

Racism Is a White Person's Problem

CHAPTER

#1

The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others.

—bell hooks (2006, p. 298)

When I first started learning about racism, I thought the goal of every race conversation was to make me feel bad. Not me, specifically, but White people in general. I came away from race conversations feeling guilty about being White, uncertain about myself, and out of touch with the proficiency and skill with which I faced most other aspects of my life. Because of this, I assumed that feeling guilty was my task. *It's a hard job, but somebody has to do it . . . finally something tangible I can do for racial justice.* And beyond that, I thought that if I could make other White people feel guilty—my friends, my students, my father (especially my father)—I could compound my already significant contribution. I set out to make all the White people I knew do penance for our racial inheritance.

Honestly, these thoughts didn't come through me consciously, as I've laid them out here. But because I felt raw and unresolved about my own White identity and privilege, I reached out to other White people from a place of woundedness, yearning for validation, ready to defend. Every conversation was a setup for one of us to win and one of us to lose. Even in multiracial conversations, I could join only from a place of sin and sorrow—with no room for liberation.

In this mindset, I experienced race conversations as a dead end—a cul-de-sac. We all traveled together down the dead-end street of race talk, made a few loops around the cul-de-sac of shame and guilt (for me), anger and sadness (for others), frustration and anxiety (for others), and then traveled out the same way we entered. We felt bad together. And inexplicably, that was how I believed we would end racism.

What I know now is that the road does not dead-end at all. It meets a roundabout, not a cul-de-sac. The roundabout is a place where we pause, reflect, and take a few turns around the circle before we decide what happens next. We talk about the racial dynamics that have played out so far on our journey. We look again at where we came from and where we are going. And while we can see where we came from as we round the circle, we don't return to that place as we would from a dead end. We choose a path forward together. Race conversations do produce feelings of guilt, shame, anger, sadness, frustration, and anxiety in many people—not just me, and not just White people. But when any particular race conversation comes to a close, we are changed by the humanity we have shared with one another. We are changed by our deeper understanding of how the systems within which we live have affected us on personal, group, familial, and ancestral levels. And because we are changed, we cannot go back the way we came. The only way out is onward, toward the next roundabout. When we brave this conversation, when we face this history, we put ourselves on a road—a path—that leads us closer to racial justice.

Racism Is Not a Person of Color's Problem

James Baldwin (1924–1987) is widely renowned for his novels, essays, and plays, as well as his unflinching willingness to look at racism and ask others to do the same. Among his numerous insights into race in the United States, he often implored people to see that racism is not a Person of Color's or Native person's problem, as it is so often framed. Racism is a White person's problem, he said in so many words, and it won't change until White people see that and do something about it.

This makes sense from a practical perspective. Assuming that People of Color and Native people could end racism without White people would be like suggesting that women could end sexism without men. How could that be? To what extent is it women who maintain the patriarchy? It would be like insisting that trans people could end transphobia without cisgender people, that Muslims should put a stop to Islamophobia without non-Muslims, or that Jews could stop anti-Semitism without non-Jews. No, racism is not going to change unless White people see it as our problem, too.

But the issue is that when a person is part of a mainstream group, it can be hard to even recognize the oppression that affects other groups, much less intervene in it. Most non-Muslims, for example, have no idea what Islamophobia looks like in the United States beyond the most overt graffiti, slurs, or violence. Islamophobia also includes not having non-pork options at company-sponsored dinners or not having a clean, safe place to pray five times a day. It means having your name mispronounced or your choice to fast during Ramadan questioned. When you are not part of a group, it can be hard to see the marginalization and oppression that members of that group must deal with.

White people cannot even see racism without People of Color and Native people sharing their realities with us and challenging our White-centric lenses. Yet this sharing comes at a price. And People of Color and Native people should not have to pay this price, precisely because racism itself already exacts a high toll. Racism almost killed James Baldwin. His life was threatened not just by the brutality of police violence or the substandard health care provided to most Black Americans in his lifetime but also by the everyday indignities of racism. Baldwin said that living in a racist society meant that on a daily basis, he waffled between restraining himself from killing White people and trying not to kill himself (Glaude, 2020). It took all his energy to avoid doing either.

White people cannot begin to make a dent in racism if learning about it comes at the expense of the lives of People of Color and Native people. We must realize the preexisting cost of living with racism before we demand that they tell us about it in a way that we can take in—and therefore incur even more of a price. We cannot expect People of Color and Native people to talk more gently to White people, patiently explain the historical background, turn the other cheek when White people mess up and say the wrong thing in a way that hurts them, or hold our hands while we walk this path. This is not because they can't or won't do these things—indeed, many People of Color and Native people in my own life have talked gently to me, explained aspects of history I didn't know, forgiven my mistakes, and held my hand. No doubt many more are doing the same for White people all over the United States right now. But Baldwin's story teaches us that how People of Color and Native people choose to respond to racism is largely a choice in which their own survival hangs in the balance. What they need to say or do in any given moment is determined by self-preservation, avoiding trauma, and supporting people they love. While it may be that a Person of Color or a Native person will decide to respond to a White person in ways that help that White person learn, White people cannot let our willingness to confront racism hinge on the gentleness or amiableness with which People of Color and Native people share their pain and experiences. It is not something I should expect or demand as a White person.

