

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER



WHITE FRAGILITY

WHY IT'S SO HARD

FOR **WHITE PEOPLE** TO
TALK ABOUT RACISM

ROBIN DIANGELO

ALLEN LANE

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Beacon Press 2018
First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2019

011

Copyright © Robin DiAngelo, 2018

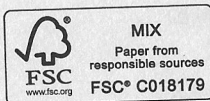
The moral right of the author has been asserted

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-141-99056-9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C018179

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

*These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy,
performed from babyhood, slip from the
conscious mind down deep into muscles . . .
and become difficult to tear out.*

—LILLIAN SMITH, *Killers of the Dream* (1949)

you can remain open as I lay out my argument, it should soon begin to make sense.

In light of the challenges raised here, I expect that white readers will have moments of discomfort reading this book. This feeling may be a sign that I've managed to unsettle the racial status quo, which is my goal. The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable. The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort. We can use it as a door out—blame the messenger and disregard the message. Or we can use it as a door in by asking, Why does this unsettle me? What would it mean for me if this were true? How does this lens change my understanding of racial dynamics? How can my unease help reveal the unexamined assumptions I have been making? Is it possible that because I am white, there are some racial dynamics that I can't see? Am I willing to consider that possibility? If I am not willing to do so, then why not?

If you are reading this and are still making your case for why you are different from other white people and why none of this applies to you, stop and take a breath. Now return to the questions above, and keep working through them. To interrupt white fragility, we need to build our capacity to sustain the discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of being racially unmoored, the discomfort of racial humility. Our next task is to understand how the forces of racial socialization are constantly at play. The inability to acknowledge these forces inevitably leads to the resistance and defensiveness of white fragility. To increase the racial stamina that counters white fragility, we must reflect on the whole of our identities—and our racial group identity in particular. For white people, this means first struggling with what it means to be white.

CHAPTER 2

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Many of us have been taught to believe that there are distinct biological and genetic differences between races. This biology accounts for visual differences such as skin color, hair texture, and eye shape, and traits that we believe we see such as sexuality, athleticism, or mathematical ability. The idea of race as a biological construct makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions we see in society are natural. But race, like gender, is socially constructed. The differences we see with our eyes—differences such as hair texture and eye color—are superficial and emerged as adaptations to geography.¹ Under the skin, there is no true biological race. The external characteristics that we use to define race are unreliable indicators of genetic variation between any two people.²

However, the belief that race and the differences associated with it are biological is deep-seated. To challenge the belief in race as biology, we need to understand the social and economic investments that drove science to organize society and its resources along racial lines and why this organization is so enduring.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

Freedom and equality—regardless of religion or class status—were radical new ideas when the United States was formed. At the same time, the US economy was based on the abduction and enslavement of African

people, the displacement and genocide of Indigenous people, and the annexation of Mexican lands. Further, the colonizers who came were not free of their own cultural conditioning; they brought with them deeply internalized patterns of domination and submission.³

The tension between the noble ideology of equality and the cruel reality of genocide, enslavement, and colonization had to be reconciled. Thomas Jefferson (who himself owned hundreds of enslaved people) and others turned to science. Jefferson suggested that there were natural differences between the races and asked scientists to find them.⁴ If science could prove that black people were naturally and inherently inferior (he saw Indigenous people as culturally deficient—a shortcoming that could be remedied), there would be no contradiction between our professed ideals and our actual practices. There were, of course, enormous economic interests in justifying enslavement and colonization. Race science was driven by these social and economic interests, which came to establish cultural norms and legal rulings that legitimized racism and the privileged status of those defined as white.

Drawing on the work of Europeans before them, American scientists began searching for the answer to the perceived inferiority of non-Anglo groups. Illustrating the power of our questions to shape the knowledge we validate, these scientists didn't ask, "Are blacks (and others) inferior?" They asked, "Why are blacks (and others) inferior?" In less than a century, Jefferson's suggestion of racial difference became commonly accepted scientific "fact."⁵

The idea of racial inferiority was created to justify unequal treatment; belief in racial inferiority is not what triggered unequal treatment. Nor was fear of difference. As Ta-Nehisi Coates states, "But race is the child of racism, not the father."⁶ He means that first we exploited people for their resources, not according to how they looked. Exploitation came first, and then the ideology of unequal races to justify this exploitation followed. Similarly, historian Ibram Kendi, in his National Book Award-winning work *Stamped from the Beginning*, explains: "The beneficiaries of slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration have produced racist ideas of Black people being best suited for or deserving

of the confines of slavery, segregation, or the jail cell. Consumers of these racist ideas have been led to believe there is something wrong with Black people, and not the policies that have enslaved, oppressed, and confined so many Black people."⁷ Kendi goes on to argue that if we truly believe that all humans are equal, then disparity in condition can only be the result of systemic discrimination.

THE PERCEPTION OF RACE

Race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage. The term "white" first appeared in colonial law in the late 1600s. By 1790, people were asked to claim their race on the census, and by 1825, the perceived degrees of blood determined who would be classified as Indian. From the late 1800s through the early twentieth century, as waves of immigrants entered the United States, the concept of a white race was solidified.⁸

When slavery in the United States was abolished in 1865, whiteness remained profoundly important as legalized racist exclusion and violence against African Americans continued in new forms. To have citizenship—and the rights citizenship imbued—you had to be legally classified as white. People with nonwhite racial classifications began to petition the courts to be reclassified. Now the courts were in the position to decide who was white and who was not. For example, Armenians won their case to be reclassified as white with the help of a scientific witness who claimed they were scientifically "Caucasian." In 1922, the Supreme Court ruled that the Japanese could not be legally white, because they were scientifically classified as "Mongoloid." A year later, the court stated that Asian Indians were not legally white, even though they were also scientifically classified as "Caucasian." To justify these contradictory rulings, the court stated that being white was based on the common understanding of the white man. In other words, people already seen as white got to decide who was white.⁹

The metaphor of the United States as the great melting pot, in which immigrants from around the world come together and melt into one

unified society through the process of assimilation, is a cherished idea. Once new immigrants learn English and adapt to American culture and customs, they become Americans. In reality, only European immigrants were allowed to melt, or assimilate, into dominant culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because, regardless of their ethnic identities, these immigrants were perceived to be white and thus could belong.

Race is a social construction, and thus who is included in the category of white changes over time. As the Italian American man from my workshop noted, European ethnic groups such as the Irish, Italian, and Polish were excluded in the past. But where they may have been originally divided in terms of origin, European immigrants became racially united through assimilation.¹⁰ This process of assimilation—speaking English, eating “American” foods, discarding customs that set them apart—reified the perception of American as white. Racial identification in the larger society plays a fundamental role in identity development, in how we see ourselves.

If we “look white,” we are treated as white in society at large. For example, people of southern European heritage, such as Spanish or Portuguese, or from the former Soviet Union, especially if they are new immigrants or were raised by immigrants, are likely to have a stronger sense of ethnic identity than will someone of the same ethnicity whose ancestors have been here for generations. Yet although their internal identity may be different, if they “pass” as white, they will still have a white experience externally. If they look white, the default assumption will be that they are white and thus they will be responded to as white. The incongruity between their internal ethnic identity (e.g., Portuguese, Spanish) and external racial experience (white) would provide a more complex or nuanced sense of identity than that of someone who doesn’t have a strong ethnic identity. However, they are still granted white status and the advantages that come with that status. Today, these advantages are *de facto* rather than *de jure*, but are nonetheless powerful in shaping our daily lives. It is on each of us who pass as white to identify how these advantages shape us, not to deny them wholesale.

Because race is a product of social forces, it has also manifested itself along class lines; poor and working-class people were not always perceived as fully white.¹¹ In a society that grants fewer opportunities to those not seen as white, economic and racial forces are inseparable. However, poor and working-class whites were eventually granted full entry into whiteness as a way to exploit labor. If poor whites were focused on feeling superior to those below them in status, they were less focused on those above. The poor and working classes, if united across race, could be a powerful force. But racial divisions have served to keep them from organizing against the owning class who profits from their labor.¹² Still, although working-class whites experience classism, they aren’t also experiencing racism. I grew up in poverty and felt a deep sense of shame about being poor. But I also always knew that I was white, and that it was better to be white.

