

White Men and Affirmative Action: A Conversation

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IN JULY 1995, THE REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA (U.C.) VOTED TO eliminate affirmative action policies for job applicants and student admissions. Since the decision, the University of Texas and other state schools and governments have considered and sometimes approved similar legislation. Due to its size and stature, U.C. is a magnet for policy experimentation, and the Regents' decision has resounding effects for all concerned with equity and access to education.

Usually conspicuously silent in the fight against the decision, white men are often at the forefront of reverse discrimination campaigns. All white men, however, do not support the Regents' decision. This article presents four white men who share a concern for equity in education. These four graduate students at U.C. Berkeley have been meeting together and speaking publicly about the need to retain affirmative action as well as the role of white men in such a struggle. The men recorded and transcribed an informal conversation regarding affirmative action and related issues, such as graduate student funding, sexism, and the hegemony of academia. This article represents one attempt to compel white men — long the beneficiaries of exclusionary policies — to support equity in education and society and to use their disproportional power for the betterment of all.

In the fall of 1995, with California abuzz with debate over affirmative action,

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a small group of white male graduate students at U.C. Berkeley came together to begin discussing the position of white men in this rapidly growing discourse. Our primary aim was to create a space where self-defined progressive white men who support affirmative action could thoughtfully interrogate a range of issues: the near absence of white men in many parts of the fight to save affirmative action, the media representations limited to either “angry white men” or “whiny white men,” and ways in which our own constructions of white masculinities and our anti-racist and anti-sexist politics have been shaped by class, sexual identity, age, and geography.

We haven’t come up with easy answers, but our conversations have been meaningful to us and have pushed the limits of both our politics and our practice. We have been invited into several public venues — classes and conferences — and asked to examine questions related to whiteness and masculinity and to engage in dialogue with an audience. At times, this feels exhilarating and at others awkward and uncomfortable. Mostly, we aim to be honest about our experiences, views, and feelings (even the ones that feel highly charged or heretical) and engage in continuing self-scrutiny. We feel that such dialogue is an important component in the debate and eventual retention of affirmative action programs.

The four white men in the “White Guys Collective,” who participated in the conversation, are Eric Rofes, David Keiser, Tony Smith, and Matt Wray.



Tony: I think there is considerable ignorance in the Graduate School of Education about affirmative action.

Matt: Yeah. A lot of this stuff is coming right out of the academy. The California Civil Rights Initiative (CCRI), which is a deeply ignorant initiative fueled by anecdotes, not facts, was written by two academics.

Eric: I’m uncomfortable with “ignorance” as the term we use under these circumstances. To me, the backlash against affirmative action seems based precisely on the opposite of ignorance, on a kind of developing “knowledge” among white men about what is shifting in the culture. I think that while many white men might not know the specific details of affirmative action or understand schooling in America, I think why affirmative action has attracted so much energy is that it is one of the first things white men can put their hands on that symbolizes and concretizes the loss of power that is really starting to occur. When I see white male resistance to affirmative action, I think, “They’re seeing through the smokescreens of what liberals like to say about affirmative action and seeing it for what it really is — which is a real loss of privilege and power occurring for white men.” I don’t think affirmative action has been effective enough to achieve that loss yet, but I think what it represents to white men is significant and the root cause of an anxiety that is permeating much of that population.

David: Right. My sense is that most people affected by the recession, depression, economic slump — whatever we want to label the nature of the work economy right now — aren't the people who are coming up with these divisive issues.... It is politicians with no threat of losing their power.

Eric: I think it's both. I think the affirmative action backlash is being led by politicians currently, but came from theorists and political think tanks tapping into their senses of white men's real anxieties. Affirmative action is attracting so much attention at this time because it hits white men across class lines. You do have poor and working-class people of all races who are being, in their minds, robbed of jobs by immigrant labor. You also have white corporate men who are being forced to sit in rooms and converse with women as equals. When they tell women to fetch them coffee these days, they are being called on it — and loudly. The assumption about women fetching coffee might seem a trivial example, but it represents a powerful cultural shift for the corporate sector. In those spaces, for white men not to be able to do whatever they want is a terrifying change in their sense of autonomy, power, and being in the world. It is a direct undercutting of many kinds of hegemonic white masculinities.

