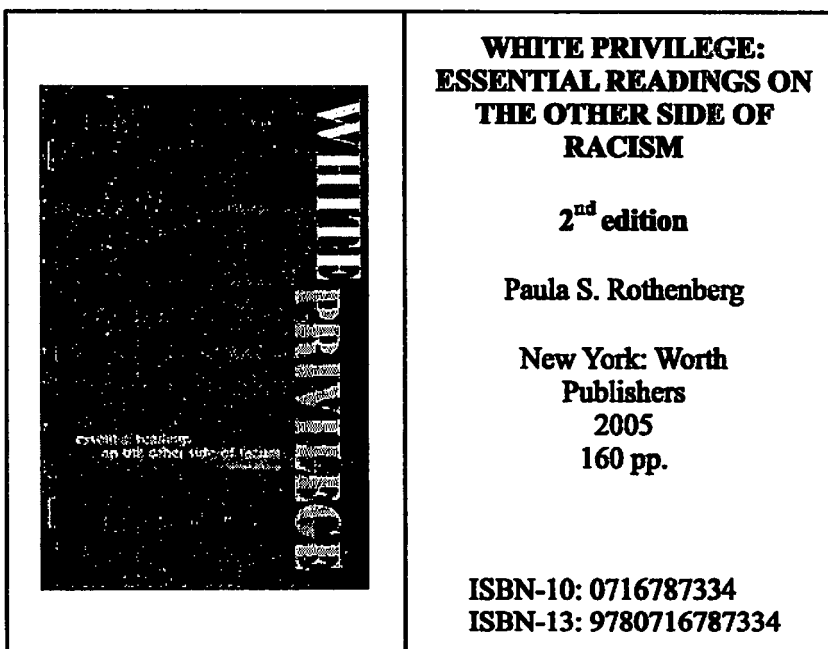


**BOOK REVIEW:
OBSERVING RACISM THROUGH WHITENESS
AND ITS ENTITLEMENTS**



Reviewed by Pratiwi Wini Artati

If only prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination were totally diminished from this world, needless to say that peace is something that we

¹ Pratiwi Wini Artati, is is <beeteewee@yahoo.com> a full time government officer in Instructional Technology at ICT Center for Education - Ministry of National Education Jakarta. She graduated from the Faculty of Letters Soegijapranata Catholic University in 2004. She is now currently pursuing her Master's Degree in Instructional Technology at Ohio University – USA.

could always breathe in and out easily, effortlessly. If only everyone did not focus on differences, everybody would have always lived in harmony for such a long time ago and in the future to come. Putting aside all differences and paying more attention the commonality and similarity that tightens the values of humanity is what we need. We often hear and imagine this will come true. Yet, the world is filled with discrimination in almost every aspect in human life.

One can be discriminated because of having different religion, sexual orientation, race, ideology, physical ability, and so forth. As to digging deeper in addressing this issue, this book by Paula Rothenberg is an inspiring formula from key essays and articles as a medium of self reflection to study whiteness and white privilege as a courageous attempt to combat racism in personal and institutional level. Challenging white privilege means to revisit and rediscover the discomfort zone. This is never been so easy since nobody wants to be called as being racist. However, many times, what comes through speech and action is not always the same in which it sometimes creates dilemmatic experience in responding to discrimination practices as what is stated in the book:

It is problematic because it categorizes and classifies, serves to no positive purposes and mostly used negatively. Even though the law protects the people and we are to be treated equally, it is the people's minds that won't change and what is causing this problem to still go on" (Rothenberg 2005: 1).

The gist of the book is to make the issue of whiteness and white privilege to be visible – a medium of shared learning experiences which addresses multidimensional issue that consists of multiple layers and shapes. This is the area where experiences, perspectives, prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination are taken into an account as a means to have a more understanding towards the other side of racism – not from the viewpoint of people of color but from the way white people perceive their own whiteness and white privilege. Furthermore, this book offers more insights about what's hidden along the way racism has been experienced, implemented, and perceived. It has become more interesting because this book reveals “the curtain” to see what has been invisible in discrimination practices to some extent. In order to be able to see the invisible, there's a need

to have a basic understanding about the concept of white privilege – what white privilege is and what it does?