RACISM

To understand racism, we need to first distinguish it from mere prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is pre-judgment about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs. Prejudice consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little or no experience and then are projected onto everyone from that group. Our prejudices tend to be shared because we swim in the same cultural water and absorb the same messages.

All humans have prejudice; we cannot avoid it. If I am aware that a social group exists, I will have gained information about that group from the society around me. This information helps me make sense of the group from my cultural framework. People who claim not to be prejudiced are demonstrating a profound lack of self-awareness. Ironically, they are also demonstrating the power of socialization—we have all been taught in schools, through movies, and from family members, teachers, and clergy that it is important not to be prejudiced. Unfortunately, the prevailing belief that prejudice is bad causes us to deny its unavoidable reality.

Prejudice is foundational to understanding white fragility because suggesting that white people have racial prejudice is perceived as saying that we are bad and should be ashamed. We then feel the need to defend our character rather than explore the inevitable racial prejudices we have absorbed so that we might change them. In this way, our misunderstanding about what prejudice is protects it.

Discrimination is *action* based on prejudice. These actions include ignoring, exclusion, threats, ridicule, slander, and violence. For example, if hatred is the emotion we feel because of our prejudice, extreme acts of discrimination, such as violence, may follow. These forms of discrimination are generally clear and recognizable. But if what we feel is more subtle, such as mild discomfort, the discrimination is likely to also be subtle, even hard to detect. Most of us can acknowledge that we do feel some unease around certain groups of people, if only a heightened sense of self-consciousness. But this feeling doesn't come naturally. Our unease comes from living separate from a group of people while simultaneously absorbing incomplete or erroneous information about them. When the prejudice causes me to act differently—I am less relaxed around you or I avoid interacting with you—I am now discriminating. Prejudice always manifests itself in action because the way I see the world drives my actions in the world. Everyone has prejudice, and everyone discriminates. Given this reality, inserting the qualifier “reverse” is nonsensical.

When a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, professor of American studies and anthropology at Wesleyan University, explains, “Racism is a structure, not an event.”¹³ American women's struggle for suffrage illustrates how institutional power transforms prejudice and discrimination into structures of oppression. Everyone has prejudice and discriminates, but structures of oppression go well beyond individuals. While women could be prejudiced and discriminate against men in individual interactions, women as a group could not deny men their civil

rights. But men as a group could and did deny women their civil rights. Men could do so because they controlled all the institutions. Therefore, the only way women could gain suffrage was for men to grant it to them; women could not grant suffrage to themselves.

Similarly, racism—like sexism and other forms of oppression—occurs when a racial group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. This authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically. Racism is a system. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the intersection of race and gender in the example of suffrage; *white* men granted suffrage to women, but only granted full access to *white* women. Women of color were denied full access until the Voting Rights Act of 1964.

The system of racism begins with ideology, which refers to the big ideas that are reinforced throughout society. From birth, we are conditioned into accepting and not questioning these ideas. Ideology is reinforced across society, for example, in schools and textbooks, political speeches, movies, advertising, holiday celebrations, and words and phrases. These ideas are also reinforced through social penalties when someone questions an ideology and through the limited availability of alternative ideas. Ideologies are the frameworks through which we are taught to represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence.¹⁴ Because these ideas are constantly reinforced, they are very hard to avoid believing and internalizing. Examples of ideology in the United States include individualism, the superiority of capitalism as an economic system and democracy as a political system, consumerism as a desirable lifestyle, and meritocracy (anyone can succeed if he or she works hard).

The racial ideology that circulates in the United States rationalizes racial hierarchies as the outcome of a natural order resulting from either genetics or individual effort or talent. Those who don't succeed are just not as naturally capable, deserving, or hardworking. Ideologies that obscure racism as a system of inequality are perhaps the most powerful

racial forces because once we accept our positions within racial hierarchies, these positions seem natural and difficult to question, even when we are disadvantaged by them. In this way, very little external pressure needs to be applied to keep people in their places; once the rationalizations for inequality are internalized, both sides will uphold the relationship.

Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society. It is not limited to a single act or person. Nor does it move back and forth, one day benefiting whites and another day (or even era) benefiting people of color. The direction of power between white people and people of color is historic, traditional, and normalized in ideology. Racism differs from individual racial prejudice and racial discrimination in the historical accumulation and ongoing use of institutional power and authority to support the prejudice and to systematically enforce discriminatory behaviors with far-reaching effects.

People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against white people, but they lack the social and institutional power that transforms their prejudice and discrimination into racism; the impact of their prejudice on whites is temporary and contextual. Whites hold the social and institutional positions in society to infuse their racial prejudice into the laws, policies, practices, and norms of society in a way that people of color do not. A person of color may refuse to wait on me if I enter a shop, but people of color cannot pass legislation that prohibits me and everyone like me from buying a home in a certain neighborhood.

People of color may also hold prejudices and discriminate against their own and other groups of color, but this bias ultimately holds them down and, in this way, reinforces the system of racism that still benefits whites. Racism is a society-wide dynamic that occurs at the group level. When I say that only whites can be racist, I mean that in the United States, only whites have the collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color. People of color do not have this power and privilege over white people.

Many whites see racism as a thing of the past, and of course, we are well served not to acknowledge it in the present. Yet racial disparity

between whites and people of color continues to exist in every institution across society, and in many cases is increasing rather than decreasing. Although segregation may make these disparities difficult for whites to see and easy to deny, racial disparities and their effects on overall quality of life have been extensively documented by a wide range of agencies. Among those documenting these challenges are the US Census Bureau, the United Nations, academic groups such as the UCLA Civil Rights Project and the Metropolis Project, and nonprofits such as the NAACP and the Anti-Defamation League.¹⁵

Scholar Marilyn Frye uses the metaphor of a birdcage to describe the interlocking forces of oppression.¹⁶ If you stand close to a birdcage and press your face against the wires, your perception of the bars will disappear and you will have an almost unobstructed view of the bird. If you turn your head to examine one wire of the cage closely, you will not be able to see the other wires. If your understanding of the cage is based on this myopic view, you may not understand why the bird doesn't just go around the single wire and fly away. You might even assume that the bird liked or chose its place in the cage.

But if you stepped back and took a wider view, you would begin to see that the wires come together in an interlocking pattern—a pattern that works to hold the bird firmly in place. It now becomes clear that a network of systematically related barriers surrounds the bird. Taken individually, none of these barriers would be that difficult for the bird to get around, but because they interlock with each other, they thoroughly restrict the bird. While some birds may escape from the cage, most will not. And certainly those that do escape will have to navigate many barriers that birds outside the cage do not.

The birdcage metaphor helps us understand why racism can be so hard to see and recognize: we have a limited view. Without recognizing how our position in relation to the bird defines how much of the cage we can see, we rely on single situations, exceptions, and anecdotal evidence for our understanding, rather than on broader, interlocking patterns. Although there are always exceptions, the patterns are consistent and well documented: People of color are confined and shaped by forces

and barriers that are not accidental, occasional, or avoidable. These forces are systematically related to each other in ways that restrict their movement.

Individual whites may be “against” racism, but they still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group. David Wellman succinctly summarizes racism as “a system of advantage based on race.”¹⁷ These advantages are referred to as *white privilege*, a sociological concept referring to advantages that are taken for granted by whites and that cannot be similarly enjoyed by people of color in the same context (government, community, workplace, schools, etc.).¹⁸ But let me be clear: stating that racism privileges whites does not mean that individual white people do not struggle or face barriers. It does mean that we do not face the particular barriers of racism.

As with prejudice and discrimination, we can remove the qualifier *reverse* from any discussion of racism. By definition, racism is a deeply embedded historical system of institutional power. It is not fluid and does not change direction simply because a few individuals of color manage to excel.

