**Chapter 1** *Why We Need White Antiracism*

Writing sixty years ago, James Baldwin observed that for whites to lose their innocent belief that they live in a humane country, they had to experience an upheaval in their universe that profoundly attacked their sense of their own reality. Even those whites who saw through the idea of white supremacy found it difficult to act on that awareness. In Baldwin’s always prescient words: “To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity” (Baldwin, 1962, p. 9). This book invites you into danger, into thinking through what it means to lose an unconscious, unwitting white supremacist white identity and embrace a new one, a proudly anti-racist white identity.

We need this book. By ‘we’, we mean the two of us, your two authors. Both of us have spent many years addressing white supremacy and racism in different contexts and struggling to find a way through all the contradictions, dilemmas and emotions inherent to such work. We have worked with many schools, colleges, and universities, but also with seminaries, community groups, health care, congregations, arts organizations, social movements, non-profits, the military, corporations, businesses, and many other settings. Because of where we live – St. Paul, Minnesota – we have almost always found ourselves doing that work in predominantly white situations. Over the years we have noticed that most of the institutional members, learners, and participants in community organizations we encounter (and also many of their leaders, staff developers and teachers) see race-based work with whites as focusing mostly on understanding the benefits of diversity and inclusion, and on trying to support the minority of black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) in the organization. There’s usually a strong emphasis on cultural competency, on working in ways that are sensitive to different cultural traditions.

We heartily support efforts at inclusion and culturally responsive practice. But we are also struck by the fact that much DEI work does not focus on whiteness; particularly on understanding what it means to have a white racial identity, how whites learn and enact white supremacy, and the way white supremacy ensures the continuance of racism. It’s quite possible, in our experience, to attend a diversity training event and never hear the words ‘racism’, ‘white supremacy’ or even ‘white racial identity’. In the work we’ve done we’ve found that when we shift the focus onto racism, white supremacy and white identity, our primarily white audiences remain skeptical and bemused.

Consequently, we’ve had many conversations where we’ve asked each other for advice and for leads on good resources. When we do this we usually end up decrying the lack of a book written from the perspective of learning, that focuses on how to help white people develop an anti-racist identity. Both of us are educators, and though we both engage in anti-racist work outside our professional roles, we are always interested in the dynamics of learning. But we’ve never been able to find the book we really needed – a book that explores how to help whites learn what an anti-racist white identity entails, and that details what it means to enact that identity in everyday actions and practices in both individual and collective ways.

So, quite simply, we decided to write the book that we needed! As it turned out the years we spent writing it – 2019 and 2020 – were incredibly tumultuous ones involving catastrophic climate change, a global pandemic, and economic collapse. For us, though, the most significant upheavals were those around racial justice. We were inspired by the *Black Lives Matter* movement, outraged by the growth of anti-Blackness in the US, and staggered by the way it became legal to tear immigrant families apart at the US border and imprison children like animals in cages. Each week brought further instances of the slaughter of people of color and the demonization of anyone not of white European descent. The murders of Philando Castile in the St. Paul suburb of Falcon Heights, and of George Floyd in Minneapolis, brought things home to our doorsteps and we became used to police helicopters over our houses, looters running through our yards, constant demonstrations and the smell of smoke and tear gas.

When we would tell friends, family and colleagues about the book we were writing on creating an anti-racist white identity, people would say “we need that book!” Then, as word of the book spread and we were invited to teach courses, run workshops, speak to community groups and congregations, people would ask “when’s it coming out? We need it!” For a while we felt the pressure to hurry the book up but then we realized that whether or not the book was published two months or two years in the future was really immaterial. It wasn’t as if racism was going to go away! And we kept telling ourselves that the events and outrages that were foremost in our minds as we were writing specific chapters would be replaced by many others, equally murderous and violent, by the time the book appeared in print and online.

**Why a Book on an Anti-Racist White Identity?**

Many best sellers on race and racism are written by people of color who chronicle the lived experience of being on the receiving end of racism. Acclaimed experts on race and racism, and most professionals in charge of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) offices and initiatives, are also people of color. So it’s not surprising that most whites typically look – as the two of us often do – to people of color when we’re trying to figure out what being anti-racist really means. There are, of course, exceptions to this; witness the enormous popularity of Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) work on white fragility.

But we feel there are traps in automatically turning to people of color to educate whites like us about racism. First, this instinctive and seemingly obvious choice underscores the mistaken notion that race is a problem of people of color. Our position is that *race is really a problem of white people*. That’s because racism is the process by which one racial group entrenches its power over all other groups by enforcing the idea (through policies, institutional practices and cultural habits) that the dominant racial group deserves its position of superiority. In the US, the dominant racial group is white.

