

Myths of White Supremacy

I now know that hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Hope allows us to push forward, even when the truth is distorted by the people in power. It allows us to stand when they tell us to sit down, and to speak when they say be quiet.

—Bryan Stevenson (as cited in Cretton, 2019)

So how do we travel an antiracist path in a way that moves the needle on racism and gets other White people to do so as well?

One answer involves recognizing how white supremacy still lives in us—in our society, our assumptions, our relationships, our bodies, and even our antiracism efforts. In the following section, I will share five myths of white supremacy that affect how White people talk to other White people about racism.

The mythological pillars of white supremacy are many. The lies and stories on which we have built our society are too numerous to count. But five myths in particular underlie the logic that guides White people in our relationships with one another, particularly with regard to how we talk (or don't talk) about race. These myths—and the ways in which we continue to act as if they are true—are part of why this love movement for racial justice feels unwelcoming and inaccessible to so many.

The myths:



Myth 1: It's rude to talk about race; we should all be colorblind.

Myth 2: We can and should be perfect—or at least appear perfect.

Myth 3: We need to “win” by competing with one another.

Myth 4: It's better to think, rather than feel, about racism.

Myth 5: Race is real and biological; racial differences are immutable.

Myth 1: It's Rude to Talk About Race; We Should All Be Colorblind

As I wrote in my introduction, I was raised to be colorblind. As far as I knew back then, my colorblindness was a phenomenon of social comfort. We didn't talk about race in my family because it was awkward, and we didn't know what to say.

Today, I can see other explanations, all of which help explain our collective studious avoidance of the topic. Educational researchers would say that my family didn't talk about race

because we lacked the background knowledge and skills—the racial literacy—to do so (Sealy-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2014). Sociologists would say we didn't talk about race because we were all White people, and we didn't realize that "race" was about us, too (Lewis, 2004). Philosophers like Charles Mills (1999) would say we didn't talk about race because we were invested in the racial contract, which traded our silence and complicity for the material gains of a system that put White people first in line for resources and opportunities and made us think we deserved them the most. Writers like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison would say we didn't talk about race because we thought racism wasn't our problem. Psychologists like Beverly Daniel Tatum and historians like Ibram X. Kendi would say we didn't talk about race because we thought of ourselves as non-racist, and we thought that was enough. From a parenting perspective, perhaps we didn't talk about race because of how my parents had been socialized to be colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) and colormute (Pollock, 2005). From a group dynamics perspective, we didn't talk about race because our Whiteness was invisible to us (Sue, 2004b).

From a political perspective, we didn't talk about race because when I was growing up in the 1980s, politicians like President Ronald Reagan overtly framed Black activists as "racists" for talking about race. He did so while methodically resisting and undoing policies meant to address historical racial inequities. Reagan promoted the message that it's racist to talk about race while restoring and re-creating the structures necessary for the maintenance of the racial caste system. The same message is prominent in conservative politics today.

My colorblindness, and that of my family, was part of our family and community culture, and it seemed relatively innocuous at the time. But I can see now all the different incentives and messages that played into our sense that colorblindness was the right way to be White. I can see how the national narrative that said *people who talk about race are the racists* distracted much of White society from thinking critically about race. I can see how I unconsciously absorbed the nightly images of Black violence, drug use, and economic dependency that saturated the media without questioning. I can see now that I wasn't afraid of traveling to Black communities simply because I had unexamined stereotypes. I was afraid because I had been socialized into playing the role that politicians, the media, and our society at large had written for me—a White girl in the suburbs who would be safer if she stayed away from Black people. The poverty, vulnerability, and violence that Black people experienced at the hands of a hostile state during that time meant that many Black youth were cornered into similarly playing the role written for them.

For all the historical, psychological, sociological, social, political, and educational reasons why my family didn't talk about race, the impact was that we didn't and couldn't talk about racism. We came to see all racial talk as racist talk. I still encounter this misunderstanding today when I mention the racial background of a person, and a teenager will say in response, "Why do you need to name their race? Isn't that racist?" It is common in our society to conflate "racial" talk with "racist" talk. The distinction between racial and racist talk comes from anthropologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant and will be covered in greater detail in Chapter 4. It is a framework that can help us begin to grow away from colorblindness, which demands that we cease and desist from all "racial" talk, lest we be seen as racist.

For White people trying to walk an antiracist path, a first step is to understand that part of our fear and discomfort with talking about race is coming from the way we were raised. I was taught in my community that talking about race is rude, just as surely as I was taught to say thank you to the waitress at Friendly's. And talking about race still often makes my heart beat faster and face go red, just as it would if I tried to go to a restaurant and be rude to the waitstaff. It's hard to go against our home training.

