**Chapter 3**

Becoming aware of whiteness is the beginning of creating an antiracist identity for whites. This is because whiteness as an identity is connected to power; in particular, the way that a learned blindness to the fact of one’s whiteness helps maintain a system that exhibits structural exclusion and normalizes brutality. As George Yancy (2018a) writes, racism is *not* the process of individually demeaning or diminishing others, “a site of individual acts of meanness” (p. 74); rather, it’s being “implicated in a complex web of racist power relationships … heteronomous webs of white practices to which you, as a white, are linked both as a beneficiary and as co-contributor to such practices” (Yancy, 2018a, p. 75). Since our whiteness constantly benefits the two of us, and since that benefit accrues to us because we’re defined in relation to the stigma of blackness, we are racist. We don’t go about hurling racial epithets but we are “embedded in a pre-existing social matrix of white power” (Yancy, 2018a, p. 76) that gives us advantages of which we have only an occasional awareness. To feel safe is our norm, to be “systemically *racially* marked for death” (Yancy, 2018a, p. 102) is Yancy’s.

We have been struck over the years by how often people of color tell us that the most helpful thing whites can do in terms of fighting racism is to become aware of what it means to be white. They say it’s much more important for whites to learn that they have a particular racial identity, and to examine how that identity operates in the world, than it is for them to learn about the cultures of racial minorities. When we act on that advice and explore the elements of white identity, we typically face accusations from those whites we work with of reverse racism, of unfairly singling out whites for their supposed sins, and of white bashing. This is, of course, very predictable given the analysis of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) and the worldview of those who have always thought of themselves as good whites (Sullivan, 2014).

We’ll often begin an analysis of whiteness by saying we want to look at the importance of identity and introducing race as one of its defining elements. If we anticipate that the audience has probably not considered their white identity as being at all significant, then we’ll often sneak it in the back door. If we use the “I am from” activity we make sure that “I am from….race” is one of the prompts. Sometimes we’ll start by asking people to tell us what it means to them to come from a particular class background, a particular place, or a particular culture. And then we’ll ask what it means for them to come from a particular race.

In response to this question we’re often told that race has no importance at all. When we ask why people’s racial identity isn’t significant they’ll often say that because everyone else around them is white, there’s no reason to focus on race. This then allows us to talk about our own upbringing in overwhelmingly white settings and how for many years we never thought about racial identity. We can then smuggle in the insight that one of the chief markers of a white racial identity is thinking that race is not that significant if you’re white, never being aware that one is raced.

For many of us whites it’s as if whiteness is an invisible force field, a wall (Lara-Villanueva, 2018) or an ocean; something that surrounds us so completely that it goes unnoticed. Yep (2007) describes teaching about whiteness to whites as the pedagogy of the opaque, an effort to reframe something completely familiar and ordinary as something totally surprising and extraordinary. If one of the most indicators of white identity is being unable to see that whiteness constitutes a racial marker (Sullivan, 2006; Tochluk, 2010), then we need to think through very carefully how we can bring that reality to other whites’ attention.

Developing a white antiracist identity starts with the enormous step of getting people to be aware that being white *is* a racial identity. Then, we need to follow that up with the equally significant project of helping them see the power attached to that whiteness. We want white colleagues, students and peers to understand that irrespective of your social class or level of income, the simple fact of being white means you don’t have to worry about overcoming racial stereotypes held by employers or teachers that create barriers to getting work or education. So although we may begin a discussion of racial identity by using a diversity framework (everyone has a racial identity and there are lots of identities in the world out there), we try to move quickly as quickly as we can to an antiracist framework (whatever one’s racial identity is, it’s connected to power).

Doing this is like walking a tightrope in a gale force wind. We want to get people to think about race as a defining marker of who they are, but we don’t want them to think that we are trying to shame them or make them feel guilty for their whiteness. This is less of a problem in settings where people have voluntary signed up to do antiracist work. But when we have to run any kind of mandatory training, where we know that many whites will feel they’re wasting their time in attending an unnecessary, politically correct attempt to ‘bash’ them, then we have to convince them that being white is actually a matter of significance. Yet we need to do that while leading them to a position of taking *pride* in being white; to create a sense that being white means standing up for fairness. If people feel they are being led down an alley that begins with their being assumed to be motivated by racial animus and ends in their confessing the sin of whiteness, then few will sign up for that journey. Their bodies may be present because they’re required to attend, but their minds will most definitely be absent.

So how can you get whites to start taking pride in standing against racism? One way is to frame what you want to talk about using the term ‘fairness’. Do you know how in the process of a spring thaw a small drip of water becomes a trickle, which creates a rivulet, which becomes a stream, which then starts to penetrate the ice? Before you know it, the frozen sheet that covered your pathway is breaking up. Well, because ‘social justice’ as a term seems threatening to many forced to attend an antiracist event, we will often begin with the word ‘fairness’. It’s our initial mental droplet that we find starts to thaw the icy resistance to contemplating race that many whites who attend compulsory anti-bias training are feeling.

