A metaphor best expresses the way my understanding of white privilege has operated and changed over the years. I think of white privilege as lighting my path of professional development. Over the course of forty years of academic life, I have come to see how this light made travel over the rocky and difficult road possible, how it lit up opportunities at many critical junctions, and how it blinded me to what was just outside my own experience.

Whatever the image or metaphor, I spent much of my career, especially the early years, without seeing the unearned white privilege that has been accorded to me and has buoyed and advanced my professional status. I am a baby boomer and therefore unaccustomed to having anything unique happen to me. Ours is such a huge bulge in the population distribution that I know that if I have had an experience—any experience—I can guarantee that I am not alone. That gives me and my generation a sense that our personal experiences define the norm. Media representation of boomers as a monolithic block obscures the great variety within our generation: early boomers compared to late ones; women of color compared to white women; those who benefited from a growing national economy compared to those who could not. What is normal for one intersectional group is worlds apart from others. The tendency to identify one’s own behavior as normative, as we know from much research on social cognition, is quite common. But in the case of white boomers, this belief tends to function like a foundational truth.

I explain my generational profile as a preface to dealing with the challenge that Yolanda Flores Niemann has given me to think through for this chapter. She observes that most white women are extremely uncomfortable distinguishing between the realities of their lives and those of women of color. White women become angry when they use the word “woman,” and she interjects, “You mean white women.” Yolanda asked me to think about why this happens. What does my position as a senior white woman in the academy help all of us understand about this denial of
privilege? I will return to the question later because first I want to describe my own intersectional position and the way it relates to my consciousness of white privilege at specific points in my adult development, location, and place in history.

There are many ways in which I experience unearned privilege—for example, I am able-bodied—but in this essay I want to focus specifically on that bright light of white privilege and the cascade of additional benefits that it has brought me. For much of my life, I have honestly thought about my good fortune without awareness of the central role that race privilege has played in creating the many opportunities I have enjoyed. My awareness of privilege was a simple “how fortunate I am in the universe” view of life. I think it wasn’t until the 1980s that I fully grasped that being a member of a particular intersectional group—in this case, white and educated—on its own conveyed a door-opening, step-to-the-front-of-the-line status associated with privilege, particularly the white advantage that I had neither earned nor asked for, yet benefited from.

My experience of both recognizing and not recognizing privilege is, I believe, a feature of being the last generation that was directly told that “you cannot do this because you are a woman.” I tell the story in episodes because they reveal, I believe, the way my understanding of intersections of privilege has changed and grown over the years. The first two episodes are set in a stunningly white world, and though any reader would notice this, the fish swimming in the water doesn’t. I begin with these episodes because I see them as important points in my journey toward understanding my intersectional position and the role of unacknowledged white privilege in defining that position.

Because intersectionality is central to the way I understand my experience, I want to be clear about how I understand this construct. I subscribe to the idea that social identities are organizing features of social relationships that mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another (Collins [1993] 2000; Crenshaw 1994b; Nakano Glenn 1999; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983). Intersections create both oppression and opportunity (Baca Zinn and Thornton Dill 1996). The white privilege that I focus on here, for example, offers more than avoiding disadvantage or oppression by actually opening up access to rewards, status, and opportunities unavailable to other intersections. While I experience a set of intersections as my individual social identity, those intersections also reflect a complex operation of power relationships among social groups. In other words, intersectionality not only defines who I am as a social individual but also reflects my relative position of power and status because of the social groups that define my identity.

Seeing and Not Seeing Privilege

I was a first-generation college student. I went to college on scholarship and federally funded work-study, and was acutely aware that my working-class background differed from that of most other students at the small, selective, and almost totally white private university I attended. Within that milieu, social class was the axis of privilege. I was grateful for the support of scholarships to be there but didn’t see my situation as privileged. Rather, it seemed to me, at the age of eighteen, that I was the happy beneficiary of terrific luck. I was deeply grateful for that luck, but I did not grasp that privilege stood behind it.