A teacher once followed me into a taxi after a six-hour workshop I had delivered at her school because she had so many questions, "You seem so comfortable talking about race. I always feel so bad after I do it. When will that change?" I had to admit to her that I commonly feel bad after I talk about race. Even then, I was about to board a train back to Philadelphia, and no doubt I would spend time on the commute lingering on what I said that was wrong, or how I screwed up. Part of this is my desire to have integrity in my work. But part of it is the way that I search for an explanation of why I feel so bad after I have done a public presentation on race. And ultimately, it's not because I did something wrong—it's because I did

something I was taught not to do. The *feeling bad* comes from acting in ways I was raised to believe were wrong.

Unlearning colorblindness, or what some people would call *learning color consciousness* (Appiah & Gutmann, 1998), means learning to recognize those unconscious physiological reactions and finding a place to put them so that they don't overwhelm you into being silent. It requires that you find spaces for talking about race, not just for the sake of talking but so that you have an opportunity to actively practice and unlearn the habits and ways of being that are integrated into who you are. In Chapter 9, I will share more about forming White antiracist learning spaces that exist for the explicit purpose of giving White people space to practice, learn, and grow with regard to color consciousness and developing racial competencies.

Myth 2: We Can and Should Be Perfect— or at Least Appear Perfect

Be perfect.¹ Appear perfect. It's a White cultural norm and a middle-class norm, but where does it come from? It seems to be particular to people who see following the rules as in their best interest. As Betsy Leondar-Wright (2005) says in her book *Class Matters*, it's a particular feature of middle-class culture to believe that following the rules will help you succeed. Leondar-Wright says that people outside of the middle class (people who are very poor or very rich) tend to eschew the rules. For the very poor, it's because the rules don't work for them. For the very rich, it's because there's no sense that rules must apply. In a capitalist society, if you have some money, and you have some access to credit, following the rules does seem to be a fairly certain path for advancement. For people who are White and middle-class, there's a sense that if we do everything right, things will go well for us. Or we believe that if things are going well for us, it's because we do things right. Many people's experience of meritocracy suggests that if things don't go well for you, it's because you did something wrong—not because the system failed you. For People of Color, Native people, poor folks, folks with disabilities, and trans and queer folks, this system is more evidently broken—or, rather, it was not set up for you to succeed to begin with. Marginalized people within this system learn early that even if they do everything right, the system may still fail them. For middle-class White people, particularly cisgender, able-bodied, straight White people, it might seem like a pretty good system. So those of us who are White and middle class set about crossing all our *t*'s and dotting all our *i*'s so that we can get the most out of it.

Deluded by the sense that perfectionism will help us get ahead, middle-class White people tend to bring this demand for perfection into our relationships with People of Color and Native people, as well as into our efforts to be antiracist. I suspect that is part of the reason this demand for perfection pervades antiracist culture and communities. Even as we are trying to be allies to People of Color and Native people, we place on them a demand that they be perfect and blame the failures of antiracism on their imperfections. But we also carry this myth of white supremacy into our own antiracism efforts, trying to be perfect and expecting other White people to be perfect as well. It's why so many don't want to speak up in conversations, for fear we'll use the wrong word or say something offensive. It's why so many people don't speak up against racism in public or even behind closed doors. We don't want to do it unless we can do it perfectly.

But it's not just our tendency toward the appearance of perfectionism at work here. It's also a genuine desire not to be hurtful to People of Color and Native people, or not to cause even more damage. The problem with this desire is that the alternative to speaking up—and possibly saying the wrong thing—is silence. Silence is not neutral when speaking up is what is called for. I can remember working with Eleonora and our small antiracist group as we role-played possible interventions to a racist encounter one of us witnessed on the subway in New York. Someone tried speaking directly to the “aggressor” in the role-play, and then we ruminated on the possibility of someone getting hurt by using that strategy. Someone tried talking directly to the “victim” to help them find a way out of the situation, but then we

cautioned the possibility of overstepping our bounds or blowing things out of proportion. We wondered if any of these solutions would actually make a difference, or if we were simply falling into the trap of wanting to be some kind of White superhero. We could see the pitfall of every potential action. Then Eleonora pointed out that there was a problem with silence and inaction as well. She said, “Maybe when we’re in situations like that, we should just plan to do the wrong thing—like Nike, only the antiracist version.” Since we can always come up with reasons not to take action—and if not taking action is wrong, too—what if we just take action and then learn from those mistakes? From then on, our motto became *Do the Wrong Thing*.