Yet it is something I need. I need this kind of gentleness, patience, and forgiveness to take my own next steps and to move through the inevitable shame-storms that I experience as I look at this history. I need encouragement and support to believe that my individual-level actions and interventions can help shift the system. I need someone to help me maintain the humility and audacity required to keep meeting my Colleagues of Color and Native colleagues

eye to eye, even as I learn the outrageous injustice of what they have to face in the United States, in a system I benefit from. I need someone to travel this path with me, help me understand, and keep me rooted when I want to run away.

This is where White people come in. Our work is to keep moving along an antiracist path and to support other White people in doing the same. This means that we will support one another so robustly that we can handle the truth of systemic racism and colonialism without being crushed with guilt or hopelessness. We will create many varied points of entry to an antiracist path and encourage other White people to take them, with opportunities for companionship and belonging throughout. This turn comes as a surprise to many White people. Too often, the way White people attend to one another's racism is with a self-righteous fury proportionate to the size of the system, rather than the size of the one comment we are addressing. Sometimes the fury is so consuming that it leaves us speechless—or capable only of talking behind one another's backs. In lieu of intervention, we cut off the relationship. Or we shame one another. The result is that people give up before they even have a chance to begin.

This is driven home for me by various accounts written by parents of teenagers who became seduced by white supremacist movements (Anonymous, 2019; Kamenetz, 2018). Why would teenagers be attracted to such movements? Throughout the stories, one common theme prevails (McLaren, 2017). The teens were lonely and isolated. White supremacist movements were places that offered belonging and respect and treated young people like rational adults. These stories haunt me because white supremacists are reaching out to young White people with the promise of belonging—to recruit them into a hate movement. Meanwhile, I consider the work of building an antiracist world to be part of a love movement. But many White people don't want to be a part of this love movement because the bar for entry seems so high. It makes them feel bad. They often don't know the right words, don't know the accurate history, or unwittingly offend. One woman said to me, "I didn't know we could be nice to each other *and* be antiracist!" Again, this is not to say that there is not a lot we need to learn and do as White people. But if we don't support one another—especially as we begin this learning—and if we don't create opportunities for belonging and respect within our learning processes, White people will opt out.

Some people might call this bending to white fragility. On some level, I suppose it is. But our argument in this book is that white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) is not an indictment or a verdict rendered as a result of bad behavior that can be corrected with the right intention—or the right punishment. As Robin DiAngelo explains, white fragility is a condition caused by our common socialization as White people in a racial caste structure (Wilkerson, 2020); it is a condition that most White people embody, given the sociohistorical context that we occupy. Supporting other White people by steadying them on an antiracist path—and being supported in turn—is not a capitulation to oppressive Whiteness; it is a strategic way forward toward racial justice.

Too often, when White people are trying to be antiracist, we focus on how we look, trying to demonstrate to the people around us that we are not racist. Our antiracism becomes performative, a way of earning credit or projecting a particular self-image, none of which has anything to do with ending racism. This phenomenon is not new and not unique to the United States. Steve Biko (1978/2002), a Black Nationalist from South Africa who was executed by the Apartheid government for his resistance to Apartheid, wrote, "Instead of involving themselves in an all-out attempt to stamp out racism from their white society, liberals waste a lot of time trying to prove to as many blacks as they can find that they are liberal" (p. 23).

This performative antiracism is a problem. Not only does it *not* advance racial justice; it also puts another form of pressure on People of Color and Native people, who then need to recognize or contend with our performance, once again centering Whiteness. It also has a polarizing effect, often driving White people in the political center further away because antiracist culture appears caustic and superficial. What if we stopped trying to look antiracist and instead started trying to *engage* in the practice of antiracism for the purpose of fundamentally changing our society? To do so means not basing our self-image on who sees our activism but quietly, steadily, and strategically engaging in antiracism, regardless of how much recognition we get. It means reaching out to support and challenge White people who

hold basic assumptions that contribute to a racist worldview—but not in a way that makes them more defensive and resistant. This means challenging racist assumptions one on one after the big public discussion. It means engaging with them over time, not just in one heated moment. It means learning from them and giving them a chance to learn from you, rather than entering into an interpersonal battle.

Furthermore, what if White people worked against racism, not only because it's the right thing to do, and not only for the sake of a just society, but because racism is damaging White people, too? As Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (2020) writes:

In *No Name*, when Baldwin recalls his first visit to the South, he says that he “felt as though [he] had wandered into hell.” He wasn’t talking about the hellish lives lived by black southerners under Jim Crow, but rather how the racial dynamics of the region had hollowed out white southerners. The lies and violence had so distorted and overtaken the private lives of white people in the region that their lived lives felt empty. (p. 48)

Baldwin was no more optimistic about White liberals than he was about slaveholding Southerners. Similar to Steve Biko, he said, “I’m a little bit hard-bitten about white liberals. I don’t trust people who think as liberals. . . . I don’t want anybody working with me because they are doing something for me” (Glaude, 2020, p. 97). He wanted White people to see what he saw in the South: how racism was actively destroying White people, just as much as it destroyed Black people.