My luck was not luck at all but a great social experiment: California’s 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education. That investment in higher education extended the
privilege of postsecondary education to a broader social and economic class than any state ever had before. Among other features of the plan, the Golden State guaranteed that residents could attend—through scholarships based on need and ability—any accredited college or university in California. The doors of community colleges were free and open to all residents “capable of profiting from the instruction offered” (California Legislature 1973, 33). Indeed, my parents had moved our family to California from Nebraska precisely because of the lure of free college for their four children. In light of higher education’s precarious position today, it is almost unbelievable that any state ever made such a commitment.

Privilege, in the form of opportunity for postsecondary education, was extended to a wide swath of the California population and coupled with a commitment to include students from underrepresented groups. Since it was a state program, access to post-high school education fashioned a normal, natural, and desirable goal. Of course, you had to be in a position to grab the opportunity and hold on to it. My high school was no great shakes, but it gave me an adequate enough education to qualify to continue, unlike other students, predominantly those of color, whose high school experience was a barrier, rather than a pathway, to such opportunity. In my own case, the full scholarship offered by the state paid not only my tuition in California but also fees for a transformative year of study abroad in Rome. Unbelievable. Without that support, study outside of the United States would have been completely out of my reach. That a state would pay for an educational opportunity of this kind does not compute in today’s political atmosphere. That year abroad changed my life deeply and permanently in a most positive way.

At the time, I knew that my university education was a great privilege and that I had had to work hard to make it a reality; what I did not see was that women of color from a similar class background to mine would be less likely to be exposed to this opportunity and thus even less likely to enjoy its long-term benefits. Poverty is overrepresented among people of color, so the disproportionate advantage that whites enjoy relative to other racial ethnic groups was further exaggerated. The Master Plan extended the privilege of higher education to many who would never before have had access, yet like another important door-opening social experiment—the post-World War II GI Bill—beneficiaries were disproportionately white, male, and middle class. In the case of the GI Bill—sexist and racist discrimination was built into the legislation, and classist discrimination into its execution (Humes 2006), whereas the Master Plan explicitly rejected potentially discriminatory measures. Nevertheless, groups that had been underrepresented in higher education (rural; poor; women of all race and ethnicities; men of color) remained that way. The ten-year evaluation of the Master Plan soberly pointed out that “our achievements in extending equal access have not met our promises . . . we have made considerable progress [but] equality of opportunity in postsecondary education is still a goal rather than a reality” (California Legislature 1973, 45).

The slogan of the political action committee Emily’s List is “Early money is like yeast.” The version of the Master Plan open to me was exactly the extra boost, the yeast that made so much more possible down the road. Today I am convinced that this great, life-changing program made my career possible, and that my whiteness and able-bodied status continued to open doors. In these days of the Great Recession and the near collapse of California’s economy, the original 1960 Master Plan for Higher Education seems a fantasy, too good ever to have been true. It has been
replaced by a system with a much-reduced potential for broad impact. Higher costs to students and fewer sources of scholarships and low-cost loans now create even greater social and economic distance between those who can find a way to higher education and the majority of women and men of color who cannot.

Coming to Terms with (White) Women’s Marginalization

One of my clearest recollections from the first weeks of grad school at Penn State is being told that women don’t finish the PhD program. Ours was the first graduate cohort in psychology at Penn State where the proportion of women was not limited to two or three in an entering class of fifteen to twenty. Another first-year woman and I were meeting with the faculty member to whom we had been assigned as teaching assistants. As he smoked his pipe, he shared with us his observation that—whatever our ambitions—it was a “fact” that women pretty much all dropped out of grad school.

So Pamela and I decided to get the data. The graduate staff assistant generously pulled out the records for us, and we discovered that women, indeed, dropped out of the program at a high rate. But there was more to the story. Men were highly likely to drop out, too, but 50 percent of two is a lot more noticeable than a comparable percentage of fifteen or more male students. We didn’t yet have the construct of “chilly climate” (Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall 1996) or research on tokenism (e.g., Niemann 1999, 2003; Yoder 1985, 2002) to explain what might be going on, but it seemed clear to us that the environment was not conducive to enhancing women’s success. We did not think to ask which of the women and men who had dropped out were students of color. And I am not sure that the department would have had that data if we had requested it. The overwhelmingly white context and the clear, in-your-face sexism overwhelmed my capacity to see that the sea change in the department’s admissions policy had largely benefited white women.