Matt: I saw a great cartoon in the *New Yorker* this week. Three white men sitting around a board table....

Eric: I love that you read the *New Yorker*.

Matt: Three white guys sitting around an executive board table and one of them says, "We're all feminists, here, right?"

There is, as Eric says, a great deal of popular commentary on how the force of these shifts is really being felt. White men, both liberal and conservative, are responding to this sense of loss by calling up these very handy demons, such as Black women — the image of the Black woman who steals white man's strength has been around as long as slavery has been around and has come up in a new guise in the affirmative action debates — the single mom, and the welfare queen, which reached a new height under Reagan. It's still with us, and I argue it is still ignorance in the sense that while you do have to say it is a form of knowledge, it's wrong. They're misdiagnosing the problem. The problem has more to do with economics....

David: Corporate downsizing.

Matt: Yes, with transnational capital, with economic shifts that are freeing capital to move in new directions, in new places and new ways, while limiting the movement of people and erecting borders between classes, nations, and neighborhoods. The borders segregate and lock people into positions, so that capitalists can move capital to whatever pool of people is most convenient for them so as to maximize profits and productivity. So I agree with you, Eric, but I want to say, while these white men are talking about a real and significant loss of power, and in *that* sense both the liberals and conservatives are seeing something, but they are *not* seeing the root cause.

Fearing the Loss of Power

Tony: Beyond just an understanding, it is fear that white men are feeling, a powerful uncertainty and people, especially white men, don't like to be uncertain. In my experience, you either get really angry and that carries you through, or you feel as if you're kind of on your heels. I think that many white men are saying, "Hey, this is unfair. This is not right. People are getting preferential treatment. They're getting things that they don't deserve. Hey, if everybody works hard..." You hear people start to go back to the whole meritocracy argument, really loud and waving the flag and saying, "This is un-American."

Matt: Two hundred and fifty years of affirmative action for white men, 25 years of affirmative action for women and people of color.

Tony: Right. So it becomes un-American, it becomes the wrong thing to do as soon as it seems like the playing field might get leveled for real. And people are afraid to give up power. Which is what this level playing field means. It is about the size of the pie. Giving up power is not like, "Well, we will just have to cut another piece of the pie." It means that the pieces of the pie get smaller. That is an uncomfortable feeling.

Eric: I guess I have a different perspective. Affirmative action has brought many white women and some men and women of color into middle management; therefore, there are many white men who are not in such positions who otherwise might have been. This tremendous shift in expectations in the workplace and academia means that a white man can no longer have a total expectation of privilege. He certainly still maintains a great deal of privilege, but can't have the unbridled and unchallenged power that many middle-class white men were raised to feel was our birthright. The shift from having *total* privilege to having *mostly* privilege is not a little shift. It is a huge shift and we have not given — this sounds ridiculous, so I'll probably edit it out before publication — white men any slack around that, to deal with the fear, the loss, the anger. We expect them to either take the loss with no room for a gradual shift in social and cultural expectations, or be a reactionary against affirmative action. Instead, I feel there must be spaces — and again I know this sounds like a whiny white man — where the pain of loss of privilege is acknowledged and you move on.

David: The same argument could be made for slave owners that lost their slaves because of the Civil War or the Emancipation Proclamation. You have people who lost property. Their property was divested from them. Would you argue, then, that there should be a reparation for that? For them to grieve their loss?

Matt: Those guys who lost their slaves were the same guys who, post-Reconstruction, formed the Ku Klux Klan. It had everything to do with their rage and their anger. They started doing Night Rides, dressing up in white robes, and lynching Black men. If only there had been something therapeutic about making that transition. I'm not sure I agree with what I'm saying; I'm just playing the

Devil's advocate a little bit here. I'm just saying, the consequences of leaving men, as Eric said, with these two choices of "shut up and take it" or go become a paleoconservative.... If there's not a third alternative that is somehow more therapeutic, then maybe we're creating monsters.

Tony: Or develop an alternative where we can find a way to understand current privilege. Because we have been forced to figure out how much privilege we've lost. I think white men are presently in a position where they are often gambling with their privilege. If they think they have more than they really do, they stand to lose everything. If you are in a position where you've got quite a bit of obvious privilege and you gamble with a woman or a person of color and say something they find harassing or offensive, you stand to lose everything. Or if you are in a position where it is very difficult to determine how much privilege you've got or lost, there is no space to talk about what that means now. So, a dialogue that can help people evaluate the present differences might be helpful. To realize white men don't have the privilege to wantonly take what they want. My question is: What does this mean in our everyday relationships? How do we know where we stand?