His comments echo in the words of historian Ibram X. Kendi, who was asked this question: “If you could design the ideal White ally, what traits would that person possess?” Kendi (2020a) responded, “I would want that White person to understand that it is in their interest to build an antiracist society . . . that it is in the interest of people of all racial backgrounds to create a more just, more equitable society.” In other words, racism is a White person’s problem—not just because People of Color and Native people can’t change it alone . . . but because racism hurts White people, too.

How Does Racism Hurt White People?

How exactly does racism hurt White people? Racism certainly does not hurt White people to the same degree or in the same ways that it hurts People of Color and Native people. It also does benefit White people a great deal spiritually, materially, politically, socially, professionally, and so on. Yet to be effective antiracist allies, as Kendi said, White people need to be able to answer this question. While individual White people might answer this question differently, I will share some of my own answers as an example of what this might look like.

At the end of the nineteenth century, W. E. B. Du Bois (1899/1995) wrote, “[Racial] discrimination is morally wrong, politically dangerous, industrially wasteful, and socially silly. It is the duty of whites to stop it, and to do so primarily for their own sakes.” Du Bois was referring to all that the United States lost as a country because the opportunities to work, to learn, to practice medicine, to create policy, and to wield power were reserved exclusively for White men for so long. Look at Charles Drew, creator of the blood transfusion, who attended medical school as an African American when very few non-White students were accepted and faced a deeply segregated medical system. He ultimately resigned as the director of the first Red Cross Blood Bank because the Red Cross insisted on segregating Black blood from White blood (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2017; NewYork-Presbyterian, n.d.). So many lives were saved throughout World War II and beyond because of Dr. Drew’s pioneering work. How many other Black people, Native people, Asian people, and Latinx people might have contributed such innovation but were denied access to education—and thus denied the opportunity to contribute to science, philosophy, business, medicine, law, policy, education, art, and history?

For so long, rather than draw from the vast talent and possibility of our diverse population, we have artificially limited who could be educated, who could contribute, and who could

shape our society. Antiracism widens these possibilities in ways that often feel threatening to White people, who believe the spaces once reserved for them in elite institutions should continue to belong to them. But in fact, this kind of inclusive expansion and diversification benefits everyone because our entire society is improved by it.

Racism Is a Mechanism for Control

In *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, policy expert Heather McGhee (2021) writes about how easily manipulated we (the U.S. public) are when we are invested in racism. Most White voters, she says, vote with their race interest rather than their class interest. By dredging up old racial stereotypes about Black people abusing government resources, self-serving politicians garner votes in spite of the fact that they promote policies that benefit only the very wealthiest in our society. Time and again, White people who depend on government programs for survival have voted in favor of a reduction in those programs out of a belief those same policies will unfairly help or coddle Black people.

McGhee depicts municipalities all over the United States that built state-of-the-art swimming pools in the 1920s and 1930s, when there was no air conditioning and few other ways to stay cool. But when those municipalities realized in the 1950s that they would have to allow Black swimmers to use the pools, many of them closed the pools or paved them over to avoid having them become racially integrated. People with financial means built their own swimming pools or created private clubs. But many White people forwent the luxury of summer swimming altogether, because of their unwillingness to swim with Black people.

McGhee shows how the housing crisis in 2008 was also facilitated by racism. Federal policies that allowed for subprime mortgage lending caused a stock market crash, robbing millions of families of all racial backgrounds of their retirement savings and even their homes. When the fiscally irresponsible policies that led to the crash were created, politicians and bank executives justified them by drawing on well-worn stereotypes of Black and Latinx people as careless homeowners. The racist stereotypes justified the reckless policies. The policies, in turn, ended up hurting many working- and middle-class people—including White homeowners. The policy makers and the bankers, on the other hand, were largely unscathed. Stereotypes of People of Color and Native people as fiscally irresponsible and government-dependent perpetuate a national economic policy that does not benefit most people in the United States. This is how racism works against us—and why antiracism benefits White people, too.

Antiracism makes us harder to manipulate. It helps us see our society with a more balanced lens. It helps us interpret and address societal problems with more accuracy—and therefore more success. On the other hand, racism itself is a tool of control, with tangible material downfalls for most White people. And that's before even considering—as Eleonora will help us see in the Internal Work section following this chapter—how it keeps us afraid, angry, and distressed. Racism keeps White people unwell in ways that are both psychologically and physiologically detrimental to us.