What is the antidote to this desire for perfection? A colleague and mentor of mine, Sarah Halley, says that mistake-making in antiracism needs to be more like mistake-making in figure skating: it’s going to happen if we want to get good. Figure skaters can’t perform a triple axel the first time they try. They probably fall hundreds of times before they actually do it. It’s not solely their skating ability that helps them become great; it’s also their ability to fall and recover. It’s their willingness to mess up and try again, to learn from their mistakes, all as a part of the process of developing competencies. This is hard to do because the task is dire; People of Color and Native people need White people to be racially competent yesterday. And yet we can’t just be good at something that we haven’t practiced. If White people want to become effective antiracists, we need to learn how to fall and recover. If we could recover quickly and easily from the corrections and feedback that we receive on all the ways in which our language and actions are still not quite antiracist, think how quickly we could all move forward.

It’s our inability to receive feedback that makes others (People of Color, Native people, and White people) hesitant to give it, knowing that if they do so, they have to put it in a way we will hear it, then make us feel better about ourselves when we are hurting, and possibly risk having us retaliate or withdraw from the relationship. White people end up not getting the feedback we need to become better antiracists because we have such a strong belief that we can and should be perfect (or at least look perfect). Maybe not accidentally, the very thing that prevents us from getting feedback and learning comes from a white supremacist framework. Being able to be imperfect, to *do the wrong thing* and reevaluate afterward, to take feedback and make change, to fall and recover—all these measures are critical to disrupting white supremacy’s rules around perfectionism and moving the needle on racism.

I have worked with several White people, one of whom has shared his story in this book, who willingly showed up imperfectly. They took risks, they opened themselves up to feedback, and they made racial equity a priority in their professional practice. When they received public feedback on their imperfections, they stayed open to it, worked to learn more, sought to make amends, and did not run away from the feedback. But in some cases, their places of work, unable to tolerate the discomfort of imperfection and the messiness of racial stress, actively worked against community healing by taking a legal stance, dictating that they avoid interpersonal repair, and telling them to say nothing while publicly distancing the institution from them. Treated as irremediably tarnished by their errors, they became persona non grata in their own communities.

I write this because our desire for perfection is not just an individual flaw; it’s a collective problem that stands in the way of growth. Again, People of Color and Native people need White people to stop acting through biased lenses altogether. That should always be the immediate intention and goal. At the same time, that is not always possible. But when White people are willing to learn from their mistakes, make repairs, and be transformed by the experience, we become even more the people that antiracism asks us to be.

Throughout this book, we will address how White people can support other White people through difficult but inevitable learning moments for the good of racial equity. And we will also address how we can deal with the discomfort of falling and recovering for ourselves. For as much as we want to help other White people walk an antiracist path, the primary thing we have control over is ourselves. We need to hold ourselves accountable and develop the skills to accept the accountability that others offer us.

Myth 3: We Need to “Win” by Competing With One Another

Another aspect of white supremacist culture that shows up in how White people interact with one another is competition—the idea that there’s enough room for only one White person to be antiracist. I still remember a moment in graduate school when, in our White antiracist learning space meeting, my friend Sue suddenly sat up straight and said, “I just realized something! It’s not about me being the best antiracist White person in the room. It’s about ending racism! It’s not about me at all.” The rest of us looked at her, stunned, and then laughed. She was one of the most humble, self-reflective, thoughtful, and supportive members of our group. The realization that even she had felt a need to compete was revealing, and it shone a light on a tendency we each had felt.

In that moment, she named the predictable and toxic dynamic in which White people compete against one another to be more antiracist, thereby making the air of antiracist group dynamics less friendly, less desirable, and less welcoming. A White person actually blocks other White people from joining an antiracist path when their impulse is to earn praise for being the one who shines—the one who “gets it.” Even when we can rein in this impulse, too many White people are quicker to see racism in other White people than in themselves. We are quicker to ask, “But we’re the choir; how do change those other, more racist White people?” Stopping this competitive mindset allows us to look at ourselves, how racism lives in us, what else we can do to change, and how we might practice antiracism with a vigor and vulnerability that will encourage and support other White people to take part in the process. When millions of White people are drawn to an antiracist path and begin to use their personal locus of control to dismantle the racial hierarchy in the systems within which they work, systemic racism begins to crumble. That is why every one of us is needed. That is why the winner of *The Most Woke White Person* award is irrelevant.