Matt: I think it helps to set the context a bit if we think about the definite advantages that a history of white male supremacy has bequeathed us. Whether you look at the social realm of work, or that of education, housing, or especially criminal justice, white men still rule the roost. We still benefit from the fact that most of the institutions we encounter in life — schools, businesses, workplaces, banks, courts, prisons, and so on — all these institutions have been formed and reformed by white men, and to a lesser extent by white women. As a consequence of this historical fact, whiteness and maleness "fit" into these institutions with ease — they were made for each other. Recent challenges by white feminists and people of color have effectively drawn attention to this fact, the reality that the structures of opportunity in this country favor white middle-class men. But the challengers have been somewhat less successful in actually changing the structures of inequality. As white men, I think we are well positioned to help do the job — from the "inside" — so to speak.

Eric: Tony, I don't share your view that white men can lose everything by doing something women or people of color consider offensive. As long as we have white skin and as long as we perform masculinity, a vast amount of privilege — symbolic but also tangible gains — accrues to us. I want to discuss what I think has changed, though. In many parts of the country, what has changed is that the state takes as its function the questioning or challenging of white male prerogative to do things like harass, rape, get jobs, or get education. There is now a state that questions those things. Whereas men before could operate in certain unrestrained ways, we are now constrained. I've seen on an organizational level just how difficult it is once men finally "get it" — that if they look at women in certain ways, say certain things, put up certain posters or calendars, or comment to someone else

about women in certain ways, they could get in trouble. You might think, “Well, what’s the big deal? Under these circumstances, you just don’t say or do those things.” I argue that it fundamentally changes men’s sense of identity and their traditional practices of bonding with the organization or the workplace. All of a sudden, they are being policed and we are not used to being policed in that sense.

Tony: Because it’s living in the flesh and blood world. I mean, you feel it. Speaking personally, if I see an attractive woman, I look at her. Or an attractive body. And that’s the thing, that’s how I rationalize it. If it’s a guy, if it’s a girl, I think, “Boy, nice pecs. Nice whatever. Wow, nice ass.” But then I think, “Is this any different from anybody else saying, ‘Hey, that’s pretty hot.’” So...there is always that question. There is that state, now, where I question, “Is this my body? Is this my mind? What am I? How am I feeling about it? Can I approach this person? Am I overstepping my bounds?” It is uncomfortable as hell, and that’s not just my desire. Sometimes I am kind of flippant in the weight room or whatever. It’s not always who I am, but it is. I’m living. I’m alive. And by virtue of being alive, you just... You know? It’s gritty. And that freedom to be experiencing, sensual, whatever...even the way you define it, is policed and regulated in ways that it never has been before. And that, I think, is really, really uncomfortable.

Matt: Yeah, I think it does come down to an issue of feeling free or feeling constrained, and that does apply to our desires, our language, and our thoughts. This is part of the reason why there is a huge cultural war over political correctness. The conservative critics are saying, “Wow, they’ve got fascist thought police on the campus.” It seems like such a paranoid reaction to what’s actually happening on campus, which is not that much. So the canons have been shaken up a little bit. How does that equal the policing of thought? How does that equal leftists wearing jackboots and marching down the halls as a new force of fascism? It just doesn’t. But somehow in the imagination, this infringement of traditional, historical male freedom to say and do whatever the fuck we want.... Uncritically. Unexamined. You take a little bit of that freedom away....

David: The same argument is made for regulation, environmental regulation, for example. It is seen as an infringement on the right to free enterprise and the right to profit, even if it saves lives. Even if it saves deformed babies, later on. Even after things like Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, oil spills, and many other tangible dangers out there, there is still this resistance to environmental regulation, for the same reason. It’s seen as an infringement on the white male’s privilege to take. It is like ecological manifest destiny: “Let’s go into the Amazon and develop it, because it’s there.” There is no conception of what else is there. I think that is something we haven’t talked very much about.