How far we know about the concept of gravity? Analogically, the way white privilege mechanizes is similar to that of gravity – it is indeed invisible. Yet to make it visible (so that it can be further studied and observed), something has to be dropped from higher ground to prove its existence and power. The same applies to white privilege – to make it visible, something has to be dropped from higher ground. In terms of dropped, the strongest-related context will be peeled out, while the higher ground represents the comfort zone. Therefore, in order to make white people realize and see their whiteness and white privilege, they need to be peeled out from their comfort zone, challenging themselves with questions that most of the times getting into their ego and self defense mechanism, such as : are you a racist? Are you benefited from being born as white? To what extent are you really aware of that privilege? How far do you take the white privilege into an account? Mention things that you could get effortlessly as being white that you have taken for granted!

Being born as white, there is a propensity to take white privilege for granted. Being white is subconsciously unaware of the ascribed status to which for so long has given comfort and safety in the society as what has described in *White Privilege* that:

We are all much more likely to disregard attributes that seldom produce a ripple than are those that subject us to discomfort. It is for most Whites, race – or more precisely, their own race – is simply part of the unseen, unproblematic background (Rothenberg 2005: 17).

In a further definition, Rothenberg describes white privilege as a birthright privilege, “a set of advantages one receives simply by being born with features that society values especially highly” (2005: 18). Furthermore, she also puts an important remark in the “invisible” existence of white privilege reinforced as “whites cultivated the practice of denying the subjectivity of blacks (the better to dehumanize and oppress), of relegating them to the realm of the invisible” (2005: 21). What can be learned so far from white privilege is the way domination foster and perpetuate discrimination and

further create oppression that has a major tendency to deculturalized humanity values.

The mainstream in observing racism mostly comes from the eye of the oppressed – minority group that has been oppressed, segregated, and marginalized. Within the mainstream of studying racism from the viewpoint of the minority is most definitely easier to be contextually captured and understood because the pain and misery caused by oppression and discrimination are very visible to the eye. Thereby, this book has become an interesting out-of-the-box experience to study whiteness and white privilege as it is the other side of racism.

Minorities might never understand the mechanism of racism from the viewpoint of white people. While white people might never want to “wake up” and realize that they have white privileges that perpetuate racism. Moreover, in terms of perpetuating racism, white privilege is mostly invisible to the eye of the whites because it serves as a comfort zone since birth where it often appears as “it is just the way it is” phrase. In cultural studies of education, the study of racism is influential for building up a solid foundation for educators to teach tolerance and diversity issues as well as promoting cultural understanding towards every existed culture and diversified background in the educational setting.

Focusing in the invisible matter in the whiteness and white privilege, this book is divided into four parts: (1) whiteness: the power of invisibility, (2) whiteness: the power of the past, (3) whiteness: the power of the privilege, (4) whiteness: the power of resistance. Reading along every part is indeed interesting because every part has its own way to arouse certain level of curiosity to appear - it is like stepping onto a different level of layer – higher steps, higher complexity, and higher dimension.

Every key essays and articles create a dynamic structure about the importance of studying white and its privilege in order to promote open-mindedness towards each other: the Whites and minorities. One key essay in every chapter of the book is pertinent towards other essays and articles in other chapter where every issue addresses by gives enforcement in a further context. Therefore, this book is a very good eye opening experience to start seeing racism in a different way where there's always have higher chance to generate bridges between the loopholes for creating better environment as to

where diversified background and culture can grow and assimilate peacefully with less level of conflict and misunderstanding. Furthermore, each section of the book concludes with questions for thinking, writing, and discussion that facilitate various uses of discussion including group discussion or reflective discussion of oneself.

