**Chapter 2** *What is a White Antiracist Identity?*

In recent years the overt expression of white supremacist ideas has become an acceptable part of political discourse. White men in particular “continue to construct and reproduce an array of sincere fictions about white America and white Americans” (Feagin and O’ Brien, 2003, p. 93) such as whiteness is a disadvantage and that, like dinosaurs, white men are becoming extinct. At the heart of these fantasies is “the idea that whites are victimized by other racial groups” (Rodriguez, 2008, p. 124). More than any other time in the lives of the two of us, racism, and its ideological handmaiden – white supremacy – has been legitimized by the words and actions of politicians, policy makers, elected officials, police and major media outlets.

Yet, contradictorily, we hear more and more calls to embrace diversity. Corporations that need to maximize profits by expanding markets, colleges that need to attract students from diverse racial backgrounds in order to stay afloat, and non-profits bound by anti-discrimination law, all seek to establish programs that proclaim the benefits of diversity and inclusion. These efforts present themselves as being inspired by the need to acknowledge the value and dignity of every human being, and the recognition that diverse human experiences enhance intellectual, community and political life. Predominantly white organizations and institutions often create special offices of diversity or inclusion, typically staffed by the only person of color in the senior leadership team.

The two of us celebrate the alterity of experience and the benefits of communicating across difference. We both share a commitment to diversity that emphasizes the valuing of all human individuals and an acknowledgment that difference illuminates and expands our understanding of the human experience. We both subscribe to Habermas’ (1990) contention that the signal that you’re entering into adulthood is when you stop universalizing your own experience. Diversity workshops that encourage people to broaden their intercultural awareness and to recognize their implicit cultural biases are good things to have in any institution.

But as leaders and participants in many diversity and inclusion initiatives we have a pretty cynical view of the assumptions informing these efforts. Despite the sincere intentions of those involved, we find that diversity and inclusion are all too often flattened into an equal embrace of all views and all people. The emphasis is placed on individuals embracing alternative perspectives rather than the need for collective mobilization to push back against racist systems and structures. In diversity efforts whites are often placed as the central actors who learn to open themselves up to other racial experiences. In this way diversity efforts often *underscore* the power of whiteness. Rarely are white people in the institution “explicitly talked about as a group in the same ways that students, faculty, and staff of color are” (Kendall, 2013, p. 168).

Missing from many of the efforts we’ve observed is attention to the power attached to different racial identities, the manner in which a racist system acts as a very real enforcement mechanism designed to benefit one racial group – Euro-Americans or, more simply, whites. As Oluo (2018) writes, “if you are white in a white supremacist society, you are racist” (p. 216). An anti-racist identity built on an awareness of how whiteness is accorded greater material power and enhanced status is conspicuously absent. If developing an antiracist identity were at the center of diversity initiatives, then we would be analyzing inclusion and equity through the lens of power. We would be analyzing the process by which different racial identities are accorded different valuations judged against the universally standard of whiteness. This is why Outlaw (2004) proposes that whites becoming aware of their racial identity should be the chief antiracist project they undertake.

An antiracist orientation begins by focusing on how whiteness has come to be entrenched as the de-facto way of assessing what it means to be human. It then moves to examining ways to challenge the unquestioned idea of white superiority and to interrupt the power of whites to be automatic gatekeepers, moralists and policy makers across multiple institutions. Right now diversity education often focuses on whites learning about people of color. By way of contrast, antiracist education focuses on whites examining how the notion of innate white superiority is weaponized to ensure that people of color are kept from material, educational and political advancement. An antiracist education teaches how to take action to challenge and dismantle white supremacy on both individual and collective levels.

**How Diversity is ‘Managed’ to Avoid Antiracism**

When predominantly white institutions are challenged by external pressure to address race – perhaps because of community outrage or legal mandate – a very predictable process ensues by which they manage threats to their authority and legitimacy. Instead of trying to oppose the challenge directly by discrediting those issuing the challenge or minimizing the nature of its importance, institutions respond in a far subtler and ultimately more effective way. They appear to take the challenge seriously by creating working parties, task forces and advisory committees to document the racial grievances being brought to their attention. They make changes to their institutional functioning that appear substantive and important. For example, when accused of racist practices or a lack of diversity, they strive for greater representation of people of color in the images and materials they present to the world as depicting what the institution is about. This is usually followed by an effort to recruit more members of color into the organization. In higher education this means diversifying the student body, staff and faculty. Often there are high profile appointments of one or two people of color to the senior leadership team or the creation of a special diversity office.