We talk about white males in a vacuum, but, clearly, there are Black people in this country. Even if it is only 10 or 15%, they are affected by policy. I mean, this is obvious, but they don’t have nearly as much of a voice. I don’t mean to otherize, but people of color just are not in government. They do not make policy in the same

way that all the white presidents have made policy. I think that absence is crucial when things like affirmative action and Prop. 187 come up, because there are no dissenting voices. People of color in power like Ward Connerly or Clarence Thomas are, however you want to label them, clearly aligned with the oppressor rather than the oppressed.

The Role of the State

Matt: I'm having trouble because of something that Eric said, actually. On the one hand, when it comes to affirmative action debates, I'm totally pro-affirmative action. On the other hand, I do worry about the state being the one that safeguards the rights of white women and people of color, because I know that with state power to safeguard those rights also comes state power to regulate and to control.... I'm aggressively paranoid about the state, because I think it is the most violent institution on the planet. My fear is that in being supportive of affirmative action and wanting to say, "Yes, affirmative action needs to be happening, right now," that I too easily become just another liberal voice that becomes an apologist for the center or an apologist for the state, and I lose my critical perspective.

David: I feel the same way about the fight against pornography. I went through this 180 degree shift about pornography several years ago, when I first started reading people like Catherine McKinnon or Andrea Dworkin. It was like, "Oh, pornography is the greatest sin, ever. And snuff films, how come no one knows about snuff films?" This was a whole tirade, backlash, knee-jerk reaction to pornography. Then I read a wonderful essay that elucidated, for me, the problems with censoring even something like pornography. One of them is that the same people who would support censorship, the people you would need to rally for referendums or votes, would want to ban homosexuality, would want to ban sodomy, and would even want to ban oral sex. At what point do you side with an institution that is going to usurp your rights later on?

Eric: What makes the current situation particularly difficult is that we are talking about rallying behind affirmative action as practiced and defined in the United States — which is problematically conceived and implemented and compromised out of integrity. So I find myself speaking in public in support of affirmative action as if it is a great answer. Given the times, it is a great answer compared with many of the other answers being offered, but it falls so short of what is really needed to diversify the culture.

Matt: Because, fundamentally, it is about creating and organizing new labor markets to enable capitalism to more effectively control different groups of people.

Eric: My critique is that "it's not about quotas, it's about goals." What is wrong with quotas? The current system turns out to be about hiring the women who are most like the man, and the people of color who are most similar to middle-class whites. Affirmative action doesn't have a class base. I know other progressive

white men who have similar concerns and use them as an excuse to not be involved in the affirmative action fight. That raises a question for me: Where are the white male voices in support of affirmative action and what keeps so many of us silent in the debate?

Motivating White Men to Save Affirmative Action

David: A few white male professors have taken a stand for affirmative action but, by and large, they have been silent. There is a white male professor in our school who has come out totally in support of affirmative action. Yet, just about every student of color in his division that I know has been alienated by him, and has stopped seeing him as their advisor and switched to someone more sympathetic. It is one thing to put a name down on a petition saying, "I support affirmative action." To embody it in your practice is quite a different thing. It takes hard work. Policy is one thing, but if you believe in it, you need to act on it. I don't think enough white males are willing to do that. So when you beg the question, "Where are white males on this?" I don't think there are enough white males that think it is morally righteous enough to sacrifice, or to risk what they have, for this cause.

Eric: Then what do we think motivates white men to support affirmative action? There have been too few white men in the academy who have signed the save affirmative action petitions. So, for me, signing a petition is something.

Yet far fewer have started to do the work to be able to live and work in an equitable situation with women of all colors and men of color. There are liberal white professors, even radical white professors, whose names are on petitions, but they are not out there at rallies and not engaged in internal university political work in the Faculty Senate. They are not doing anything with their professional organizations. They simply are not doing organizing. What is going on, with few exceptions, is that liberal white men are signing petitions and then really doing nothing. They have to sign the petitions because people are looking to see who signed. They really don't support affirmative action in a meaningful way.

Tony: We need to make people more aware that they need to be working. I think some people just don't get that they need to be out; they need to show model behavior. Whether they are saying that they are too busy, whether it is that they just sign a petition because they know they had to sign it, whatever is going on, people need to call them on it.