WHITENESS AS A POSITION OF STATUS

Being perceived as white carries more than a mere racial classification; it is a social and institutional status and identity imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges that are denied to others. Reflecting on the social and economic advantages of being classified as white, critical race scholar Cheryl Harris coined the phrase “whiteness as property.” Tracing the evolving concept of whiteness across legal history, she explains:

By according whiteness an actual legal status, an aspect of identity was converted into an external object of property, moving whiteness from privileged identity to a vested interest. The law’s construction of whiteness defined and affirmed critical aspects of identity (who is white); of

privilege (what benefits accrue to that status); and, of property (what legal entitlements arise from that status). Whiteness at various times signifies and is deployed as identity, status, and property, sometimes singularly, sometimes in tandem.¹⁹

Harris’s analysis is useful because it shows how identity and perceptions of identity can grant or deny resources. These resources include self-worth, visibility, positive expectations, psychological freedom from the tether of race, freedom of movement, the sense of belonging, and a sense of entitlement to all the above.

We might think of whiteness as all the aspects of being white— aspects that go beyond mere physical differences and are related to the meaning and resultant material advantage of being defined as white in society: what is granted and how it is granted based on that meaning. Instead of the typical focus on how racism hurts people of color, to examine whiteness is to focus on how racism elevates white people.

Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm. Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone. White people find it very difficult to think about whiteness as a specific state of being that could have an impact on one’s life and perceptions.

People of color, including W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin, have been writing about whiteness for decades, if not centuries. These writers urged white people to turn their attention onto themselves to explore what it means to be white in a society that is so divided by race. For example, in 1946, a French reporter asked expatriate writer Richard Wright his thoughts on the “Negro problem” in the United States. Wright replied, “There isn’t any Negro problem; there is only a white problem.”²⁰

As Wright pointed out, racism against people of color doesn’t occur in a vacuum. Yet the idea that racism in the United States can operate

outside white people is reinforced through celebrations such as Black History Month, in which we study the Civil War and civil rights eras as if they occurred separately from all US history. In addition to the general way these color-based celebrations take whites out of the equation, there are specific ways that the achievements of people of color are separated from the overall social context and depoliticized, for instance, in stories we tell about black cultural heroes.

The story of Jackie Robinson is a classic example of how whiteness obscures racism by rendering whites, white privilege, and racist institutions invisible. Robinson is often celebrated as the first African American to break the color line and play in major-league baseball. While Robinson was certainly an amazing baseball player, this story line depicts him as racially special, a black man who broke the color line himself. The subtext is that Robinson finally had what it took to play with whites, as if no black athlete before him was strong enough to compete at that level. Imagine if instead, the story went something like this: "Jackie Robinson, the first black man whites allowed to play major-league baseball." This version makes a critical distinction because no matter how fantastic a player Robinson was, he simply could not play in the major leagues if whites—who controlled the institution—did not allow it. Were he to walk onto the field before being granted permission by white owners and policy makers, the police would have removed him.

Narratives of racial exceptionality obscure the reality of ongoing institutional white control while reinforcing the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy. They also do whites a disservice by obscuring the white allies who, behind the scenes, worked hard and long to open the field to African American players. These allies could serve as much-needed role models for other whites (although we also need to acknowledge that in the case of the desegregation of baseball, there was an economic incentive for these allies).

I am not against Black History Month. But it should be celebrated in a way that doesn't reinforce whiteness. For those who ask why there is

no White History Month, the answer illustrates how whiteness works. White history is implied in the absence of its acknowledgment; white history is the norm for history. Thus, our need to qualify that we are speaking about black history or women's history suggests that these contributions lie outside the norm.

Ruth Frankenberg, a premier white scholar in the field of whiteness studies, describes whiteness as multidimensional. These dimensions include a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society, and a set of cultural practices that are not named or acknowledged.²¹ To say that whiteness is a location of structural advantage is to recognize that to be white is to be in a privileged position within society and its institutions—to be seen as an insider and to be granted the benefits of belonging. This position automatically bestows unearned advantages. Whites control all major institutions of society and set the policies and practices that others must live by. Although rare individual people of color may be inside the circles of power—Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, Marco Rubio, Barack Obama—they support the status quo and do not challenge racism in any way significant enough to be threatening. Their positions of power do not mean these public figures don't experience racism (Obama endured insults and resistance previously unheard-of), but the status quo remains intact.

To say that whiteness is a standpoint is to say that a significant aspect of white identity is to see oneself as an individual, outside or innocent of race—"just human." This standpoint views white people and their interests as central to, and representative of, humanity. Whites also produce and reinforce the dominant narratives of society—such as individualism and meritocracy—and use these narratives to explain the positions of other racial groups. These narratives allow us to congratulate ourselves on our success within the institutions of society and blame others for their lack of success.

To say that that whiteness includes a set of cultural practices that are not recognized by white people is to understand racism as a network

of norms and actions that consistently create advantage for whites and disadvantage for people of color. These norms and actions include basic rights and benefits of the doubt, purportedly granted to all but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people. The dimensions of racism benefiting white people are usually invisible to whites. We are unaware of, or do not acknowledge, the meaning of race and its impact on our own lives. Thus we do not recognize or admit to white privilege and the norms that produce and maintain it. It follows that to name whiteness, much less suggest that it has meaning and grants unearned advantage, will be deeply disconcerting and destabilizing, thus triggering the protective responses of white fragility.

WHITE SUPREMACY

When we look back to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, we might think of white supremacists as the people we saw in photos and on television, beating blacks at lunch counters, bombing black churches, and screaming at little Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to integrate an all-white elementary school in Louisiana in 1960. Today we might think of the self-described “alt-right” white nationalists marching with torches in Virginia and shouting “blood and soil” as they protest the removal of Confederate war memorials. Most white people do not identify with these images of white supremacists and so take great umbrage to the term being used more broadly. For sociologists and those involved in current racial justice movements, however, white supremacy is a descriptive and useful term to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as white and the practices based on this assumption. White supremacy in this context does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination. Again, racism is a structure, not an event. While hate groups that openly proclaim white superiority do exist and this term refers to them also, the popular consciousness solely associates *white supremacy* with these radical groups. This reductive definition obscures

the reality of the larger system at work and prevents us from addressing this system.

While racism in other cultures exists based on different ideas of which racial group is superior to another, the United States is a global power, and through movies and mass media, corporate culture, advertising, US-owned manufacturing, military presence, historical colonial relations, missionary work, and other means, white supremacy is circulated globally. This powerful ideology promotes the idea of whiteness as the ideal for humanity well beyond the West. White supremacy is especially relevant in countries that have a history of colonialism by Western nations.

In his book *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills argues that the racial contract is a tacit and sometimes explicit agreement among members of the peoples of Europe to assert, promote, and maintain the ideal of white supremacy in relation to all other people of the world. This agreement is an intentional and integral characteristic of the social contract, underwriting all other social contracts. White supremacy has shaped a system of global European domination: it brings into existence whites and nonwhites, full persons and subpersons. It influences white moral theory and moral psychology and is imposed on nonwhites through ideological conditioning and violence. Mills says that “what has usually been taken . . . as the racist ‘exception’ has really been the rule; what has been taken as the ‘rule’ . . . [racial equality] . . . has really been the exception.”²²

Mills describes white supremacy as “the unnamed political system that has made the modern world what it is today.”²³ He notes that although white supremacy has shaped Western political thought for hundreds of years, it is never named. In this way, white supremacy is rendered invisible while other political systems—socialism, capitalism, fascism—are identified and studied. In fact, much of white supremacy’s power is drawn from its invisibility, the taken-for-granted aspects that underwrite all other political and social contracts.

Mills makes two points that are critical to our understanding of white fragility. First, white supremacy is never acknowledged. Second, we cannot study any sociopolitical system without addressing how that

system is mediated by race. The failure to acknowledge white supremacy protects it from examination and holds it in place.

