**The “Burden” of Whiteness with Peggy McIntosh and Alison Bailey**

**Sandra Bertin (producer):** Examining Ethics with Andy Cullison is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics

[begin music]

**Andy Cullison (host):** I’m Andy Cullison. Welcome to Season Two of Examining Ethics. Our first guest for our second season is the esteemed scholar of race and gender, Peggy McIntosh. Her groundbreaking essays on whiteness and white privilege published in the 1980s and 90s are still helping to frame discussions about race today.

**Peggy McIntosh (guest):** [pull quote] Whites want to feel good about ourselves. We were taught to feel good about ourselves. The corollary is we were taught to make others feel bad about themselves. We were taught to have great faith in our ability and our basic goodness.

**Andy:** Stayed tuned for more from Peggy McIntosh. We’ll also hear from the philosopher Alison Bailey. Thanks for joining us.

[end music]

**Andy:** The producers of the show, Christiane Wisehart and Sandra Bertin, are here with me to set the stage for today’s discussion.

**Christiane Wisehart (producer):** I’m Christiane.

**Sandra:** And I’m Sandra.

**Christiane:** So the title of today’s show is the “Burden of Whiteness.” Sandra, when you first mentioned that as a possibility as a title, it immediately raised a bunch of alarm bells, because I’m afraid people will take it like, “oh it’s so hard to be white. What a problem it is to be white in America.” But, I’m wrong, right? That’s not why you suggested that as the title. That’s not what we mean here, right?

**Sandra:** No, it is definitely not what we mean. So, the reference is actually to the poem “The White Man’s Burden,” written in 1899 by Rudyard Kipling, which he used to encourage the US to colonize the Philippines. The poem basically argues that it's the moral responsibility of the white man to civilize the third world. And, I see this episode and this topic as as sort of a rejection of that poem, especially the way it uses the term burden and its racist implications. But, we are also playing with idea of the burden on the show, we’re trying to explore... what is the true burden of white people, as in, what should white people be working towards? What is the moral responsibility here?

**Christiane:** And I think a good place to start and I think where we’re starting today is just to talk about some facets of whiteness in general, specifically what it means to be white in America. And, we’re talking about two parts of whiteness: the privileges that come with being white, and some problematic behaviors whites engage in when they talk about race. And so we’re kind of playing with a second meaning to the word “burden” in our title today.

**Sandra:** These problematic behaviors often place an extra burden on people of color, *on top* of the necessity of navigating a racist system every day. So I’m suggesting that there is a real burden on white people to change individual behavior as well as the larger systems that privilege them, but I also want to call attention to the fact that these behaviors and systems place a burden on people of color in this country.

**Andy:** So, there are some reasons to think that we have a system that unfairly favors the interests of white people. Given that, doesn’t it seem worth thinking about whether that imposes a burden on white people to take responsibility for that and do something about it.

**Sandra:** Yeah, something that’s happening a lot is that well meaning white people are asking people of color what whites can do about racism. And by doing this, white people are unintentionally placing that additional burden on people of color. And in response, people of color have been calling for more white people to take responsibility for racist structures... and to figure out that answer themselves... So, this episode is an attempt to join in a conversation that is already happening to figure out what the heck white people can do...but not under the assumption that we are going to fix a racist system by February 3.

**Christiane:** I need to edit my to-do list then...you know, make a meal plan, figure out new childcare, fix racism.

**Andy:** Yeah, crossing that off.

[music]

**Andy:** Today on the show, renowned scholar Peggy McIntosh will be joining us to talk about white privilege. Then, we’ll discuss one of those problematic behaviors Sandra and Christiane were talking about, “white talk” with the philosopher Alison Bailey. In both of these conversations, we will be joined by the director of DePauw’s Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies--Tamara Beauboeuf.

Professor Beauboeuf created a lecture series on DePauw University’s campus called American Whiteness, which brought both McIntosh and Bailey to campus to explore the idea of whiteness in America. (And just for listeners who may not have made this connection, Examining Ethics is hosted by the Prindle Institute, which is a part of DePauw University.)

**Christiane:** Professor Beaubouef’s series has been mind-blowing for me. Before this lecture series, I never would have thought to focus specifically on “whiteness” in a discussion on race.

**Andy:** Yeah, I think our listeners would be curious to know why she focused on whiteness. Here she is explaining the lecture series:

**Tamara Beauboeuf (guest):** I created it in a specific context, I think it’s not a unique conversation, but it is trying to shift the way we think about our racial tensions. Instead of looking outward, and “what do they want, what’s happening to them.” But to recognize that there’s a center that keeps creating this violence and harm. And trying to name, to see the center. And often we don’t see things that we haven’t named.

It just struck me that as a person of color, maybe I’m more sensitized to this than other people might be. That when we talk about race, we put a lot of burden on the people who are affected by racism. And it’s not that their experiences are not important. But the problem is not their experience, the problem is the thing that creates their experience.   
And I felt that there was a huge unexamined center that in the scholarship is called “whiteness.” And whiteness is something that is a form of dominance. It’s the center that creates the margins, it’s the center that creates the harm, it’s the center that covers its tracks, it’s business as usual. And so whiteness is a term for naming a series of assumptions about the world and refusals to change it.

[music continues]

**Sandra:** Before we go any further, I wanted to tell a story. Whenever we post an article about race on our online magazine, the Prindle Post, we always get the same comments. “Stop trying to start a race war” or “this is reverse racism...” and since Andy is a philosopher and loves to debate, he wanted to present his defense of acknowledging the issue of whiteness.

