

# Thomas Chatterton Williams: My black privilege

By THOMAS CHATTERTON WILLIAMS  
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People participate in what organizers call a "Black Christmas" protest on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago on Dec. 24. (E. Jason Wambsgans / TNS)

A couple of years ago, I participated in an Aspen Institute symposium on the state of race. During the roundtable that followed the panels, as I spoke about my experiences growing up black in the 1990s, I was interrupted by a Latino sociologist and former gang member from UC Santa Barbara. People who care about people of color, the professor instructed me, ought to focus their energies on continued systemic racism and forget about anything so nebulous and untrustworthy as observation. Like it or not, I was the victim of greater social

forces. It did not matter that I had come to see my life as something of my own making — the evidence of my senses was useless.

I thought about this exchange often in 2015, a year in which the discussion of racism — always relevant — became omnipresent. This was mostly a good thing. Yet it is dismaying how hard it is now to have a serious conversation about black experience without coming across some version of the professor's condescending remarks.

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Perhaps the most influential book last year was Ta-Nehisi Coates' "Between the World and Me," a jeremiad whose thesis is that black people "have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels." The string of high-profile police killings of black men and women seemed to underscore Coates' point, and galvanized support for the Black Lives Matter movement, which, in turn, forced an urgent critique of the very real bias plaguing the criminal justice system. That movement has also frequently veered away from the work of reforming law enforcement practices, enlisting itself in a social media-driven culture war over far more ambiguous problems, such as microaggressions and safe spaces.

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Black people everywhere, many of our most audible voices seem to say, will always and everywhere be "the faces at the bottom of the well," as Coates put it.

But the truth is more complicated than that. I am a black man of mixed race heritage, and while every black member of my family has encountered racism, we are also the ones in the family who hold graduate degrees, own businesses and travel abroad. My black father, born in 1937 in segregated Texas, is an

exponentially more worldly man than my maternal white Protestant grandfather, whose racism always struck me more as a sad function of his provincialism or powerlessness than anything else. I don't mean to excuse the corrosive effects of his views; I simply wish to note that when I compare these two men, I do not recognize my father as the victim.

As for me, I was raised in a household in which I took as a birthright the kind of first-rate college education the majority of kids are denied. Today, I live in Paris, where I've found the freedom to exist outside the American racial binary. I have by no means achieved great wealth or status, but I've supported myself for almost a decade by reading and writing, which in itself constitutes an incredible luxury.

Of course, my personal life is just that — personal and highly particular. But is the black experience in America anything but the sum of individual lives?

In a November New York Times article about the Princeton University protests over Woodrow Wilson's racist legacy, Takim Williams, a black senior studying philosophy, said he felt "torn." He said: "My race has never been a disadvantage to me — at least that's how I view it — so I haven't had the same visceral reaction" to seeing Wilson's name strewn around campus.

Though Williams, like all his classmates, speaks from the vantage of one of the premier academic institutions in the world — a place where most whites could never hope to go — his views were dismissed on social media. He was deemed a sellout or a deluded young man en route to a painful awakening. Like a piece of paper that is both red all over and green all over, for far too many Americans of all backgrounds, the idea of a simultaneously black and advantaged person is impossible to imagine.



something other than a person set upon is at odds with the assumptions people of all colors project.

An example of the way we are expected to speak about ourselves, even in positions of privilege, is found in the 2011 documentary "Allowed to Attend," which followed several students of color at the elite Manhattan prep school Trinity. In one scene, a girl laments that she is "unable to feel pretty" when the standard of beauty around her — white, skinny, tall — is something she can never attain.

"It's hard for me to get a guy to pay attention to me in a predominantly white school," she confides, "because I'm black, and that's miserable."

Although the statement was confusing — what does it mean to say that blackness is incompatible with being slender or tall? — it's so familiar as to go unchallenged, passing for basic common sense.

What is more harmful — and pervasive in these disillusioned last days of the first black presidency — are the ways in which left-leaning discussions now share assumptions with the worst conservative and even white supremacist ideology.

Whether put forth by racists or anti-racists, the insistence that, as James Baldwin noted, it is a person's "categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended," is oppressive. When genuinely anti-racist views lead us to the same practical conclusions an open bigot would embrace — that black life is miserable compared with white life — we give white people too much credit and strengthen the status quo.

The false choice between acknowledging the repugnant history of racism that informs the present, and the wish to accept the reality that a growing number of black people may nonetheless experience the freedom to define ourselves, is infantilizing. What this current moment of protest and awakening must lead us to, if it is to lead us anywhere, is a dignified means of fully inhabiting our ever more complicated identities.

Several years ago, I came across a Ralph Ellison quote that has stayed with me ever since: "Said a young white professor of English to me after a lecture out in Northern Illinois, 'Mr. E., how does it feel to be able to go to places most black men can't go?' Said I to him, 'What you mean is, how does it feel to be able to go to places where most white men can't go.'"

Ellison's way of thinking was honest and brave in 1970 and remains uncommon today. While prejudice and inequality have proven tenacious, if we take the expression "black lives matter" seriously, we must also accept when black autonomy, equality and even privilege exist. To do otherwise is like overprescribing antibiotics: a valuable defensive tool grows impotent through overuse. Our reflexive indignation fosters a laziness of thought that, paradoxically, can reinforce some of the very anti-black biases it hopes to wipe out.

*Thomas Chatterton Williams is the author of a memoir, "Losing My Cool."*

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