In Ta-Nehisi Coates's essay "The Case for Reparations," he makes a similar point:

To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, to pretend that the problems of a dual society are the same as the problems of unregulated capitalism, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying. The lie ignores the fact that reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same. . . . [W]hite supremacy is not merely the work of hotheaded demagogues, or a matter of false consciousness, but a force so fundamental to America that it is difficult to imagine the country without it.²⁴

In light of the reality of historical and continual white supremacy, white complaints about "reverse" racism by programs intended to ameliorate the most basic levels of discrimination are profoundly petty and delusional. As Mills summarizes:

Both globally and within particular nation states, then, white people, Europeans and their descendants, continue to benefit from the Racial Contract, which creates a world in their cultural image, political states differentially favoring their interests, an economy structured around the racial exploitation of others, and a moral psychology . . . skewed consciously or unconsciously toward privileging them, taking the status quo of differing racial entitlement as normatively legitimate, and not to be investigated further.²⁵

Race scholars use the term *white supremacy* to describe a sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefits those defined and perceived as white. This system of structural power privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group. If,

for example, we look at the racial breakdown of the people who control our institutions, we see telling numbers in 2016–2017:

- Ten richest Americans: 100 percent white (seven of whom are among the ten richest in the world)
- US Congress: 90 percent white
- US governors: 96 percent white
- Top military advisers: 100 percent white
- President and vice president: 100 percent white
- US House Freedom Caucus: 99 percent white
- Current US presidential cabinet: 91 percent white
- People who decide which TV shows we see: 93 percent white
- People who decide which books we read: 90 percent white
- People who decide which news is covered: 85 percent white
- People who decide which music is produced: 95 percent white
- People who directed the one hundred top-grossing films of all time, worldwide: 95 percent white
- Teachers: 82 percent white
- Full-time college professors: 84 percent white
- Owners of men's professional football teams: 97 percent white²⁶

These numbers are not describing minor organizations. Nor are these institutions special-interest groups. The groups listed above are the most powerful in the country. These numbers are not a matter of "good people" versus "bad people." They represent power and control by a racial group that is in the position to disseminate and protect its own self-image, worldview, and interests across the entire society.

One of the most potent ways white supremacy is disseminated is through media representations, which have a profound impact on how we see the world. Those who write and direct films are our cultural narrators; the stories they tell shape our worldviews. Given that the majority of white people live in racial isolation from people of color (and black people in particular) and have very few authentic cross-racial

relationships, white people are deeply influenced by the racial messages in films. Consider one statistic from the preceding list: of the hundred top-grossing films worldwide in 2016, ninety-five were directed by white Americans (ninety-nine of them by men). That is an incredibly homogeneous group of directors. Because these men are most likely at the top of the social hierarchy in terms of race, class, and gender, they are the least likely to have a wide variety of authentic egalitarian cross-racial relationships. Yet they are in the position to represent the racial “other.” Their representations of the “other” are thereby extremely narrow and problematic, and yet they are reinforced over and over. Further, these biased representations have been disseminated worldwide; while white supremacy originated in the West, it circulates globally.

White resistance to the term *white supremacy* prevents us from examining how these messages shape us. Explicit white supremacists understand this. Christian Picciolini, a former white nationalist, explains that white nationalists recognized that they had to distance themselves from the terms *racist* and *white supremacy* to gain broader appeal. He describes the “alt-right” and white nationalist movements as the culmination of a thirty-year effort to massage the white supremacist message: “We recognized back then that we were turning away the average American white racists and that we needed to look and speak more like our neighbors. The idea we had was to blend in, normalize, make the message more palatable.”²⁷ Derek Black, godson of David Duke and former key youth leader in the white nationalist movement, explains: “My whole talk was the fact that you could run as Republicans, and say things like we need to shut down immigration, we need to fight affirmative action, we need to end globalism, and you could win these positions, maybe as long as you didn’t get outed as a white nationalist and get all the controversy that comes along with it.”²⁸

Today’s white nationalists are not the first to recognize the importance of distancing oneself from more-explicit expressions of white supremacy. In a 1981 interview, Lee Atwater, Republican political strategist and adviser to presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, explained what came to be known as “the Southern strategy”—how

to appeal to the racism of white Southern voters without pronouncing it openly:

You start out in 1954 by saying, “Nigger, nigger, nigger.” By 1968 you can’t say “nigger”—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states’ rights and all that stuff. You’re getting so abstract now [that] you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. . . . But I’m saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me—because obviously sitting around saying, “We want to cut this,” is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger.”²⁹

Our umbrage at the term *white supremacy* only serves to protect the processes it describes and obscure the mechanisms of racial inequality. Still, I understand that the term is very charged for many white people, especially older white people who associate the term with extreme hate groups. However, I hope to have made clear that white supremacy is something much more pervasive and subtle than the actions of explicit white nationalists. White supremacy describes the culture we live in, a culture that positions white people and all that is associated with them (whiteness) as ideal. White supremacy is more than the idea that whites are superior to people of color; it is the deeper premise that supports this idea—the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm.

Naming white supremacy changes the conversation in two key ways: It makes the system visible and shifts the locus of change onto white people, where it belongs. It also points us in the direction of the lifelong work that is uniquely ours, challenging our complicity with and investment in racism. This does not mean that people of color do not play a part but that the full weight of responsibility rests with those who control the institutions.

THE WHITE RACIAL FRAME

Sociologist Joe Feagin coined the term “white racial frame” to describe how whites circulate and reinforce racial messages that position whites as superior.³⁰ In this way, the white racial frame rests on, and is a key mechanism of, white supremacy. The frame is deep and extensive, with thousands of stored “bits.” These bits are pieces of cultural information—images, stories, interpretations, omissions, silences—that are passed along from one person and group to the next, and from one generation to the next. The bits circulate both explicitly and implicitly, for example, through movies, television, news, and other media and stories told to us by family and friends. By constantly using the white racial frame to interpret social relations and integrating new bits, whites reinscribe the frame ever deeper.

At the most general level, the racial frame views whites as superior in culture and achievement and views people of color as generally of less social, economic, and political consequence; people of color are seen as inferior to whites in the making and keeping of the nation. At the next level of framing, because social institutions (education, medicine, law, government, finance, and the military) are controlled by whites, white dominance is unremarkable and taken for granted. That whites are disproportionately enriched and privileged via these institutions is also taken for granted; we are entitled to more privileges and resources because we are “better” people. At the deepest level of the white frame, negative stereotypes and images of racial others as inferior are reinforced and accepted. At this level, corresponding emotions such as fear, contempt, and resentment are also stored.

The frame includes both negative understandings of people of color and positive understandings of whites and white institutions. It is so internalized, so submerged, that it is never consciously considered or challenged by most whites. To get a sense of the white racial frame below the surface of your conscious awareness, think back to the earliest time that you were aware that people from racial groups other than your own existed. People of color recall a sense of always having been aware, while most white people recall being aware by at least

age five. If you lived in a primarily white environment and are having trouble remembering, think about Disney movies, music videos, sports heroes, Chinese food, Aunt Jemima syrup, Uncle Ben’s rice, the Taco Bell Chihuahua, Columbus Day, Apu from *The Simpsons*, and the donkey from *Shrek*.

Reflect on these representations and ask yourself, Did your parents tell you that race didn’t matter and that everyone was equal? Did they have many friends of color? If people of color did not live in your neighborhood, why didn’t they? Where did they live? What images, sounds, and smells did you associate with these other neighborhoods? What kind of activities did you think went on there? Were you encouraged to visit these neighborhoods, or were you discouraged from visiting these neighborhoods?

What about schools? What made a school good? Who went to good schools? Who went to bad schools? If the schools in your area were racially segregated (as most schools in the United States are), why didn’t you attend school together? If this is because you lived in different neighborhoods, why did you live in different neighborhoods? Were “their” schools considered equal to, better than, or worse than, yours? If there was busing in your town, in which direction did it go; who was bused into whose schools? Why did the busing go in one direction and not the other?

If you went to school together, did you all sit together in the cafeteria? If not, why not? Were the honors or advanced placement classes and the lower-track classes equally racially integrated? If not, why not?

Now think about your teachers. When was the first time you had a teacher of the same race as yours? Did you often have teachers of the same race as your own?

Most white people, in reflecting on these questions, realize that they almost always had white teachers; many did not have a teacher of color until college. Conversely, most people of color have rarely if ever had a teacher who reflected their own race(s). Why is it important to reflect on our teachers in our effort to uncover our racial socialization and the messages we receive from schools?

As you answer these questions, also consider which races were geographically closer to you than others. If your school was perceived as racially diverse, which races were more represented, and how did the racial distribution affect the sense of value associated with the school? For example, if white and Asian-heritage students were the primary racial groups in your school, your school was likely to be seen as better than a school with more representation from black and Latinx students. What were you learning about the racial hierarchy and your place in it from geography?