Our experience as white women in a psychology doctoral program was certainly different than that of women who had begun grad school just two or three years ahead of us. Rhoda Unger (1998) writes about the almost-generational difference of experience that separated cohorts of women who were only a few years apart in age. Half of our class was women, and most of us had already embraced women’s liberation. That first year was a watershed for women in the program in many ways. Women grad students, lecturers, and one of the two women faculty members began to meet occasionally. Those meetings led to a graduate seminar on the psychology of women the following year and ultimately to the establishment of a women’s studies program.

Change was in the air, and the magnitude of what needed transformation could not be ignored. Carolyn W. Sherif and Ellen Piers were the only tenure-line women in a department of thirty-some all-white faculty. And I recall only three African

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1 Phyllis W. Berman, then a well-known developmental psychologist and one of several lecturers in the department, initiated this first local activism. Her husband was a tenured professor in another department, but she was a lecturer because Penn State at that time was averse to hiring both members of a couple into tenured positions. Phyllis recruited me to help her invite all women faculty, lecturers, and grad students to meet to discuss “mutual interests as women psychologists” (I still have a copy of that invitation).

2 Carolyn’s actual experience was far more difficult than we graduate students could see. In
American grad students and no other women or men of color among the sea of white faculty, staff, and grad student faces. Penn State’s location in then all-white rural central Pennsylvania offered no real diversity. Most telling, in my view, is that the department conducted searches for six tenure-line positions that year, and every one was filled by a white man. Graduate students were at that time not included in any aspect of the search process—I don’t think we understood what had happened until the following fall, when there were six new white male faculty faces. Had that search taken place the following year—once women in the department began to organize—I would like to believe the outcome would have been different.

Working against us in pressing for change was the low proportion of white women and miniscule proportion of women and men of color in the pool of potential faculty applicants. In 1971–72 (the year of that job search), the proportion of PhDs going to women and men of color and white women was only beginning to rise above more than token levels. In 1970 just over 20 percent of the PhDs awarded in psychology went to women (Cynkar 2007). By 2008 70 percent of new PhDs were women (National Science Foundation 2010). In 1978 only 6.8 percent of PhDs awarded in psychology went to women and men of color, and by 2008, the proportion had only increased to 20 percent (Thurgood, Golladay, and Hill 2006; National Science Foundation 2010). (It should be noted that I could not find psychology data reported for gender by racial ethnicity, from either APA or NSF even for recent years.)

I was aware that I occupied a suspect and precarious position in the academic citadel. Yet I had been admitted and saw that I could have an effect. What made us successful was critical mass. Though I don’t have the data for the five women in the clinical half of my cohort, of the five women in experimental psychology who started together, four of us completed the PhD program, a huge improvement over women’s situations in previous years. Our critical mass and an optimistic belief in opportunity for women made a world of difference in the way our cohort fared; we did not see ourselves as isolated tokens but as the leading edge of a new wave.

Was I aware of my privilege as a woman in this monochromatic world? Absolutely. I was reminded at every turn that I was entering a space where women’s entrance had previously been restricted. Was I aware of my privilege as a white woman? I am not sure, but I believe I did not fully consider the racial privilege of my position. I believe my lack of consciousness did not arise from an exclusionary impulse but from a limited experiential horizon, a lack of consciousness that contributed to a false sense of normalcy. I was preoccupied with feeling like an interloper. As a first-generation college student I had learned to “do college” pretty well, but to “do graduate school” was something else—I hadn’t known anyone who had gone to graduate or professional school, so I had no clue what was involved in graduate work.

Looking back now—as out of my depth as I felt—I understand how my race and other characteristics that made me look as if I fit in as a graduate student smoothed the way for me. I had arrived into this overwhelmingly white, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, nonimmigrant world from another that was just as overwhelmingly white, Judeo-Christian, heteronormative, and nonimmigrant. I didn’t notice anyone missing as I moved from one environment to the next. This, of course, is the essence of privilege. At that time, my sense of both comparative privilege and lack
of privilege was completely defined by the way that I differed from the highly visible dominant group: white male PhDs.