But all these measures can be taken without any fundamental change to the structures of power within the organization. Whites will still be overwhelmingly in positions of institutional authority and, ensnared by the ideology of white supremacy, can continue to act in racist ways. To take just one small example, faculty of color are often hired specifically to teach the courses dealing with diversity and race in predominantly white universities. Their performance of this responsibility is at least partly assessed via student evaluation of teaching forms that ask students to rate how effective, clear, and responsive instructors have been in delivering content, explaining difficult material, addressing questions and providing feedback. The results of these forms are then factored into reappointment and tenure decisions.

In a predominantly white institution the courses that are often most feared or disliked by white students are those dealing with race and diversity. Yet, to meet a diversity requirement, a certain number of these need to be taken. Faculty members of color show up and are deemed immediately by many students to be ‘playing the race card’ in teaching this content and regarded as being intent on shaming, embarrassing and making white students feel guilty for things they had no control over way back in history. As the class engages with more and more contentious issues, students feel like they are being forced to admit to being racist and that instructors of color are singling them out unfairly. Consequently, on the end of term evaluations of teaching they hammer the instructor for what they judge to be his or her pursuit of an unjustified and unrelenting focus on fictional racism. The faculty of color then has to justify poor teaching evaluations that have been occasioned by them simply doing their job; teaching the inherently raw and contentious topic of race. In this case all the power is in the hands of the white students filling out the forms and the white department chairs or deans reading them. White administrators will view faculty of color as ‘failing’ because their teaching scores are poor. They are then quietly counseled to leave before tenure decisions become due and replaced by new hires who just repeat the cycle.

This whole process has been nicely described by Marcuse (1965) as repressive tolerance, the strategy by which organizations to appear to change whilst still maintaining the status quo. On the surface it looks as though a major new institutional initiative has been launched. But the way this is implemented means that dominant ideology is unchallenged and white supremacy continues to frame daily practices, routines and habits.

In this chapter we want to examine how to help whites in predominantly white institutions develop an antiracist identity. This involves thinking and acting in fundamentally different and more purposeful ways than those entailed by just embracing diversity. Of course, learning to develop and enact an antiracist identity is a journey that is never fully realized. As whites we are always *becoming* antiracist, never quite there. Racism is a system that has become so much a part of daily life that we who benefit from it, we who are complicit with it, have been taught not to see it. But at the outset of this book we think it’s helpful to suggest a number of indicators or markers that would be in place if such an identity was being developed. These markers will be examined in much more detail throughout the chapters that follow, so for now we review them briefly.

**Antiracist Content and Curriculum**

By ‘curriculum’ we mean the typical content that would be the focus of any workshops, courses or training institutes that might be offered in an antiracist program. Such a curriculum would emphasize the following:

* Moving people from an understanding of racism as committing acts of individual privilege and personal hatred or bigotry, to seeing it as the way a system privileges the continuing power of one racial group.
* Understanding white supremacy as a dominant ideology that frames how people experience and act in the world. This ideology holds that because whites are judged self-evidently to be more intelligent, rational, objective and logical than other racial groups, that they should have the power to make decisions on how society’s resources should be used for the good of all.
* Making clear how the stereotyping of people of color as emotional, unstable, unpredictable, less intelligent and unable to deploy rational thought keeps white superiority intact.
* Learning how whiteness is conceptualized as the universal and highest end point of human development. This idea informed how Christians of all denominations justified slavery. If slaves were believed to be sub-human, then treating them as if they were animals was no abomination. Contemporary racism enacts this same belief in overt and covert ways.
* Studying how the idea of white superiority outlined above becomes broadly internalized and accepted as normal, natural, common sense so that it informs how the institutions and systems in our society function. At a university, for example, recruitment efforts, admissions policies, standards for what counts as superior academic work, the racial make-up of the faculty and student bodies, disciplinary procedures – even something as basic as how people talk (or don’t talk) about race – all take place within a frame that whiteness is the standard by which ‘human-ness’ is assessed.
* Helping colleagues examine how the standards and procedures for assessing what counts as reliable knowledge – what Foucault (1980) called the regime of truth - reflect the dominance of white academic gatekeepers. What are the racial identities of journal editors, handbook editors, conference overseers and other disciplinary gatekeepers and how do they enforce specific conceptions of disciplinary intelligence and expertise?
* Developing structural thinking through which people are encouraged to analyze the connection between how institutions and systems operate and their own individual actions. This is where work on implicit bias and micro-aggressions comes into play.
* Understanding whiteness as a particular racial identity.
* Moving to develop a positive white identity in which feelings of shame, guilt or resentment are replaced by an acknowledgment of whiteness as a racial identity like any other that can join in the common project of dismantling white supremacy.
* Focusing students not on the sins of their ancestors or their personal complicity in past racism, but on how they can help build institutions and communities that strive for racial equity.