If you lived and went to school in racial segregation as most people in the United States do, you had to make sense of the incongruity between the claim that everyone was equal and the lived reality of segregation. If you lived in an integrated neighborhood and/or attended an integrated school, you had to make sense of the segregation in most of society outside the school, especially in segments considered of higher value or quality. It is also highly likely that there was still racial separation within the school. And for those of us who may have grown up in more integrated environments due to social class or changing neighborhood demographics, it is unlikely that integration has been sustained in our current lives. Reflection on these questions provides an entry point into the deeper messages that we all absorb and that shape our behavior and responses below the conscious level.

In the US, race is encoded in geography. I can name every neighborhood in my city and its racial makeup. I can also tell you if a neighborhood is coming up or down in terms of home equity, and this will be based primarily on how its racial demographics are changing. Going up? It will be getting whiter. Going down? It will be getting less white. When I was a child, posters on my school walls and television shows like *Sesame Street* told me explicitly that all people were equal, but we simply do not live together across race. I had to make sense of this separation. If we were equal, why did we live separately? It must be normal and natural to live apart (certainly no adult in my life was complaining about the separation). And at a deeper level, it must be righteous that we live apart, since we are better people. How did I get the message that

we were better people? Consider how we talk about white neighborhoods: good, safe, sheltered, clean, desirable. By definition, other spaces (not white) are bad, dangerous, crime-ridden and to be avoided; these neighborhoods are not positioned as sheltered and innocent. In these ways, the white racial frame is under construction.

Predominately white neighborhoods are not outside of race—they are *teeming* with race. Every moment we spend in those environments reinforces powerful aspects of the white racial frame, including a limited worldview, a reliance on deeply problematic depictions of people of color, comfort in segregation with no sense that there might be value in knowing people of color, and internalized superiority. In turn, our capacity to engage constructively across racial lines becomes profoundly limited.

To illustrate an early lesson in white racial framing, imagine that a white mother and her white child are in the grocery store. The child sees a black man and shouts out, “Mommy, that man’s skin is black!” Several people, including the black man, turn to look. How do you imagine the mother would respond? Most people would immediately put their finger to their mouth and say, “Shush!” When white people are asked what the mother might be feeling, most agree that she is likely to feel anxiety, tension, and embarrassment. Indeed, many of us have had similar experiences wherein the message was clear: we should not talk openly about race.

When I use this example with my students, sometimes a student will say that the mother is just teaching her child to be polite. In other words, naming this man’s race would be impolite. But why? What is shameful about being black—so shameful that we should pretend that we don’t notice?³¹ The mother’s reaction would probably be the same if the man had a visible disability of some kind or was obese. But if the child had seen a white person and shouted out, “Mommy, that man’s skin is white!” it is unlikely that the mother would feel the same anxiety, tension, and embarrassment that would have accompanied the first statement.

Now imagine that the child had shouted out how handsome the man was, or how strong. These statements would probably be met with

chuckles and smiles. The child would not likely be shushed, because we consider these statements compliments.

The example of a child publicly calling out a black man's race and embarrassing the mother illustrates several aspects of white children's racial socialization. First, children learn that it is taboo to openly talk about race. Second, they learn that people should pretend not to notice undesirable aspects that define some people as less valuable than others (a large birthmark on someone's face, a person using a wheelchair). These lessons manifest themselves later in life, when white adults drop their voices before naming the race of someone who isn't white (and especially so if the race being named is *black*), as if blackness were shameful or the word itself were impolite. If we add all the comments we make about people of color privately, when we are less careful, we may begin to recognize how white children are taught to navigate race.

CHAPTER 3

RACISM AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

"Children today are so open. When the old folks die off, we will finally be free of racism."

"I grew up in a small rural community, so I was very sheltered. I didn't learn anything about racism."

"I judge people by what they do, not who they are."

"I don't see color; I see people."

"We are all red under the skin."

"I marched in the sixties."

New racism is a term coined by film professor Martin Barker to capture the ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist.¹ Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva captures this dynamic in the title of his book *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*.² He says that though virtually no one claims to be racist

ways than in the past. Today we have a cultural norm that insists we hide our racism from people of color and deny it among ourselves, but not that we actually challenge it. In fact, we are socially penalized for challenging racism.

I am often asked if I think the younger generation is less racist. No, I don't. In some ways, racism's adaptations over time are more sinister than concrete rules such as Jim Crow. The adaptations produce the same outcome (people of color are blocked from moving forward) but have been put in place by a dominant white society that won't or can't admit to its beliefs. This intransigence results in another pillar of white fragility: the refusal to know.

CHAPTER 4

HOW DOES RACE SHAPE THE LIVES OF WHITE PEOPLE?

White People: I don't want you to understand me better; I want you to understand yourselves. Your survival has never depended on your knowledge of white culture. In fact, it's required your ignorance.

—Ijeoma Oluo

To understand how white people become so difficult in conversations about race, we need to understand the underlying foundation of white fragility: how being white shapes our perspectives, experiences, and responses. Every aspect of being white discussed in this chapter is shared by virtually all white people in the Western context generally and the US context specifically. At the same time, no person of color in this context can make these same claims.

BELONGING

I was born into a culture in which I belonged, racially. Indeed, the forces of racism were shaping me even before I took my first breath. If I were born in a hospital, regardless of the decade in which I was born, any hospital would be open to me because my parents were white. If my parents attended a childbirth preparation class, the instructor was most likely white, the videos they watched in class most likely depicted white

people, and their fellow classmates with whom they built connections and community were also most likely white. When my parents read their birthing manuals and other written materials, the pictures most likely depicted primarily white mothers and fathers, doctors and nurses. If they took a parenting class, the theories and models of child development were based on white racial identity. The doctors and nurses attending my birth were in all likelihood white. Although my parents may have been anxious about the birth process, they did not have to worry about how they would be treated by the hospital staff because of their race. The years of research demonstrating racial discrimination in health care assure me that my parents were more likely to have been treated well by hospital personnel and to receive a higher caliber of care than would people of color.¹

Conversely, the people who cleaned my mother's hospital room, did the laundry, cooked and cleaned in the cafeteria, and maintained the facilities were most likely people of color. The very context in which I entered the world was organized hierarchically by race. Based on this hierarchy, we could predict whether I would survive my birth based on my race.

As I move through my daily life, my race is unremarkable. I belong when I turn on the TV, read best-selling novels, and watch blockbuster movies. I belong when I walk past the magazine racks at the grocery store or drive past billboards. I belong when I see the overwhelming number of white people on lists of the "Most Beautiful." I may feel inadequate in light of my age or weight, but I will belong racially. For example, in 2017, singer Rhianna introduced a makeup line for women of all skin colors. Gratitude from women of color poured in. Many of their tweets included the exclamation "Finally!"² These are tweets I have never needed to send.

I belong when I look at my teachers, counselors, and classmates. I belong when I learn about the history of my country throughout the year and when I am shown its heroes and heroines—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, Amelia Earhart, Susan B. Anthony, John Glenn, Sally Ride, and Louisa May

Alcott.³ I belong when I look through my textbooks and at the pictures on my classroom walls. I belong when I speak to my children's teachers, when I talk to their camp counselors, when I consult with their doctors and dentists. No matter how I might explain why all these representations are overwhelmingly white, they still shape my identity and worldview.

In virtually every situation or context deemed normal, neutral or prestigious in society, I belong racially. This belonging is a deep and ever-present feeling that has always been with me. Belonging has settled deep into my consciousness; it shapes my daily thoughts and concerns, what I reach for in life, and what I expect to find. The experience of belonging is so natural that I do not have to think about it. The rare moments in which I don't belong racially come as a surprise—a surprise that I can either enjoy for its novelty or easily avoid if I find it unsettling.

For example, I was invited to the retirement party of a white friend. The party was a pot-luck picnic held in a public park. As I walked down the slope toward the picnic shelters, I noticed two parties going on side by side. One gathering was primarily composed of white people, and the other appeared to be all black people. I experienced a sense of disequilibrium as I approached and had to choose which party was my friend's. I felt a mild sense of anxiety as I considered that I might have to enter the all-black group, then mild relief as I realized that my friend was in the other group. This relief was amplified as I thought that I might have mistakenly walked over to the black party! All these thoughts and feelings happened in just a few seconds, but they were a rare moment of racial self-awareness. The mere possibility that I might have to experience not belonging racially was enough to raise racial discomfort.

