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SOCIETAL CHANGE." —CLAUDIA RANKINE

# WHITE FRAGILITY



WHY IT'S SO HARD

FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO  
TALK ABOUT RACISM

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FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

INTRODUCTION

## WE CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

*I am a white woman. I am standing beside a black woman. We are facing a group of white people seated in front of us. We are in their workplace and have been hired by their employer to lead them in a dialogue about race. The room is filled with tension and charged with hostility. I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color. A white man is pounding his fist on the table. As he pounds, he yells, "A white person can't get a job anymore!" I look around the room and see forty employees, thirty-eight of whom are white. Why is this white man so angry? Why is he being so careless about the impact of his anger? Why doesn't he notice the effect this outburst is having on the few people of color in the room? Why are all the other white people either sitting in silent agreement with him or tuning out? I have, after all, only articulated a definition of racism.*

White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race, and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage. Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society

we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina. Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority that we either are unaware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We consider a challenge to our racial worldviews as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*. Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.

Summarizing the familiar patterns of white people's responses to racial discomfort as white fragility has resonated for many people. The sensibility is so familiar because whereas our personal narratives vary, we are all swimming in the same racial water. For me, the recognition has come through my work. I have a rare job; on a daily basis I lead primarily white audiences in discussions of race, something many of us avoid at all costs.

In the early days of my work as what was then termed a diversity trainer, I was taken aback by how angry and defensive so many white people became at the suggestion that they were connected to racism in any way. The very idea that they would be required to attend a workshop on racism outraged them. They entered the room angry and made that feeling clear to us throughout the day as they slammed their notebooks down on the table, refused to participate in exercises, and argued against any and all points.

I couldn't understand their resentment or disinterest in learning more about such a complex social dynamic as racism. These reactions

were especially perplexing when there were few or no people of color in their workplace, and they had the opportunity to learn from my cofacilitators of color. I assumed that in these circumstances, an educational workshop on racism would be appreciated. After all, didn't the lack of diversity indicate a problem or at least suggest that some perspectives were missing? Or that the participants might be undereducated about race because of scant cross-racial interactions?

It took me several years to see beneath these reactions. At first I was intimidated by them, and they held me back and kept me careful and quiet. But over time, I began to see what lay beneath this anger and resistance to discuss race or listen to people of color. I observed consistent responses from a variety of participants. For example, many white participants who lived in white suburban neighborhoods and had no sustained relationships with people of color were absolutely certain that they held no racial prejudice or animosity. Other participants simplistically reduced racism to a matter of nice people versus mean people. Most appeared to believe that racism ended in 1865 with the end of slavery. There was both knee-jerk defensiveness about any suggestion that being white had meaning and a refusal to acknowledge any advantage to being white. Many participants claimed white people were now the oppressed group, and they deeply resented anything perceived to be a form of affirmative action. These responses were so predictable—so consistent and reliable—I was able to stop taking the resistance personally, get past my own conflict avoidance, and reflect on what was behind them.

I began to see what I think of as the pillars of whiteness—the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses. I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. And in light of so many white expressions of resentment toward people of color, I realized that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve; I

saw our investment in a system that serves us. I also saw how hard we worked to deny all this and how defensive we became when these dynamics were named. In turn, I saw how our defensiveness maintained the racial status quo.

Personal reflections on my own racism, a more critical view of media and other aspects of culture, and exposure to the perspectives of many brilliant and patient mentors of color all helped me to see how these pillars of racism worked. It became clear that if I believed that only bad people who intended to hurt others because of race could ever do so, I would respond with outrage to any suggestion that I was involved in racism. Of course that belief would make me feel falsely accused of something terrible, and of course I would want to defend my character (and I had certainly had many of my own moments of responding in just those ways to reflect on). I came to see that the way we are taught to define racism makes it virtually impossible for white people to understand it. Given our racial insulation, coupled with misinformation, any suggestion that we are complicit in racism is a kind of unwelcome and insulting shock to the system.

If, however, I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth. One of the greatest social fears for a white person is being told that something that we have said or done is racially problematic. Yet when someone lets us know that we have just done such a thing, rather than respond with gratitude and relief (after all, now that we are informed, we won't do it again), we often respond with anger and denial. Such moments can be experienced as something valuable, even if temporarily painful, only after we accept that racism is unavoidable and that it is impossible to completely escape having developed problematic racial assumptions and behaviors.

None of the white people whose actions I describe in this book would identify as racist. In fact, they would most likely identify as racially progressive and vehemently deny any complicity with racism. Yet all their responses illustrate white fragility and how it holds racism in place. These responses spur the daily frustrations and indignities people

of color endure from white people who see themselves as open-minded and thus not racist. This book is intended for us, for white progressives who so often—despite our conscious intentions—make life so difficult for people of color. I believe that *white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color*. I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or is less racist, or in the “choir,” or already “gets it.” White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice. White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so.