**Antiracist Practices in Organizations**

By antiracist practices we mean the actions that people engage in as they enact living an antiracist identity. These might include:

* Calling out when repressive tolerance functions to divert attention away from structural change and into superficial indicators of improvement, thus preventing the neutralization of antiracist efforts.
* Illuminating how antiracist efforts are sabotaged by those whites who either believe racism is a myth, or who fully understand how it benefits them.
* Developing procedures and protocols to hold individuals and institutions accountable for their enactment of racism.
* Learning how to stay constantly alert to the way racism still moves within us.
* Developing strategies to talk about racism in ways that keep the conversation going and help people live with the inevitable tension of realizing that fundamentally different ways of seeing the world co-exist in groups, communities and organizations.
* Bearing witness to the testimony of people of color.
* Learning how to organize collective efforts – small and large – to call out racism and push for racial equity.
* Deliberating collectively about what a racially equitable and inclusive community would look like and how it would function.
* Organizing and running conversations that focus on how racism manifests itself in everyday life.
* Learning how to analyze institutional and systemic practices and policies to reveal their racist dimensions.
* Organizing resistance to racism through institutional initiatives and community movements.
* Challenging white superiority and white normativity when it structures decision-making, policies and practices.
* Calling out institutions and individuals for their explicit, but also their unacknowledged, racism.
* Holding ourselves accountable for our explicit, but also our unacknowledged, racism.
* Enacting antiracist change, both small and large scale, in specific environments.

**How We Think as Antiracists**

Antiracism is not just a set of things we study and a collection of practices. It also represents an epistemology, a way of seeing the world and judging how to assess what is truthful. Epistemology is the study of how we know what we know, and an antiracist epistemology focuses particularly on studying how patterns of thinking based in white supremacy, white privilege and white normativity become accepted as truthful representations of the empirical world.

We propose the following as elements of an antiracist epistemology.

**Knowing that Race is Not Real but Racism Is**

A fundamental element of antiracist epistemology is the realization that race as a biologically determined category is a complete illusion. Race is not real, even as racism is very real. Racism benefits from the pseudo-scientific sheen created around discussions of cultural conditioning that conflate culturally learned habits with biologically determined, essential differences. This is not to deny the existence of observable physical differences; clearly there are variations across humankind evident in skin color and phenotype in the shape of eyes, the texture of hair, the color of skin, structure of facial features, and so on. The problem is that under racism those insignificant biological differences are ascribed completely fictional genetic identities. So understanding that racial difference is a social construction is a fundamental marker of an antiracist way of thinking.

Along with recognizing the myth of biologically innate genetic differences goes the acknowledgment that pervasive racism is the enduring reality of American life. There is no time spent in debating whether or not racism exists; acknowledging that racism is real is the *sine qua non* of an antiracist consciousness. This is, of course, the backbone of a critical race theory perspective (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017) and it has significant implications for the conduct of antiracist practice. In diversity training white participants frequently express a color blind view of the world, arguing that they don’t see color, only actions, or that the past election of a black President means that we are now living in a post-racial world. Facilitators then have to counter that with personal testimony, documentary evidence, research and statistics.

In antiracist training, on the other hand, the enduring permanence and pervasiveness of racism should be the taken for granted starting point. Trainers and leaders must refuse to go down the rabbit hole of proving to skeptics that racism is real, and instead reassert the purpose of the workshop as developing an antiracist identity and practice. Even though some participants are invariably disgruntled, the leader must assert her belief that we are here to combat racism, not to debate its existence. For us this is an ethical use of teacher power and authority.

How you assert the reality of racism differs, of course, depending on context. The stance of insisting that discussing the possibility that racism doesn’t really exist is off the table is *much* easier if you’re overseeing an antiracist training event where people have volunteered to attend. At such a gathering you may never hear such a viewpoint expressed. After all, if people have come to learn how to be antiracist of their own volition, it would be surprising indeed if they felt that racism wasn’t actually real.