It is rare for me to experience a sense of not belonging racially, and these are usually very temporary, easily avoidable situations. Indeed, throughout my life, I have been warned that I should avoid situations in which I might be a racial minority. These situations are often presented as scary, dangerous, or "sketchy." Yet if the environment or situation is viewed as good, nice, or valuable, I can be confident that as a white person, I will be seen as racially belonging there.

FREEDOM FROM THE BURDEN OF RACE

Because I haven't been socialized to see myself or to be seen by other whites in racial terms, I don't carry the psychic weight of race; I don't have to worry about how others feel about my race. Nor do I worry that my race will be held against me. While I may feel unease in an upper-class environment, I will take for granted that I belong racially in these settings. I certainly will not be the only white person there, unless the event is specifically organized by, or celebrating, people of color. George Zimmerman would not have stopped me as I walked through a gated suburban neighborhood.

Patrick Rosal writes poignantly about the pain of being mistaken for the help at a black-tie event celebrating National Book Award winners.⁴ I have witnessed this assumption of servitude many times as I checked into hotels with colleagues of color. I have made this assumption myself when I have been unable to hide my surprise that the black man is the school principal or when I ask a Latinx woman kneeling in her garden if this is her home.

As I consider career choices I will have countless role models across a vast array of fields. When I apply for a job, virtually anyone in a position to hire me will share my race. And although I may encounter a token person of color during the hiring process, if I am not specifically applying to an organization founded by people of color, the majority of those I interact with will share my race. Once hired, I won't have to deal with my coworkers' resentment that I only got the job because I am white; I am assumed to be the most qualified.⁵ If there are people of color in the organization who resent my hire, I can easily dismiss them and rest assured that their feelings won't carry much weight. If resentment from employees of color does manage to come to my attention, I can find copious validation and other support from my white coworkers, who will reassure me that our colleagues of color are the ones who are biased. With race as a nonissue, I can focus on my work and productivity and be seen as a team player. This is yet another example of the concept of whiteness as property discussed earlier: whiteness has psychological advantages that translate into material returns.

As I move through my day, racism just isn't my problem. While I am aware that race has been used unfairly against people of color, I haven't been taught to see this problem as any responsibility of mine; as long as I personally haven't done anything I am aware of, racism is a nonissue. This freedom from responsibility gives me a level of racial relaxation and emotional and intellectual space that people of color are not afforded as they move through their day. They don't lack these benefits just because they are members of a numerical minority and I am not (white men are a numerical minority). People of color lack these benefits because they are racialized within a culture of white supremacy—a culture in which they are seen as inferior, if they are seen at all.

Raised in a culture of white supremacy, I exude a deeply internalized assumption of racial superiority. Having to navigate white people's internalized assumption of racial superiority is a great psychic drain for people of color, but I have no need to concern myself with that.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

I am free to move in virtually any space seen as normal, neutral, or valuable. While I might worry about my class status in some settings, for example, when attending a "high-society" event such as a museum opening or an art auction, I will not have to worry about my race. In fact, my race will work in my favor in these settings, granting me the initial benefit of the doubt that I belong there.⁶ I also will certainly not be the only white person there, unless the event is specifically organized by, or celebrating, people of color.

In the early years of my career as a workplace diversity trainer, I co-led the workshops with Deborah, an African American woman. After a particularly grueling travel schedule, I proposed that we get away for a relaxing weekend and suggested Lake Coeur d'Alene in Idaho. Deborah laughed at the suggestion and let me know that visiting northern Idaho did not sound like a relaxing weekend for her. Besides being a very small town, Lake Coeur d'Alene is near Hayden Lake, where the Aryan Nation was building a compound.⁷ Although not all people

who live in the area are avowed white nationalists, the knowledge that some people might be part of this openly racist group was terrifying for Deborah. Even if there were no organized white nationalist encampments in the area, Deborah did not want to be isolated in a virtually all-white environment and have to interact with white people who may have never met a black person before. Yet as a white person, I did not have to consider any of this; all places I perceive as beautiful are open to me racially, and my expectation is that I will have a pleasant and relaxing experience there.

JUST PEOPLE

Another way that my life has been shaped by being white is that my race is held up as the norm for humanity. Whites are “just people”—our race is rarely if ever named. Think about how often white people mention the race of a person if they are not white: my black friend, the Asian woman. I enjoy young adult literature but am taken aback by how consistently the race of characters of color is named and how only those characters’ races are named.

To use an example from school, consider the writers we are all expected to read; the list usually includes Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, and William Shakespeare. These writers are seen as representing the universal human experience, and we read them precisely because they are presumed to be able to speak to us all. Now consider the writers we turn to during events promoting diversity—events such as Multicultural Authors Week and Black History Month. These writers usually include Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Amy Tan, and Sandra Cisneros. We go to these writers for the black or Asian perspective; Toni Morrison is always seen as a black writer, not just a writer. But when we are not looking for the black or Asian perspective, we return to white writers, reinforcing the idea of whites as just human, and people of color as particular kinds (racialized) of humans. This also allows white

(male) writers to be seen as not having an agenda or any particular perspective, while racialized (and gendered) writers do.

Virtually any representation of *human* is based on white people’s norms and images—“flesh-colored” makeup, standard emoji, depictions of Adam and Eve, Jesus and Mary, educational models of the human body with white skin and blue eyes.⁸ Take, for example, a photograph that was circulated widely and featured in the *Daily Mail*. The photo of a blond, blue-eyed white woman is captioned “What Would a Scientifically Perfect Face Look Like?” Below the image is the question “Is this the perfect face?”⁹ This one example illustrates several concepts discussed thus far: the white racial frame, whiteness as the human norm, whiteness as ideal beauty, and whiteness as naturally superior. Not only is the idea behind the claim racially problematic in its own right, but it rests on and reinforces the backdrop of an earlier era of scientific racism.

Consider models for child development and its stages, and how our culture talks about children as a collective group. Theorists present human development as if it were universal. Occasionally, we may distinguish between boys and girls, but even then, the categories are presumed to include all boys or all girls. Now consider all the dynamics I have discussed thus far. Is an Asian or an Indigenous child’s development the same as a white child’s within the context of white supremacy?

WHITE SOLIDARITY

White solidarity is the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic. Educational researcher Christine Sleeter describes this solidarity as white “racial bonding.” She observes that when whites interact, they affirm “a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of groups of color, and drawing conspiratorial we-they boundaries.”¹⁰ White solidarity requires both silence about

anything that exposes the advantages of the white position and tacit agreement to remain racially united in the protection of white supremacy. To break white solidarity is to break rank.

We see white solidarity at the dinner table, at parties, and in work settings. Many of us can relate to the big family dinner at which Uncle Bob says something racially offensive. Everyone cringes but no one challenges him because nobody wants to ruin the dinner. Or the party where someone tells a racist joke but we keep silent because we don't want to be accused of being too politically correct and be told to lighten up. In the workplace, we avoid naming racism for the same reasons, in addition to wanting to be seen as a team player and to avoid anything that may jeopardize our career advancement. All these familiar scenarios are examples of white solidarity. (Why speaking up about racism would ruin the ambiance or threaten our career advancement is something we might want to talk about.)

The very real consequences of breaking white solidarity play a fundamental role in maintaining white supremacy. We do indeed risk censure and other penalties from our fellow whites. We might be accused of being politically correct or might be perceived as angry, humorless, combative, and not suited to go far in an organization. In my own life, these penalties have worked as a form of social coercion. Seeking to avoid conflict and wanting to be liked, I have chosen silence all too often.

Conversely, when I kept quiet about racism, I was rewarded with social capital such as being seen as fun, cooperative, and a team player. Notice that within a white supremacist society, I am rewarded for not interrupting racism and punished in a range of ways—big and small—when I do. I can justify my silence by telling myself that at least I am not the one who made the joke and that therefore I am not at fault. But my silence is not benign because it protects and maintains the racial hierarchy and my place within it. Each uninterrupted joke furthers the circulation of racism through the culture, and the ability for the joke to circulate depends on my complicity.