Racism has been among the most complex social dilemmas since the founding of this country. While there is no biological race as we understand it (see chapter 2), race as a social construct has profound significance and shapes every aspect of our lives.<sup>1</sup> Race will influence whether we will survive our birth, where we are most likely to live, which schools we will attend, who our friends and partners will be, what careers we will have, how much money we will earn, how healthy we will be, and even how long we can expect to live.<sup>2</sup> This book does not attempt to provide the solution to racism. Nor does it attempt to prove that racism exists; I start from that premise. My goal is to make visible how one aspect of white sensibility continues to hold racism in place: white fragility.

I will explain the phenomenon of white fragility, how we develop it, how it protects racial inequality, and what we might do about it.

## CHAPTER 1

# THE CHALLENGES OF TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

### WE DON'T SEE OURSELVES IN RACIAL TERMS

I am a white American raised in the United States. I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview, and I move through the world with a white experience. My experience is not a universal human experience. It is a particularly white experience in a society in which race matters profoundly; a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race. However, like most white people raised in the US, I was not taught to see myself in racial terms and certainly not to draw attention to my race or to behave as if it mattered in any way. Of course, I was made aware that *somebody's* race mattered, and if race was discussed, it would be theirs, not mine. Yet a critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.

### OUR OPINIONS ARE UNINFORMED

I have never met a white person without an opinion on racism. It's not really possible to grow up in the United States or spend any significant time here—or any other culture with a history of Western

colonization—without developing opinions on racism. And white people’s opinions on racism tend to be strong. Yet race relations are profoundly complex. We must be willing to consider that unless we have devoted intentional and ongoing study, our opinions are necessarily uninformed, even ignorant. How can I say that if you are white, your opinions on racism are most likely ignorant, when I don’t even know you? I can say so because nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years.

For example, I can be seen as qualified to lead a major or minor organization in this country with no understanding whatsoever of the perspectives or experiences of people of color, few if any relationships with people of color, and virtually no ability to engage critically with the topic of race. I can get through graduate school without ever discussing racism. I can graduate from law school without ever discussing racism. I can get through a teacher-education program without ever discussing racism. If I am in a program considered progressive, I might have a single required “diversity” course. A handful of faculty will have fought for years to get me this course, likely having had to overcome resistance from the majority of their white colleagues, and will still be fighting to keep the course. In this diversity course, we might read “ethnic” authors and learn about heroes and heroines from various groups of color, but there’s no guarantee we’ll discuss racism.

In fact, when we try to talk openly and honestly about race, white fragility quickly emerges as we are so often met with silence, defensiveness, argumentation, certitude, and other forms of pushback. These are not natural responses; they are social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively, and they function powerfully to hold the racial hierarchy in place. These forces include the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity.

Interrupting the forces of racism is ongoing, lifelong work because the forces conditioning us into racist frameworks are always at play; our learning will never be finished. Yet our simplistic definition of racism—as intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals—engenders a confidence that we are not part of the problem and that our learning is thus complete. The claims we offer up as evidence are implausible. For example, perhaps you’ve heard someone say “I was taught to treat everyone the same” or “People just need to be taught to respect one another, and that begins in the home.” These statements tend to end the discussion and the learning that could come from sustained engagement. Further, they are unconvincing to most people of color and only invalidate their experiences. Many white people simply do not understand the process of socialization, and this is our next challenge.

### WE DON'T UNDERSTAND SOCIALIZATION

When I talk to white people about racism, their responses are so predictable I sometimes feel as though we are all reciting lines from a shared script. And on some level, we are, because we are actors in a shared culture. A significant aspect of the white script derives from our seeing ourselves as both objective and unique. To understand white fragility, we have to begin to understand why we cannot fully be either; we must understand the forces of socialization.

We make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens. This lens is neither universal nor objective, and without it, a person could not function in any human society. But exploring these cultural frameworks can be particularly challenging in Western culture precisely because of two key Western ideologies: individualism and objectivity. Briefly, individualism holds that we are each unique and stand apart from others, even those within our social groups. Objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias. These ideologies make it very difficult for white people to explore the collective aspects of the white experience.

Individualism is a story line that creates, communicates, reproduces, and reinforces the concept that each of us is a unique individual and that our group memberships, such as race, class, or gender, are irrelevant to our opportunities. Individualism claims that there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success and that failure is not a consequence of social structures but comes from individual character. According to the ideology of individualism, race is irrelevant. Of course, we do occupy distinct race, gender, class, and other positions that profoundly shape our life chances in ways that are not natural, voluntary, or random; opportunity is not equally distributed across race, class, and gender. On some level, we know that Bill Gates's son was born into a set of opportunities that will benefit him throughout his life, whether he is mediocre or exceptional. Yet even though Gates's son has clearly been handed unearned advantage, we cling tightly to the ideology of individualism when asked to consider our own unearned advantages.

