

# The “Invisible Knapsack”: Rip it open. Spend it down.

Kaleidoscope Journal  
/  
Spring 2019



BY:



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I used to think of my whiteness as a burden. Now I realize it is an account that I can cash in to weaken systems of unearned power in my classroom and beyond.

The comedian Michael Jr. does a bit in his stand-up routine where he talks about knowing your “what” versus knowing your “why” (Michael Jr., 2015). For me, the “what” has always been teaching, but the “why” has been harder to articulate. If you had asked me six years ago why I wanted to be a teacher, I would have said something about loving to work with kids; about how satisfying it is when a student finally “gets” a concept. For a long time, the why behind my desire to teach was self-motivated, rooted in the personal satisfaction I got from helping others. Now my why is different. Now, I teach to disrupt hegemonic and racist power systems.

Everything I am is the result of institutionalized practices that bolstered me along life’s journey, and I am committed to not only unlearning these practices, but intentionally and actively working against them. Teaching is the vehicle that helped me arrive at this “why,” and it is also the vehicle through which I work to actualize it.

Every day, we participate in oppressive practices that systematically subjugate people based on their identities.

Through our participation in these normalized practices, we learn to reproduce them. Deborah Ball called this the “apprenticeship of participation” (2018), the process by which we learn, repeat, and thus normalize oppressive practices. No one is immune to this apprenticeship, because hegemony is the air that we breathe. How often do we refer to a group of people as “guys,” thereby centering the male experience? How often do we call someone “crazy,” normalizing an ableist view of the world? How often do we fail to honor the First Nations people on whose land we stand, contributing to their systematic erasure from our collective history?

These are not practices that I have always been attuned to, and I know there are many more that I am still not yet aware of. Identifying and unlearning the ways that I perpetuate oppression is active, intentional work. If I want to be anti-racist and disrupt hegemonic power structures, I need to first start with myself.

## Phase One: Looking Inward

The first phase in actively disrupting racist and hegemonic systems requires me to look inward; to interrogate the multiple aspects of my identity and understand how my culture—which is deeply rooted in these identities—affects the way that I show up in the world. I have to start by recognizing the air that I breathe.

When you exist in a culture that reflects you and gives you power, it’s easy to be unaware of your privilege—to think that your identity is the “default,” the “norm.” Hegemony is the air that we breathe.

I remember sitting in the library reading Peggy McIntosh’s *The Invisible Knapsack* and being struck by McIntosh’s image of the knapsack of whiteness: an unearned package filled with special tools, privileges, and codes that others did not have access to, but that I did because of my racial identity (McIntosh, 1989, p. 10).

There I was, realizing at the age of 22 that I had been walking around with this knapsack for my entire life, accessing its contents constantly, never knowing it was there. I felt as though blinders had been removed. The world suddenly looked different. For the first time, I caught the scent of the air that I was breathing.

Reading *The Invisible Knapsack* was just the first step in what has become an ongoing journey for me: a journey of constant internal examination of how my identity shapes my lived experience. As a woman, I can't help but gender my experiences, but as a White person, it is easy for me to de-racialize—to ignore the ways that my race affects my reality.

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And so the first step in being actively anti-racist, the first step in disrupting, is to actively practice racial consciousness: to recognize that every experience I have is racialized. When I leave the store and don't get asked to show my receipt, that experience is racialized. When I can take risks because my performance will not be seen as a reflection of my entire race, that experience is racialized. When I write this piece in a language and style that mirrors those used in my home, that experience is racialized.

What's more: people of color are not responsible for educating me on how my experiences are racialized. Rather, this is internal work that I need to do on myself, for myself. Practicing consciousness means constantly reminding myself that where I am today—every accomplishment, every milestone, every step—is the direct result of oppressive systems that give me power while erasing and subjugating those who do not look like me.

Just practicing consciousness, though, can get us stuck in the paralyzing quicksand of guilt. I could smell the hegemony in the air, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. My best solution was to work at a public neighborhood school where I would get to teach students who were targeted by many of the injustices I saw around me. The second phase of my work had begun.

## Phase Two: Pushing Outward

The second phase in this work requires me to push outward. It means I must intentionally work to build an anti-racist and anti-hegemonic culture in my

classroom; to change the air that students breathe, even if just for the 45 minutes they are in my class.