However, if you’re running a mandatory attendance event in a predominantly white institution where people are coerced into attending, you’ll possibly be facing many whites who flat out deny the existence of racism. They’ll say (or feel) that race isn’t a problem anymore, that talking about whiteness is unpatriotic, and that your session is a politically correct waste of time. In such a situation you can’t just tell people they’re wrong. Their experiences, their cultural conditioning, and the authority figures they trust and revere have all combined to convince them that racism isn’t a problem. Dismissing these as inaccurate and wrongheaded means you’re dismissing their whole beings, their identities, their cultures. Do this and you’ve just lost the chance for learning to happen.

As we emphasize throughout this book, people have a right to their deeply felt beliefs and opinions, even if you know in your core that these are the result of racist ideological manipulation. So, through anonymous social media tools such as sli.do ([https://www.sli.do/)](https://www.sli.do/%29) and backchannelchat.com ([https://backchannelchat.com/)](https://backchannelchat.com/%29) we’ll often start an event by giving participants the chance to express their resistance and convictions. We want them to know that we take what they believe seriously, and will allow them to explain why they hold the ‘racism doesn’t really exist’ viewpoint.

But then we as educators, leaders and activists have a right to present our counter narrative. We do this by modeling our own struggles with the white supremacy that lives within us, and by presenting personal and digital narratives and testimonies from people of color and whites. We’ll try to explain racism as structural, not personal, and show how being white historically constitutes a permanent structural advantage in the US (Lipsitz, 2018). We may use terms such as ‘white advantage’ if we judge that saying ‘white privilege’ or ‘white supremacy’ will initially cause people to switch off mentally for the duration of the training or meeting. We’ll introduce some scenarios in which race is a central factor and ask people to interpret what’s going on. Then we’ll move them into various discussion protocols, all the time doing quick check-ins to see how they’re reacting to the presentation of data that represents a 180-degree difference in how they think the world works. And, when people don’t appear to change their thinking on the spot, we remind ourselves that transformative learning is usually initially rejected, takes a long time to happen, and typically occurs incrementally. All of these ideas and practices to help people become white antiracists will be examined much more thoroughly in the pages to come.

**Recognizing White Supremacy as a Dominant Ideology in the USA**

White supremacy; now there’s a term guaranteed to ignite contention! For most people the term is associated with the KKK, lynching, cross burnings and angry white men carrying Tikki torches or white nationalist militias ‘policing’ *Black Lives Matter* demonstrations. Depending on context, the two of us may use alternate terms such as white advantage (Lipsitz, 2018), white superiority (Saini, 2019), white privilege (McKintosh, 1997), white normativity (Essed, Farquharson, Pillay and White, 2018), implicit bias (Nordell, 2017) or the white racial frame (Feagin, 2013). But eventually we get round to the terminology of white supremacy, which to us communicates the twin notions of white superiority and the systemic enactment of white power.

White supremacy is both an idea and a practice. The idea is that whites, because of their innate ability to thinking clearly and logically about what comprises the common good, should be in positions of leadership. The practice is the reproduction of this idea in the way that organizations, institutions and systems function. White supremacy blends spurious biology and pseudo-science to argue that those born with white skin are more intelligent, more rational and capable of more sophisticated thought. It’s the idea “that white equals better, superior, more worthy, more credible, more deserving and more valuable” (Saad, 2020, p. 14). In the United States a strong element of anti-blackness (Mosley et. al., 2020; Ross, 2020) is embedded in this ideology.

As is the case with any dominant ideology, its point is to retain of the ability of a particular group – in this case whites - to keep control of commonly shared resources, and decide how such resources should be allocated. This is accomplished by ensuring that people of color remain on the margins of decision-making processes. If leadership is seen as white, if history is written by whites, if the judiciary, the penal system, the police, housing policy, health care and education all function to the disadvantage of racial minorities, then white supremacy is clearly in place. And if that situation is accepted as normal, as just the way things shake out, then the ideology of white supremacy is left intact to ensure that an historically constructed arrangement is seen as being a somehow universally appropriate way to arrange human affairs.

The culture and epistemology of white supremacy are widespread and pervasive, soaking our worldviews and framing our actions. Ideologies like white supremacy “tend to disappear from view into the taken-for-granted ‘naturalized’ world of common sense” (Hall, 2003, p. 89). When we speak what are really ideologically constructed truths we feel we are presenting something so obviously accurate and authentically personal it elides any critical questioning. White supremacy ensures that a particular system of meaning-making becomes accepted as a universal, empirically accurate norm. A white racial frame comprising a “set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, interlinked interpretations and narratives, and visual images” (Feagin, 2013, p. xii) serves to justify and explain the continued subjection of racial minorities. Okun (2010) and Jones and Okun (2001) outline a series of habits of mind such as perfectionism, individualism, objectivity, the worship of profit, and binary thinking that are drawn from white European enlightenment epistemology. Similarly, Paxton (2010) describes a white epistemological paradigm of compartmentalization, rationality, individualism, competition, positivism, logic, scientism and dualism.