Regardless of our protestations that social groups don't matter and that we see everyone as equal, we know that to be a man as defined by the dominant culture is a different experience from being a woman. We know that to be viewed as old is different from being viewed as young, rich is different from poor, able-bodied different from having a disability, gay different from heterosexual, and so on. These groups matter, but they don't matter naturally, as we are often taught to believe. Rather, we are taught that they matter, and the social meaning ascribed to these groups creates a difference in lived experience. We are taught these social meanings in myriad ways, by a range of people, and through a variety of mediums. This training continues after childhood and throughout our lives. Much of it is nonverbal and is achieved through watching and comparing ourselves to others.

We are socialized into these groups collectively. In mainstream culture, we all receive the same messages about what these groups mean, why being in one group is a different experience from being in another. And we also know that it is "better" to be in one of these groups than to be in its opposite—for example, to be young rather than old, able-bodied rather than have a disability, rich rather than poor. We gain

our understanding of group meaning collectively through aspects of the society around us that are shared and unavoidable: television, movies, news items, song lyrics, magazines, textbooks, schools, religion, literature, stories, jokes, traditions and practices, history, and so on. These dimensions of our culture shape our group identities.

Our understanding of ourselves is necessarily based on our comparisons with others. The concept of pretty has no meaning without the concept of ugly, smart means little without the idea of not-smart or "stupid," and deserving has no meaning without the concept of undeserving. We come to understand who we are by understanding who we are not. But because of our society's emphasis on individuality, many of us are unskilled at reflecting on our group memberships. To understand race relations today, we must push against our conditioning and grapple with how and why racial group memberships matter.

In addition to challenging our sense of ourselves as individuals, tackling group identity also challenges our belief in objectivity. If group membership is relevant, then we don't see the world from the universal human perspective but from the perspective of a particular kind of human. In this way, both ideologies are disrupted. Thus, reflecting on our racial frames is particularly challenging for many white people, because we are taught that to have a racial viewpoint is to be biased. Unfortunately, this belief protects our biases, because denying that we have them ensures that we won't examine or change them. This will be important to remember when we consider our racial socialization, because there is a vast difference between what we verbally tell our children and all the other ways we train them into the racial norms of our culture.

For many white people, the mere title of this book will cause resistance because I am breaking a cardinal rule of individualism—I *am generalizing*. I am proceeding as if I could know anything about someone just because the person is white. Right now you may be thinking of all the ways that you are different from other white people and that if I just knew how you had come to this country, or were close to these people, grew up in this neighborhood, endured this struggle, or had

this experience, then I would know that you were different—that you were not racist. I’ve witnessed this common reflex countless times in my work.

For example, I recently gave a talk to a group of about two hundred employees. There were no more than five people of color in their organization, and of these five, only two were African American. Over and over, I emphasized the importance of white people having racial humility and of not exempting ourselves from the unavoidable dynamics of racism. As soon as I was done speaking, a line of white people formed—ostensibly to ask me questions—but more typically to reiterate the same opinions on race they held when they had entered the room. The first in line was a white man who explained that he was Italian American and that Italians were once considered black and discriminated against, so didn’t I think that white people experience racism too? That he could be in that overwhelmingly white room of coworkers and exempt himself from an examination of his whiteness because Italians were once discriminated against is an all-too-common example of individualism. A more fruitful form of engagement (because it expands rather than protects his current worldview) would have been to consider how Italian Americans were able to become white and how that assimilation has shaped his experiences in the present *as a white man*. His claims did not illustrate that he was different from other white people when it comes to race. I can predict that many readers will make similar claims of exception precisely because we are products of our culture, not separate from it.

As a sociologist, I am quite comfortable generalizing; social life is patterned and predictable in measurable ways. But I understand that my generalizations may cause some defensiveness for the white people about whom I am generalizing, given how cherished the ideology of individualism is in our culture. There are, of course, exceptions, but patterns are recognized as such precisely because they are recurring and predictable. We cannot understand modern forms of racism if we cannot or will not explore patterns of group behavior and their effects on individuals. I ask readers to make the specific adjustments they think

are necessary to their situation, rather than reject the evidence entirely. For example, perhaps you grew up in poverty, or are an Ashkenazi Jew of European heritage, or were raised in a military family. Perhaps you grew up in Canada, Hawaii, or Germany, or had people of color in your family. None of these situations exempts you from the forces of racism, because no aspect of society is outside of these forces.