People of color certainly experience white solidarity as a form of racism, wherein we fail to hold each other accountable, to challenge

racism when we see it, or to support people of color in the struggle for racial justice.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

As a white person, I can openly and unabashedly reminisce about “the good old days.” Romanticized recollections of the past and calls for a return to former ways are a function of white privilege, which manifests itself in the ability to remain oblivious to our racial history. Claiming that the past was socially better than the present is also a hallmark of white supremacy. Consider any period in the past from the perspective of people of color: 246 years of brutal enslavement; the rape of black women for the pleasure of white men and to produce more enslaved workers; the selling off of black children; the attempted genocide of Indigenous people, Indian removal acts, and reservations; indentured servitude, lynching, and mob violence; sharecropping; Chinese exclusion laws; Japanese American internment; Jim Crow laws of mandatory segregation; black codes; bans on black jury service; bans on voting; imprisoning people for unpaid work; medical sterilization and experimentation; employment discrimination; educational discrimination; inferior schools; biased laws and policing practices; redlining and subprime mortgages; mass incarceration; racist media representations; cultural erasures, attacks, and mockery; and untold and perverted historical accounts, and you can see how a romanticized past is strictly a white construct. But it is a powerful construct because it calls out to a deeply internalized sense of superiority and entitlement and the sense that any advancement for people of color is an encroachment on this entitlement.

The past was great for white people (and white men in particular) because their positions went largely unchallenged. In understanding the power of white fragility, we have to notice that the mere questioning of those positions triggered the white fragility that Trump capitalized on. There has been no actual loss of power for the white elite, who have always controlled our institutions and continue to do so by a very wide margin. Of the fifty richest people on earth, twenty-nine are American.

Of these twenty-nine, all are white, and all but two are men (Lauren Jobs inherited her husband's wealth, and Alice Walton her father's).

Similarly, the white working class has always held the top positions within blue-collar fields (the overseers, labor leaders, and fire and police chiefs). And although globalization and the erosion of workers' rights has had a profound impact on the white working class, white fragility enabled the white elite to direct the white working class's resentment toward people of color. The resentment is clearly misdirected, given that the people who control the economy and who have managed to concentrate more wealth into fewer (white) hands than ever before in human history are the white elite.

Consider this data on the distribution of wealth:

- Since 2015, the richest 1 percent has owned more wealth than the rest of the planet owns.¹¹
- Eight men own the same amount of wealth as do the poorest half of the world.
- The incomes of the poorest 10 percent of people increased by less than three dollars a year between 1988 and 2011, while the incomes of the richest 1 percent increased 182 times as much.
- In Bloomberg's daily ranking of the world's five hundred richest people, the world's wealthiest three (Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, and Jeff Bezos), all white American men, have total net worths of \$85 billion, \$79 billion, and \$73 billion, respectively.¹² By comparison, the 2015 gross domestic product of Sri Lanka was \$82 billion; Luxembourg \$58 billion; and Iceland, \$16 billion.¹³
- Of the world's ten richest people, nine are white men.¹⁴
- In 2015–2016, the world's ten biggest corporations together had revenue greater than that of the government revenues of 180 countries combined.
- In the US, over the last thirty years, the growth in the incomes of the bottom 50 percent has been zero, whereas incomes of the top 1 percent have grown by 300 percent.

The call to Make America Great Again worked powerfully in service of the racial manipulation of white people, diverting blame away from the white elite and toward various peoples of color—for example, undocumented workers, immigrants, and the Chinese—for the current conditions of the white working class.

The romanticized “traditional” family values of the past are also racially problematic. White families fled from cities to the suburbs to escape the influx of people of color, a process socialologists term *white flight*. They wrote covenants to keep schools and neighborhoods segregated and forbade cross-racial dating.

Consider the extreme resistance to busing and other forms of school integration from white parents. In the landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court ruled that separate was inherently unequal and that schools needed to desegregate “with all deliberate speed.” Busing children from one neighborhood into a school in another to account for residential segregation became a major strategy of desegregation (notably, white children were generally not bused into predominately black schools; instead, black children endured long bus rides to attend predominately white schools). Regina Williams, a black student from Roxbury, Massachusetts, was bused into a school in South Boston. She described her first day in a formerly all-white school as “like a war zone.” School officials, politicians, the courts, and the media gave precedence to the desires of white parents who overwhelmingly and vehemently opposed school desegregation. It has not been African Americans who resist integration efforts; it has always been whites.¹⁵ The practice of our lives as a white collective has rarely been in alignment with the values we profess.

At the minimum, this idealization of the past is another example of white experiences and perceptions positioned as universal. How might this nostalgia sound to any person of color who is aware of this country's history? The ability to erase this racial history and actually believe that the past was better than the present “for everybody” has inculcated a false consciousness for me personally and as a national citizen.

WHITE RACIAL INNOCENCE

Because we are not raised to see ourselves in racial terms or to see white space as racialized space, we position ourselves as innocent of race. On countless occasions, I have heard white people claim that because they grew up in segregation, they were sheltered from race. At the same time, we turn to people of color, who may also have grown up in racially segregated spaces (because of decades of *de jure* and *de facto* policies that blocked them from moving into white neighborhoods) to learn about racism. But why aren't people of color who grew up in segregation also innocent of race? I ask my readers to reflect deeply on the idea that white segregation is racially innocent.

Because people of color are not seen as racially innocent, they are expected to speak to issues of race (but must do so on white terms). This idea—that racism is not a white problem—enables us to sit back and let people of color take very real risks of invalidation and retaliation as they share their experiences. But we are not required to take similar cross-racial risks. They—not we—have race, and thus they are the holders of racial knowledge. In this way, we position ourselves as standing outside hierarchical social relations.

White flight may be seen as another aspect of white racial innocence, as it is often justified by beliefs that people of color (again, especially black people) are more prone to crime and that if “too many” black people move into a neighborhood, crime will increase, home values will go down, and the neighborhood will deteriorate. For example, in a study of race and perceptions of crime conducted by sociologists Heather Johnson and Thomas Shapiro, white families consistently discussed fear of crime and associated crime with people of color. In their minds, the more people of color in an area (specifically, blacks and Latinos), the more dangerous the area was perceived to be. Research matching census data and police department crime statistics show that this association does not hold, but these statistics do not quell white fears. For most whites, the percentage of young men of color in a neighborhood is directly correlated with perceptions of the neighborhood crime level.¹⁶

Deeply held white associations of black people with crime distort reality and the actual direction of danger that has historically existed between whites and blacks. The vast history of extensive and brutal explicit violence perpetrated by whites and their ideological rationalizations are all trivialized through white claims of racial innocence. The power we now wield and have wielded for centuries is thus obscured.

It has been well documented that blacks and Latinos are stopped by police more often than whites are for the same activities and that they receive harsher sentences than whites do for the same crimes. Research has also shown that a major reason for this racial disparity can be attributed to the beliefs held by judges and others about the cause of the criminal behavior.¹⁷ For example, the criminal behavior of white juveniles is often seen as caused by external factors—the youth comes from a single-parent home, is having a hard time right now, just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, or was bullied at school. Attributing the cause of the action to external factors lessens the person's responsibility and classifies the person as a victim him or herself. But black and Latinx youth are not afforded this same compassion.

When black and Latinx youth go before a judge, the cause of the crime is more often attributed to something internal to the person—the youth is naturally more prone to crime, is more animalistic, and has less capacity for remorse (similarly, a 2016 study found that half of a sample of medical students and residents believe that blacks feel less pain¹⁸). Whites continually receive the benefit of the doubt not granted to people of color—our race alone helps establish our innocence.

For those of us who work to raise the racial consciousness of whites, simply getting whites to acknowledge that our race gives us advantages is a major effort. The defensiveness, denial, and resistance are deep. But acknowledging advantage is only a first step, and this acknowledgment can be used in a way that renders it meaningless and allows us white people to exempt ourselves from further responsibility. For example, I have often heard whites dismissively say, “Just because of the color of my skin, I have privilege.” Statements like this describe privilege as if

it's a fluke—something that just happens to us as we move through life, with no involvement or complicity on our part.