Whites maintain their racial power by persuading all racial groups to internalize a view of the world that accepts this situation as normal and natural, as just the way that things are. This view of the world is the core of white supremacy, the idea that, because of their supposedly superior intelligence and greater capacity to use logic and reason to come to objective decisions, white people should naturally be in positions of power and authority. As long as whites have an unexamined white supremacist worldview lodged in their consciousness, they won’t see the need to involve themselves in any effort to bring about sustained change. Why would they? After all, it’s not their problem, is it? So understanding how white supremacy is learned, how it becomes so deeply internalized, is crucial to dismantling racism.

Second, always turning to people of color to take on the work of teaching whites about racism, while the same time they are trying to negotiate a white supremacist world, is an unfair division of labor. Fighting everyday racism takes an enormous psychic and physical toll and requires constant networking, collective organizing and the provision of emotional sustenance (Soloman and Rankin, 2019). To survive in a war against white supremacy takes everything you have and leaves you bone tired, even when faith and community lift you up. So it’s exhausting for BIPOC to be asked to devote effort to educating whites about their racial cluelessness. Those people of color who do find the time and emotional energy to work with whites in this way are committing an enormous act of generosity.

Perhaps even more troubling though, is that expecting people of color always to take the lead in educating whites about racism removes any responsibility from the shoulders of whites of having to think through the next steps they should take. Too often we’ve seen whites turn to people of color and ask, quite innocently, “what should we do?” And, equally frequently, we’ve seen people of color reply, often exasperatedly, “work it out for yourself.” When pressed further they will usually say: “Find out about what it means to be white. Become aware of your own white identity and how that affects how you navigate the world.” So we need books that help white people think through what it means to have a white racial identity and how to get other whites involved in developing an anti-racist white identity.

The biggest problem to achieving any measure of racial justice, however you define that slippery and contested term, is the continuing existence of the ideology of white supremacy. As long as the idea that whites are innately superior flourishes in people’s consciousness and is enacted in institutional behaviors, cultural messages, and political policies, racism will continue largely intact. So for us, helping whites become aware of the ideology that legitimizes their power is a major anti-racist project.

Of course becoming aware of one’s whiteness and what that means for your life is the start, not the end, of developing an antiracist identity. We don’t think you can be seriously anti-racist without a thorough understanding of how your whiteness benefits you, of how it means you don’t have to deal with the consequences of being perceived as a person of color in the US. But too often we’ve seen whites (including ourselves) think that by simply becoming aware of white privilege they have somehow transformed themselves into becoming white antiracists. Just being aware of racism, and deploring and condemning it, doesn’t mean you are antiracist. As a white person you can quote W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Rosa Parks, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Malcolm X and Audre Lorde. You can wear *Black Lives Matter* caps and T-shirts. You can send round videos of Kimberly Latrice Jones, Alicia Garza or Opal Tometi. But as you do those things your whiteness means that the system still continues to advantage you and you can continue enacting multiple racial micro-aggressions without being aware of that fact.

Understanding how racism and white supremacy works allows you to see the system in action and is a helpful precursor to getting involved in changing it. But an antiracist identity is only truly realized when you take individual and collective action to challenge white supremacy. An anti-racist white identity is inherently activist.

**Why Confronting Racism is Necessary for White Mental Health**

When white people are asked why they are interested in becoming antiracist, they typically cite the need to stop the violence and cruelty enacted against people of color. They will talk of the need for racial justice, of the loss of life, hope and talent represented by mass incarceration and police murder of unarmed people of color, and the corrosive effects of not challenging a political economy built on slavery and genocide.

When the two of us speak of these antiracist motivations we typically get a lot of approval from white colleagues, students and friends who consider themselves ‘woke’ or who think of themselves as trying to live a better, antiracist life. Sometimes people of color also express appreciation, though it’s often tinged with the unspoken sentiment; “Duh! How did it take you so long to see what’s going on in front of your eyes?” A dynamic we’ve often observed in multiracial settings is whites earnestly striving to testify to their commitment to antiracism, while people of color are forced to sit and listen to a series of confessionals along the lines of “I used to be racist but now the scales are lifted from my eyes and I see injustice everywhere.”

Our advice is that you should assume that people of color are tired of having to confer blessings and absolution on whites who desperately need to know that people of color see them as allies, as good whites. BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) folks may well have been burned by countless instances in which white folk profess a commitment to antiracism and then don’t follow through with the daily hard work of calling out white supremacy whenever they see or enact it.