**Andy:** So, I thought it would be important to say something about the term “whiteness.” It’s not racist to note that things go differently in society for you based on the color of your skin. There’s nothing racist about saying that you’re more to have an easier time getting a job or you’re going to have an easier time not getting arrested, and so on if you’re white. So, if it turns out that there is in fact a system in place that strongly favors the interests of white people, there’s nothing racist about acknowledging that such a system exists, and we need a name for it. Well, what should we call a system like that? Well, “whiteness” seems to be a good label. So, I don’t think there’s anything racist about acknowledging that such a system exists. And, if there is such a system, we need a label for it. Why not pick a label that descriptively tells us what that system is?

**Sandra:** A major component of whiteness is the privilege that comes from having white skin in the US. Whiteness, and specifically white privilege, were for a long time virtually invisible - at least to white people. In 1988, our guest Peggy McIntosh wrote the ground-breaking essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.” She also wrote the now-famous essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” These two pieces lay the groundwork for our current understanding of white privilege. It’s rare for white people to consider racism their problem. There is usually the feeling that white people don’t belong in discussions of race, or it’s not about them. But as Peggy shows us, white people do need to do their own work to deconstruct their privilege, or their knapsack as she calls it.

**Andy:** Let’s jump in. Here’s Christiane talking to Peggy McIntosh and Tamara Beauboeuf. Sandra will shepherd us through the interview today.

**Christiane:** Peggy McIntosh, welcome to Examining Ethics. Thank you for being here!

**Peggy:** Thank you, I'm glad to be here.

**Christiane:** So, your work centers on, or often centers on, this idea of white privilege. For listeners who may not be familiar with that concept, could you kind of briefly explain what white privilege is?

**Peggy:** White privilege is one of many forms of privilege.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** Anytime you're born with some aspect of your life that pushes you ahead in an unfair way within a culture that favors that aspect of your personality, then you're experiencing privilege. It can be having to do with body type, or your parents relation to money, or your region of the world, or the religion you were born to, and so on and so forth. There are many forms of unearned advantage but white privilege is unearned advantage that advances you because you were white in a society that favors whites.

**Christiane:** In your writing you use the metaphor of an invisible knapsack of privileges, which I think is an incredibly apt metaphor, because it describes privilege perfectly, right? It's something that we don't ever really notice unless we're kind of tuned into it. When did you first notice your own knapsack of privilege?

**Peggy:** Well, it was a parallel move, a lateral move from noticing that men had a knapsack of privilege that they didn't notice. It was in the context of seminars I was teaching, at the Wellesley College Club in the college where I work in Massachusetts. It happened several years in a row, that the men who had occupied all the spots in the curriculum didn't see how they could get women into the curriculum even though they agreed that we're half the world’s population, and some of them even agreed with me that we've had half the worlds lived experience. The men, to a person, said, "We're sorry. We love this seminar, we love studying this new research on women, but you can't put the results of this research into the first year courses that students take." They didn't realize it that they were insulting as they answered the question.

One of them said, "When you're laying the foundation blocks for knowledge in those introductory courses, you can't put in soft stuff." That meant that all he had been reading by and about women in the history of the world and in all the disciplines, was still to him, soft. Now, actually we were blessed by his candor. Then we knew where we stood.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** But it was insulting to be told that all of the scholarship on your sex, female, was soft. And, another year, also a very nice man and we value his candor, he said, "You can't put in women early. He said that when the students are in their first year they're trying to choose their discipline, that's their major. If you want to teach them to think in the disciplined way, you can't put in extras." All these guys are born of a women but none of the men disagreed with him that women are extra. Of course, we're all born of women too.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** I was asking myself, "What is happened to these men's minds to make them feel that our half of the population is soft. And, I finally figured out, once I got past the idea that, "Well, they're so nice. How could these comments be so oppressive? Because if you're nice, you're not oppressive. Are they nice, or are they oppressive?" Then I got over the idea that you had to choose that a person is either nice or oppressive. I decided that actually niceness has nothing to do with it. These are very nice men, but that they had been taught a kind of litany of truth which they had drunk in, and I had too going to college, that men have knowledge.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** Men make more knowledge, men publish and profess knowledge as professors, men run the big university presses, and they run the big research universities. They have taken in the idea that knowledge itself is male, and men are knowers. That explained a lot to me. It isn't that they're not nice men, it's that they're still the main picture, they're the main course on the entrée. They are the real thing and we are soft or we are extra.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** But, because I had read black women's essays that said almost in so many words, certainly strongly implied, "White women are oppressive to work with."

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** I had been struggling with this thought, "How can they think we are oppressive to work with? We're nice." I also had this oppressive idea, very racist idea, but this was myself in 1980, "I especially think we're nice if we work with them!" You can hear the racial condescension, superiority in that.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** I thought, "Oh, dear!" Now, for a couple of years I hoped that I had been so nice that they hadn't noticed my patronizing racial attitudes, but I got over that. I decided, "Yes, they did notice." They were working with me because they thought, "Well, here's a white woman who's at least trying, but she doesn't get it." In any case, they knew that niceness has nothing to do with. That white women, period, were oppressive to work with.

Noticing that the men were oppressive, and unconsciously so, I had to shift over laterally too. Yes, I was oppressive and unconsciously so. It isn't that I was putting other people down so much as I was neglecting my own experience of being exempt from all the oppression's that they experienced.

And, I said, "How can I describe this because I've never seen it before? How can I describe it?" Our family was always interested in camping, and I thought, "Well, it's as though I was born with a knapsack full of assets that was put on my back at birth. I didn't ask for it and I can't be blamed for it, but I can count on reaching back and unzipping those pockets and cashing in on the things in the knapsack. It struck at the beginning they were like freeze dried food, emergency blanket, maps, guide books, code books, letters of introduction. In fact, blank checks.