Rather than use what you see as unique about yourself as an exemption from further examination, a more fruitful approach would be to ask yourself, “I am white and I have had X experience. How did X shape me as a result of *also being white*?” Setting aside your sense of uniqueness is a critical skill that will allow you to see the big picture of the society in which we live; individualism will not. For now, try to let go of your individual narrative and grapple with the collective messages we all receive as members of a larger shared culture. Work to see how these messages have shaped your life, rather than use some aspect of your story to excuse yourself from their impact.

### WE HAVE A SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

The final challenge we need to address is our definition of “racist.” In the post–civil rights era, we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; racists are immoral. Therefore, if I am saying that my readers are racist or, even worse, that all white people are racist, I am saying something deeply offensive; I am questioning my readers’ very moral character. How can I make this claim when I don’t even know my readers? Many of you have friends and loved ones of color, so how can you be racist? In fact, since it’s racist to generalize about people according to race, I am the one being racist! So let me be clear: If your definition of a racist is someone who holds conscious dislike of people because of race, then I agree that it is offensive for me to suggest that you are racist when I don’t know you. I also agree that if this is your definition of racism, and you are against racism, then you are not racist. Now breathe. I am not using this definition of racism, and I am not saying that you are immoral. If



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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

someone, hurt feelings because we think we must have been misunderstood) will enable us to address these frameworks. We also need to examine our responses toward other people's emotions and how they may reinscribe race and gender hierarchies. Our racial socialization sets us up to repeat racist behavior, regardless of our intentions or self-image. We must continue to ask *how* our racism manifests, not *if*.

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 CHAPTER 12
 

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## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

*The equity team has been invited to a meeting with the company's new web developer. The team consists of two women, both of whom are black, and me. The new web developer, who is also black, wants to interview us so that she can build our page. She starts the meeting by giving us a survey to fill out. Many questions on the survey inquire about our intended audience, methods, goals, and objectives. I find the questions tedious and feel irritated by them. Pushing the survey aside, I try to explain verbally. I tell the web developer that we go out into the satellite offices to facilitate antiracism training. I add that the training is not always well received; in fact, one member of our team was told not to come back. I make a joke: "The white people were scared by Deborah's hair" (Deborah is black and has long locked braids). The meeting ends and we move on.*

*A few days later, one of my team members lets me know that the web developer—who I will call Angela—was offended by my hair comment. While I wasn't paying attention at the time, once I am informed, I quickly realize why that comment was off. I seek out a friend who is white and has a solid understanding of cross-racial dynamics. We discuss my feelings (embarrassment, shame, guilt) and then she helps me identify the various ways my racism was revealed in that interaction. After this processing, I feel ready to repair the relationship. I ask Angela to meet with me, and she accepts.*

I open by asking Angela, "Would you be willing to grant me the opportunity to repair the racism I perpetrated toward you in that meeting?" When she agrees, I continue. "I realize that my comment about Deborah's hair was inappropriate."

Angela nods and explains that she did not know me and did not want to be joking about black women's hair (a sensitive issue for many black women) with a white woman whom she did not have a trusting relationship with, much less in a professional work meeting.

I apologize and ask her if I have missed anything else problematic in the meeting.

"Yes," she replies. "That survey? I wrote that survey. And I have spent my life justifying my intelligence to white people."

My chest constricts as I immediately realize the impact of my glib dismissal of the survey. I acknowledge this impact and apologize.

She accepts my apology. I ask Angela if there is anything else that needs to be said or heard so that we may move forward.

She replies that yes, there is. "The next time you do something like this, would you like feedback publicly or privately?" she asks.

I answer that given my role as an educator, I would appreciate receiving the feedback publicly as it is important for white people to see that I am also engaged in a lifelong process of learning and growth. And I could model for other white people how to receive feedback openly and without defensiveness.

She tells me that although these dynamics occur daily between white people and people of color, my willingness to repair doesn't, and that she appreciates this. We move on.

In chapter 9, I identified the common emotions, behaviors, claims, and underlying assumptions of white fragility. In this chapter, we'll see how those elements would change if we transformed our racial paradigm.

It is difficult for me to imagine that my aforementioned interaction with Angela would have been as constructive if it had occurred before I began this work. I simply could not and would not have responded well if I had been operating from the dominant paradigm. When my coworker let me know that Angela was offended, I would have been filled with anxiety and immediately explained my intentions to my coworker, seeking her understanding and absolution. I would have felt unfairly accused and seen myself as the victim of Angela's unfairness. In responding this way, I would have lost any potential relationship with her, protected my limited worldview, and stunted my emotional and intellectual growth. Yet day in and day out, this defensive reaction is what people of color get from white people, and it explains why they more often than not don't even try talking to us.