Losing Friends

I can recognize how racism and antiracism have affected me personally in many ways. For example, in college, I took a winter study course in which we studied how the civil rights movement was taught to the public. To do this, our class traveled around the South, visiting museums and historically important sites. There were only five students in the group—three White and two Black—and we became quite close. When we returned to campus for the spring semester, my Black classmate invited me to hang out in his common room. All-gender socializing was a very normal thing to do—in fact, I lived with two White men in a suite across campus, and I was very used to hanging out in common rooms with men. But what I didn't realize was that I was mostly accustomed to hanging out with White students. When I arrived at my friend's common room, he was there with three other Black junior classmen. And as

I came into the room, I panicked. I don't think I'd ever been in a room with four Black men before. Racist tropes were unconsciously playing in my mind, triggering fear, anxiety, and insecurity. Regardless of how much I had just learned on the civil rights trip, I didn't know how to calm down. My body was having a defensive reaction in response to something that was not threatening and not in fact dangerous. For all practical purposes, it was a delusional, unhelpful, and unhealthy reaction—one that racism had conjured up in a very real way inside of me. In this case, sadly, I left. And I lost touch with that friend.

When I think about antiracism, I think about how I have garnered the tools to distinguish real threats from fabricated threats. I think about the friendships I might still have if my discomfort had not been so activated by racial difference. I think about the fact that our ability to detect safety becomes warped by racism. Alternatively, my antiracist practice has made it possible for me to build robust, honest, loving relationships with People of Color and Native people whose lives, worldviews, and perspectives have expanded my own. I shudder to think of my life without some of the relationships that have sustained me over the past 20 years—relationships that could exist only because of my ongoing efforts to unlearn my early racial socialization. And in truth, it was within the context of those relationships—with support and love from those friends and colleagues—that so much of my unlearning transpired.

Racism Renders Us Less Competent

Racism hurts White people because it convinces us that we are fundamentally incapable of building healthy multiracial community with People of Color and Native people. I once spent an entire eight-hour day training the predominantly White faculty of a small independent school that served about 50 percent Black students and 50 percent White students. The school invited me because they wanted to be more effective in serving their Black students by understanding their own Whiteness. At the end of the training, the White principal essentially threw up his hands. “This was really great,” he said, “we learned so much. But let's face it. When it's all said and done, Black kids aren't going to trust me. And why should they?”

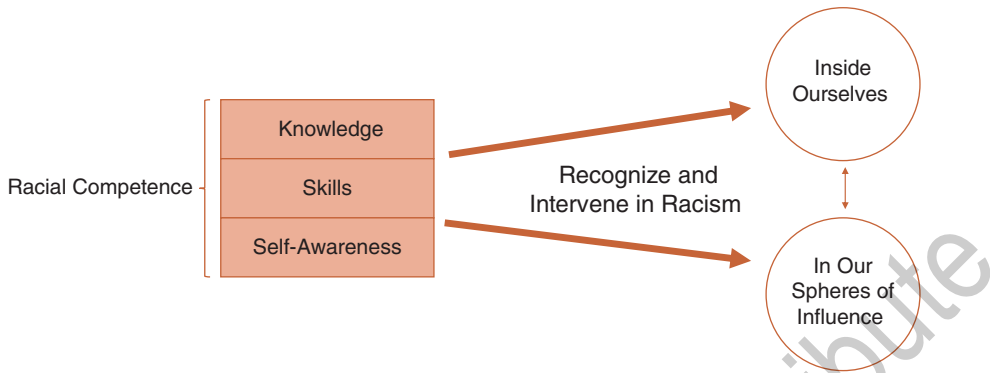
I agree with the principal on several points. Black students may have an implicit distrust of White administrators when they first come into the school. They have every right to. Black students need Black teachers and administrators in their lives. White educators need to support the hiring and retention of more Faculty of Color and Native faculty. All of that is true. But his belief that he could not muster the necessary competence to become the administrator who quelled that distrust meant that he was giving up on relationships with Black students. He was abdicating the responsibility to build mentoring relationships with Black students.

When I first started learning about racism, I felt very much like this principal. When it came to race conversations, I believed White people would always be wrong, and People of Color and Native people would always be right. I also thought that People of Color and Native people were basically born with the ability to talk about race, while White people were born with an intrinsic deficiency. In reality, nobody is born with the ability to talk about race or the knowledge needed to navigate racially stressful situations. People of Color and Native people aren't all skilled at talking about race. When they are, it's because they have practiced. It's because they deal with racism on a regular basis, they talk about it, and they strategize about it. Because People of Color and Native people need to navigate racial stress to survive, they often have well-honed skills for doing so.

Not all White people are unskilled at talking about race or navigating racial stress. But by and large, White people have less practice than People of Color and Native people do. We're not bad at it because we're White. We're bad at it because most of us don't have to do it to survive. We lack the skills because we lack the practice.

Dr. Howard Stevenson was the first person I heard talk about racial competence as a set of skills that anyone can learn. As he says, our capacity to navigate racial stress is a reflection of our competence, not character (Stevenson, 2014). In other words, not knowing how to respond or what to do in a racially complex scenario doesn't make us bad people; it just makes us unskilled. The corollary to this is also true: we can be very good people, but that does not mean we know how to navigate racially stressful situations. Good intentions are valuable but not sufficient for building racial competence. For that we need skills and practice.