The competitive mindset also plays into the white-savior dynamic, which so many of us learned as children. I can still remember watching Michele Pfeiffer’s character in the movie *Dangerous Minds* roll into a school full of Children of Color and turn it around with her wit and charm. I wanted to be Michele Pfeiffer as Ms. Johnson. I wanted to be a teacher who saved Children of Color, just like her. I learned early in college to be critical of my inner white-savior desires, but if I’m telling the truth, it probably still connects to why I do what I do today. But as I learn to see and name that tendency toward Ms. Johnson-ism, or white saviorism, I can continuously bring myself back to my reasons for practicing antiracism that are not about looking bad-ass in a leather jacket or saving all the Black and Brown kids. It’s about doing my part to help create a just, equitable, antiracist world; enlisting other White people in the effort; and trying to get out of the way of Black and Brown people so that they can live and shine as they were born to do.

It is in White antiracist learning spaces that we learn how to be allies with other White people, rather than just friends. Friends are people we get together with, talk to, laugh with, and care about. Allies are the same. But allies also share our antiracist goals. Allies hold us and themselves accountable to a larger intention of walking an antiracist path.

I still remember taking a walk with a White colleague in graduate school and telling her that I had unwittingly called a Black student by another Black student’s name. I was embarrassed, annoyed, and angry that I had done this. I knew it was a hurtful microaggression, and I needed to talk through it. This friend said to me, “Oh, Ali. You’re not racist. You’re the least racist person I know. You don’t need to worry about that.” In my head, I realized that this friend was not yet an ally. That’s not to label her or make her wrong. But in that moment, I needed an ally who could hold me in loving accountability rather than dismiss my concerns. Learning to identify my allies helps me discern whom to call when I need to be held accountable.

Eleonora and our antiracist learning group became my allies. When I told them about the same microaggression, they said things like, “Ouch. I hate it when that happens. I’ve done that before. It hurts when that happens. Tell us more about it. What was going on at the time?”

What are your relationships like with those two students? What did you do? What do you wish you'd done?" They gave me space to process, to explore, to better understand the bias that led to that moment, and to help me consider how to prevent the same thing from happening in the future. They helped me look at my bias squarely without hiding it or sweeping it under the rug.

When White people are my allies, they provide the scaffolding that helps me grow beyond my current possibilities. When I was leading a workshop recently, a participant reached out privately and lovingly to tell me how much she was learning but also to offer me feedback on using the term *blind spot*, which she understood—from disability rights advocates—to be an ableist term. Initially I bristled at her feedback, but she had written with such generosity that I was able to write her back to tell her honestly that I had bristled, explaining that I think of a blind spot as something that all people experience when we're driving. She wrote back that she agreed, yet she had heard multiple people from the disability rights community say it was offensive. In this back and forth, I was able to sort through some of my own resistance, get more information from her, process my thinking, and ultimately decide that I should reconsider my language. (I now try to use the term *oversight*.) If she had simply corrected me or shamed me, or if she had brought it up publicly, I may not have been able to process it in the same way. I think of her as an ally because she allowed me to sit with my discomfort, voice it, process it, and then integrate something new into my thinking. Her gift was staying in relationship with me through it all.

Being an ally to White people is never about cutting others down for their shortcomings. It's about holding them accountable to their antiracist and social justice intentions—and doing so in a way that helps them stretch in the direction in which they hope to grow.

Myth 4: It's Better to Think, Rather Than Feel, About Racism

Janet Helms (2020), a Black psychologist who studies White racial identity development, says that for White people to be effective antiracists, we need to grow beyond a stage called *pseudo-independence*, in which White people tend to *think* about racism, rather than *feel* about it.

We need to grow beyond this stage to be antiracist, yet I find myself stuck in it time and time again. It is one of my growing edges—a place where I need to keep putting time and energy. From the inside, I find it hard to know the difference between thinking and feeling, but every once in a while, it becomes glaring. I can still remember sitting in a research meeting with Eleonora and receiving a text. At the time, we were working with the same school, and a teacher from that school had included both of us on a group text. The text was a picture from that morning's Halloween parade. One of the teachers marching in the parade had worn a noose around his neck. When the picture showed up on my phone, I said, "Oh no. What an idiot." Eleonora, on the other hand, said, "I feel like I've been punched in the gut." In the heat of that moment, it occurred to me that Eleonora was in her feelings, while I was not. I was only able to see that this was an unthinking action and to predict that people were going to be hurt and angry—but I did not feel hurt and angry myself.

I contrast this moment with another conversation I had with a parent of my daughter's friend, who said she had heard that one of the adults working with the older children in our community organization was creepy. "Creepy, how?" I asked. She said, "Creepy, as in with girls." In that moment, I could feel my blood turn to ice. I felt the cold spread through my body, and almost simultaneously, I could hear my thoughts turn to planning an escape: "We need to move. We need to sell our house. We need to quit that organization. My child will not work with a creepy adult."