Today I understand this strange juxtaposition of marginalization and privilege as deeply connected to that historical moment and geographic location (Roth 2004). A few years earlier, it would have been unlikely that I would have been admitted to graduate school. A few years later, the inclusion of white women—as graduate students at least—would be taken for granted, not the transformation that my cohort represented. This raises the question of what it takes to expand our consciousness to include groups outside of the realm of our immediate experience. When do other intersections—invisible to those enjoying privilege—become noticeable by their absence? And once they have been noticed, what do those of us who have made it through the door do to ensure that it doesn’t swing shut behind us?

Owning Up to White Privilege

I was in a white world in Pennsylvania, and it wasn’t until my return to California to take a position at the University of California, Davis, in 1977 that I fully realized the impact of white privilege as a significant factor in every aspect of my everyday life. Through teaching the psychology of gender, I had begun to grapple with intersections of social identity, though I did not have the theoretical language that has since developed. While finishing my dissertation, I had taught at the Altoona campus of Penn State, where diversity meant first-generation adult students: rural white women who were trying to juggle child rearing and college and mostly white male Vietnam veterans.

Preparing for classes in northern California, however, brought the previously unexamined dimension of race and ethnicity into the equation with a sizeable number of Latina/o and Asian American students in classes. Teaching compelled me to revise my understanding of women and gender in a fundamental way, not only through continually revealing the diversity of experience within the conventional (and thereby presumed white) female/male gender categories but also by demonstrating that gender is inseparable from the meaningful, salient social identities that intersect with it. The times were changing, too. The backlash against affirmative action (UC–Davis School of Medicine admission practices led to the Bakke case) made the reality of privilege much more salient.

In my first years as an assistant professor, though, I had the tunnel vision fostered by a publish-or-perish environment. As other contributors to this volume know better than I do, one of the most energy-draining aspects of being on the margins is the constant requirement to justify your existence: Why are you here? In my untenured years, my professional survival was on the line, and justification of presence was an ordinary part of my life in my “tenure home” department, with respite coming only through links with other women (women of color and white women) across the campus. It is hard to see your own privilege when everything points to your marginalization. It seems almost unbelievable now that I could have felt so vulnerable as a woman faculty member and because of what I studied, but—as with my graduate school cohort—timing was everything. A few years earlier, I would have never been hired because of my research on gender; a few years later, it would not have been an obstacle.

Even with tunnel vision directing my actions, however, the diversity of the state and undergraduate population created a reality that demanded engagement. Though I didn’t yet have the concept of intersectionality—that idea would not make its way to
the psychology of gender for another ten years—I began to understand—in a way I had not before—that social identities inseparably define one another. There was no great epiphanic moment when I realized this. Rather, my understanding evolved over time as the cumulative effect of individual moments and sometimes difficult conversations, especially classroom discussions. Most important, I think, was a growing awareness that I should not assume that my existing knowledge about another group’s experiences was sufficient for me to presume that I understood that experience. In other words, I learned that one of the most important things I could do to understand my relative privilege and others’ relative lack of it was simply shut up and listen. I also discovered that understanding your unearned privilege contains a responsibility for action.

Another significant factor in coming to terms with my relative privilege was seeing firsthand what Latina and Native American women colleagues who had been hired before or about the same time as I had were forced to deal with. This was in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I already knew that their scholarship and teaching were constantly under the microscope. Students were especially vocal in demanding their attention and often challenged their racial and ethnic loyalty whenever a conflict arose between the administration and the students, which, at that time, was often. Especially striking was the paternalism that these colleagues encountered at almost every step when dealing with university administration. Institutional paternalism did not seem simply to be the style of a single, particular administrative unit but occurred across the entire organizational structure.³