Those who weren't given such a knapsack can see it on my back, can see that I can cash in on those things. They can also see, I don't know I'm carrying it. It's an invisible, weightless knapsack of unearned advantages that help me get ahead and survive.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative) ... This invincible knapsack is something that you say is given to people at birth, right?

**Peggy:** Yes.

**Christiane:** We receive it at birth whether we want it or not. If I can be permitted to extend the metaphor a little bit, in some ways it's an heirloom that's passed down. I'm the mother of two little white boys and the heirloom is not precious to me, but it's there. I have no choice but to confront it, so how can I help my two little boys, and more generally, how can we help young children see their knapsack from a very young age? How can we begin to try to make it more visible, make it a little heavier?

**Peggy:** As I think back on my own parents I realize they did say to me things like, "Always remember you're privileged." What they meant by it is, always remember you're lucky to have ten fingers and ten toes. Now, they didn't add whiteness because it hadn't yet occurred to them, but it was seen as good luck to have had amassed so much. It didn't yet have to do with an over advantage that corresponded to some peoples disadvantage.

**Tamara:** I like the extension when you said, "These are heirlooms."

**Sandra:** That’s Tamara Beauboeuf, who joined Peggy and Christiane during the interview. She’s off-mic, so the sound quality is a little rough here**.**

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Tamara:** I mean, it makes it clearer to me why seeing and taking off the backpack would be seen as an act of betrayal, or disloyalty, or something that was just a very cruel and heartless thing to do towards people who just love you and want the best for you. Do you know what I mean?

**Christiane:** That's so interesting. Yeah, because you know we're talking about future generations, right? How to teach them, but if I try to think about how to challenge the racism of my parents or my grandparents, that's harder for me to think about, right? Challenging that, than it is to think about passing a legacy on.

**Tamara:** Yeah, but the legacy I think is not so much the racism but the benefits.

**Sandra:** It’s interesting that the benefits that white people gain from racist structures are often unrecognizable to the white person who reaps those same benefits. It’s strange to think that entire generations of white people might have lived without the knowledge that they have received any benefit at all. And even if white people *are* forced to acknowledge that they are better off, you usually hear protests of, “well, my parents pulled themselves up by their bootstraps” or they worked hard for where they are today...as if all privileges are born out of this hard work. Christiane asked Peggy what she thought of the idea of an American meritocracy.

**Christiane:** Americans especially are raised to believe in this myth of meritocracy. In Ta-Nehisi Coates recent book, "Between The World And Me," he calls it, "Dream land." He calls people who believe themselves to be white, "The dreamers," and part of the dream is that everything we have we've earned, and we did it by ourselves through individual bootstrapping effort. A lot of white Americans want to believe that racism is as you say, "Kind of an individual act of meanness that you can control."

**Peggy:** Yes.

**Christiane:** That individual acts then can stop or control. Is there a way to begin to help students or young people see the world in a more systemic way, or in a way that kind of begins to try to shed that myth of the individual that we love so much in America?

**Peggy:** Mm-hmm (affirmative), I think teachers do need to work against five common myths, and to say right up front, "These are all myths and they help to keep racism in place."

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** "Each one has some degree of truth in it, but only a little degree of truth in it." Then I think teachers need to tell the students, "In the myth of meritocracy two assumptions are made and I don't want you to make these assumptions. One is that the unit of society is the individual. That's not true, you were born into relation with other human beings. The second part of the myth is that whatever you end up with when you die must be what you individually, as an individual, wanted, worked for, earned, and deserved. That is the myth of meritocracy and it is untrue. It keeps power in the hands of those who already have the most power, so you need to unlearn it."

There are four more major myths that teachers even in elementary grades should be taking on. One is the myth of white racelessness, that whites don't have race. Others have race and whites are just normal. They need to tell the children, "You all have ethnic backgrounds, and skin color, and heritage that comes from different parts of the world." You need to make maps show where the heritage is for all the children in the course. Lots will come from Europe, of course, but then not all do.

Another myth they should really take on even in elementary school is the myth of monoculture, which is the idea that there's just one big world here in America and we're all experiencing that world in pretty much the same way. It's a myth.

The next myth teachers should take on and have the bravery to stand up to is the myth of manifest destiny. Manifest destiny is the theory they had that God intended Europeans to expand, first by taking all of Indian land, and second by taking the Philippines, and that God was on the side of those who did that. "Manifest," means shown, clear, demonstrated, that's manifest. "Destiny," means fate. It was, "Clearly, shown fate," that we should take over the Philippines, and we should also take over all Indian land.

The final myth is the myth of white managerial and moral superiority. It's very hard to get the kids, including me in sixth grade, to believe anything else. It's that those who are in charge are really the best. Whites are in charge of everything because we do it the best. It's a very deeply held white belief that those who are up top, are up top because they're the best. Anything that jostles that sense that we deserve to be in charge, and that we do it well, creates a terrible reaction in the psyches of whites. Very, very upset and they use various defensive maneuvers to get back into the position of feeling good about ourselves. Whites want to feel good about ourselves. We were taught to feel good about ourselves. The corollary is we were taught to make others feel bad about themselves.

We were taught to have great faith in our ability and our basic goodness. If you start to talk about racism you'll find even whites who say, "I'm color blind. I don't see race." They have a kind of interior panic

[music]

**Christiane:** You write that, "Oppression often takes two forms." There's an active, obvious forms of oppression, and then there are forms of oppression that are embedded and not so obvious, at least to the oppressor, him or herself. It's fairly easy for me to avoid putting on a white robe and placing a flaming cross in somebodies yard. I can avoid that, I don't want to do that, right? But challenging for avoiding that second embedded form of oppression is not something that an individual can tackle on their own. In what ways can individuals even begin to address systemic, embedded, institutional forms of racism?