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Figure 1.1 Definition of Racial Competence

In this book, we define *racial competence* as the knowledge, skills, and self-awareness that enable a person to recognize and intervene in racism, both inside themselves and outside themselves (see Figure 1.1).¹ Racial competence is liberating and exciting. It allows us to move through the world with more confidence, less fear, and more receptors for building connections with People of Color and Native people. And as Stevenson (2014) says, it is something that anybody can develop with practice.

We See What We Believe

On a weekend trip to New York City during grad school, I stopped briefly to get some coffee. I remember walking out of a busy rest stop in New Jersey behind an older White woman. As she approached the exit door, four teenage boys who were Black were entering from the other side. I looked up to see them smiling and joking. But I saw them get serious as they glimpsed the older woman in front of me, who had stopped in her tracks and appeared to be frozen in fear. This whole exchange happened in an instant, but I knew what she had perceived when she saw them, because it was a perception I might have had in the same scenario at a different point in my life. And it was clear from their reaction that they knew what she perceived as well. In the moment, I moved ahead of her and held the door, ushering her out, hoping that the young men could then go on their way without a second thought. In myself, I noticed a complete lack of fear or confusion; I knew in my gut that those young men were not a threat. I also knew that years before I may have seen them as such. The racial competence I had gained in the interim was like a new pair of glasses that clarified things that had previously been blurry and inaccurate. I was grateful for this greater capacity to see people clearly, knowing that a White woman's faulty fear is a very real threat to Black men (and, in this case, boys).

As Eleonora will explain further in the Internal Work section on priming (following Chapter 3), we don't actually believe what we see; we see what we believe. Our view of the world we live in—and our ability to enjoy its richness—is severely distorted by the racist views we inherit. It reminds me of my dad's reaction to reading *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*. When he finished the book, he said, "I will never look at a Black man the same way again." Recognizing and intervening in the racism that has taken root inside ourselves changes our lenses, so that we see the world differently. The human community and our sense of belonging within it open up to us in a whole new way.

Racism Robs Us of a Certain Joy

Finally, joy! Joy may be the number-one motivating factor for engaging in antiracism. I have found that talking about race and racism—and being honest about how we get treated differently by society—makes it possible to take relationships to a whole new level.

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It is similar to how couples counseling helps my partner and me maintain a relationship that is mutually satisfying while helping each of us grow into the people we want to be. Counseling is not usually easy or fun, but it helps us build a family and a life that is deeply gratifying and full of joy. Antiracism helps me see people clearly and wholly because we have processed together how our racial backgrounds affect our relationships with and our reactions to one another. I experience joy with People of Color and Native people and with other White people along this path. We will talk more about joy in the final chapter.

Reimagining What Could Be

As a White person practicing antiracism, I have long been guided by James Baldwin's words, which he shared in so many different ways throughout his life: *Racism is not a problem only for People of Color and Native people. It's a White person's problem. It's not going to change unless White people do something about it.* In summer 2020, I picked up Eddie Glaude Jr.'s biography of Baldwin and began to reacquaint myself with him in a way I never had before. To my surprise, while it is true that Baldwin said what I had understood him to say about racism being a White person's problem, he did not say it in the way I remembered.

After Baldwin moved to Paris to escape racism in the United States, he answered a question about what it felt like not to have to constantly think about how White people perceived him. Baldwin said, "I didn't have to walk around with one half of my brain trying to please Mr. Charlie and the other half trying to kill him. Fuck Mr. Charlie! It's his problem. It's not my problem" (Glaude, 2020, p. 34).

"Fuck Mr. Charlie! It's his problem. It's not my problem." That's what Baldwin actually said. *Fuck White people. Racism is their problem, not mine.* It's essentially the same statement I remembered, but in vastly different words. It's almost certain that Baldwin made other statements at different points in his life similar to the one I recalled. But it's also possible that I somehow heard these words and recast them into a less dismissive, more inviting account.

Either way, Baldwin's insight had already changed my life. It upended my childhood understanding of racism as a problem only for People of Color and Native people and clarified for me the need to play my part in ending it. It was like a calling, an invitation, a passing of the baton. It was a door opening to a place where I formerly felt I didn't belong, rendering obsolete questions such as "What right do I have to go into that class with so many Students of Color and Native students?" "What do I have to say against racism?" "What right do White people have to speak up about racism or, for that matter, to write a book about racism?" and "What do I even know?" For me, Baldwin's insight became a benediction: *Stop doubting yourself. Do something. Who are you not to take responsibility for this? This is your problem. This is about you.*

My hope is that by engaging White people in an antiracist practice, we can help the United States finally live up to its democratic principles in a way that enables people of all racial backgrounds to live in safety, to care for their families, to manifest their unique talents, and to thrive as professionals and individuals. In particular, I hope that when White people engage in this work, People of Color and Native people can stop wasting energy on trying to communicate a message of injustice in precisely the right way so that White people will hear it. And then, because of the time and energy White people put into supporting one another, we will hear all the words spoken by People of Color and Native people as an invitation, no matter how it is conveyed.