One particular situation a few years later stands out. In connection with the inauguration of a campus-wide consortium for research on women and gender, I organized an event in the new alumni center. As planning advanced, Chicana colleagues told me that the room I had reserved for the event was unacceptable to them. It bore the name of a fraternity that some years earlier had had a lewd song about a young Mexican woman as its drinking anthem. My colleagues wanted no part of a celebration where they had to enter a room with that fraternity’s name. I did not know about this history and was grateful that they trusted me enough to tell me (rather than just boycott the event). I was able to change the venue for the event, but the room in the alumni center still carried the name, so the fundamental problem was not resolved. With my colleagues’ permission, I tried to make some headway with the alumni association and administration to listen to the problem and work with us to fix it. Not only did I get nowhere in evoking interest in hearing the complaint, but when I got any response at all, it implied that these Chicana faculty were simply digging up irrelevant history (subtly implying that it was for obscure political reasons). I had encountered plenty of administrative indifference throughout the years, but in this case, there wasn’t even any willingness to go through the motions of listening. I would say that I let my colleagues down, but we were all shut down and shut up before we even had a chance.

Of course, understanding something in one area may fail to generalize it into others. What did I fail to see? Probably the most blatant example of blindness to white privilege was lurking at the heart of my own research. Much of my work focuses on ³ This same sort of paternalism occurred in response to women faculty’s demand for a salary equity study and adjustment in the early 1990s. Throughout the process—from delays in conducting the study to the final grotesque procedure for petitioning for redress—we were met with obfuscation and a patronizing dismissal of our concerns.
the connections between gender and emotion. Some of my early work in the 1980s addressed the question of gender-emotion stereotypes. Surprisingly, at that time, there was next to no research on beliefs about the connection between gender and emotion. Unthinkingly, I began the way that most gender-stereotype researchers did—by using descriptions of a generic woman and generic man to explore the stereotypes. And—as research has shown time and time again—generic in the US academic world signals white.

Interestingly none of the probably all-white audience of editors, conference attendees, or other colleagues who assessed my work stopped to ask “which woman? which man?” It was only as I worked to develop the theoretical framework of this line of research that I saw what I had failed to notice before—my own work was being built on a psychology of exclusion, an approach that I had long critiqued. I wish that I could say it was easy to remedy the problem, but to this day, I continue to grapple with ways to make my research methods effectively and efficiently define significant intersections in social identity. My writing explicitly acknowledges my own experiential and epistemological position, but that feels less and less an adequate response as time goes on.

Making Something of Privilege

Promotion to full professor is the most liberating experience of academic life. I vividly recall talking with a friend from the German department who had also been promoted that year. We realized that we were now “the senior women”—the people that we had always assumed exercised some presence and power within the university. It was, indeed, a position of privilege because it brought tremendous freedom to speak your mind. In addition, the proportion of women (across racial ethnicity and departments) to men was increasing: the university had hired some key senior women (mostly white women), so there were more of us to shoulder the responsibility of pressing for change. I also had the luxury of a secure position from which to see that old problems lingered, whether because of misogynistic department culture or tokenism or both.

Overall, however, white women faculty had reached a critical mass that collectively could have an impact. The power of white women in the academy, relative to other groups, has grown, I believe, largely through the power of numbers. There are simply more of us proportionately than any group other than white men. As we know from research on tokenism in organizations, once a group can reach the critical mass of 30 percent or so, individuals have more opportunities to exercise their power as a group and are also more likely to be seen as individuals.

What did we want to change? We pressed for salary equity. We pushed for on-campus child care. We pressed for bringing women into academic leadership. And we achieved most of these goals in some form or another. I think it was the University of California culture that made some ambitious goals totally noncontroversial (e.g., bringing women of color and white women into leadership positions). Action on other issues, however, was at the mercy of oppositional, angry, white male faculty (e.g., addressing gender-based salary inequity).