**Peggy:** Well, in one of my papers called, "White Privilege: An Account to Spend," I compared white privilege. In it, I wouldn't jettison the knapsack image but I added another image for people who wanted a more positive image. I said, "White privilege is like a bank account I was given at birth. I can't be ashamed about it, I didn't ask for it, but the bank account has allowed me to purchase a good life. Now I have the choice, do I want to spend down some of that unearned bank account money in the service of weakening the system that gave it to me. I can make that choice to spend it down, and because the bank account is made of unearned white privilege, it will continue to refill no matter how I spend it down. I will continue to be given the benefit of the doubt that fills it up."

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** In that paper I wrote a list of sixteen ways of which I use my white skin privilege to work against the more embedded forms. For example, when I lived in Bethesda, Maryland our street was all white. So, a group of us went door to door to ask families, "Would you agree not to move out, not to sell your property if a family of color move in?"

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** Over two years we got every single family on the street to agree that they wouldn't sell. Then we had realtors who weren't showing anything in my part of Bethesda to African American families, even if they were in the State Department, we got the realtors agree to sell to a person of color who asks. Nobody moved out. The family that moved in is still there.

Then another form the activism took is that the accountant in our building had a tenth grade son. He was stopped by the Newton police when he was coming home one night driving his car. The police stopped him quite near his own home, asked to see his ID and they decided he must of stolen it. They made him go home and wake up his parents to prove that he belonged in the neighborhood. It was a black family. Here they are standing at the top of the stairs, top of the banister in their nightclothes having to look down on two officers who have taken in their son because they think he's forged his credentials. The woman this happened to, said to me, "You know, we'll never forget it." To them it was just an incident, "Oh, sorry we were wrong," but to them, her and her husband, they'll never forget it.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** They already knew, in a way, they had no recourse to the police in Newton Mass, but now they have reason to mistrust the police even more actively. That they would do that to their son and to them, the insult of it, the ignorance of the whites not knowing that black families were living in that part of Newton. I went to the police over that and then it was on the police blotters. Thank goodness in Newton, Mass the police have to report what they've done each week.

There was another incident in which a young black man was pulled over and was thought to have forged credentials, and it turned out and was exonerated. I went to two different police departments over that. Now, in the first one I didn't know what to say when the presiding officer said to me, "We're just trying to protect you ma'am."

**Christiane:** From what?

**Peggy:** Well, yeah. I thought that over from what, and then by the time the second Police Captain told me that I had an answer. He said, "We're just trying to protect you ma'am," I said, "Oh no you're not! This is a protection racket. You have caused the danger that you're claiming you rescue me from. The danger is bad race relations and you are causing them!" They were not expecting this little professor to chew them out like that. I didn't get any satisfaction at the time from it because I was afraid of the police now, and also I wasn't in the habit of calling people crooks, and I was calling them crooks.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** It wasn't a pleasure then but it is a pleasure to me now to remember that I had the courage to call them and use mob language to do it!

**Christiane:** That brings up an interesting point because that's a perfect example of how we white people can spend, and I think we white women, right? We sweet, nice, little white women can spend down our bank account of privilege, because nobody expects it from us. They weren't going to handcuff you and throw you in a jail cell for saying what you did, right?

**Peggy:** No, yes.

**Christiane:** That's one way in which we can spend down that account.

**Peggy:** Yes, and it will refill in the sense that those same cops won't arrest me the next day for speeding even if they should, because I've just gone into the great white mass of people they do protect.

**Sandra:** Peggy made it clear that it’s not just huge issues like racial profiling or housing discrimination that we need to pay attention to. She also explains that we need to tackle racism in things like, like bandaid color options and crayon color options…

**Peggy:** My sister and I worked on Crayola to change the flesh tone crayons. Now, some people say, "Why would that matter?" Well, to small children in kindergarten, first grade who can't find a crayon that matches their skin, it matters a whole lot.

**Christiane:** Mm-hmm (affirmative).

**Peggy:** We persuaded the company to vary the available skin tones. They did a cynical thing, which we then had to critic in turn. They put out a little box called, "The multicultural skin tone box," okay? It had in it just four of the browns that are in the collection of the hundred and twenty-four. Oh sorry, six. They pulled out six and then they added black and white.

When we said, "What is the black and white for?" They said, "Well, that's for blending," but if you remember crayons, they don't blend. It's not like pastels. We said, "This is a cynical thing. Do you research," so my sister and I said, "Go to the cosmetic counters of Chicago, Boston, Seattle, LA, and buy the actual foundation tones that women of color purchase for themselves, and make an honest multicultural skin tone box." That time they changed, they made a skin tone box of sixteen colors. We said, "Good for you," but was that a merely cosmetic thing to do? No, that was racial activism we were doing.

**Christiane:** Race sort permeates not just the big cosmic stuff, right?

**Peggy:** Yes.

**Christiane:** It permeates little tiny things that you buy at a drug store, right?

**Peggy:** Yes.

**Christiane:** It permeates everything, every aspect of culture.

**Christiane:** Peggy McIntosh, thank you so much for joining us. This was great!

**Peggy:** You're very welcome! I like your questions.

**Sandra:** Wow. that interview was great. She has that way of explaining things to like shes giving words to feelings you have had all along. I worry though that there are still people out there thinking, OK so I have privilege but it’s not my fault so why should I care?