When explaining why you as a white person are interested in becoming antiracist we advocate considering taking a different tack that may seem at first to be counterintuitive; the tack of selfishness, of personal interest. Following Tim Wise’s advice in *White like me* (2011) we suggest that people of color will be far more likely to take your antiracist expressions seriously – at least initially – if you talk about the fact that you’re doing this for yourself, that it’s in your own best interest to do so.

In many ways, striving to become an antiracist white person is motivated by a concern for your own mental health, as much as anything else. This is because if you accept the myth of white supremacy, then at some deep level you know that you’re living a lie. And living this way is deeply alienating. You know that who you really are – a fallible, imperfect being struggling to make sense of the contradictions and complexities of daily existence – is not whom white supremacy has told you that you are. White supremacy tells you that you’re superior to people of color and that that’s why you deserve your relative wealth, power and privilege. Your supposedly elevated intelligence and ability to make calm, logical decisions mean that you, or people like you, should quite naturally control the levers of power. White supremacy also tells you that people of color should be kept marginalized and barred from positions of influence because of their imputed volatility, emotionality and irrationality.

But every day you encounter clear empirical evidence that white people are *not* inherently more humane, rational, intelligent or reasonable than people of color. Equally, you see the reality of humanity, compassion, strength, resilience and a clear eyed focus on the prize of racial justice amongst colleagues and friends of color. You see video of trigger-happy cops, rousting people of color and responding to benign and compliant actions by emptying their magazines into black bodies. Processing this either forces you to a 180-degree reconsideration of the identity narrative you’ve been sold – whites are calm and reasonable and people of color are unpredictable and violent – or, it triggers a convoluted reordering of the truth you’ve witnessed whereby cops’ actions are justified by a real and immediate threat to their lives.

So in many ways, being white means you’re at war with myself. On the one hand, you’ve been conditioned to think that your racial identity as white means that you, and others like you, constitute the norm of how a human being should think, feel and act. On the other hand, the world constantly illustrates to you the insanity of that belief.

When you live a life as a white person based on racial lie, you have to spend a lot of emotional energy maintaining an untenable fiction. It’s almost a form of racial schizophrenia. Your socially constructed racial DNA tells you that you constitute the preferred norm, that you represent the universal standard of how people should behave. Your daily reality, however, teaches you the opposite. So deconstructing the myth of white supremacy is really necessary for your mental health. That’s why thinking through, and acting on, the need to be a white antiracist, is really a selfish act of personal survival. If you didn’t try to do this, you’d go crazy.

There’s another selfish reason why you need to try and develop a white antiracist identity. If you accept the myth of white supremacy, then you live in a state of constant fear. When you’re accused of racism, you have to expend a lot of emotional energy explaining it away by insisting that you’re really a good person, that your actions and words didn’t mean anything or intend to harm, and that you’ve been misunderstood or misinterpreted. Every time you witness righteous anger expressed by people of color, white supremacy tells you this is further evidence of “their” volatility and emotional instability. You start thinking about buying a gun, about preparing for the race war that must be coming.

Living in this state of constant fear is a psychosocial cancer that eats away at your wellbeing. Being constantly afraid of coming disruption and planning how to respond when it happens is exhausting.

Of course, living with the very real fear of death is the lifelong reality of so many people of color. For them reaching inside your jacket gets you killed. Talking back gets you killed. Not complying quietly and immediately with commands gets you killed. And sometimes complying with those same commands gets you killed anyway. White fear is exhausting but the two of us don’t live our lives knowing that we’re marked by law enforcement as potentially unstable and uncontrollable, liable to explode into irrational violence at any moment.

Finally, living with learned racism is an act of self-denial, of cutting yourself off from pleasure. Living in fear of a BIPOC planet means you forego access to the alterity of experience. The project of life, and the chief social learning task of adulthood, is understanding that your experience, no matter how varied and multifaceted that might be, is still only that – *your* experience. Coming to the realization that you share space with people who experience life in a bewildering variety of ways is sometimes threatening, particularly if your assumptions about how the world works are shattered. But it’s also beautifully sensuous. It opens you up to new realities and to the joy of complexity. Human growth and development are premised on the promise of transformation, of coming to understand that the world is not settled and that the future is in fact open to your invention. Living with a white supremacist consciousness, in which the category of whiteness constitutes the settled standard for how to live life, stops you in your tracks and prevents you from exploring the sensuous shades of experience the world offers.