Critical race scholar Zeus Leonardo critiques the concept of white privilege as something white people receive unwittingly. He says that this concept is analogous to suggesting that a person could walk through life with other people stuffing money into his or her pockets without any awareness or consent on the walker's part. Leonardo challenges this conceptualization, which positions white privilege as innocence, by arguing that "for white racial hegemony to saturate everyday life, it has to be secured by a process of domination, or those acts, decisions, and policies that white subjects perpetrate on people of color."¹⁹ Viewing privilege as something that white people are just handed obscures the systematic dimensions of racism that must be actively and passively, consciously and unconsciously, maintained.

The expectation that people of color should teach white people about racism is another aspect of white racial innocence that reinforces several problematic racial assumptions. First, it implies that racism is something that happens to people of color and has nothing to do with us and that we consequently cannot be expected to have any knowledge of it. This framework denies that racism is a relationship in which both groups are involved. By leaving it to people of color to tackle racial issues, we offload the tensions and social dangers of speaking openly onto them. We can ignore the risks ourselves and remain silent on questions of our own culpability.

Second, this request requires nothing of us and reinforces unequal power relations by asking people of color to do our work. There are copious resources available on the subject generated by people of color who are willing to share the information; why haven't we sought it out before this conversation?

Third, the request ignores the historical dimensions of race relations. It disregards how often people of color have indeed tried to tell us what racism is like for them and how often they have been dismissed. To ask people of color to tell us how they experience racism without first building a trusting relationship and being willing to meet them

halfway by also being vulnerable shows that we are not racially aware and that this exchange will probably be invalidating for them.

SEGREGATED LIVES

On a television talk show in 1965, James Baldwin responded passionately to a Yale professor's argument that Baldwin always concentrated on color:

I don't know if white Christians hate Negroes or not, but I know that we have a Christian church that is white and a Christian church which is black. I know that the most segregated hour in American life is high noon on Sunday. . . . I don't know whether the labor unions and their bosses really hate me . . . but I know I am not in their unions. I don't know if the real estate lobby is against black people but I know that the real estate lobbyists keep me in the ghetto. I don't know if the Board of Education hates Black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools that we have to go to. Now this is the evidence. You want me to make an act of faith risking . . . my life . . . on some idealism which you assure me exists in America which I have never seen.²⁰

Life in the United States is deeply shaped by racial segregation. Of all racial groups, whites are the most likely to choose segregation and are the group most likely to be in the social and economic position to do so.²¹ Growing up in segregation (our schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, shopping districts, places of worship, entertainment, social gatherings, and elsewhere) reinforces the message that our experiences and perspectives are the only ones that matter. We don't see people of color around us, and few if any adults acknowledge a lack of racial diversity as a problem. In fact, the classification of which neighborhoods are good and which are bad is always based on race. These assessments may also be based on economic divisions among whites, but if black and Latinx students attend a school in significant numbers

(significant in the white mind), whites will perceive the school as bad. If there *are* people of color around us, we are seldom encouraged to build cross-racial friendships.

Segregation is often lessened somewhat for poor urban whites who may live near and have friendships with people of color on the local level because white poverty brings white people into proximity with people of color in a way that suburban and middle-class life does not (except during gentrification, when the mixing is temporary). Urban whites from the lower classes may have more integrated lives on the micro level, but we still receive the message that achievement means moving away from the neighborhoods and schools that illuminate our poverty. Upward mobility is the great class goal in the United States, and the social environment gets tangibly whiter the higher up you climb. Whiter environments, in turn, are seen as the most desirable.

For upwardly mobile whites from the lower classes, reaching toward the most valuable places in society usually means leaving friends and neighbors of color behind. For example, I grew up urban and poor and lived in apartment buildings in crowded rental-based neighborhoods. In my childhood, there were many people of color around me. But I knew that if I was to improve my life, I would not stay in these neighborhoods; upward mobility would take me to whiter spaces, and it has. I did not maintain those early relationships with people of color, and no one who guided me encouraged me to do so. Segregation was still operating in my life at the wider societal level: it dictated what I learned in school, read in books, saw on TV, and learned to value if I wanted to improve my life.

Meritocracy is a precious ideology in the United States, but neighborhoods and schools are demonstrably not equal; they are separate and unequal. Tax bases, school resources, curricula, textbooks, opportunities for extracurricular activities, and the quality of the teaching staff differ widely between school districts. Who is not aware that schools in the United States are vastly unequal? Without white people's interest or effort invested in changing a system that serves them at the expense of others, advantage is passed down from generation to generation. Rather

than change these conditions so that public education is equal for all, we allow other people's children to endure conditions that would be unacceptable for our own.

A 2009 study published in the *American Journal of Education* found that while suburban parents, who are mostly white, say they are selecting schools on the basis of test scores, the racial makeup of a school actually plays a larger role in their school decisions. Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Columbia University's Teachers College, found the same coded language when she studied how white parents choose schools in New York City. She writes, "In a postracial era, we don't have to say it's about race or the color of the kids in the building. . . . We can concentrate poverty and kids of color and then fail to provide the resources to support and sustain those schools, and then we can see a school full of black kids and say, 'Oh, look at their test scores.' It's all very tidy now, this whole system."²² Readers have no doubt heard schools and neighborhoods discussed in these terms and know that this talk is racially coded; "urban" and "low test scores" are code for "not white" and therefore less desirable.

While many whites see spaces inhabited by more than a few people of color as undesirable and even dangerous, consider another perspective. I have heard countless people of color describe how painful an experience it was to be one of only a few people of color in their schools and neighborhoods. Although many parents of color want the advantages granted by attending predominantly white schools, they also worry about the stress and even the danger they are putting their children in. These parents understand that the predominantly white teaching force has little if any authentic knowledge about children of color and has been socialized (often unconsciously) to see children of color as inferior and even to fear them. Imagine how unsafe white schools, which are so precious to white parents, might appear to parents of color.

The most profound message of racial segregation may be that the absence of people of color from our lives is no real loss. Not one person who loved me, guided me, or taught me ever conveyed that segregation deprived me of anything of value. I could live my entire life without a

friend or loved one of color and not see that as a diminishment of my life. In fact, my life trajectory would almost certainly ensure that I had few, if any, people of color in my life. I might meet a few people of color if I played certain sports in school, or if there happened to be one or two persons of color in my class, but when I was outside of that context, I had no proximity to people of color, much less any authentic relationships. Most whites who recall having a friend of color in childhood rarely keep these friendships into adulthood. Yet if my parents had thought it was valuable to have cross-racial relationships, they would have ensured that I had them, even if it took effort—the same effort so many white parents expend to send their children across town so they can attend a better (whiter) school.

Pause for a moment and consider the profundity of this message: we are taught that we lose nothing of value through racial segregation. Consider the message we send to our children—as well as to children of color—when we describe white segregation as good.

In summary, our socialization engenders a common set of racial patterns. These patterns are the foundation of white fragility:

- Preference for racial segregation, and a lack of a sense of loss about segregation
- Lack of understanding about what racism is
- Seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization
- Failure to understand that we bring our group's history with us, that history matters
- Assuming everyone is having or can have our experience
- Lack of racial humility, and unwillingness to listen
- Dismissing what we don't understand
- Lack of authentic interest in the perspectives of people of color
- Wanting to jump over the hard, personal work and get to "solutions"
- Confusing disagreement with not understanding

- Need to maintain white solidarity, to save face, to look good
- Guilt that paralyzes or allows inaction
- Defensiveness about any suggestion that we are connected to racism
- A focus on intentions over impact

My psychosocial development was inculcated in a white supremacist culture in which I am in the superior group. Telling me to treat everyone the same is not enough to override this socialization; nor is it humanly possible. I was raised in a society that taught me that there was no loss in the absence of people of color—that their absence was a good and desirable thing to be sought and maintained—while simultaneously denying that fact. This attitude has shaped every aspect of my self-identity: my interests and investments, what I care about or don't care about, what I see or don't see, what I am drawn to and what I am repelled by, what I can take for granted, where I can go, how others respond to me, and what I can ignore. Most of us would not choose to be socialized into racism and white supremacy. Unfortunately, we didn't have that choice. While there is variation in how these messages are conveyed and how much we internalize them, nothing could have exempted us from these messages completely. Now it is our responsibility to grapple with how this socialization manifests itself in our daily lives and how it shapes our responses when it is challenged.