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Feature Article

### **Our World's Changed, Bro.**

Gay Men on White Privilege during COVID-19

“What *is* white privilege, anyway?”

Bob takes a deep breath and waits, sheepishly, for at least some shade to be thrown his way. It's a Wednesday evening at the end of March, and I'm staring at a Zoom-sized wall of ten, orthodontically corrected Chicago-based gay men, cloistered from a killer virus. They are meeting online for their second Pride Project male affirmation workshop since the curse of COVID-19 has driven everyone indoors to shelter in place. The men usually assemble at the Center On Halsted, a kind of Boystown City Hall, and according to Pride Project, their purpose “is to create a safer world by growing “better” men.”

Bob cautiously continues, “I feel like it's just a line someone throws in when what they really want to do, is shut down the conversation.”

“Yeah. It's like the gripes are aimed at boxing you in and they're impossible to bounce back from,” a guy called Tim says before declaring that privilege allegations are often served by soccer moms high on Zoloft and smugness wanting to shame the “big, bad wolf.”

“Some girls are bad wolves too...” Bob snarks and shrugs, “...like Phyllis Schlafly.”

I'm here at the invitation of a friend who worries that I am becoming a churlish grass widower, sitting out COVID-19 while my husband is in South Africa—continentally distant,

minding the small hotel we own. Brian lured me by revealing that the topic of discussion will be “white privilege.” He figured that as a U.S. citizen of South African birth, I might have some thoughts to share. It’s an hour into the three-hour meeting, and already I’ve been made the brunt of some lighthearted banter and I’m randomly called “buddy.” I’ve been included in private messages asking where in the city I live (irrelevant), how I’m doing with “all this” (appreciated), and where I’ve been their whole life (flattered).

The mood is convivial. A comment by a guy sipping a martini that “it’s not drinking alone if I have my dog for company,” is met with a chat message that “it’s a problem if it’s only 9.00 a.m. LMAO.” Two new guys log in and are welcomed with yippity enthusiasm by the screen of waving hands. Displays of maleness are brisk and pointed around these parts. “I’m Ken, and I’m in the Gold Coast. Retired lawyer. Hi, everyone.” Ultra-truncated resumes are rattled off in sonorous declamations lest anyone thinks anyone sounds gay. “Eric—I’m in Andersonville.”

I feel duty-bound to share some of my intercontinental knowledge on the privileges of whiteness with Bob. Mindful of not lowering the tone, I gingerly skim over some highlights: inequality, systemic imbalances, disproportional wealth distribution, redlining, segregation, and the need for prison reform. I end with a flourish on apartheid since being a member of the white tribe gives me privileged knowledge of the inner workings of these things.

“Privilege,” I make a hold-my-drink pause before continuing, “lies in Band-Aids only matching peachy-pink skin. And we have to rethink what we mean with the word racism.” I point out that according to the *Black Agenda Report*, racism implies power and that black people in the United States have very little institutional power. “We may have seen a black president, but don’t hold your breath waiting for a black Federal Reserve Chairperson. *That* is a tempered glass ceiling.”

Pride Project is set apart from groups like Evryman [*sic*] by what it views as the “added challenge, and gift, of belonging to a minority group.” The intimacy of safe spaces encourages individuals to contribute to the collective experience and confront the realities of being gay in a

straight world. The organization focuses on confronting some of the challenges faced by GBTQ men who are raised by society to be homophobic before realizing that they themselves are, in fact, homosexual. Since the start of the COVID-19 ordeal, demand for online interaction has outpaced availability. Movements like Pride Project are under pressure to organize more events on remote conferencing media during a time of unprecedented social distancing.

Shaun—one of the few voices of diversity in the group—feels that the issue of privilege is a changeable thing. “Anyone can find their slice of privilege if they know where to look—you know what I mean?” He is joining from his parents’ home in New Orleans, where he is visiting for a month. Shaun mentions that he also attends Ebanman, a monthly gathering for professional gay black men in Chicago. “As a black man, when I deal with another person of color, the situation is reversed—a white guy wouldn’t get the access or low-down that I can get.” Shaun laughs and points out that he is on a third martini, and that his theory applies mostly to restaurants and the service industry. His tone courses. He shares that he has spent most of his career as a diversity hire, but that not having the same leg up as white colleagues, pales into insignificance compared with “crimes” like driving while black. “I can’t just grab jeans and a hoodie. White people already think I stole my own damn Audi.”

I mention a 2014 *Time* opinion piece that drew sharp criticism when its author, Princeton freshman Tal Fortgan, wrote that being made aware of his privilege creates “an imposition to actually explore how I got where I am, and a reminder that I ought to feel personally apologetic because white males seem to pull most of the strings in the world.” But Fortgan misses the point. White men *are* protected by some “patron saint of white maleness” who resides in the Fourteenth Amendment, all but guaranteeing (un)equal protection under law, barely worth the paper it’s written on if you are a black man at the end of a bad cop’s gun.