**Andy:** Yeah, this is an interesting question. The challenge is why should I be held responsible for the actions of other white people. The short answer is that no one is holding your responsible in the sense that they think you’re guilty or that you’re blame worthy in some why. They’re just asking you to acknowledge this and maybe do something about it to try and correct some of this injustice. Now, the reply might be “but that’s the thing I object to. You expect me to do certain things. You expect me to behave in a certain way. You expect me to change the way I want to live to correct for the injustice caused by other people. Why should I be expected to do that?”

Now the first answer’s short and simple. Correcting for injustice almost always falls on people who are not the causes of the injustice. So, it’s not surprising.

**Sandra:** That’s so true. The people you see working towards poverty, like nuns… Nuns didn’t cause poverty.

**Andy:** And so, it’s not weird to think that we’re called to correct for injustices that we didn’t cause, but a more precise answer that speaks directly to the question. If going about living your life the way you want to means continuing to have your life go well because resources that were unfairly distributed to you, then it’s not unreasonable to ask you to think carefully about how you use those goods and whether you should use them at all.

So, here’s an analogy. Suppose someone stole a million dollars and left it to you, you don’t get to just spend that money. We think you have to give it back. You didn’t earn it, and furthermore, it was taken from someone else. Suppose that money was taken and for whatever reason, you’re now the only person who can spend it. You can’t give it back. If it’s going to be spent, you have to be the spender, we’d still expect you to think about how you’d spend it. We’d say either don’t spend it at all or spend it in a more selfless way. Note in these examples, you yourself haven’t done anything wrong. No one’s blaming you for this good fortune that you have, but it seems fair to expect that you behave in certain ways moving forward.

[begin music]

**Andy:** Stay tuned after a short break for our discussion of white talk with philosopher Alison Bailey.

[end music]

**Andy:** Welcome back to the show. I’m your host Andy Cullison. With me again are producers Sandra Bertin and Christiane Wisehart.

**Sandra:** We’ve just heard from Peggy McIntosh about white privilege: what it is, how it’s passed from one generation down to the next and what white people can do to begin to dismantle it.

**Christiane:** So white privilege is one facet of whiteness in America. This privilege is often invisible to white people. And in fact, you could argue that whites are *taught* to ignore or dismiss their own privilege. This leads us to another facet of whiteness, a phenomenon known as “white talk.” So if white privilege is a like an invisible knapsack, white talk is a way of ensuring that the knapsack is kept invisible, that it is kept unseen.

**Sandra:** We should explain to our listeners what white talk is.

**Christiane:** So white talk is something that white people often do in conversations about race. There’s this cluster of similar speech patterns performed by white people that get repeated over and over in conversations about race, and it’s known in academia as white talk. These speech patterns effectively shut down conversations about race.

Andy sat down with philosopher Alison Bailey, who writes about these speech patterns. We asked her to give us some examples of white talk.

**Alison Bailey (guest):** So, it sounds like this: You can’t prove that Eric Garner was beaten because he was a black man. White people get harassed by cops all the time. You just don’t hear about it because we don’t complain. And yeah, I’ve heard that Black Lives Matter, but really, you know, All Lives Matter, including cops’ lives. Are you sure the reason campus police stopped you and asked if you were a student was because of your race? Could it be that they just didn’t recognize you, or that they made a mistake and thought you were someone else? I’m from a poor white family. We suffered, too and you don’t hear us complaining. If you stick to your dreams and work hard then anyone can make it. The problem is, that people of color make everything about race--it’s an excuse for everything. Oh right, right, I understand the problem. I’ve read James Baldwin and bell hooks. I’m queer so I know what it feels like to be oppressed. I don’t think of myself as white, I’m Irish, Dutch and German. Look, I’m a good person. I’m not prejudiced. My ancestors never owned slaves. Anyway, that was a really long time ago and I’m not responsible for the Indian Removal Act, Japanese internment and Jim Crow laws. I wasn’t even born yet. Yeah, I know that America has a history of racism and genocide, but you really can’t dwell on the tragedies of the past. Things are so much better now. We have a black president. And anyway, I’m not the problem, it’s only bad whites, those racists are the problem. I’m not like my bigoted father. The problem is, that some people don’t treat others equally, and just to be clear, I have friends that are Asian. My church does work in the Chicago barrios. It’s not like I’m a member of the Arizona militia or something. Trust me, my heart’s in the right place. I’m a good white person, there’s no problem here.

**Sandra:** It was depressingly easy to find examples *just like* the ones Alison gives in the real world.

[media clip compilation available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGlyymFQs-U>]

**Sandra:** You know, no white person is immune from saying stuff like this.

**Christiane:** I’m guilty! But, skeptics might say that academics like Alison Bailey have identified a group of speech patterns, so what? Are these speech patterns a good thing? Are they a bad thing? Why are we talking about this?

**Andy:** Well, whether or not we think it’s a good thing or a bad thing, at the very least, it’s unproductive. And furthermore, it looks like a suspiciously easy way for us a white people to avoid having difficult conversations about race. If it even seems like there’s a phenomenon that makes conversations about race difficult, then that phenomenon is worthy of examination. When I spoke with Alison and Tamara, we got to talking about how white people use white talk to avoid certain kinds of conversations. Here’s Alison explaining:

**Alison:** So they find ways of detouring and distracting the question about, deep questions about racial privilege in the United States and turning them into exercises in goodness or exercises in meritocracy. “Oh, everybody’s discriminated against. “Oh all lives matter, not just black lives.” So those moves are harmful, right? They erase the testimony of people of color. And they’re difficult to hear in classroom settings. They can change the caliber of the conversation. I like to focus on not just what white people lose, but who’s doing the emotional labor. And also, just how deep our resistance is to this. I’m trying to figure out how to say this so it’s not like, “oh gosh, we’re losing out on knowledge, boy that’s bad. We need people of color to educate us.” That’s not what I’m saying. But the fact that you shut down about something that someone is saying to you. “This is important to me, this is important about my world and I want you to hear it.” And white people say, “Oh I never owned slaves, my parents were Irish immigrants.” THAT’S harmful! That’s terrible, right?