We pushed for more diversity in faculty hiring. Fortunately the university administration was on board with that idea even when departments were not. For example, search committees were expected to review and pay attention to data on the proportion of women of color, white women, and men from underrepresented groups who
were in the national applicant pool (typically recent PhDs), and compare it to the
composition of their applicant pool at each stage of the search process. It would be
great to say that this was enough to inject diversity into the short list of applicants
or offers made, but more often it took additional search money and prodding from
the dean’s office to get some departments to consider a candidate who had been
overlooked in the first round or interview a candidate from the longer short list
who had not made it to the interview stage. At all steps of the search—from writ-
ing the ad through final deliberations—the words “qualified candidate” were often
used as a kind of code by obstructionist faculty who meant “substantially better than
other candidates I would be comfortable with.” In other words, “qualified” when
applicants from under-represented groups meant “spectacular but nonthreaten-
ing.” Although many faculty saw through these word games, I do not remember any
open discussion of this verbal duplicity.  

Essentially, we wanted to change the face of the faculty, but this is easier said than
done. It takes years to alter faculty composition because of the low turnover rate and
late average age of retirement. Even though tenure could be cast as a villain here
because it contributes to the slow rate of turnover, its presence makes the academy
a safe place to propose, discuss, and follow through on ideas and actions that chal-
lenge the status quo. To challenge and change the academy for the better, multiple
intersectional perspectives must be represented. This requires that those of us who
enjoy the privilege of tenure explicitly broaden the way we think about and conduct
faculty searches.

My concern is that there is not enough room to change the composition of the
faculty fundamentally without some radical restructuring of the way we hire and
reconsideration of what we value in promotion and tenure. Of course, my concern
may become a moot point through the increasing reliance on temporary, part-time
faculty—which creates another growing problem of a two-tier faculty class system,
one likely to have a preponderance of women of color and white women in tem-
porary positions. It is assuredly easier on our comfort zone to admit temporary
hires—with less status and salary than our own—into our realm, as demonstrated by
research on aversive racism (Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner 2009).

What didn’t I see or acknowledge? If anything, I underestimated the need for
coalition building to create the desired change in faculty culture. Especially in my
early years, when the campus was smaller and there were few faculty women, any
woman who wanted to be known by other faculty women was visible. There was a
general sense of connectedness. I think I knew all of the faculty women of color,
including the one African American woman in the medical school and the only
African American woman in the law school. But the campus and the proportion of
women grew, and I found myself working for change most closely with the women
faculty I already knew best, and with few exceptions, we were white. At the time, I
saw myself as working for the benefit of all women faculty. I witnessed and under-
stood the extra demands and scrutiny that women of color endure, but I believe I
presumed too much about the collective position of women and did not think suf-
ficiently that the added layers of oppression that women of color experience may
require a different approach to objectives and priorities.

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4 Our university avoided a strategy for ersatz diversification that I have seen more recently,
namely, recruiting (or appointing) to visible administrative positions women and men of
color from outside the US.
Yolanda asked me how “white women’s unwillingness to see their privilege leads to continued marginalization and oppression of women of color.” I would say that, for many of us, it is not unwillingness to see privilege, but unthinkingness, a kind of taken-for-granted state. To escape from it first requires insight into our position relative to others and then careful and consistent watchfulness not to settle back into a comfort zone. It may seem strange to view change-seeking as a comfort zone, even if it is, because there is nothing comfortable about lobbying for a pay-equity study, child care leave, and on-site child care, and the list goes on. That said, it is easy to get wrapped up in the action and miss how narrowly that action is defined; thus, some colleagues are better served than others.

Whatever our victories, constant vigilance is needed to prevent not only our own backsliding but regression by the institution itself. Studies of salary equity, for example, have shown that old gender-based inequities reappear within a few years of administrative correction. Equally as chilling is the fact that gains in diversifying faculty composition can vanish almost overnight. The experience of the University of California is telling here. Challenges to California’s affirmative-action laws in the mid-1990s resulted in the passage of an anti-affirmative-action initiative in 1996. Martha West (2000, 2007) reports that the impact on the composition of the University of California faculty across its ten campuses was striking and immediate, resulting in a precipitous drop in the proportion of women faculty (both women of color and white women). Without attentiveness to hiring and retention practices, the proportion of tenure-line women faculty fell drastically below the number available in the national hiring pool.