However, from a transformed paradigm, when we are given feedback on our inevitable but unaware racist patterns, we might have very different feelings:

- Gratitude
- Excitement
- Discomfort
- Guilt
- Motivation
- Humility
- Compassion
- Interest

When we have these feelings, we might engage in the following behaviors:

- Reflection
- Apology
- Listening
- Processing
- Seeking more understanding
- Grappling
- Engaging
- Believing

What claims might we make when we have these feelings and engage in these behaviors? Notice that none of the following claims

characterize us as falsely accused or as beyond the discussion; these claims suggest openness and humility.

- I appreciate this feedback.
- This is very helpful.
- It's my responsibility to resist defensiveness and complacency.
- This is hard, but also stimulating and important.
- Oops!
- It is inevitable that I have this pattern. I want to change it.
- It's personal but not strictly personal.
- I will focus on the message and not the messenger.
- I need to build my capacity to endure discomfort and bear witness to the pain of racism.
- I have some work to do.

These feelings, behaviors, and claims will probably be less familiar to readers, as they are all too rare. But when our fundamental understanding of racism is transformed, so are our assumptions and resultant behaviors. Imagine the difference in our environment, interactions, norms, and policies if the following list described our assumptions:

- Being good or bad is not relevant.
- Racism is a multilayered system embedded in our culture.
- All of us are socialized into the system of racism.
- Racism cannot be avoided.
- Whites have blind spots on racism, and I have blind spots on racism.
- Racism is complex, and I don't have to understand every nuance of the feedback to validate that feedback.
- Whites are / I am unconsciously invested in racism.
- Bias is implicit and unconscious; I don't expect to be aware of mine without a lot of ongoing effort.
- Giving us white people feedback on our racism is risky for people of color, so we can consider the feedback a sign of trust.

- Feedback on white racism is difficult to give; how I am given the feedback is not as relevant as the feedback itself.
- Authentic antiracism is rarely comfortable. Discomfort is key to my growth and thus desirable.
- White comfort maintains the racial status quo, so discomfort is necessary and important.
- I must not confuse comfort with safety; as a white person, I am safe in discussions of racism.
- The antidote to guilt is action.
- It takes courage to break with white solidarity; how can I support those who do?
- I bring my group's history with me; history matters.
- Given my socialization, it is much more likely that I am the one who doesn't understand the issue.
- Nothing exempts me from the forces of racism.
- My analysis must be intersectional (a recognition that my other social identities—class, gender, ability—inform how I was socialized into the racial system).
- Racism hurts (even kills) people of color 24-7. Interrupting it is more important than my feelings, ego, or self-image.

These assumptions might interrupt racism in various ways, such as the following:

- Minimize our defensiveness.
- Demonstrate our vulnerability.
- Demonstrate our curiosity and humility.
- Allow for growth.
- Stretch our worldview.
- Ensure action.
- Demonstrate that we practice what we profess to value.
- Build authentic relationships and trust.
- Interrupt privilege-protecting comfort.
- Interrupt internalized superiority.

When white people ask me what to do about racism and white fragility, the first thing I ask is, “What has enabled you to be a full, educated, professional adult and not know what to do about racism?” It is a sincere question. How have we managed not to know, when the information is all around us? When people of color have been telling us for years? If we take that question seriously and map out all the ways we have come to not know what to do, we will have our guide before us. For example, if my answer is that I was not educated about racism, I know that I will have to get educated. If my answer is that I don’t know people of color, I will need to build relationships. If it is because there are no people of color in my environment, I will need to get out of my comfort zone and change my environment; addressing racism is not without effort.

Next, I say, “Do whatever it takes for you to internalize the above assumptions.” I believe that if we white people were truly coming from these assumptions, not only would our interpersonal relationships change, but so would our institutions. Our institutions would change because we would see to it that they did. But we simply cannot end racism from the current paradigm.

The final advice I offer is this: “Take the initiative and find out on your own.” To break with the conditioning of whiteness—the conditioning that makes us apathetic about racism and prevents us from developing the skills we need to interrupt it—white people need to find out for themselves what they can do. There is so much excellent advice out there today—written by both people of color and white people. Search it out. Break with the apathy of whiteness, and demonstrate that you care enough to put in the effort.

As an analogy, imagine you go to the doctor, who tells you that you have an acoustic neuroma. Just as she is about to explain what that is and what your options are, she gets an emergency call and must rush off, abruptly ending your visit. What would you do? You would very likely go home, get on the internet, and read everything you could find on the subject. You might join a discussion group with people who had experience with the condition. Even if the doctor wasn’t called

away and she explained the condition and gave you some advice, you would probably still go home and do the research so that you would have more than one opinion on such an important—perhaps even a life-and-death—condition. Bottom line: you would care enough to get informed. So consider racism a matter of life and death (as it is for people of color), and do your homework.