I was determined to do something about these injustices that I was starting to sense all around me, so I attempted to assuage my White guilt by dedicating huge amounts of time to planning lessons grounded in social justice issues. My students used exponential functions to analyze predatory lending; used graphs to chronicle years of injustices against women; and used proportions to critique the electoral college. I used complex instruction, presentations, and research projects aimed at redistributing power by elevating students' voices and centering their experiences. Student test scores improved, the rigor of the course increased, and surveys showed measurable improvements in students' relationship with mathematics. Because I could see and feel that these moves were leading to better math experiences for my students of color, I assumed I was doing my part to deconstruct power systems. "What" I was doing was teaching social-justice lessons, "why" I did that was to empower my students of color. It took a change of context for me to realize just how much more learning and work lay ahead of me.

After three years, I accepted an offer to work at a selective school where students must score highly on a test to be admitted. This was a fraught decision for me, to say the least. Until that point, I had been focused entirely on empowering students of color, helping them see themselves in their math curriculum, and encouraging them to reclaim their power in my classroom. At my new school, though, my classes were filled with well-served, mostly White students who had always had this power. I struggled to see how I could continue my social justice work in this environment. How could I fight for justice if I wasn't working primarily with students who were victims of injustice?

To resolve this dilemma, I had to realize that my "why" went deeper than just empowering students of color. The reason why I aim to empower students of color is to dismantle racism. And if my why is dismantling racism, then in fact there are many pathways I can (and must) follow to pursue that goal.

I came to understand that while empowering students of color is a critical and necessary part of the work of antiracism, it isn't enough. Being anti-hegemonic

requires me to work with everyone to change the air for everyone; it is not just a project to be done with my students of color within the walls of my classroom. This concept of extending my work beyond the walls of my own classroom felt risky for a long time. I wasn't convinced that I had the capital to try and spur any kind of social change within my school community.

### Phase Three: Spending the Capital of My Privilege

The third phase of actively disrupting racism and hegemony requires me to cash in on my whiteness—to spend the capital of my privilege towards making change. During the first two phases of my journey, my fear of speaking out had held me back from seeking change beyond my classroom. I justified my lack of outreach by blaming my colleagues: telling myself they were close-minded and uninterested in bringing justice into their classrooms. I fell back on the convenient narrative of the disengaged veteran teacher and let fear dictate my lack of action.

Enter McIntosh again, this time with the analogy of whiteness as “an account of unearned assets that [she] can count on cashing in each day” (McIntosh, 1989, p. 10). If my whiteness is an account of privilege, it gives me capital to spend. I can intentionally cash in that capital to disrupt normalized hegemonic practices. With this understanding of my racial identity as capital, I could no longer work in isolation in my classroom. I realized that I was going to have to speak up, knowing that I could count on my account of privilege to shield me from the potential negative consequences that I feared.

I have slowly begun to cash in this capital, but the work continues to be messy, ill-defined, and full of unanswered questions. For example, at the end of last year, I began to raise questions about the fairness of our department's assessment system, in which we were seeing a range of negative outcomes for our students of color. I agonized over the ways that I contributed to these outcomes, but also continued to push my colleagues in conversations about it until we eventually met to re-work our system. It felt risky, and so I spent the capital of my privilege slowly at first in my individual conversations, then more liberally when I called my first ever department meeting—knowing that whatever capital I was spending by speaking up would soon be replenished, because that's how the account of

privilege works.

This summer, I continued to spend my capital by speaking up at professional development and calling my White colleagues to action. Our summer professional development was entirely focused on issues of race and equity, and I was excited to see so many of my White colleagues leaning in to this work. I was inspired by the risks that many of them took in being vulnerable during those workshops, but it was exhausting for my colleagues who are people of color. Having spent their lives interrogating their racialized lived experiences, they felt frustrated by the amount of time being spent catering to White staff members' personal racial awakenings.

So at the beginning of one of our workshops, I spoke up in front of 115 colleagues. I shared my personal journey interrogating my identity, and called in my White colleagues to do this work on ourselves, for ourselves, rather than asking our colleagues of color to bear that responsibility for us. I have no idea what effect this had on my colleagues, if any. I do know that no matter how terrified I felt in that moment, I was (and will continue to be) backed by my racial capital. That alone is enough to make me continue taking steps forward, no matter how risky they may feel.

I have always been able to identify my "whats." My "what" is teaching. My "what" is creating culturally relevant, social justice-oriented lessons. My "what" is helping students of color reclaim their power from those who have systematically taken it from them. But without a "why," these "whats" could only take me so far. I didn't know how to work towards justice in my new school. It wasn't until I reflected on my "why" that I realized empowering students of color is not enough, and that it is equally urgent that I cash in my whiteness to talk back to, question, and push on power systems. As Michael Jr. says in the conclusion of his piece: "when you know your why, your 'what' has more impact, because you are walking towards your purpose" (Michael Jr., 2015).

## CITATION

Roach, G. (2018). The "invisible knapsack": Rip it open. Spend it down.