**What’s So Important about a *White* Anti-Racist Identity?**

This is a book about one particular racial group that we refer to as ‘white’. This term is a shorthand description of a racial category and is, like all such terms, problematic, porous and inconsistent (Bazelon, 2018). For example, in the United States, those who are thought of as white has changed over time (Painter, 2011) and debates have always existed about who can be considered authentically white (Yancey, 2003). And, of course, to lump everyone that a particular classification considers white into one generic category and assume an essential similarity or shared identity between them is crazy. Just like any other group, those of us considered white on a census form or job application have multiple other identities and exhibit enormous differences.

When we use the term ‘white’ we use it to mean Americans of European descent even though they may refer to themselves by their nationality (Italian, Swedish, Irish) or ethnicity (Jewish). Those in this broad category of ‘white’ typically don’t think of themselves as raced, because to them racial identity is usually associated only with people of color. Whites will often say they know nothing about race, never think about race, and are therefore unqualified to enter into a conversation about it. But white people have specific characteristics that set them up for a particular role in race talk.

First, whites are the experts on white supremacy. For example, the two of us (like almost every other white person we know) can speak with some experiential authority about how white supremacy is learned and transmitted. We can testify to the power of stereotyping and the way we learn to do that via family stories and jokes with peers. We know the ease of slipping into casual white-on-white racism and how hard it sometimes is to interrupt racist talk in gatherings where racism is allowed, even encouraged and celebrated. In particular, we know how whites ‘other’ people of color by speaking of them as exotic or dangerous, by highlighting their physical prowess or possession of ‘soul’. Othering does not necessarily involve denigration. Whites can admire the sporting and artistic achievements of people of color in a way that positions these as delightful deviations from the generally accepted norm.

Second, your identity as a white person means that you occupy a particular position within anti-racist work. You will be mistrusted by people of color as a tourist enacting optical allyship, as someone looking for the affirmation of people of color so that you can think of yourself as a ‘good white person’ (Sullivan, 2014). But you have the privilege conferred on you by your whiteness of being able to say and do things that would bring much harsher penalties down on the heads of people of color. If you choose to make race an issue in a community meeting, workshop, class or casual conversation, you won’t be accused of playing the race card or of having a narrow racial agenda. And you will probably make further unchallenged inroads into white centers of power and still be taken seriously, compared to a person of color. So one of the things you will have to figure out as a white person is how to leverage the privilege and strategic advantages you have as you work for racial justice.

Third, your whiteness means you have the specific task within antiracist work of focusing on teaching other whites. Whites teaching other whites about whiteness has its own very particular dynamics, and you will need to understand these as you go forward. You will probably spend a lot of time learning how to model critical reflection on your struggles to work, act and practice in antiracist ways. As a white person your unique mission is to help other intimidated white friends and colleagues engage in anti-racist action, while simultaneously revealing and analyzing how you are constantly screwing up, committing multiple racial micro-aggressions, and feeling naïve, unqualified, and uninformed.

**Why We Need to Understand Racism as Systemic Not Individual**

We want to make sure that we introduce in this chapter a clarification of what we mean by racism. When we teach courses and workshops, or when we lead meetings, we often find white folks interpreting being antiracist as the project of ridding themselves of the implicit biases and racial stereotypes they hold as individuals. They see being antiracist as an act of personal cleansing, of ideological detoxification. In their minds the end result will be their emerging with a new identity in which they will commit no more racial micro-aggressions and be free of racist instincts and impulses.

Of course, these are important projects and we wouldn’t want to dissuade organizations and institutions from running programs that promote these purposes, or individuals from pursuing them. But we do want to underscore what for us is a central truth of racism; that is should always be understood as systemic.

Racism is a system that is designed to perpetuate the power of one particular racial group over others. This system is maintained by laws and policies, supported by state, judicial and paramilitary power. When the system works as it’s designed it has the effect of disproportionately benefitting one racial group. In the USA that group is white people. This is why, when white critics say the system is dysfunctional, people of color will often reply with the opposite sentiment; the system is extremely functional in the terms it sets itself. The system works very well to keep the dominant white group in power via a whole set of institutional disparities; what Lipsitz (2018) describes as the possessive investment in whiteness.