### THE REPAIR

Returning to the example of the racism I perpetrated toward my co-worker, we can see that I followed a series of steps. These steps are based on the preceding list of assumptions and behaviors (reflection, apology, etc.) presented above. First, once I was aware that I had behaved problematically, I took the time to process my reaction with another white person. It was not Angela’s duty to take care of my feelings or feel pressure to reassure me. I was also careful to choose someone who I knew would hold me accountable, not someone who would insist that Angela was too sensitive. After I vented my feelings (embarrassment, guilt, shame, and regret), we did our best to identify how I had reinforced racism. I was then ready to return to Angela. I was clear and open about why I wanted to meet with her, and asked her if she would be willing to meet. I was prepared for her to say no; if I could not accept no for an answer, then I would not have been ready to make an authentic apology.

When Angela and I met, I owned my racism. I did not focus on my intentions but focused on the impact of my behavior and apologized for that impact. Nor did I use passive framing such as “*If* you were offended.” (Apologies that start this way are subtle efforts to put the onus on the recipients of our racism. Indirectly, we are saying that the breach was not inherently offensive—many would not find it offensive at all—but if you were offended because of your extreme sensitivity, then we are sorry.) I simply admitted that my behavior was offensive. Recognizing that I, as a white person, as well as my white friend who had helped me process my feelings, would most likely not understand all the dynamics, I asked Angela what I had missed. She was willing to

enlighten me further, and I accepted this additional feedback and apologized. I made a commitment to do better, and I closed by asking her if there was anything else that needed to be said or heard so that we might move forward.

We then did move forward. Today, we have more trust—not less—in our relationship than we did before this incident. While I regret that it came at a cost to Angela, it wasn't the end of the world. Many people of color have assured me that they will not give up on me despite my racist patterns; they expect that I will have racist behavior given the society that socialized me. What they are looking for is not perfection but the ability to talk about what happened, the ability to repair. Unfortunately, it is rare for white people to own and repair our inevitable patterns of racism. Thus, relationships with white people tend to be less authentic for people of color.

### GOING FORWARD

In chapter 4, I warned readers not to depend on people of color for our racial education and explained why this dependency is problematic. Readers may have been left wondering how we would get this information if we don't ask people of color to give it to us. We can get it in several interconnected ways. We can seek out the information from books, websites, films, and other available sources. Many people of color *are* committed to teaching whites about racism (on their own terms) and have been offering this information to us for decades, if not centuries. It is our own lack of interest or motivation that has prevented us from receiving it.

We can also demand that we be given this information in schools and universities and that we not be required to take special, elective courses to be exposed to it. We can get involved with multiracial organizations and white organizations working for racial justice. And we can build authentic cross-racial relationships and be willing to watch, listen, and learn. Sometimes, within the context of these relationships, we can ask direct questions and ask for explicit information, but this is

not always necessary. Simply by virtue of living an integrated life and paying attention, we will learn what we need to know.

Still, white people do have knowledge of aspects of race and racism, and we can easily unearth this knowledge with some minimal reflection. For example, we can reflect on messages we have received, privileges we enjoy, how we came to be socialized to feel superior (while denying that we feel this way), and how all of this may be manifesting in our lives.

When I began this work, I dreaded getting feedback from people of color on my racist patterns and assumptions. Now I welcome this feedback. Perhaps the most powerful lesson I have learned in terms of interrupting my own white fragility is that this feedback is a positive sign in the relationship. Of course, the feedback seldom feels good—I occasionally feel embarrassed or defensive. But I also understand that there is no way for me to avoid enacting problematic patterns, so if a person of color trusts me enough to take the risk and tell me, then I am doing well.

Many people of color have shared with me that they don't bother giving feedback to a white person if they think the individual is unwilling to accept it; they either endure the microaggressions or drift away from the relationship. They do not feel close to white people to whom they can't speak honestly about racism, and these relationships always have a degree of distance and inauthenticity. While we worry that if we have revealed our racism in any way, the people of color in our lives will give up on us, I have found the opposite to be true. When we engage with the feedback and seek to repair the breach, the relationship deepens. Trying to explain away our racism does not fool people of color or bring them closer.

Because I will never be completely free of racism or finished with my learning, what are some things I can do or remember when my white fragility surfaces? There are several constructive responses we can have in the moment:

- Breathe.
- Listen.

- Reflect.
- Return to the list of underlying assumptions in this chapter.
- Seek out someone with a stronger analysis if you feel confused.
- Take the time you need to process your feelings, but do return to the situation and the persons involved.