David: Right there the phrase "too busy," in the academy, needs some serious analyzing. What does "too busy" mean? It largely means you are perpetuating an institution that has systematically excluded men of color and women from high tenure positions or administrative positions since its inception. Unless I know what someone is doing with their time, when they say they are too busy, that means very little to me. We could all be doing 10 other things, right now: transcribing, writing, reading, editing, whatever we need to be doing. We are in this race to get through an institution that is hard to master, even for white men. What makes it less busy?

Tony: Say that to somebody: “What makes you too busy?” White professors are in a real insular position, as long as they put their name on that petition, they sit in a place where they did their work by putting their name down. We need to call them out.

Eric: I want to examine that statement, Tony, because they have been called. They have been called by women, and they have been called by men of color. I think that this is an important time to talk about the work that we’re not doing, about the work that we have to do and the work that other white men have to do. This is all about us confronting each other and confronting ourselves. The wars within the academy around these questions are not often white men accusing other white men of discrimination. There are women naming what is happening when discrimination occurs, and there are people of color naming it. And “our kind” is often on the wrong side. I think we can pretend that confronting racism, sexism, or homophobia is just the right thing to do and hence one does it, but this is where breaking rank comes in; this is where “race traitor” and “gender traitor” stuff comes in. To accuse professors, to accuse fellow graduate students around these questions, you will pay.

David: In terms of power and privilege in the academy that I perceive as unjust, I feel that if I confront a professor on what I perceive to be his lack of concern, commitment, “professionalism,” and, indeed, performance, then I would be cutting my own throat in the years to come. I struggle with whether to voice a concern or criticism and jeopardize my academic future, or whether to hold it in.

Eric: Would you feel the same way if the professor were a Black man? Is it something you would feel differently if he were a white woman?

David: That’s an excellent question.

Eric: I don’t feel like I could confront this white male professor, but I have confronted white women professors and I’ve felt comfortable doing it. I’ve been able to bring concerns to professors who are men of color. I don’t know how much of this is real and how much is my own intimidation by white men. When I confront a woman professor around questions like this, I bring with it the idea that women are more open to this and also that they have fewer guns. When I think about confronting most — not all — white male professors, I feel like they would make sure I never get my degree.

Tony: It’s all about how you do it, though. I’ve done this. I’ve gone in to people and said, “I don’t think that you’re doing a very good job.” But it doesn’t have to necessarily be, “You really suck. You’re really shitty.” If you present it pretty evenly, say, “You know, I just don’t think you’re fulfilling your part of the bargain....” Because it *is* a bargain. Say clearly why you feel this way.

Matt: But it does go wrong now and then. I’m thinking about one friend. In his case, this professor actively went around and bad-mouthed him to the rest of the faculty. My friend only found out about that through his advisor, whom he trusts.

The Giving Up of Privilege

Eric: I want to shift the discussion to something that has been underlying some of our talk tonight. What moves white men to struggle to give up privilege? And what would a movement based on giving up privilege look like?

Matt: Eric, you once told us that what moved you was a sense of morality that you gained from your Jewish upbringing, and I found myself nodding my head in agreement, because my religious upbringing, despite the problems I have with it, instilled me with a pretty hyperactive sense of justice. Perhaps it sounds abstract to say that what motivates me is a sense of justice and injustice, but I think on a very concrete level, that's what it is. When I see people getting excluded for no good reason, that just doesn't seem right to me. I feel as if I want to do something about it. It's not as though I live and breathe to fight.... I'm not like Super Friends, but it is there. It is a pretty strong motivation.

David: I feel that as well. Even though I haven't worked in the field for several years, people ask me, "Why did you get into domestic violence work? Do you come from a violent home?" No. "How did you get into Special Ed? Do you have any disabled siblings? No?" I came to my politics through upbringing and experience. When I was about eight or nine years old, a friend of mine was leaving my apartment, a white Italian kid, and he hit me before he left. And it was like his last shot. Right? Then he ran down the stairs. So I said, "Later on, nigger." My mom laid into me, not physically, but let me know in no uncertain terms that I was never to use that word in her presence again. I knew that there was something about the term that made it different from profanity or just being loud. And I couldn't even *say* that word for years. I haven't been racially oppressed, too much, and yet, that's a huge issue for me. Something seminal like that, set it in stone.

Eric: David, you and Matt gave examples of why you work for social justice. Yet I also wonder what motivates people to work on a social justice issue that, in a narrow frame, could be seen as working against their own interest. For example, white men for affirmative action.