When I reflect on these two moments, I can see how the second moment, which included a potential threat to my own child, created a physiological reaction in me that moved me to action. We didn't end up leaving, but I did investigate the claims, which turned out to be connected to a former coach who didn't work at the organization anymore. But what stayed with me was the fact that I had felt my blood turn to ice in a way that it hadn't really since college,

when I sat through a graphic presentation on how to stay safe from rape. How many times had I heard stories from People of Color and Native people about the trauma that they have experienced in schools, and never once had my blood run cold in that same way? I don't say that to judge my initial numbness; judgment only makes this harder. Yet recognizing my reaction helps me understand my action or inaction with regard to other aspects of racism. If I really felt the terror of racism in my body, as a physiological reaction, the urgency and immediacy of doing something about it would be real to me in an entirely new way. If I cannot *feel* about racism, I cannot engage in deep, empathetic responsive action.

This tendency of White people to think our way into understanding racism—to intellectualize it or see it as theoretical—has many roots. Like many other White people, I learned about racism through theory. As I described in the introduction, I first learned about racism in an African American literature class. And while my Black classmates shared some of their own experiences with racism, most of the class was focused on the words and experiences of authors, many from another era, such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid, and Audre Lorde. When I hear people criticize White people for being so theoretical about racism, I often wonder, “How else could we possibly be?” It's a necessary critique, but it seems as if it should be less of a criticism and more of a statement of fact: White people are theoretical about racism, in part because they first learn about it as theory. Very few White people experience racism directly, overtly, and viscerally in the way that People of Color and Native people experience it. We live in a deeply segregated society in which most of our relationships are with people of racial backgrounds similar to our own. With the exception of White people who are in intimate relationships with People of Color or Native people through partnerships, marriages, stepparents, children, and friendships, very few White people even get exposed to the rawness of lived racism. Very few White people even know what it's like to be disrespected by a police officer, an experience that is common and well known among most People of Color and Native people. Beyond that, when we do get to hear how People of Color and Native people are affected by racism, we are primed to conjure explanations that make the victim the “other” or “at fault,” which means that we don't get proximal in ways that would actually make us empathize.

If we can't feel, we don't have much chance of taking action. So what steps can we take to feel more about race? The first is simply recognizing when we are being led by thoughts rather than by feelings. We can *track* our reactions internally. *Tracking* is a group-dynamics term that means *noticing without judgment*. We can notice that we are thinking about race rather than feeling about it. Then we can push ourselves to feel about it by asking ourselves and one another, “What if that were me or a loved one?”

Sometimes I notice myself start to feel something as I read a troubling headline in the newspaper, and then I numb the feeling by continuing to scroll on to other, often equally horrifying, headlines. People have created a term for this: *doomscrolling*. It's bad for our health for so many reasons, but it's particularly effective at numbing us from any individual story. When I'm reading the paper, I try to stop after one story—to write down the names of the people in the story, to find a few reports on that particular story. I do this particularly when Black people are victimized by police violence. But I also do it with COVID stories or with healthcare policies—racialized and emotional things that we often numb ourselves to. In this way, I can become emotionally invested in a person's story, rather than just vaguely aware of the general reality.

Eleonora's work throughout this book will introduce you to other exercises that will support a shift from exclusively *thinking* about racism to *feeling* about it, too. It is the feeling that ultimately generates both motivation and direction for action.

Myth 5: Race Is Real and Biological; Racial Differences Are Immutable

The final myth that gets in the way of antiracism—whether it's White people or People of Color and Native people practicing it—is the idea that race is real and biological and that racial differences are immutable. This is a problem of paradigm. It's a paradox. We can't recognize

and intervene with racism if we can't talk about race. Yet race is not real, nor is it biological. Historically, it has been based on biological features, such as skin color and hair texture (albeit in subjective and inconsistent ways), but it's fundamentally a made-up category.

This is a confusing idea, but we have to name and expose this myth if we are going to build an antiracist society. Foundational to white supremacist thinking is the idea that race is real, genetic, and biological. White supremacy holds that White people are biologically and intellectually superior to People of Color and Native people. It holds that Black people are biologically inferior to White people but somehow genetically wired to be athletes or manual laborers. Scientists and anthropologists have debunked this hierarchy. Researchers have demonstrated that we are usually more genetically similar to people who are technically categorized as other "races" than we are to others in our own racial group (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2013). There is no biological justification for the notion of race (Goodman et al., 2003). The paradox is that we have to use the notion of race to undergird antiracist thinking and action, even though antiracist action ultimately requires that we abolish said categories. James Baldwin wrote, "We find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of categorizations" (as cited in Glaude, 2020, p. 92). How did Baldwin navigate this paradox, given that he was a scholar and narrator of the impact of race and racism? Baldwin's biographer writes, "Black identity politics, for Baldwin, was only a means to an end. They could never be an end in itself because a certain acceptance of blackness sprung the trap, imprisoning us in the very categories we needed to escape" (Glaude, 2020, p. 92).