We can interrupt our white fragility and build our capacity to sustain cross-racial honesty by being willing to tolerate the discomfort associated with an honest appraisal and discussion of our internalized superiority and racial privilege. We can challenge our own racial reality by acknowledging ourselves as racial beings with a particular and limited perspective on race. We can attempt to understand the racial realities of people of color through authentic interaction rather than through the media or through unequal relationships. We can take action to address our own racism, the racism of other whites, and the racism embedded in our institutions. All these efforts will require that we continually challenge our own socialization and investments in racism and the misinformation we have learned about people of color. We can educate ourselves about the history of race relations in our country. We can follow the leadership on antiracism from people of color and work to build authentic cross-racial relationships. We can get involved in organizations working for racial justice. And most important, we must break the silence about race and racism with other white people.

### THE QUESTION OF GUILT

Audre Lorde eloquently addressed her thoughts on white guilt at the National Women's Studies Association Conference in 1981:

I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just

another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.<sup>1</sup>

I am sometimes asked whether my work reinforces and takes advantage of white guilt. But I don't see my efforts to uncover how race shapes my life as a matter of guilt. I know that because I was socialized as white in a racism-based society, I have a racist worldview, deep racial bias, racist patterns, and investments in the racist system that has elevated me. Still, I don't feel guilty about racism. I didn't chose this socialization, and it could not be avoided. But I am responsible for my role in it. To the degree that I have done my best in each moment to interrupt my participation, I can rest with a clearer conscience. But that clear conscience is not achieved by complacency or a sense that I have arrived.

Unlike heavy feelings such as guilt, the continuous work of identifying my internalized superiority and how it may be manifesting itself is incredibly liberating. When I start from the premise that *of course* I have been thoroughly socialized into the racist culture in which I was born, I no longer need to expend energy denying that fact. I am eager—even excited—to identify my inevitable collusion so that I can figure out how to stop colluding! Denial and the defensiveness that is needed to maintain it is exhausting.

### A POSITIVE WHITE IDENTITY?

There are many approaches to antiracist work; one of them is to try to develop a positive white identity. Those who promote this approach often suggest we develop this positive identity by reclaiming the cultural heritage that was lost during assimilation into whiteness for European ethnics. However, a positive white identity is an impossible goal. White identity is inherently racist; white people do not exist outside the system of white supremacy. This does not mean that we should stop identifying as white and start claiming only to be Italian or Irish. To do so is to deny the reality of racism in the here and now, and this denial would

simply be color-blind racism. Rather, I strive to be “less white.” To be less white is to be less racially oppressive. This requires me to be more racially aware, to be better educated about racism, and to continually challenge racial certitude and arrogance. To be less white is to be open to, interested in, and compassionate toward the racial realities of people of color. I can build a wide range of authentic and sustained relationships across race and accept that I have racist patterns. And rather than be defensive about those patterns, I can be interested in seeing them more clearly so that I might ameliorate them. To be less white is to break with white silence and white solidarity, to stop privileging the comfort of white people over the pain of racism for people of color, to move past guilt and into action. These less oppressive patterns are active, not passive. Ultimately, I strive for a less white identity for my own liberation and sense of justice, not to save people of color.

### A FEW STRATEGIES FOR WORKING TOGETHER

When I give a talk or workshop, the number one question I get from white participants is, “How do I tell so-and-so about their racism without triggering white fragility?” My first response to this question is, “How would I tell you about *your* racism without triggering *your* white fragility?” With this response, I am trying to point out the unspoken assumption that the person asking the question is not part of the problem. In other words, the question distances the participant from racism; it assumes that the questioner doesn’t need feedback or doesn’t struggle with his or her own white fragility. The person’s question is not one of humility or self-reflection.

Having said that, I can offer a few strategies for trying to work with one another on our white fragility. First, I try to affirm a person’s perspective before I share mine, and when I do share mine, I try to point the finger inward, not outward. For example, I might say, “I can understand why you feel that way. I have felt that way myself. However, because of my opportunity to work with people of color and hear their perspectives, I have come to understand . . .” I then share what I have

come to understand with the emphasis on how this understanding relates to me. While this strategy is not guaranteed to lower defensiveness, it’s difficult to argue with someone who has framed a response as her or his own personal insight.

I also give myself some time if I feel at a loss to respond in the moment. When we have an ongoing relationship with someone, it’s fine to take some time and return to the issue later. With this strategy, we can then choose a time when we feel more prepared and sense that the other person is open. In this case, I might say, “Can I talk to you about something? I have been feeling uncomfortable about our interaction the other day but it has taken me a while to get clarity on why. I have a better sense now. Can we return to our conversation?” I then do my best to share my thoughts and feelings as calmly and concisely as possible. Ultimately, I let go of changing the other person. If someone gains insight from what I share, that is wonderful. But the objective that guides me is my own need to break with white solidarity, even when it’s uncomfortable, which it almost always is. In the end, my actions are driven by my own need for integrity, not a need to correct or change someone else.