David: I don't think it's working against our own issues.

Tony: Exactly. In working toward social justice, in working toward equity, or getting opportunity equalled out, in Marxist terms, we become more human.... We will reach our full humanity. This is philosophical, but I think that is the way you have to understand these matters if you choose to live and work for them. You don't have to be a Super Friend, but there is something about social justice and anti-racist, anti-sexist work that is heroic. You give up part of what you could shoot for, the half-million-dollar house on the hill. Instead, you decide: "I'm going to live my life toward equity."

Equity means that my Black brother, my brown sister.... You start pointing fingers to those people around you and pretty soon you have community as

opposed to up and down, stratification and class.... I wish there were a way to say it that wasn't so fuzzy, or that I could nail it. But, damn it, everybody is somebody. If you engage someone, they have something. There is something about them that *is*. And that's why I do it. That's why I feel like I can sit up in front of people as we did earlier today and talk about things I would not necessarily choose to talk about to a group of 100 people. It's toward the possibility that, one day, they could also decide: "Yeah, I'll do it." That is what motivates me. And what would a movement look like? My ideal movement is one where people have a vision of not necessarily what I can do, but how *we* can do it.

Matt: You must have some sense of empowerment in what you're doing, in order to be effective. I was struck by that question, "What would it mean to form a movement based on giving stuff up?" The model we have for social movements is one of gaining rights and access, gaining privilege....

David: Except for the abolitionist movement.

Eric: White men now must either learn to envision what it means and looks like to give up power or we will very shortly find ourselves in a position to have power seized from us. This failure to envision alternatives to a violent overthrow of white patriarchy is what is being symbolically played out, right now, in affirmative action in California.

I used to say that the reason I worked to create multicultural organizations and worlds was because it is the world I want to live in. As I've gotten older, I've found that I have had to revise that statement, primarily because it is not the world in which I truly live. One of the realities I've seen in the world of many white progressives is that it is very difficult to have long-term, sustained cross-race relationships. This is something that people don't like to talk about. It's often very embarrassing. It often seems a contradiction and a betrayal.

To me, it shows what a challenge it is to build multiracial communities that include white people, as well as how few of them have been built around the country. I treasure the examples I've seen — primarily within feminist circles, particularly lesbian-feminist circles. I still think of this as a worthy aim, but I no longer have the expectation of being able to create, in my lifetime, the world that I wanted.

Matt: I sometimes wish that my personal life were less segregated. I often look around and say, "Wow, with a few exceptions, my friends are all white." But I have different levels of investment, in my political persona, or the person that I am in school, or in my job in the past. I have a different level of investment in cross-racial connections in those areas than I do in my personal life. I think, for me, that it is okay for them to be different, compartmentalized a little bit. My personal life is a little bit separate from my public life.

Eric: What do you mean by your "personal life"?

Matt: By personal life, I mean my close friends, the people that I hang out with apart from work and school. For me, the statements I would make about

affirmative action and wanting diversity, the stakes are higher in the realms of work and school than they are with whom I drink beer.

Scholarships, Instructorships, and Academic Funding

David: What brings many of these questions home for me in graduate school is in terms of scholarship money, of having money for school. I feel like anyone in graduate school should be funded. If you are expected to work full time at being a student, you need a subsistence wage. Right? Being a teaching assistant (T.A.) barely cuts it. Regardless of being a T.A., you should get \$1,100 a month, or some subsistence figure. When I apply for a scholarship that targets graduate students working with underprivileged and minority youth, well, I've been doing that kind of work for years. That sounds arrogant, but it's true. I can't name a placement that I've had that hasn't been with a multicultural, cross-class population. Yet, no amount of emphasis I can place on my experience in an application for that fellowship, for that few thousand dollars a year, is going to make me a better candidate than someone who is from that population. That is where it kind of eats at me. I guess the linchpin, the thing that makes it not eat at me, is the knowledge that the institution is hegemonic and self-perpetuating, and such scholarships represent minimal inroads to equity.