But at its heart, white supremacy is about power, specifically about ensuring that the structural dominance of white people is viewed as unremarkable, normal and correct. As with all dominant ideologies, if you can get people to think in a certain way then systems and structures can continue to function in clearly iniquitous ways without people complaining. An antiracist identity foregrounds the existence of white supremacy, identifies its presence in the interactions of everyday life, and seeks to disrupt its smooth operation.

**Thinking Structurally**

Diversity and inclusiveness training often focus on the importance of bringing multiple individuals into play, of making sure everyone gets a chance to contribute, of giving everyone a voice at the table and of becoming more aware of racial and cultural differences. The focus for participants is usually on changing individual behavior; how can I be less racist, less subject to implicit bias and more culturally competent? How can I develop protocols that don’t exclude people because of their cultural habits? These are undoubtedly important tasks. However, missing from such questions is a focus on the structural and systemic ways that racism operates.

The story of reformed white supremacist Derek Black is noticeably heartening to many whites (Saslow, 2018). Black attended college, was outed as a white power broadcaster, and changed his views because of conversations with members of groups he deemed evil and/or inferior. He represents the possibility of change through reflection and education, precisely the story that the two of us love to read. We, just as much as anybody else, need to read about hope and witness transformative possibility. But we also need to be wary of getting stuck at the level of individual journeys such as those taken by Black. Racism is structural and systemic and individual choices and actions around race are inevitably framed by the wider ideology of white supremacy. For us the imperative is always to move beyond skill sets of cultural competence and code shifting and to see becoming antiracist as entailing collective efforts for change.

Thinking structurally is a major part of antiracist identity formation. As Eddo-Lodge writes, “we need to see racism as structural in order to see its insidiousness. We need to see how it seeps, like a noxious gas, into everything” (p. 222). But shifting to structural thinking is complex, difficult and takes time. Furthermore, “the implication that White students are themselves ‘racist’ is a big part of what they are likely seeking to avoid through resistance” (Kernahan, 2019, p. 61). So as we work to encourage this shift we need to give people hope that, even though structural racism is pervasive, that does not mean we can’t take any individual antiracist actions. In her classic and highly influential book *Why are all the black kids sitting in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*, Beverly Tatum talks about acknowledging one’s own sphere of influence as an antidote to hopelessness. She writes, “I can’t fix everything, but some things are in my control…everyone has some sphere of influence in which they can work for change” (Tatum, 1997, p. 204).

If we start thinking this way, then we refocus our task from changing individuals to changing structures. Thinking structurally “places this agency within a larger political framework and recognizes the multiple ways that people struggle within and against larger structures of domination” (Mangino, 2008, p. 40). Seeing the systemic and structural ways in which racism has become embedded in our society helps illuminate the road in front of us. For example, when choosing how best to deploy what energies and other resources we have available to us, the two of us always look for actions that will change structures. Changing individual hearts and minds is important, of course; but by the same token those hearts and minds are formed structurally. Racism is learned as we negotiate systems and structures and not something that’s innate to consciousness. So a major antiracist priority is dismantling and rebuilding in more equal ways the structures that form who we are and how we live.

Thinking structurally is one of the hardest disciplines to learn, particularly if we have bought into the Horatio Alger myth of individuals pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. Rugged individualism and the frontier mentality are heavily entrenched in narratives of American identity. Allied to this is an ideologically learned mistrust of collectivism as communistic control and the denial of personal creative expression. So when you think structurally you have to reject some powerful ideologies of individualism and anti-collectivism. In their place you need constantly ask ‘who most benefits from a suggestion, programmatic change or new policy?’ Equally, you ask ‘who is most disadvantaged by these changes and policies?’ You get into the habit of focusing on the levers of control that exist in any organization, the sites where decisions are made, and the communication patterns that determine the flow of information.