### PEOPLE OF COLOR NAVIGATING WHITE FRAGILITY

People of color have occasionally asked me how to navigate white fragility. I so wish I had a simple formula to offer them! I want us to stop manifesting white fragility so that people of color don’t have to ask this question. Still, besides the strategies discussed thus far, there is another approach that people of color may find useful. Whenever you—as a person of color—do not want to bear the burden of pointing out a white person’s racism but do not want to let it go, you might ask a white person whom you trust to deal with it. While addressing white racism is rarely easy, white people can certainly bear the brunt of a hostile response less painfully than people of color can. There may even be a little less fragility because the intervention is coming from another white person. This strategy also helps a supportive white person demonstrate support and practice breaking with white solidarity.



Some people of color have told me that it is useful to know how they have colluded with my white fragility. In answering this question, I must first be clear that navigating white fragility is fundamentally a matter of survival for people of color. The consequences of white fragility include hours of agonizing as well as far more extreme consequences such as being seen as a threat and a troublemaker. These biased assessments often lead to job loss, stress-related illness, criminal charges, and institutionalization. To choose to survive in any way deemed necessary is thus an empowered choice. It is white people's responsibility to be less fragile; people of color don't need to twist themselves into knots trying to navigate us as painlessly as possible. Still, in helping people of color decide whether or how to interrupt white fragility, I can share some ways that I have noticed people of color enabling mine.

Because I am seen as somewhat more racially aware than other whites, people of color will often give me a pass. While this is certainly more comfortable for me, it doesn't hold me accountable or support my racial growth. I ask my friends of color to trust that I can handle their feedback, and then it's on me to demonstrate myself as worthy of that trust. Although I recognize the risk it takes, I would not have my current awareness if people of color had chosen to protect my feelings. Since my learning will never be finished, neither will the need to hold me accountable.

When a person of color gives me feedback that I consider unfair, I am tempted to go to another person of color for reassurance that I am a good person. This search for reassurance pressures people of color to align with me over one another by agreeing that I have been unfairly attacked. Empathy with people in distress creates a strong urge to comfort them, and in my search for this comfort, I am, consciously or not, taking advantage of this urge. But the search for reassurance from people of color is inappropriate. My need functions as a kind of divide-and-conquer wedge. Further, my quest for reassurance upholds racism by reinforcing the very idea that the feedback was an unfair attack and/or that there was a correct way to give it and the person of color in question has broken the rules of engagement. In essence, by

complaining to one person of color about the unfairness of feedback from another person of color (no matter how diplomatically or indirectly I try to mask my complaint), I am pressuring a person of color to collude with my racism.

Equity consultant Devon Alexander shared with me what is perhaps the most pernicious form of pressure on people of color: the pressure to collude with white fragility by minimizing their racial experiences to accommodate white denial and defensiveness. In other words, they don't share their pain with us because we can't handle it. This accommodation requires a profoundly unfair degree of inauthenticity and silent endurance. In a vicious racial cycle, white fragility has functioned to keep people of color from challenging racism in order to avoid white wrath. In turn, not challenging white people on racism upholds the racial order and whites' position within that order.

### IN CONCLUSION

The default of the current system is the reproduction of racial inequality; our institutions were designed to reproduce racial inequality and they do so with efficiency. Our schools are particularly effective at this task. To continue reproducing racial inequality, the system only needs white people to be really nice and carry on, smile at people of color, be friendly across race, and go to lunch together on occasion. I am not saying that you shouldn't be nice. I suppose it's better than being mean. But niceness is not courageous. Niceness will not get racism on the table and will not keep it on the table when everyone wants it off. In fact, bringing racism to white people's attention is often seen as *not* nice, and being perceived as not nice triggers white fragility.

Interrupting racism takes courage and intentionality; the interruption is by definition not passive or complacent. So in answer to the question "Where do we go from here?," I offer that we must never consider ourselves finished with our learning. Even if challenging all the racism and superiority we have internalized was quick and easy to do, our racism would be reinforced all over again just by virtue of living in the

culture. I have been engaged in this work in a range of forms for many years, and I continue to receive feedback on my stubborn patterns and unexamined assumptions. It is a messy, lifelong process, but one that is necessary to align my professed values with my real actions. It is also deeply compelling and transformative.

## RESOURCES FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION

This brief list cannot do justice to the scores of excellent resources available to anyone willing to take the initiative to seek them out; it is intended as an entry point.

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