**Christiane:** So white talk shuts down conversations about race. White talk is a way of resisting a certain kind of knowledge.

**Sandra:** Couldn’t we just say, well, okay, a lot of white people are doing this bad thing, this shutting down. Why can’t people of color just continue the conversation *without* white people? Then it’s just the white peoples’ loss if they don’t participate.

**Andy:** I had a similar kind of thought. But Alison set me straight on this. It’s a problem when white people refuse to talk about race.

**Alison:** Epistemically-speaking, we’re members of communities, so we create knowledge together.

**Sandra:** Wait, what does “epistemic” mean?

**Andy:** Epistemic just means related to knowledge or justification of a reasonable belief.

**Sandra:** Got it.

**Alison:** Epistemically-speaking, we’re members of communities, so we create knowledge together. So imagine white folks doing white talk, shutting down, as part of that epistemic community. What does that do to that community? If we don’t hear testimonies of people of color about everyday microagressions. Or if we dismiss them as, “Well, you made the decision to do this.” Or, “That’s because you don’t work hard enough.”

**Sandra:** So, because people learn together in communities, when white people perform white talk and shut down conversations about race, she’s saying that it actually prevents knowledge about other races from entering into the white community bubble.

**Andy:** And, while Alison doesn’t explicitly say this, I suspect she’d agree that part of the problem here is by removing themselves from these conversations, people engaging in white talk prevent certain things from becoming part of our shared knowledge base. Epistemic communities create a set of shared beliefs, what we would all agree it’s safe to assume everybody else knows. If enough white people stay out of these conversations on race, they can basically prevent certain facts about racial injustice from ever being part of our shared knowledge base.

**Christiane:** So, then isn’t the answer just to, if you’re a white person, be more aware of white talk and stop doing it?

**Andy:** That was sort of my first thought, but according to Alison, the short answer here is no. Here she is to explain:

**Alison:** Cleaning up our discursive practices is not going to eliminate 500 years of deep structural racism. I don’t want to silence white talk in the same way I’d want to cure a symptom. Because I think it’s a point of entry thing again. Because it’s, “What’s this thing doing?” And white folks will, if you say, “Don’t say that, that’s bad.” White folks will go, “Okay, I’m bad. It’s too much work.” You don’t want white folks to shut down. You want to say, “You went there. Why did you go there?” And not to, “Huh, there’s something deep and structural and power-oriented that I need to think about.” You went to, “I have black friends.” Or something like that. So it’s like, “Wow, that’s not the question I asked. But you answered it in this way that’s pulled the conversation into epistemic home turf where, it’s your home turf. And you get to play the game you want on that turf.

**Andy:** So you can’t just take out white talk and everything will be okay, according to Alison, because white talk is sort of like a fever; it’s a symptom. Just getting rid of the symptom isn’t enough. So, if you notice this bad thing, like a fever and you go “How do we get rid of the fever?” You’re not zeroing in on the most important issue.

**Sandra:** Okay, so if white talk is just a symptom, what’s the disease?

**Andy:** Tamara Beauboeuf joined us in this conversation as well. Here, she explains the disease, according to her, that is creating symptoms like white talk:

**Tamara:** I think it’s more than talk and I think we can’t lose sight that this is about power over people, and unequally positioned groups, and who gets to say, “It’s getting too hot.” And who gets to determine what’s a valuable conversation and who gets to determine, “It’s now, and not later.” And so to me, this is always about power. We have people who exert extraordinary control over the lives and the livelihoods of other people. And so we have to examine their investment, or they have to examine their investment, in something that is not democratic. That wants to maintain its authority over other people, to tell them what reality is.

**Christiane:** Okay, so we could say that the disease that creates white talk is something like structural racism or structural systems of domination that leave some people in control over others.

**Andy:** And, I’d like to add that I don’t think it’s merely the existence of these structures. I think it’s partially the discomfort that comes with recognizing that you’re part of a system. You may be part of a system that harms other people and not yourself. And there’s this deep need that people sometimes feel to avoid that morally uncomfortable feeling.

**Sandra:** Yeah, I’ve even heard someone who identifies as a white ally say, “I was here to help you. But if you’re going to yell at me, then I’m leaving.” So I think it makes sense when Tamara says that it’s all about power.

**Christiane:** Yeah, and white people are the ones currently dominating American culture. So it makes sense that at last at this point white people control how a conversation about race happens, and in what tone it happens in. So then, the next question is why do whites do this? It’s really hard for me to imagine that a white person is doing white talk as a conscious power move or an ego thing.

**Sandra:** It seems because white people are *rewarded* for doing it. When white people say “I’m not talking about this” they don’t have to talk about it. They aren’t forced to disrupt their world view.

**Alison:** White talk is just one bar in the cage of oppression, to borrow Marilyn Frye’s metaphor, that keeps white supremacy or white privilege in place. So it does this by distracting us from deep issues. It allows us to, what W.E.B. DuBois calls, “flutter.” Just sort of dip down and touch racism in a way that recenters our goodness, or makes us feel comfortable about talking about racism, and doesn’t make us feel like we’re bad people. So white people constantly steer conversations back to meritocracy, to our own goodness, to one-size-fits-all discrimination. And there’s a whole host of lists of these patterns. So white talk is used to derail, to redirect conversations, to dismiss counter-arguments, to silence, to interrupt, and to collude with other whites in creating a culture of goodness, which makes it really difficult to critique the white world.