One consequence of thinking structurally is helping you to move past the guilt and shame produced by realizing that you have been acting in racist ways, enacting micro-aggressions, or supporting racist systems. It’s easy to become consumed with guilt and embarrassment as you review your unacknowledged collusion in racism. Whites like us experience an alarming fall from grace as we realize we are not the good white people (Sullivan, 2014) we imagined ourselves to be and we can quickly spiral into an arc of self-recrimination and self-loathing.

Thinking structurally helps keep this tendency in check. If people can understand that racist instincts, impulses and actions are learned as part and parcel of moving through the systems and institutions in which they live their lives, then they will see it would be remarkable for them *not* to have learned racism. Part of thinking structurally is getting people to see they are socially formed, that when you’re surrounded by a frame of white superiority it is normal to grow up assuming that leadership, history and expertise all look white.

In this sense we believe that it is important to normalize racism; that is, to get people to see it as a normal thing to have assimilated racist ideology in a white supremacist world. If people understand that it’s normal to have breathed in and internalized the racism embedded in the air they breathe, then this stops them picking at the scab of their supposed moral failings of doing racist things and having racist thoughts. As we shall stress throughout this book, we both believe in modeling and disclosing our own daily enactments of white supremacy to help normalize its existence.

**Embracing Brave Spaces**

Part of becoming a white antiracist is recognizing that the work ahead will be raw, bruising and tense, but still being ready to embrace that reality. It won’t be conducted in a safe space in which people agree to disagree, everyone’s experience is recognized as equally valid, and emotions are kept at a safe distance or controlled by a facilitator who ‘doesn’t let things get out of hand’. As we move into embracing a white antiracist identity we must enter brave rather than safe spaces since “authentic learning about social justice often requires the very qualities of risk, difficulty, and controversy that are defined as incompatible with safety” (Arao and Clemens, 2013p. 139). Of course, we both acknowledge that when people of color bear witness to experiences of racism that their testimonies must be shared in a safe space where their stories won’t be dismissed as unfounded, partisan, or playing the race card. But in mostly white spaces developing an antiracist identity means signing up for danger and recognizing the need for courage.

In her description of how she builds brave space classrooms Pawlowski (2018) writes of how she explains to her students that safe spaces work to privilege whites by never letting them confront directly their own racism. She asks her learners to enter a brave rather than safe space in which they will be open to challenge, be exposed to the expression of raw emotion, and not expect to leave an encounter with a sense of resolution. She points out how being honest about one’s experiences, actions and thinking inevitably involves saying the ‘wrong’ thing and making so-called mistakes. She emphasizes how she shares her own many ‘mistakes’ in racial dialogue as a way of giving permission for her students to stop worrying about being politically correct or non-racist.

Part of entering a brave space involves reappraising the bourgeois decorum that hooks (1994) identifies as the norm in white academic conversation. White notions of respectful conversation are that it is calm and ‘reasonable’, an even-tempered analytical exchange in which expressions of anger or crying are signs that things have got out of control. The culture of whiteness privileges cognitive frameworks that rule expressing strong emotions as out of order – unless of course they are the purview of dominance. There are numerous tropes circulating in our cultural spaces – the angry black woman, the threatening black man, the sensual, spontaneously emotional Latina – which create derogatory and denigrating perceptions of emotional displays that in white people are more likely to be viewed as appropriate. People who feel angry, sad, fearful or guilty should not have to strive to remain calm as their bodies are shaking and their hearts racing.

One sign that the work of developing an antiracist white identity is succeeding is when whites embrace the full humanity of participants in dialogue, with all the emotions and frustrations this generates. Bryan Stevenson (2014) points out that embracing discomfort is a key element of transformative change. There is hard work involved in recognizing one’s own complicity in causing pain to other people. Living into connected activism brings a whole range of emotions with it and requires finding ways to embrace discomfort constructively.

**Detecting Demonization and Avoidance**

Anyone doing antiracist work with whites should be aware of the very common traps of and avoidance and demonization. Some whites will do anything to avoid having the focus of attention on themselves, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). One diversionary strategy is to turn themselves emotional victims whose displays of fraught emotion as they confront their collusion in white supremacy become a problem to be ‘fixed’. Okun (2010) notes the, “‘acting out’ of feelings that students and workshop participants use to avoid actually dealing with class content, to remain the focus of attention, to take up space while the rest of us, uncomfortable with someone in distress, spend our collective energies trying to make the emotive person feel ‘better’” (p. 154).