Note

1. Our definition builds on Sue and Sue's (2019) definition of *cultural competency* and the scope of White antiracist work laid out by Mattheus and Marino (2011).

INTERNAL WORK

Antiracism in a Human Body

My heart races, yet again, as I'm about to utter the word *Black* in a large faculty meeting. As I feel my blood pressure rise, I begin to forget what I was going to say, and my own exasperated inner voice screams at me: *Why is this so damn hard? What's wrong with me?* The colorblindness that has been ingrained in me insists that I should stay quiet, and I feel my mouth stutter, caught between what I know intellectually to be right and the feeling that saying *Black* out loud is wrong. To get beyond this moment, I employ my compassionate inner voice and reassure myself: *It's okay. . . . It's okay. . . .* And with that reassurance, I'm back, present in the meeting and refocused on my comments.

While I couldn't bypass that first reaction, I have trained myself to recognize it and come back from it fairly quickly, much of the time. This practiced internal skill allows me to lean into, engage in, learn from, and act when faced with uncomfortable topics or interactions, even ones as simple as overcoming the taboos arising from colorblind socialization. These skills allow me to get myself unstuck over and over again as I attempt to operationalize my antiracist knowledge and intentions.

This is the essential rationale behind the Internal Work sections of this book: it's impossible to take antiracist action to any extent without enlisting our body's consent—regardless of how knowledgeable or well-intentioned we might be. And when I say “action,” I don't simply mean attending protests, organizing, voting, or speaking up. We are biological beings, and as such, anything we intend to do must enlist our physiology; this includes thinking, listening, empathizing, and staying in relationship. And most of us White people find it indeed challenging to talk with other White people about race, hear about the racism experienced by People of Color and Native people, and even just think about how race shapes our lives—not to mention act in antiracist ways.

Because we are socialized within white supremacy, most of us grow up believing that speaking about race is impolite, even shameful. So when we are asked to engage in conversation on race and racism—say, in school, the workplace, or the community—we promptly feel under threat. Given this anxiety on the one hand and our lack of knowledge and skills on the other, we can fear the topic in all its forms. Simply uttering the word *race* or using a term such as *Latinx* can be anxiety-provoking. And this physiological response only deepens as the curtains are pulled back on white supremacy and we come to understand that the racism experienced by People of Color and Native people is in fact true. Early in these conversations, many of us can start feeling bad simply for being White, as if we carry some kind of indelible original sin. When someone points out our microaggressions, we all too often internally shame ourselves, deeming ourselves hopelessly racist, or we desperately try to prove ourselves otherwise. In short, engagement with the topic of race is intense. The body perceives it as a threat to such a high degree that, more often than not, it activates the areas of our brains designed to protect us. It encourages us to shut down and step away. This is why no amount of antiracist intellectual understanding alone will lead us to antiracist action. We need our bodies to stop preventing us from listening and learning—and, by extension, from acting. When we don't train to meet these challenges, we manifest “fragile” behaviors (DiAngelo, 2018), and

we do so in very predictable ways, to the exasperation of our peers and allies—and often even to our own dismay.

The good news is that in spite of what our bodies have been taught, sound waves produced by words reaching our ears are not actually physically dangerous. No race-related word has intrinsic harming power. No truth spoken by a Person of Color, a Native Person, or a White ally is physically harmful to us; in fact, such truths are incredibly useful gifts along an antiracist path. We perceive race-related words or truths about racism spoken aloud as a threat only because we are trained to do so. And our bodies are great students, especially when it comes to our safety.

While our culture and educational systems teach us to privilege the part of our nervous systems responsible for higher-order thinking, which is where our antiracist knowledge and planning reside, that capacity is not always primary, nor do we have unconditional access to it. As it turns out, fear unhinges it quite effectively and without our volition: when our bodies detect danger, we go into survival mode, which in turn overrides our attempts to notice race, think about race, speak about racism, or follow through with our antiracist intentions. So, indeed, it can feel *that damn hard* to align our antiracist words and actions with our antiracist plans. Our bodies are, quite literally, blocking us. And if you have picked up this book, you are most likely all too aware of that very fact. Just think back to any recent unresolved racially charged event when you felt anger, frustration, anxiety, or shame. You probably felt your blood pressure rise, your heart rate quicken, and your mind speed up and get foggy. Your body detected danger and, without your conscious consent, initiated what is called a *stress response*.

Our Survival Mechanism: The Stress Response

Our bodies are evolutionarily, biologically, and genetically designed first and foremost to survive. We come into the world profoundly underdeveloped (more so than any other species) and take a very long time to reach full development (more than 20 years, when it comes to our brains). While our need for care to survive is most apparent during our earlier years, our likelihood of surviving outside of community at any point during our lifetimes is slim to none. To demonstrate this intrinsic interdependence, simply take stock of how many people you have relied on by the time you eat breakfast in the morning, including the people who ensure that you have running water, that your electricity works, that there was milk stocked at the store, and that it was brought to the store from the farm so that you could pour it on your cereal (to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr., 1963/2010). Think about what it would mean not to rely on that broad network of human beings, not to mention animals and nature.