[music]

**Christiane:** So we mentioned before the kind of shutting down that happens with white talk. White people are effectively closing themselves off from knowledge. But another thing that’s happening as a result is that people of color aren’t allowed to share their experience of the world.

**Andy:** Yeah and Alison Bailey calls this shutting down “epistemic closure.” She defined it for us during our discussion.

**Alison:** Yeah, “epistemic closure” is just a fancy word for “I’m not gonna go there.” So you close down in order to protect your sense of goodness. And that’s a huge testimonial injustice. And I’ve watched this in the classroom. Students of color will say over and over again things that are happening in the community. The surveillance that happens to them on campus, the policing in the community. And white folks are just like, “Are you sure?” You know, there’s this doubt. You haven’t been heard. And then so you can imagine what this does to bodies of color as they move through the world. You’ve got microagressions, and then you’ve got no uptake. So the correct response to that isn’t, “Are you sure that was about race?” No. The correct response is, “Are you okay? Is this something that we need to have a conversation about in our community?”

**Christiane:** Yeah, I think this epistemic closure, this shutting down takes many forms. Sandra, when we first discussed white talk you brought up another variation of epistemic closure.

**Sandra:** Yeah, there’s been something that I’ve been noticing at every conversation about race that I’ve taken part in. There is always one white person who points out that the problem in the community lies with the people who aren’t there... and what they are *really* saying is that to show up to a conversation about race as a white person means that your job is done. You are the “good” white person and the white people out there are bad.

And I just want to go to one conversation in which the white people present are willing to talk about the things that *they* do wrong and what they can do to be better, instead of deflecting blame and listing their anti-racism resumes. These conversations should be moments of deep self reflection that motivate us to treat those around us better. The reality is we all hold prejudices, we were socialized this way and white people would do well to admit our shortcomings in order to progress.

**Christiane:** That’s a great example of just how insidious white talk and epistemic closure can be. So I’ve been that white person, who’s like, “Where are the other white people?” And it never occurred to me that by doing that, I was creating epistemic closure until you pointed it out. And there are other, equally as subtle forms of shutting down that take place.

**Alison:** And white talk has a somatic or bodily component to it. You watch white folks get tense in the presence of people of color about race. And so what does *that* do to bodies of color. The failure to want that knowledge and shut down is harmful, because you’re saying, “It’s not worth me knowing these things and I know when I shut down I hurt you and I’m still willing to take that position.” So it’s not just that, “Oh goody, white people get knowledge and we can walk away.” It’s, no, the fact that we don’t have that knowledge, that’s the problem, that we shut down and we don’t see harm, and we don’t see pain and we don’t see injustice. And *that* is big.

**Christiane:** Alison and Tamara discussed examples of when you can actually see epistemic closure happening.

**Tamara:** So Alison, you mentioned body language. You can see that. And you had a couple of images in your talk yesterday. And it happened to be two white students. And you can see, one woman, her hands are crossed across her chest.

**Alison:** They’re crossed across her chest, over her heart. She’s protecting her heart.

**Tamara:** “I’m not going to engage, this is my shield. And I don’t have to. I can stay here, I can be a testament to my right not to engage a reality.” And the white man, his body language was not loving at all. It was questioning, it was skeptical. It was sort of like, “This doesn’t make sense to me, therefore it has no sense.”

**Sandra:** So if the answer is not just, “Stop performing white talk, stop closing off certain kinds of knowledge,” what are white people supposed to do about this?

**Andy:** In some of Alison’s other work, she makes a very important point about solutions to this problem. She basically says that getting rid of white talk is a misguided way to think about the whole problem. She argues that you can’t just make a quick fix in this situation. BUT, she does have some positive views about how white people might begin to change the way they talk about race. I asked her about this.

[from a different conversation] “So there’s this phenomenon of white talk. What do I do? What do I say? How do I conduct myself?” Do either of you have some thoughts about, what people should be thinking when they’re going into these kinds of dialogues?

**Alison:** Yeah, nothing that’s going to be an immediate, quick fix. So the problem and the harm of white talk come from defensiveness and refusal to know things about the world and their perpetuation of harms. Then, that’s a very protective identity. So one things that I think white folks need to get good at is taking risks. I can remember thinking in school, okay I just need to get through this conversation on race with no one seeing me. And not taking risks and not being vulnerable. And what I’ve come to learn is that by making those mistakes, and what you’ve got to understand is that you’re going to make them. You can’t just try to be perfect on this. So, making mistakes and having someone call you out. Maybe another white person, hopefully, who says, “No, we don’t do that.” And learning from those mistakes. I find I can do a lot of work by being just sort of present, listening, and being open-hearted to what folks have to say. And navigating that in really kind ways. And when things get messy, just going, we need to let things settle and circle back. Because there’s an incubation period for these conversations. And sometimes you have to go, “Whoa, we just need to take a break here.”

**Sandra:** So the takeaway here is that we should own up to our mistakes…

**Christiane:** And be willing to make mistakes in the first place. Be vulnerable to screwing up.

**Sandra:** But most importantly, be willing to apologize when you mess up.

**Christiane:** Yeah, it’s how you would treat someone you love. If your best friend says you hurt her, your first response should be to reflect and apologize. The loving way to respond isn’t to immediately get defensive and come up with excuses.

**Sandra:** It doesn’t matter in this moment if she’s right or wrong. That’s not the issue right now. When someone you love is hurting, you just listen. It’s what Tamara calls the difference between an arrogant and a loving approach to the world. She introduced us to the work of Maria Lugones, who wrote about having an arrogant perception of self and a loving perception of the world. Tamara elaborated on the notions of “arrogance” and “loving.”

