero ideal, etcetera...

And this is not to discount the specifics of my life that make this such a bourgeois tragedy: see the university professor complain about his troubled, tricky existence,

his hard schedule,

his self-reflexively derived guilt.

It is to say, though, that these moments are occasions where such privileges are not experienced as such. Indeed, if we are to understand privilege, we would do well to pay closer attention to how the body feels and actually experiences power.

These do not feel like zero-sum power differentials to me.

Privilege, it seems, becomes burdensome in direct proportion to our becoming aware of it.

It's the performative double-edge of a process of coming to consciousness.

Of self-implicature.

Of living the critical life.

Of recognizing that the desperate need for social justice in the world—

—and a commitment to work toward that goal—

inevitably has to implicate and/or involve my being-in-the-world.

Part of the problem with how we treat privilege—as a binary that is often un-commented upon...

...and, if it is, with risks of being rebuked for whining—

—is that it necessarily simplifies complexity in favor of easy, too-easy, distinctions.

There is something to that “ignorance is bliss” statement, odious as it is.

Uncritical—i.e., unaware—tourists just don't experience their privilege as a burden.

They—they just enjoy it.

And, I have to confess: my psychoaffective body wants to have that experience. I feel wary and worn down—undeniably, often.

I want (dare I say it?) I want my privilege without the self-reflexive existential crisis!

But is that really what I mean to say here? I'm not sure...

A confession of my own... As a self-identified bisexual, I desire what I cannot have. This is not the same, I would argue, as the heterosexual who eyes other women in a smoky bar (not that anyone can smoke in bars anymore). It is not the same as the heterosexual man who flirts with his secretary or who desires to fuck his T.A.

This is a very different kind of desire that, because I have chosen a partner and we have chosen monogamy (note my own acknowledgement of choice and agency in this), I have effectively said that men are off the table. This means that not only will I not touch the flesh, with desire, of some other

body, but also that it is effectively impossible for me to fulfill my desire with my partner. It does not mean I do not love her, that I do not desire her. It is to say that she will never be, by definition, a he.

I sometimes think about this as I see two men together and envy—setting aside the risks they live under in this violent and fucked up world—their ability to touch, to desire freely. I think about this when I am called out for being straight; which I mostly take without a fight since I have the privilege of appearances.¹

I think about this when I walk into a restaurant for dinner and know that folks see me, Gina, and the boys as the idealized heterosexual family.

I think about how privilege needs some unpacking in a world where binaries chafe those within and outside of the dualistic structures that so bind us.

We even have a small, but present, white picket fence!

So, it seems we're bumping up against desire and its (in)ability to play itself out in a world that is defined and demarcated not just by others but also by our own choices. And that those choices, though instances—instantiations?—of agency and privilege, also situate us in complicated ways.

Our choices em-body us in ways that, once the choice is made, we may not like.

Because we live in a world where institutions and structures (over)determine what those choices are going to mean, how they're going to be experienced, lived out.

So, when I say I want my privilege without the self-reflexive existential crisis, maybe it's not about what I want for myself but, really, about what I want for others.

My experience of privilege as burden is not about me. Not really.

It's about the Other.

It's about the countless hailings and failings of life in an incredibly complex—
—*and fucked-up*—
sociocultural and political system.

Privilege-versus-oppression simply protects and orders power.

And the refusal to engage such binaries because we fear being “whiny” is—
—*as we have noted in our dialogue(s)*—

—to protect those binaries and, in fact, to protect our own privilege.

Privilege is not a zero-sum game, and we'd do well to make greater efforts to complicate it.

Otherwise, we just end up poorer for it; and, most significantly, power remains as stable and secure as ever.



Our tendency is to name our privileges as some sort of prelude to any auto/critical project.

¹ I am thankful to one of the reviewers of this piece, who rightly noted that queer theory and/or literature might speak to, and even complicate, John's framing of bisexuality and sexual desire. Because John cannot answer these questions directly, this concern, alas, remains unaddressed (which is not to say that it cannot, or should not, be addressed elsewhere).

We name our “isms.”
Is that what we’ve done, then? Named our “isms”?
What have we satisfied in doing so? Who have we satisfied?
Beware the whine of the privileged...
Beware.
Be aware?
Be aware...

Works Cited

- Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press, 1973. Print.
- Spry, Tami. *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast, 2011. Print.
- Warren, John T. *Performing Purity: Whiteness, Pedagogy, and the Reconstitution of Power*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003. Print.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, U.S.A.