So, for example, redlining mortgage policies ensure that people of color cannot get loans to purchase property in areas that are predominantly white. People of color live in the poorest areas where property taxes are insufficient to fund good schools and proper health care. The higher levels of education correlated with professional jobs are thus closed off, meaning that minimum wage jobs in the service economy are filled by people of color. When people of color find themselves in supposedly integrated public schools, the racist stereotype that they are less academic and less intelligent ensures a de-facto re-segregation whereby they are much more likely to be automatically placed in groups, classes and streams that have low academic expectations. Environmental law allows for the dumping of toxic waste in poor areas that are inhabited disproportionately by people of color. The securing in the public mind of the innate criminality of black, brown and indigenous people means that they are then targeted for arrest and conviction, resulting in the school to prison pipeline.

The individual behaviors mentioned earlier – holding and acting on racial biases, subscribing to stereotype threat, making racist jokes – are all reflections of this system. If we focus only on eliminating these individual behaviors we’re not tackling their cause which is, of course, the wider racist system. So, while working on individual enactments of racism is important, it’s only one part of the story. Organizing to change the system is the real way you live out a commitment to white antiracism.

**Where is White Supremacy in All This?**

How is it that the system reproduces itself successfully for most of the time? Well, that’s because people accept it as the natural way the world is ordered. Having people think a certain way, without their even being aware that this viewpoint is constructed, secures and legitimizes white power. This is because the ideology of white supremacy is in place.

White supremacy is the ideological bulwark of racism. It’s a simple idea, a worldview that becomes accepted as obvious and commonsense, a way of explaining and justifying the racial disparities we see around us. White supremacy turns these humanly created and enforced disparities into a law of nature, as detached from, and impermeable to, human intervention as the weather.

At the heart of white supremacy is the idea that white people, because they are supposedly more intelligent than other racial groups, should be in positions of power and authority. White supremacy holds that whites deserve to be in these positions because they use reason at a higher level than BIPOC folk. Whites are deemed to be better at staying calm in a crisis and making good, objective decisions based solely on evidence. Under white supremacy, “logic assumes a historical posture that grants eternal objectivity to the views of elite Whites and condemns the views of non-Whites to perpetual subjectivity” (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi, 2008, p. 17). The ability to think and act logically is conflated with white racial identity. People of color are deemed to think anecdotally, to rely on personal experience and emotion in decision-making, in contrast to whites’ capacity to use clear, calm, cold, remorseless logic.

White supremacy also contends that people of color can’t be trusted with power and authority and shouldn’t occupy positions of responsibility, because they are too emotional, volatile, and unpredictable. They are seen as governed not by reason, but rather driven by animalistic instinct that will, if not kept in check, undeniably turn violent. Their decision-making is viewed as fundamentally flawed because it is held to reflect personal predilection, rather than an objective assessment of data. Most ironically, whites argue that decisions should not be handed over to people of color because any decisions they make will reflect their racial interests and further a racialized agenda. This despite the fact that white supremacy has ensured that policy and practice since the founding of the republic of the US has furthered a racial agenda of cementing white power and authority so as to make it appear as the natural state of the universe.

This idea is the glue that holds systems in place. If the stereotypes of white supremacy are broadly accepted, then all the educational, economic, health, penal and environmental inequities mentioned earlier are seen as completely explicable. When the two of us use the term white supremacy, we don’t use it to describe its most extreme and violent manifestations in white power and white nationalist groups. We use it instead to refer to the broadly accepted idea of innate white superiority and the way that outlook legitimizes the continued existence of massive racial disparities.

We should point out that it is possible for someone to say that they’re antiracist whilst also being in thrall to white supremacy. The two of us are living examples of that apparently contradictory state. We both strive to change a racist system in institutional and individual ways, but we both have the legacy of white supremacist consciousness within us. We can fight against it and be more alert for its presence, but it will never be completely erased. This consciousness has been so deeply sedimented in us that it makes it hard for us to notice the daily interactions with, and enactments of, racism that we encounter on a daily basis. Sometimes we don’t notice these for what they really are because we’ve been very successfully socialized into assuming that that’s just the way the world works.

**Our Five Basic Understandings**

So there you have it! Our book is premised on these five basic understandings.

* We need as white people to confront racism because it’s morally wrong, but also because it’s in the interest of our own mental health to do so.
* We need to take responsibility for doing the work of white antiracism and not asking people of color to educate us about how racism works.
* We need to work out how best to use the strategic advantages conferred on us by a white identity to push for change and racial justice
* We need to understand racism as a system that works to secure the continued dominance of one particular racial group, rather than the expression of individual prejudice.
* We need to challenge the way that the mythical but powerful idea of white supremacy keeps this system in place by explaining it as a ‘natural’ ordering of the world.