Another tendency evident in white groups exploring antiracism is to create a binary between good ‘woke’ whites and those with a supposedly inferior level of racial cognizance. This creates a ‘call out culture’ “in which White people try to one-up one another or shame one another, a culture that ultimately alienates more people than it persuades” (Michael, 2015, p. 110). Those who think they are woke demonize the ‘bad whites’ in the room and then shaming and blaming each other takes up all the energy. In a study of white student leaders who wished to become racially conscious leaders, Foste (2020) notes how the enlightenment narrative of moving towards greater cultural competency and antiracist mastery via performative tasks that can be measured and checked, governed their understanding of becoming antiracist. The desire to show that they had become good whites who could then educate colleagues who were less ‘woke’ than them, was “fundamentally at odds with the vulnerability, humility, and uncertainty necessary to meaningfully critique and unlearn whiteness” (Foste, 2020, p. 40).

An allied approach is to demonize rural and working class whites outside the room as too ignorant or dumb to realize their own bigotry. The focus is then shifted to the great ‘they’ outside the workshop, training or class who are too unsophisticated to ‘get’ racism in the way that those inside an event are doing. Sullivan (2018) describes this as “the middle-class dumping of responsibility for racism on lower and working-class people, who are posited as the true source of ongoing racial injustice. Lower-class white people allegedly are the bad white people who are too unintelligent or unenlightened to know that people of color aren’t inferior to white people” (p. 6). Similarly, whites retreat into distancing themselves from a racist, slaveholder past so that “whoever the real racists are – white slaveholders, white supremacists, poor white people – they are over there, not here where the middle-class white people are” (p. 8).

Finally, a recurrent avoidance strategy is to turn the classroom into a confessional for the purging of white sins. People assume that if you detail the various ways you have been guilty of unintentional racism that you will be ‘cleansed’. Others will marvel at the depth of your immersion in white supremacy and celebrate your epistemological release from all the blinkered and constrained ways of thinking that have blocked you in the past. As Karnahan (2019) writes, “students, especially White students, can simply view feel themselves as better people if they have ‘confessed’. Having admitted that they are personally privileged or that they feel guilty, they are free to exempt themselves from the larger system of institutional racism” (p. 117). Obviously, we want people to come to this awareness and to feel a necessary degree of guilt. But in becoming a white antiracist we focus on what we do with those feelings and emotions, with how they can propel action and commitment.

**Bearing Witness**

In empirical studies of transformative learning (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Cranton, 2012; Cranton, 2016), a key indicator to changing one’s worldview is exposure to a disorienting dilemma; an event that throws one’s previous reading of the world into productive confusion. For whites in brave spaces one such dilemma is hearing accounts of a reality they thought they understood being presented in a totally different way. For example, whites may think they’ve been working within a multiracial group that has built a history of good, trustful relationships in which everybody gets along. It is healthily disorienting for them to hear people of color in the group describe how they have experienced their voice constantly being marginalized. We have both experienced the ways in which organizations and communities that pride themselves on their smoothly rational humanity are shattered by narratives from members detailing sustained and pervasive racism.

Critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017) has long insisted on the power of counter narratives that challenge the stock stories (Bell, 2010) of racial progress. Bearing witness to testimonies of racism – listening intently with empathy to raw hurt – is a crucial step in developing an anti-racist white identity. We distinguish here between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy conveys a feeling inspired by having experienced the same situation. It is ‘feeling - with’. Empathy is deeper and more complex. It comes from a realization that while you will never fully experience what someone else is feeling, you can still be drawn into compassionate response. You can search your own life for situations in which you have experienced a flicker of something analogous. So, as a cis-gender woman, Mary knows much of what it means to be disadvantaged by the misogyny and sexism that permeates our society. But as a white person, she does not know what it means to live at the sharp end of the stick of racism. Both of us think that it is possible to have compassion for those who are situated differently from ourselves. And both of us have a deep interest in and desire for learning about racism, in part because that helps us understand the permanent frisson of fear and suspicion that lurks in our consciousness of the unruly ‘others’ we fear will kill us in a race war. Racism advantages whites but it also harms them, separating them from the experience of a common humanity and placing them in a constant state of anxiety.

Becoming a white antiracist means you can never skip this step of bearing witness. Rationally you can accept as a white person that people of color have been subject to a continuous lifelong assault on their personal dignity and life chances, and you can vow to do your bit to change that reality. But that effort must be underscored by trying diligently to get inside another person’s experiences of daily hurt, frustration and deep anger. It’s true that as a white person you can never understand what it’s like to live as a person of color. But while acknowledging that, you must still try and draw on whatever memories you have of being abused by dominant power to find the best place inside yourself to understand what it must be like to be on the receiving end of sustained racism.