Our intrinsic vulnerability and interdependence have profound implications for our biology, and the ways in which we maximize our chances of survival are encoded all over our nervous systems. Some of our neural survival mechanisms are reflexive and completely out of our control (e.g., blinking when an object approaches our eyes). Others depend on judgment calls, which still happen very quickly and often bypass our higher-order thinking centers. Think again about a recent tense conversation about race—chances are that you were already flushed and ready to react by the time you even registered what might have triggered you, and once you were triggered, I bet you felt all but clear-headed.

While we might not be able to control our reflexes, we can absolutely modulate our response to perceived danger. This Internal Work is about understanding what happens in our bodies when we engage in any antiracist practice—when we push back on the white supremacy myths that Ali will describe in Chapter 2. To be sure, our stress response is a supremely powerful, deeply hardwired neural strategy. Simply knowing about it is not enough to change its grip on us. But if we train to work with it, it does not have to prevail, either. The Internal Work sections in this book will help you do just that.

What exactly is the stress response, and how is it involved in our deep discomfort about race? It is the same neural mechanism designed to protect us from imminent danger. It became encoded into our genes a very long time ago, and it's present throughout most of nature. While this part of our nervous systems can be quite effective at allowing us to survive moments of acute danger (e.g., when we step onto the curb while a car is fast approaching), it's a rather blunt instrument: it reacts to all threats in the same exact way. Our stress response does not distinguish between real or imagined threats to our physical integrity, social status, or emotional well-being. Inconveniently, all these threats feel equally deadly and are responded to as such. Evolutionarily, this makes sense. Because communal support was essential to our physical survival, our bodies evolved to experience threats to our standing within the community as lethal, in the same way a saber-toothed tiger posed a lethal threat. However, the social and environmental contexts in which we live today are quite different from the milieu in which our genes evolved. Therefore, our neurological bias for overestimating what might constitute imminent danger can cause serious problems at a time when imminent threats from the natural world are not what we contend with most in our daily lives.

How Do Our Bodies Respond to Perceived Danger?

I am going to outline next exactly what happens when our nervous systems perceive danger. Before I do that, I want to specify that here I am not talking about the perceived danger generated by our bodies because White people are often taught to be afraid of People of Color and Native people—to see Black men as dangerous and to see Brown Muslim people as terrorists. Although our stress response is activated in these instances as well, this is not what causes most of our angst on an antiracist path. In fact, these might be some of the easiest and most obvious fears to recognize as unfounded. Here, I am pointing to the perceived danger our bodies detect in merely talking about race, in taking a risk of getting something “wrong” and unwittingly offending a Person of Color or Native person, or in being excluded from a respectable social circle. In other words, People of Color and Native people are not the threat that triggers our nervous systems in ways that impair us from acting in antiracist ways. It is challenging racism in other White people or in our institutions that scares us and limits us. It is the intensity of our guilt or shame that we find profoundly threatening. It is the fear of losing community and belonging that makes us retreat and stay silent. These pitfalls plague us the most while being the least visible to us.

What exactly happens, then, in our nervous systems when we detect danger in any form, real or imagined? In response to threats, our stress responses initiate a cascade of events, implicating a number of hormones, which compel us to enact one of three strategies. Which strategy we enact depends on our nervous systems' assessment of our ability to confront the threat:

1. If our nervous systems think we can overcome the danger, they propel us to *fight*. This strategy can manifest as physical or verbal aggression but also as intense thinking or ruminating and overplanning. It can look like blaming the victim, complaining about the timing and form of the feedback we receive, or replaying over and over what we should/could/would have said or done. It is most often associated with feelings of anger and frustration.
2. If our nervous systems think we can outrun the danger, they propel us toward *flight*. This strategy can manifest as physical avoidance or emotional/psychological withdrawal. It can look dramatic, like changing careers, quitting a committee, or physically leaving a conversation; it can also be more subtle, like disengaging

emotionally or verbally or letting the urge to give up prevail. It is most often associated with feelings of fear and anxiety.

3. If our nervous systems think that there is no chance for either overcoming or escaping the danger, they make us *freeze*. This strategy is meant to lessen the psychological and physiological pain of succumbing to the threat. Personally, I know I'm freezing when my mind goes blank. On the outside, we might look like a deer in the headlights or appear to be checked out. On the inside, we feel stuck, even utterly exhausted, all the energy draining from our bodies. We could go as far as feeling outside of ourselves or no longer in contact with what's happening around us. The freeze response is most often associated with feelings of shame and helplessness.

The more we feel unsafe, the more our nervous systems deploy these fight, flight, or freeze strategies. The more these strategies are deployed, the less access we have to the parts of our brains that allow us to think, learn, and empathize. In other words, in moments of perceived danger, our physiology is designed to concentrate all its energy on reestablishing safety and minimizing pain. Those moments are not the time to look around, get some perspective, befriend the enemy, or recall stored information. As you think back on a recent unresolved racially charged event in your life, you might begin to identify how these specific strategies manifested specifically for you.