**Tamara:** So when you’re arrogant, you stand apart. When you’re arrogant you judge. When you’re arrogant you presume rightness in what you’re doing. And you shut things out. And you put a lid on things that you don’t like. You are, like a king in the world. You dominate. But a loving perception is, playful and open and willing to take risks. But I think it comes from a fundamental valuing of another person. And to me, in the classroom, or when I’m thinking about other interactions, that simple, elegant, but very profound contrast is good to understand that there are at least two very different ways of going through the world and we know when we’re one, and we know when we’re the other, because we’ve had experiences of both. And I think the challenge for people with dominance, whether by class or by race, or social accesses to a certain situation is to know, when am I arrogant? And what am I trying to achieve in that arrogance? And what would be a loving way of being in this space?

**Christiane:** This idea of arrogance versus loving doesn’t just apply to interpersonal interactions. It also plays out in the media.

**Tamara:** It is very arrogant, if we’re talking about Eric Garner, to show his murder, over and over and over. As just news. As if we’re just supposed to see that it was not a murder? I mean, if you’re a person of color, that’s all you saw. And I’m not sure how you can *not* see that. And then you gave the analogue, would be, the, murder of two newscaster, that out of respect for their family members was *never* shown. Never shown. So what does that tell me? What does that tell everyone? *White lives matter*. Black lives are spectacles. That’s an arrogant perception of self and reality.

**Andy:** I didn’t even think about that. When the newscaster murders happened, it sparked this HUGE debate about auto-streaming of video on Facebook. You know, people were scrolling through, and everyone was outraged that this thing was just autoplaying in front of them. That kind of stuff was happening with the Eric Garner thing. When people posted video of that. But that didn’t spark this national outrage. So people were like, “We’ve been violated by you foisting this murder on us.” But no one said that about the.

**Tamara:** But they didn’t see a murder. They didn’t see it. When you had that opening white talk example, “How can you be sure?” How can you *not* be sure that this was something that was not an atrocity. And that had everything to do with race. And that’s the thing about white talk. It doesn’t just shut down a conversation. It refuses factual information. A man is selling cigarettes and is taken down for an offense that is not of that magnitude.

**Alison:** And you can’t see race in that. But the public spectacle thing is chilling. So the journalist…she was protected. And the man that was with her was protected. And the language around that was, “This is a public execution.” But no one said of Trayvon Martin, “This is a public execution.” Or Eric Garner, “This is a public execution.” Or Tamir Rice, “This is a public execution.” And I could go on. These are all public executions. And the fact that those were aired and reinscribed over and over and over again? There’s a history behind that. Lynching was a public spectacle. And people made postcards and circulated them. It was entertainment. And so that’s chilling. It tells me that we haven’t come that far in our visual culture, in our cultural representation of black bodies.

**Sandra:** So part of having an arrogant perception of the world is not seeing things that are right in front of you.

**Christiane:** Or if you see them, seeing them incorrectly. And there’s so much talk about, the solution, the quick fix to this is body cameras. And the thinking there is that if we have visual proof, then maybe we can make sense of it. But the problem is that even when it’s smacking us in the face over and over again we can’t see it. Even when there’s evidence we can’t see it correctly.

**Sandra:** Seeing things doesn’t help if people refuse to interpret what they see in a loving way. It’s a refusal of facts. A refusal to see the facts.

**Tamara:** So the misperceptions, I think you just said this, are a part of white talk. Because if you’re on the receiving end of it, you’re like, “That’s how you’ve seen me all along? As a thug? It doesn’t matter that you know these other things about me. That’s what you go back to.”

I think that’s why Lugones’ term, it’s not “arrogant sensation,” it’s perception. It’s meaning-making. You have things, and you choose to interpret them in a way that’s arrogant.

**Alison:** And just to go back to Lugones, because I think it’s a really useful tool for teaching this thing. And there’s one piece in the essay on loving playfulness and world travelling where she says I am not interested in assigning blame or responsibility. I’m interested in finding a loving way out of this. And she’s talking to women of color and white women about the dialogues across difference in feminist spaces and how we can’t come together and what barriers there are for these sorts of talks. But she’s like, “Don’t have that conversation. Things are tough. We need to find a loving way out of this.” There’s an immediacy here. Rather than think “who’s at fault?” “Well, my ancestors never owned slaves.” No! That doesn’t do anybody any good.

**Christiane:** “Let’s find a loving way out of this.”

**Sandra:** “Let’s find a loving way out of this.”

[begin music]

**Sandra:** So the takeaway for all of this is that here is to remember that white people have a bank account of white privilege. White people are not powerless to fight racism. People *with* privilege have ways to spend down the bank account of privilege to try to dismantle racist structures.

**Christiane:** Yeah but at the same time, I love keeping Alison Bailey’s point about solutions in mind as I think about all of this. There are no quick fixes.

**Sandra:** White people make mistakes, it’s OK. Own up to them, learn, grow. When people point out problems in your community whether that community is a school, a city or a nation...don’t approach the conversation with cynicism … approach with love and respect.

[end music]

**Andy:** If you’re white in America, you’ve basically hit the life lottery. Even if you think you’ve had a rough life, there’s a very good chance that you’d be worse off if you were having that rough life and were not white. The purpose of this episode is to just get us all thinking about that and to call attention to the ways in which people with good intentions might make it easier to avoid thinking about these issues. It’s been suggested that many people have unearned advantages. This warrants our attention. We also need to think more carefully about what someone’s responsibilities are if they come to realize that much of their good fortune is the result of unearned advantage. In all of this, it’s worth engaging in a bit of self-scrutiny to make sure we're not avoiding difficult issues for our own comfort.

[begin music]

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[end music]