Sitting with a story of racism told by a person of color often prompts a number of reactions from whites like the two of us. Inevitably we want to offer comfort, to let people of color know that we’re allies and that they’re not alone in their struggle. We want to show them we are doing our best to empathize with their stories by linking them to our own. All these strategies can backfire disastrously as they become seen as white attempts to take over the narrative and re-center whiteness. Our experience is that it is best to listen quietly and intently, to wince, cry and shake with emotion and righteous anger, and to show that you are visibly affected. It’s fine to offer brief and heartfelt recognitions of pain and to acknowledge that as whites you can have little real understanding of what people are describing. But you must resist the call of European epistemology to ‘fix’ the problem, or the call of your own conscience to keep letting people of color know you’re an ally. Don’t try to take over the narrative with examples of all the worst experiences of white racism you’re witnessed. Just focus on doing your best to appreciate what it must feel like to live the life of the storyteller.

One other thing. There is a danger of whites turning testimonies of racism into only narratives of victimhood. Your feelings of guilt and shame can cause you to miss the narratives of resistance inevitably woven into accounts of racialized experience. In most testimonies there are rich descriptions of pushing back, of finding solace in community, of developing solidarity to fight white racism and drawing on family, faith, wellsprings of courage and the wisdom of elders. We who are white need to notice, and be as moved by, these elements, as we are horrified by the destructive reality of white racism. And we need then to work within white spaces, so that we can express our own deeply painful feelings without fatiguing those with whom we walk in solidarity.

**Building Collective Action**

And so we come to the whole point of developing an antiracist identity; to build collective action that works to dismantle racist institutions, practices and behaviors. To paraphrase Marx’s 11th thesis on Feuerbach (Marx and Engels, 1998), it is not enough to understand how racism works, we must seek to change it. Becoming a white antiracist entails a lifelong commitment to work for racial justice; to identify and push back against racism in multiple settings, and to change the structures that keep racism intact. Sometimes our eye is on a short term goal such as fighting to reverse a specific policy or practice that is harming people we know personally. But our eye should always be on the long term prize of creating a more racially equitable world. It’s fine and appropriate for our actions to be locally focused in our sphere of influence (Tatum, 1997). Much of the time we will be working with particular classrooms, teams, or departments caught in an unacknowledged perpetuation of racist practices. But that work must also be viewed as part of a regional or national movement for political change.

Although we both recognize that intra-personal work is valuable and that it’s always necessary to work on identifying how white supremacy lives within you as a white person, our core commitment is to collective action. Individuals can always influence events, and particularly charismatic individuals can embody the spirit and character of a broader movement and serve as an inspirational conduit for the efforts of thousands. But it is always the movement, the collective, the group, that ultimately changes things over the long run.

We both invoke the term solidarity to encapsulate what we’re striving for. Because of sustained efforts to discredit unions over the last several decades, and because of the de facto media ban on any language that smacks of socialism, the term solidarity is pretty much restricted these days to grass roots organizing. But an effective antiracist movement is founded on the principal of multiracial solidarity. Although there are times when different racial groups need their own space to share their own experiences with each other and to strategize together, lasting structural change usually comes from a strong multiracial alliance. It is important that this movement *not* be led by whites. Developing an antiracist white identity means heeding the leadership and direction of the people most directly harmed by systems of racial exclusion.

Of course that caution does not excuse whites from exercising leadership from the back and the side, and occasionally from the front. Leadership can, after all, be enacted by anyone. It is a process, not a person-specific phenomenon. As whites we can leverage our privilege in predominantly white institutions to draw attention to shameful practices. We can say critical things without being accused of playing the race card. We can point out racist policies and behaviors without being seen as pursuing a narrow racial agenda. We can show that it is the responsibility of whites to dismantle racism, and keep saying that racism is primarily a white problem caused by a blindness to the way the world is organized in favor of people like us.

**Final Comment**

In the rest of this book we examine how to develop a disciplined focus on becoming a white antiracist who is commited to changing the world. The markers we offer in this chapter are signposts on a road the end of which we cannot yet see. Many religious and mystical traditions tell us that the journey is really the goal and adaptive action scholars remind us that complex changes result from unknown forces acting unpredictably to bring about surprising outcomes (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013). The journey to an antiracist white identity is one rooted in a sense of history, attentive to the present, and always looking to the future. It is one of the best examples of what it means to embody “lifelong learning”.