“It’s hard to talk about social distancing without considering that privilege buys more space to be distant in. We’ve seen social distancing before. It was called segregation.” Shaun was not done.

“Rona doesn’t care about privilege. It’s equal opportunity.” I ask him about Black Lives Matter and subsequent proliferation of “also matters” that, to me at least, diminish the importance of the meaning behind the BLM movement. “I don’t like groups like Blue Lives Matter and shit. I’m a cop. It’s a job. You know what I’m sayin’? I can take the blue off.” I would spend the next few days hearing those words in my head.

What emerges after two hours with the group is that our zeitgeist prohibits conversation without a coronavirus leitmotif creeping in. After a bathroom break Dylan, meneur d’hommes and a handsome man in his sixties with a wise countenance to boot, launches a chatroom diversion which he calls “Deep Diving.” He asks us to delve into our prejudice and complete the line he is typing. It reads: *Shedding my bias, if I came from a place of strength, rather than worry, I would...*

Adrián raises his hand. “I would ask for a raise.” He stops and looks down before sharing with the group that as a trucker, he is barely staying ahead with deliveries to supermarkets. “This thing also has me questioning...a lot. I’ve got no life of my own. I mean, I’ve got four kids. Two grandkids. I’m divorced from my wife, but I’ve...I’ve never really been loved, you know...by a man. Except for hookups...and stuff.” He is visibly distraught.

“This virus is hard to deal with.” Tim has been muted for a while. “I’ve been HIV positive for fifteen years—I’m undetectable. This kind of fucks that up.” It does. “I am angry at Trump, who now suddenly emerges from some fugue state, but still dragging his heels. And it’s people like me who are at risk.” The group has grown quiet, hesitant to “dive deep.” The format is not designed for grief. I don’t think the group was *made* for grief.

“Jonathan—what’s *really* going on in South Africa?” Bob again. I share my feelings of isolation and disenchantment with the postapartheid government which is flailing and floundering under the weight of such rampant corruption that the economy has been downgraded below junk status. I wonder aloud if white Africans have pissed in the goodwill soup so much that we are beyond redemption. I want to explain that the South African democracy wasn’t randomly concocted out

of micro-aggressions and myopia. Rather, it was nurtured in the fertile soil of repentance, confession, and brutally plain-spoken admissions of complicity. I need to express the anger I feel at my adopted country for electing a leader who, bereft of empathy, gloats, and basks in the praise of sycophants. I want to point out that white America has a race problem that it stoically refuses to confront. Then again, I know my frustrations, wrapped in déjà vu, will be moot because Bob thinks Africa is a country and he will ponder whether black South Africans would like the whites to leave. He will allude to some passé white guilt complex as starting point for healing—in a place he has never been—because you know, Mandela, and so instead of discussing dogma and discrimination, next time, let's talk about how privilege is the sleep aid to that American dream, Bob.

Eric takes a stab at lifting the flagging group spirit. “You know, everyone's like, wanting to know how you feel about all this and if you're doing OK? I feel that we are all getting closer, which, you know, sounds weird, but it's like people want to get into deeper conversations.” The atmosphere perks up—all mutes are off, and the simultaneous chatter adds a *Blade Runner* feel to the event. “I took a picture of a coyote on Monday as it was crossing Michigan Avenue. By coincidence, I had my camera out,” new-guy Ken says. He screen-shares a picture of the coyote on a graveyard-quiet Magnificent Mile. It reminds me of Pripyat. Judging by the silence of the group, I suspect we're all recalibrating our responses to yet another fact or image that hints at the dystopia which has become the COVID-19 hallmark. “Canada Goose uses coyote fur for their jackets.” Bob is now fully realized in his role as the Debbie Downer of the group.

By 9.00 p.m. the group dynamic ebbs, and we do an online version of a post-game huddle, chewing the collective cud. Dylan implores us to “remain strong” or something, and lands a last clunker about “embracing the feeling of being loved.” I drift off, wondering if this really is the new normal. We pledge to be “get-real bros” and that we will allow ourselves the indulgence of personal mental maintenance. What I experience most intensely, however, is abandonment. It is made all the more prominent by dropped signals, Zoom niceness, and coy flirtations with strangers who, under

old-normal non-COVID-19 circumstances, I would not spend an evening with. I imagine them in their condos scattered across this beautiful city, and like me, they are making tea, drawing a bath, or watching Rachel Maddow as we stare out of our windows. In one way or another, we always manage to take detours from isolation and viral loneliness. Each one of us caught in the melancholy of a social isolation that predates, outlives, and goes beyond, this or any other virus.



A Coyote running down an empty Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Credit: [u/strange\\_unicorn](#)

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