New Intersections, New Marginalization, New Privilege

I just turned sixty-one. Identities are not static but change or, more optimistically, evolve over one’s life course. Aging has lately introduced me to yet a new view of my privilege. It now includes recognition of my comparative financial security, an awareness heightened by the lingering effects of the Great Recession. It is ironic that I am back to where I started: social class is a significant personal intersection, but now it has a very different meaning than it had years ago. My social class position today exaggerates the unearned white privilege that has always benefited me and that I trace back to the critically important, privilege-linked opportunity to attend university. I have also come to be much more aware of age as a salient intersection. In the US youth-oriented culture, age is not an intersectional identity that is advantageous, especially not for women of any ethnic or racial group. In some situations, age is a ticket to social invisibility; in others, it evokes patronizing behavior; in still others, it elicits fear of women’s strength and potential power.

These changes in my intersectional position lead me back to the question that Yolanda asked me to consider in this essay: why are white women uncomfortable distinguishing between the realities of their lives and those of women of color? Why, when white women use the word “woman” and she interjects, “You mean white women,” do they become angry? What is happening? What does my position as a senior white woman in the academy help us understand about this denial of privilege? I cannot speak for other white women, but I can say what I have observed and what I have experienced.

Some people’s reactions are, I believe, simple to explain: there are some white women who just don’t get it—not only don’t they get it about women of color, they
don’t get it about white women. In fact, they don’t get gender politics at all, whether it is because they believe they live in a postracial, postgender, everybody’s-fine world or for other reasons. They are offended by any reminder that unearned privilege and undeserved inequity exist in the world they move through. This position is patently defensive at the core: what, me privileged? These women, I hope, are the minority.

But what about other white women in the academy? I think there are layers of explanation for what appears to be or is an angry reaction. Sometimes these women may hear “you mean white women” as an accusation, whatever the speaker intends. By this I mean that they hear that they are personally to blame for their unearned privilege. This reaction exposes their ambivalence about their position. These are their demons, not a problem in communication, and they must resolve their issues. I think it is not unlike what white male students in psychology of gender classes have to overcome—a sense that if we are talking about male privilege, the intent is not to blame them individually (after all, they signed up for the class, and other men did not) but to push them to acknowledge their unearned privilege and exercise the social responsibility that follows that acknowledgment.

At other times, the reaction is to a person’s own inattention or embarrassment at being caught for overgeneralizing (“Yes, I meant to say . . . ”). Or it may reflect fears and insecurities because prejudice has surfaced when this attitude fundamentally goes against the person’s self-concept as a nonprejudiced person (“I didn’t mean to say . . . ”). My level of awareness and how I interpret it is directly connected to the context where these interactions take place, my position in that social environment, and what I have learned or failed to learn before. Of course, it isn’t the job of my women of color colleagues to correct my inattention, but, frankly, we live in a world that encourages forgetting at every turn, and I may need help to remember what I know and believe.

At a deeper, more complicated level is another message that “you mean white women” appears to convey. Singling out whiteness defines my intersectional position solely as unidimensional white privilege, a position only interested in and capable of seeing the world through that lens. “Wait a minute,” I want to say, “you don’t know who I am.” The combined facets of my social identity connect me in complex ways to relative privilege and relative disadvantage. I am more than my whiteness. My class background, sexual orientation, age, gender, ability status, and more—not just race—are all points of intersection that define my social identity at this moment. Yet, at the same time as I mentally raise this protest, I know that the facets of my social identity—each intersection—mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another. Thus, the thread of whiteness is inevitably woven through gender, age, and every other significant dimension that defines me.

The construct of intersectionality thus both clarifies and complicates my understanding of my white privilege. In my research and writing, it complicates my study of women and gender, forcing me to spell out to whom my conclusions apply and under what conditions (Shields 2008; Shields and Bhatia 2009). On a personal level, an intersectional perspective provides a scaffold to construct my understanding of the advantages and relative disadvantages that I experience. It enables me to understand the way those positions have shifted over the years and gives me a language to describe the connections and uniqueness of different intersectional points. It acts as the reminder that I so often need to keep me from settling into the unexamined complacency of privilege.