The creation of "race" involved putting people into boxes based on skin color, then assigning value, rights, access to resources, and opportunity based on those boxes. People in the "Black" box were not only denied rights; they were denied humanity. They were deemed enslavable; they and their children could not own even themselves. Those in the "White" box were given political rights, humanity, access to jobs, access to their White progeny, education, and mobility, to name a few.

One way to see the absurdity of race is to look at two states in the Jim Crow South. In one state, a person had to be one fourth Black to be considered Black. In the neighboring state, a person had to be one sixteenth Black to be considered Black. What this meant is that a person could literally cross state lines and turn from being considered Black to being considered White. And in that designation, established by the state, lay the legally enforced rights and mandates of the person's place in the racial caste system. If they were White, that meant they had access to an entirely different array of jobs, schools, stores, safety, protection from police, public office, jury duty, voting, and so on.

Because of the socially constructed nature of race, Black writer and public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me* and *The Water Dancer*, does not write about *White Americans* but rather *those Americans who believe that they are White* (Coates, 2015, p. 6). I have always struggled with this framing, not because it is untrue, but because I actually think most White people don't even consciously identify with being White or see themselves as part of a racial group called "White." I think part of bringing White people into an antiracist consciousness requires that we first learn that we are White, that we've been framed as such by social and legal structures that confer advantages on us because of that framing, and that we have a responsibility to challenge racism because of it. Then we have to remember that we're not actually White; we're just human beings stuck in a society that insists on putting people into racial boxes. At this time in history and geography, we are in the White box.

The fact that those racial boxes are constructed and based on falsehoods does not mean that we can ignore them. Many social constructions in our society affect us, even though they are actual fictions. Take Santa Claus, for example. It does not matter whether you believe in him—or even whether you like him—you cannot raise a child in the United States without answering questions about Santa. He may be a social construction, a story that you tell, but that does not mean he goes away if you don't want to perpetuate the myth or if you don't celebrate Christmas. Capitalism is also a social construction. It's not an economic framework found in nature. We made it up. We regulate it (sometimes); we set the rules; we decide what happens when you break them. But just because it's a social construction doesn't mean that

a person can choose to opt out of it. Similarly, the social construction of race and racism have been well integrated into our society—and into our bodies. Ignoring them will not make them go away.

Moving Away From the Myths

We start moving away from these myths by facing the realities:

Reality 1: We cannot challenge racism if we are colorblind. Talking about race is not racist.



Reality 2: We will make mistakes, and we need to learn to fall and recover quickly so that we can learn from them and keep going.

Reality 3: We are interconnected and interdependent. We can go further together than we can alone. Placing value on teamwork, cooperation, and community is antithetical to white supremacy.

Reality 4: When we acknowledge our feelings—as well as our minds—and when we connect deeply and empathetically with People of Color and Native people, how to take action becomes clear.

Reality 5: Race is a social construction. We are often more alike across racial differences than we are like others in our racial group.

When we find ourselves—or one another—unwittingly embracing any of these myths, sometimes our reaction can be further shame or exclusion: “How dare you bring white supremacist myths or styles into this antiracist space?! We’re trying to be antiracist, and you are poisoning our efforts. How can we end racism when you can’t let that stuff go?” The problem with this reaction is this: white supremacy is the language we speak. It’s the *only* language we speak. Accidentally using a word or phrase in that language is inevitable. The project we are engaged in is not to learn a new language but to *create* a new language that has never been spoken before. When we find ourselves using the language of white supremacy, or operating out of these myths, we need to put aside the shock, anger, and judgment and just notice it. If we have been successful at helping other White people climb onto an antiracist path, a small noticing—and an offer to help brainstorm alternative ways to move forward—should be sufficient for helping White people move beyond it. Shaming one another out of a sense of competition or a belief that we should be perfect means that we are continuing to uphold white supremacy by playing into its mythology.

Note

1. The dynamic of perfectionism as an aspect of white supremacy has been explored by researcher Tema Okun (2020) in her highly circulated piece “White Supremacy Culture.”

INTERNAL WORK

To Act, You Must Pause

In some senses, all antiracist action starts with a pause. There's no need for the pause, of course, if you haven't started yet. That would be like practicing patience when no one bothers you. You must practice pausing while engaging in antiracist activities and conversations, so that you can open yourself up to learning from—and building on—each of those experiences.