As helpful as this mechanism is to survive a real, imminent threat to our physical integrity, it causes problems for the routine day-to-day interactions in which there is no real, tangible threat but toward which we initiate an all-out, out-of-proportion defensive response. Further, our stress response is actually toxic to us in the long term. Short bursts of a fight, flight, or freeze response stress our physiology just enough to strengthen it, like a good workout. But when these responses become too frequent, they are poisonous and have serious health consequences—just like our muscles are meant to be used but not overtrained. Chronic use of our stress response is not only detrimental to our health (e.g., by fostering heart disease, impairing our immune system, dysregulating cell repair, increasing inflammation, impairing learning and memory) but also highly problematic when it comes to race conversations. To the extent that these conversations feel scary, this mechanism will make it difficult to remain in relationship, use our antiracist knowledge, or notice all that is said to us or that is taking place around us. All these capacities are physiologically diminished. So you are not wrong—white supremacist training has made it *that damn hard* to practice antiracism in all its forms. But contrary to other species, we have a choice: we can follow the path of least resistance and remain reactive to what scares us, or we can train for courage and keep access to all our capacities, even when our bodies detect danger.

It is crucial to our antiracist effectiveness to realize that this is the biological context within which we receive messages about race. As Ali will describe in laying out five of the myths of white supremacy in Chapter 2, we are overtly trained to fear conversations about race by one part of our society—and then harshly judged by another part as intrinsically defective (read: racist) if we don't enter such conversations smoothly and with full competence. Even if others don't berate us for failing to do so, we berate ourselves. To make things worse, we are taught to suppress our emotions, which means that we often don't even know when we are having a fight, flight, or freeze response. And we are certainly not taught emotional-regulation skills that would help us manage our stress response.

In sum, very little in our cultural and social contexts prepares us to handle tensions around race in nonreactive ways. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that we are actively trained to be reactive. But we can't build racial competence on our reactivity. In fact, racial competence depends on our ability to recognize our reactivity and moderate it.

Strengthening Your Antiracist Practice

Notice Your Stress Response: Graduated Exposure

Graduated exposure is a great way to build your ability to notice when you are in a flight, fight, or freeze state and the particular forms these states take in your life under different circumstances. To start, list a few racially charged events that are distressing for you. You should list a mix of both mildly and intensely distressing events. For me, a mildly distressing racially charged event would involve becoming aware that I'm taking too much space as a White person in a conversation or realizing that I did not see how another White person's behavior was racist before a Person of Color or Native person pointed it out to me. I feel a lot more distress when I am told I have acted in racist ways. I still cringe thinking back to having mistaken a Neighbor of Color for someone else and remembering the expression on his face when I called him by the wrong name. We might even experience distress after speaking up against racism or while planning an event that challenges our institution to think differently, as we begin to imagine the potential for backlash.

Here are the steps to practice exposure:

Step 1: Identify five to ten racially charged events that are clearly distressing for you, thinking back to racially tense experiences you've participated in or witnessed in the past few months.

Step 2: Rate each experience from 0 (not distressing at all) to 10 (most distressing). Your distress scale should reflect your level of distress in general, not just as it pertains to racial tensions, so a rating of 0 reflects times when you were completely relaxed, and a rating of 10 indicates times when you were the most distressed you have ever felt, in any situation. In counseling, we call these Subjective Units of Distress.

Step 3: After you assign a Subjective Unit of Distress to each event, select any one event with a rating of 5 to 7 as your initial focus for exposure, and commit to working on it for few minutes each day—perhaps while you are commuting to work, doing the dishes, or brushing your teeth. Working on an event means

- *thinking* about it for a few seconds;
- *noticing* when your body begins to initiate a fight, flight, or freeze reaction;
- *watching* the physiological sensations that begin to emerge, again for a few seconds;
- and then spending as much time as needed re-grounding your body, by taking some deep breaths or mindfully tracking physical sensations (I offer a few additional practices in the Internal Work section following Chapter 2).

Once you feel relaxed again—whether it takes a few seconds or a couple of minutes—*repeat the process* a few times: go back to thinking about that same event again, notice and watch your fight, flight, or freeze reaction, and then re-ground yourself.

(Continued)

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Step 4: Once you become relatively quick at re-grounding yourself, select an event that has a higher Subjective Unit of Distress, perhaps around 8, and repeat the same exact procedure for this new target. But don't rush the process! No one's watching; no one's keeping tabs on how quickly you move through the list of events you have created. Only you can know when each event you have selected to work on still offers good practice—or when it has become too easy and is not offering you a challenging enough opportunity to practice pausing and re-grounding. The point is to train the muscle of re-grounding, and moving too quickly—but not thoroughly—up the ladder will not actually build your skills.

As you work through each of the scenarios you have selected, you will become quite proficient at handling not only the specific instance you've practiced and trained for, but also most instances that provoke a similar level of distress. In other words, the re-grounding muscles you develop in one context will automatically generalize to others with similar emotional undertones. So don't worry about working with all the events that you rated as a 5, for example, or that feel very similar. Keep challenging yourself to move up the scale or through different kinds of situations.

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