Matt: I go through the same process. This is my fourth year in graduate school. I haven't gotten a dime of support, only graduate student instructorships. And it's not looking like I'm going to get any money. It seems as if every other fellowship I look at is devoted to women and people of color. I'm now in a program, Ethnic Studies, where it seems like everybody is funded, except for me. When I feel resentment around affirmative action, right now, it's around who's getting money to go to school. But, like David, I go through a rationalization process like, "Okay, Matt, you know you can get graduate student instructor jobs probably much easier than any of the people in this program." I can get a job outside of school, which I've done. I'm going to be the first hired and the last fired in most situations. But when I do get burned, it's around that.

Eric: What goes on with all the white men in the same position, who don't share your perspective? This is a great example, for me, of where power shifts get real. You both seem to have found ways to have your anger and to have your politics with this. But this is where many of the scholarships are targeted, for women and people of color. And there are reasons, I think; politically, you can get behind it, but it is about losing privilege for white men. It's a concrete example.

David: I've been in positions where I feel like people got positions that I didn't, because they brought more to the plate in terms of cross-cultural competence in dealing with things like parents, or other teachers of color, or people who spoke different languages. Again, I've tried to identify it as something tangible, even capital. So, "Okay, because I'm white, I'm not going to have as easy a time talking to some families when they come to pick up their son at the end of school or

summer camp. Maybe you need someone who speaks Spanish, or someone who they won't feel threatened by." Maybe that is just liberal rationale...but I feel that if academia doesn't work out, I can go out and work. I'm very confident.

The other piece that I've left out, intentionally, is that though I haven't gotten money from my parents in a while, I know that if something bad happened to me, like an accident — there is a net. There's this safety net that frees me up to do things like work for \$1,100 a month, feel poor, live in a tiny place, and know it's a stage, right? I know it certainly plays into me taking risks and taking jobs.

Tony: What about the white people who are in that situation? I had to get a football scholarship to make it out. I have been making my own way since I was 13. I've had to pay my own way. Fortunately, because of my ability, I had people in the community who would buy me shoes so I could play football. Not having a net is really disconcerting. So when I am just working for \$1,100 a month or whatever, it is.... You're like, "Okay, how can I make this work?" You're busy making it work. Always, making it to the end of the month. Not having that net, I don't know.... I've had this discussion with my friends, quite a bit. I consider them my net.

Matt: I'm like, "Okay, wait. On some level this doesn't feel just." You know? And in my worst moments, I find myself thinking, "I deserve that money or that privilege, not them. They are stupid. I'm smarter." And shit like that just comes up, it's right there. And it's real easy for me to call it up.

Eric: It is also easy for us as white men to assume that people are getting fellowships or jobs because they are women or people of color, and they are not getting them because he or she was more qualified. It's one of those hard spots that I am very uncomfortable with, but I find myself thinking that if I lose out, it's an affirmative action kind of thing going on. Then I have to think, "Hey, you support affirmative action. Let go of it." But they probably got the job because they were more qualified.

Matt: I spent most of my life thinking that people got what they got because they were better than me. Having these feelings now is a real mindfuck, because growing up poor I just assumed that I'm really a piece of shit and that is why our family is poor and that's just the way things are. I'm not valued in this world and that's okay. So to be feeling the opposite now is really troublesome.



It is difficult to bring to a tidy closure the issues raised in this discussion about white men's loss of privilege, the role of the state in ensuring equity and freedom from discrimination, and tensions and contradictions in our academic careers. Our thinking clearly is evolving and our feelings undergo many changes and surprising shifts. What is apparent to us is that much more discussion needs to occur among white men who support affirmative action in addition to other efforts to remove

structural and cultural barriers to full participation by all in our society.

We recognize that many progressive white men feel they cannot, as a group, contribute to struggles around racial and gender equity without in some way reproducing white male supremacy. Many progressive white men fear these efforts might be dismissed by their friends and allies in the movements of white women and people of color. Thus, the only spaces where white men come together tend to be reactionary, and their efforts are viewed as those of “whiny white men” or “angry white men.” The challenge of creating an awareness of whiteness, masculinity, and privilege on the part of white men involves contending with these views and having this work derided, trivialized, and even ridiculed. This is especially difficult when such responses emerge from white women and people of color allies.

Our White Guys Collective maintains an ongoing commitment to creating political spaces where progressive white men can gather and discuss the changing role of white men in leftist politics. As we like to say, we seek action, not reaction; we want analysis, not paralysis. We hope to continue to do our part to create sites for new types of white men’s inquiry, dialogue, and transformation.