Pausing does not mean inaction, nor bypassing, nor giving up. Think of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist who nominated Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize. Throughout his life, he was able to harness tremendous power, insight, and courage for causes he believed in. He was exiled and risked his life multiple times for speaking truth to power. By today's measure of activism, in which we have come to value speed and boisterous displays of competence as a sign of "wokeness," he would come up wanting. If you look at any video of him speaking, walking, or otherwise engaging with audiences, you will see the intensely slow and deliberate fashion in which he paused between words and actions long enough to bring his full presence to them. Sometimes the pauses are so long that they are uncomfortable to watch, even for me, a therapist who has been trained to hold space for silence. But by bringing his full presence, Thich Nhat Hanh made it possible to challenge the systems of oppression that surrounded him. Slowing down in the moment actually allows for maximum learning and impact.

How do we pause while engaging in antiracist action? The trickiest part is knowing when it's time to pause, because it requires us first to notice when our systems begin to rev up a defensive (fight, flight, or freeze) response. This is a conceptually easy proposition but a very challenging one in practice. Here is where most of us get tripped up. Remember that you will feel compelled to believe the "danger" signals that your body alerts you to, and you will absolutely want to follow them. The gravitational pull toward fight, flight, or freeze is tremendous. So how can we work with that? In my own practice, I have found it useful to rely on three habits.

Habit 1: The first habit is grounded in the assumption that no matter how many times I engage in conversations about race and/or act in antiracist ways, I will still continue to experience the surge of fight, flight, or freeze energy, even in minor interactions. So I am always on the lookout for such surges to occur.



Habit 2: The second habit involves telling myself that a flight, fight, or freeze response is useful only in truly dire and life-threatening situations—for example, when I need my adrenaline to help me quickly and instinctively jump back on the curb when a car is fast approaching. At all other times, I am better off overriding that response so that I can enlist my full thinking and empathizing capacities. By assuming that a full-out fight, flight, or freeze response is not necessary, I rebalance the overpowering gravitational pull toward reactivity and defensiveness.

Taken together, these first two habits make it a lot more likely for me to notice when my body is initiating an unnecessary fight, flight, or freeze reaction that needs to be paused, instead of followed.

Habit 3: The third habit entails identifying on an ongoing basis the defensive styles my nervous system tends to utilize, as well as exactly what behaviors I tend to manifest when I experience each style. While each of us employs all three fight, flight, or freeze strategies in different circumstances, we tend to gravitate toward one of them more than the others at various times in our lives and in given contexts. Earlier in my racial identity development,² I had a strong preference for the fighting response, to prove to myself and others that I was a “good” person and a “woke antiracist ally.” To this day, I still feel a considerable pull to flight, especially when my heartfelt antiracist efforts are rebuked or criticized. My flight behaviors are often accompanied by a private muttering of “I give up!” or “You do it, then, if you think you can do better!” As I have accrued more practice and experience with antiracist conversations and actions, I have been able to mitigate both of these styles, so I now tend to freeze when I get stirred up.

My freeze reaction is not subtle. I am very rarely out of words, but in these moments, I become speechless. I first noticed this reaction a few years back in situations when I was teaching, especially at times when I felt the room suddenly “go cold” without knowing what had just happened or how to address it. More recently, I have drawn a blank multiple times when some of the People of Color and Native people in my life have shared their pain and outrage at the *macroaggressions* they have increasingly experienced during the Trump presidency and its aftermath, and all the more during the pandemic. As a therapist, theoretically I know how to sit with and listen to pain. Even then, by virtue of knowing myself to be complicit with white supremacy (as a White person) and of feeling helpless to prevent it, I freeze—and as I freeze, I also begin to panic because I know that I’m freezing! Both reactions are powerful and immediate. But knowing that about myself is tremendously helpful. As soon as I notice what’s happening, I can begin to coach myself, reminding myself to take a few breaths, slow down, and listen more attentively and with my full heart. I may be more or less effective interpersonally in any one of those moments, but I always learn from them: to listen better, to witness with more presence, to recognize more opportunities to disrupt white supremacy by hearing how People of Color and Native people experience it, to better offer support, and to know when to appropriately share my own process.

No matter the form it takes, it is harder than it might sound to slow down in these ways. Whether it’s the grief and helplessness I feel in realizing I don’t have the power to end white supremacy and its horrific impact by myself or all at once, or the guilt and shame at having been less than “woke” in an interaction, my body’s impulse to retreat into safety is strong. And that’s exactly what motivates me to intentionally train for these moments.

How Can I Train So That I'm Ready to Pause?