WHITENESS: THE POWER OF INVISIBILITY

The first chapter of the book, “Whiteness: the power of invisibility” contains essays and articles that emphasize on how whiteness and white privilege is so invisibly well-rooted, hidden in the unconsciousness. As Richard Dyer, Harlon Dalton, and Bell Hooks are on the same page in terms of perceiving factors that make whiteness and white privilege are strongly invisible: underlying assumption that remarkably depicts how white perceive their own racial position and representation. From here, Dyer, Dalton, and Hooks' introductory door has been able to translate reality that happens in the society with personal reflection from the reader with the help of well-wrapped - questions for thinking, writing, and discussion for part one.

WHITENESS: THE POWER OF THE PAST

The red thread will be continued to grow curiosity and sensitivity towards the issue in chapter 2 – the next chapter that contains essays and articles that in retrospect discusses the power of how history gave a construction to the white society as it is today. James, E Barret and David Roediger are stressing on how white people became white along with the history of racialization and disfranchisement in the United States. Karen Brodtkin presents the issue of how Jews became white folks along with the history of anti-Semitism and Euroethnicity in the United States. In A similar fashion, Neil Foley depicts the issue of becoming Hispanic: Mexican Americans and Whiteness along with the history of de facto segregation of Mexican American in which it enabled them to learn about whiteness and whitening prior to coming to United States. Reaching towards the end of chapter two, George Lipsitz thoroughly describes the possessive investment in whiteness as the consequence of de jure

segregation in the 1960's. Further he describes possessive investment as in the following:

Yet, today the possessive investment is not simply the residue of conquest and colonialism, of slavery and segregation, of immigrant exclusion and "Indian" extermination. Contemporary whiteness and its rewards have been created and recreated by policies adopted long after the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s" (Rothenberg 2005: 69).

From here, the essays and articles presented in chapter two have provided stronger foundation for further and deeper understanding to learn about white privilege as its underlying essence are well-captured on the last page of chapter two where there are questions for thinking, writing, and discussion.

WHITENESS: THE POWER OF PRIVILEGE

Stepping on further in peeling the layer of whiteness and white privilege, the level of sensitivity and comfort has are more unfathomable – as it is striking deep into the unconscious layer of the white as being white and having privilege. The striking of chapter three is as striking as Peggy McIntosh deliberately and straightforwardly describes what it means to have white privilege in personal level and societal level. She did a project where she challenged her own white privilege by uncomfortably making a list in which she benefited from the white privilege. This list has become the manuscript of understanding privilege as the author of this book; Rothenberg, who also dedicated this book to McIntosh for "leading the way". Accompanying McIntosh, Wildman and Davis, Johnson, Jensen, and Wise have brought salient discussion about challenges to make the white privilege to be more visible and to see how it shapes the US. As this chapter ends with questions for thinking, writing, and discussion, the reflective elements are felt much more deeply awakened in a sense that the urge to explore discomfort area will be part of reading this chapter.

WHITENESS: THE POWER OF RESISTANCE

In continuation with chapter one, two, and three, chapter four has a function as challenging the willingness to see white privilege and how the willingness takes place as an attempt to “break the silence” in the societal level. As it is hard to change what has been solidified for such a long term in the society, the changes begins from oneself in the personal level in terms of choices in how implementing white privilege for better implication. To put it in another way, Paul Kivel places this chapter as the turning point of how white privilege can be used as allies as opposed to enemies, to people of color in the struggle to end the racism by what Beverly Tatum describes as “breaking the silence” with the paralysis of fear – engaging more in dialogue about racial issues. In the same way, Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera encompasses on how to confront one's own racism by taking anti racist actions. As climax, the eight questions in the last page of chapter four address perfectly about the power of resistance in white privilege as it continues to be prevalent in the future.

REFERENCES:

- Adams, Maurianne, et al. *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Rothenberg, Paula S. *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*. New York: Worth Publishers, 2005.