

“Peculiar Benefits” (*Excerpts*) by Roxane Gay

Excerpt 1:

Privilege is a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor. There is racial privilege, gender (and identity) privilege, heterosexual privilege, economic privilege, able-bodied privilege, educational privilege, religious privilege and the list goes on and on. At some point, you have to surrender to the kinds of privilege you hold because everyone has something someone else doesn't.

The problem is, we talk about privilege with such alarming frequency and in such empty ways, we have diluted the word's meaning. When people wield the word *privilege* it tends to fall on deaf ears because we hear that word so much the word it has become white noise.

One of the hardest things I've ever had to do is accept and acknowledge my privilege. This is something I am still working on. I'm a woman, a person of color, and the child of immigrants but I also grew up middle class and then upper middle class. My parents raised my siblings and I in a strict but loving environment. They were and are happily married so I didn't have to deal with divorce or crappy intramarital dynamics. I attended elite schools. My master's and doctoral degrees were funded. I got a tenure track position my first time out. My bills are paid. I have the time and resources for frivolity. I am reasonably well published. I have an agent so I have every reason to believe my novel will find a home. My life has been far from perfect but I have a whole lot of privilege. It's somewhat embarrassing for me to accept just how much privilege I have.

It's also really difficult for me to accept my privilege when I consider the ways in which I lack privilege or the ways in which my privilege hasn't magically rescued me from a world of hurt. On my more difficult days, I'm not sure what's more of a pain in my ass—being black or being a woman. I'm happy to be both of these things, but the world keeps intervening. There are all kinds of infuriating reminders of my place in the world—random people questioning me in the parking lot at work as if it is unfathomable that I'm a faculty member, whispers of Affirmative Action when I achieve a career milestone I've busted my ass for, the persistence of lawmakers trying to legislate the female body, street harassment, strangers wanting to touch my hair, you know how it is.

Excerpt 2:

We tend to believe that accusations of privilege imply we have it easy and because life is hard for nearly everyone, we resent hearing that. Of course we do. Look at white men when they are accused of having privilege. They tend to be immediately defensive (and, at times, understandably so). They say, "It's not my fault I am a white man." They say, "I'm working class," or "I'm [insert other condition that discounts their privilege]," instead of simply accepting that, in this regard, yes, they benefit from certain privileges others do not. To have privilege in one or more areas does not mean you are wholly privileged. To acknowledge privilege is not a denial of the ways you are marginalized, the ways you have suffered. Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult but it is really all that is expected.

Excerpt 3:

You don't necessarily *have* to do anything once you acknowledge your privilege. You don't have to apologize for it. You don't need to diminish your privilege or your accomplishments because of that privilege. You need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about. They might endure situations you can never know anything about. You could, however, use that privilege for the greater good—to try to level the playing field for everyone, to work for social justice, to bring attention to how those without certain privileges are disenfranchised. While you don't have to do anything with your privilege, perhaps it should be an imperative of privilege to share the benefits of that privilege rather than hoard your good fortune. We've seen what the hoarding of privilege has done and the results are shameful.