You'll have plenty of opportunities to practice noticing your fight, flight, or freeze reactions in the moment. The *graduated exposure* exercise described in the Internal Work section for Chapter 1 gives you a structured way to hone this skill. It might be helpful to keep in mind that the particular forms your flight, fight, or freeze reactions take in your life can differ greatly depending on the circumstance. For example, after two decades of working with students and training fellow clinicians, I have become quite comfortable speaking about uncomfortable topics in virtually any setting where I am the presenter. But recently I attended an antiracist weekend workshop as a participant, and it didn't take long to realize how "out of shape" I was at sitting with the discomfort of not being the teacher. While I always enjoy having the opportunity to be a student and learn from other professionals, I found myself becoming deeply distressed when a White man's fight strategy manifested as pedantic "mansplaining" at the presenter, and again when a White woman embodied her flight strategy as helplessness. My distress rating on a 10-point scale was easily an 8 or 9 for each instance! I was immediately flooded with anger at the two participants. I felt an acute urge to protect the presenter (a Person of Color) in true white-savior style and prove myself as woke to everybody there. In the midst of my internal sense of urgency, I lost all perspective about the presenter's expertise, agency, and resilience. I didn't consider the fact that both participants were investing time and energy in attending an antiracism workshop, were fully engaged in the conversation, and had great potential for learning. In the moment, I didn't recollect the numerous and even recent times when I had exhibited the same reactions as these participants did in both overt and subtle ways, and I didn't stop to consider what stereotypical White behaviors I was exhibiting through my own reactivity. In reality, I had a lot to learn from these two participants and everyone else's engagement with the conversation. But my fight reaction was overpowering and pulled me completely out of my ability to think and empathize—and therefore learn—in that moment, let alone remain in connection with White people I could have potentially supported.

Sometimes we realize that we are in fight, flight, or freeze mode but can't get out of it nonetheless. I was definitely overwhelmed by my fight reaction during the workshop. However, I had trained enough in grounding practices to at least pause, watch myself become intensely reactive, and do nothing. If nothing else, I didn't make things worse. After the workshop ended, surprised by how off-balance I had felt, I made a point to work with those incidents by doing the graduated exposure technique described in the Internal Work section for Chapter 1. Now, I will share a few grounding practices that will keep you steady when you realize that your nervous system is overrun by a fight, flight, or freeze response.

Strengthening Your Antiracist Practice

Ease the Grip of the Stress Response: Grounding Practices

These three practices will help you strengthen your capacity to release your nervous system's defensive grip. The beauty of these grounding practices is that they are quick, simple, free, available to you at any moment, and no one knows you are accessing them. I suggest you pick one of these practices each day and try it a few times, for one to two minutes at a time. None of these practices is better than the others; it's just a matter of preference. Once you have tried all three, decide which one you will continue to practice and make your own. Again, these are muscles you train outside of crisis moments, so that you can more easily access them to re-ground yourself when you need it.

Practice 1: Body Scan

Take one to two minutes to slowly mentally scan your body, from the top of your head to the tip of your toes: head, neck, shoulders, arms, torso, pelvis, thighs, calves, feet. Simply notice what each part feels like. You don't have to change anything about it at all. Simply notice whatever sensations might be there, bringing an attitude of curiosity and care to each part. Tell yourself that you have nothing else to do and nowhere else to be for those one to two minutes, but notice how your body feels.

Practice 2: Engaging Your Parasympathetic Response

Try two or three of the following (whichever you prefer) for about 20 to 30 seconds each:

- Focus right in front of you, then allow your peripheral vision to take over, by focusing on what you can see on your sides while still looking forward.
- Go to a window or outside, and look up at the sky, the top of trees, or far away at the horizon.
- Place your attention on your body as a whole, while sitting upright or standing tall in a relaxed fashion.
- Picture in your mind's eye your favorite nature scene (real or imagined), and let your mind rest on it.

You will know that your parasympathetic system (responsible for feeling calm and grounded) is kicking in when you feel your mouth watering, a yawn coming up, or a deeper breath emerging spontaneously.

Practice 3: Belly Breathing

Put one hand on your belly, and notice how your hand moves as your belly expands with air. Inhale and exhale slowly but easefully (anywhere from three to six seconds for the inhale, making the exhale one to two seconds longer than the inhale). Try to breathe mostly with your belly. Repeat for one to two minutes.

Remember that sometimes the difference between acting in service of liberation and remaining complicit with oppressive forces will be determined by our ability to take a single, well-trained, intentionally placed breath.

Notes

1. I say that I *tell myself* this, rather than I *believe* this, because I can't be certain that this is true in all cases for all people.
2. Ali will describe a model of White racial identity in Chapter 5.