“That’s not fair” is a phrase that most whites are quite comfortable with using and, if you ask people to describe something that seems unfair to them, they’ll usually focus on the fact that someone is being denied an opportunity that everyone should have access to, usually because of some arbitrary characteristic or behavior. We often hear white participants saying something along the lines of, “it’s not fair that he or she should have that, just because of who they are, or who they know. That’s an unfair advantage. They don’t deserve it.” This kind of comment is music to our ears because it pries open an opportunity to take the words people have used and reframe it in explicitly racial terms. If people take seriously the idea that it’s unfair to get special treatment not because of something you’ve done, but because of who you are or because of your network of connections, then our stream becomes a river washing away the winter ice.

If we focus on fairness, then the next step is to link it to white power and white privilege. But with a reluctant audience forced to attend a training we often hold off on talking about white privilege, a term many working class whites have an understandable knee-jerk reaction against. A white high school dropout who works two or three menial service jobs to pay the bills, who has no union, no health care and who can be laid off by their employers at a moment’s notice, will bridle against hearing themselves described as privileged. So, at least initially, we tend to use the term ‘white advantage’. We want to build on the notion of an unearned advantage that so many whites regard as basically unfair, but this time link it to racial advantage. When skeptical white participants talk about how affirmative action discriminates against whites, they’re very relaxed using terms like ‘reverse racism’ or ‘anti-white discrimination”. That at least gets us in the door, terminologically speaking.

When people start throwing around words like racism and discrimination, that allows us then to provide factual data from official reports and government agencies on how racism *really* works to disadvantage communities of color. For example, Lipsitz’s (2018) work on the possessive investment in whiteness carefully documents the myriad ways that, “whiteness is not so much a color as a condition, a structured advantage sustained by past and present forms of exclusion and subordination” (p. xxii). In health, finance, residence, education and incarceration, whites profit from “opportunity hoarding” (Lipsitz, 2018, p. xxii), the ability to participate fully in civil society at a fuller and more prosperous level than their BIPOC counterparts. Of course, if research like this or government data are then refuted as untrustworthy ‘fake news’, the product of deep state agencies controlled by those who want to turn the US into a socialist or communist state, then we have another related set of problems to deal with!

Heightening awareness of the quotidian and mundane nature of everyday racism and making it the object of analysis requires a number of different approaches. One possibility is to teach about different models of white and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) racial identity development (Helms, 2019; Racial Equity Tools, 2020). For whites struggling to understand what constitutes a racial identity, seeing it charted in stages in which they can locate themselves can be reassuring and helpful. They can recognize elements of their past and anticipate what waits in the future. Another is to focus on how scholars of color such as Yancy (2004, 2012) throw whiteness into sharp relief by seeing it from a different racial perspective.

Both approaches are helpful. When elements of whiteness are highlighted by people of color we learn particularly about how white supremacy operates to circumscribe and devalue their lives. On the other hand, when whites examine whiteness together they learn how these norms are transmitted amongst themselves, how challenges to these norms are deflected, and how groupthink operates to stop efforts to identify what whiteness means. The two of us would both still be living in a totally unraced way had it not been for other people – both colleagues of color and other whites - pointing out the meaning of our white identity to us.

Early on it’s important to point out to white colleagues, friends, students and community members that the point of learning about whiteness is not to embarrass or humiliate. We’ll say that nobody wants to volunteer for being exposed to an experience of sustained disgrace concerning something they can’t control – their racial identity. (We’ll often follow that comment by observing how that’s often the lifelong reality for communities of color.) Then we’ll emphasize instead that we’re trying to develop a white identity that people can take pride in. Katz (2003) describes this as the project of helping people become “anti-racist racists” (p. 179); that is, helping whites “live their whiteness in ways that actually challenge white domination” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 152). Rather than only feeling shame or guilt, whites need to work out what constitutes a positive white racial identity. This identity work can focus on how to leverage the privilege one has to work for racial justice (Warren, 2010), how to be an interventionist bystander (Sue et. al., 2019), and how to confront racism at the individual, group and systemic level (Michael, 2015).

A positive white identity is best developed in groups in our view. Whites need other whites to support and share stories and experiences of struggling to be anti-racist. Only with such a support group in place can whites, “develop a spiritually healthy form of self-love” (Sullivan, 2014, p. 149). Given that making mistakes and feeling out of your depth is a constant reality in white anti-racist work, it can’t be done alone. Even if we act as discrete individuals in a particular setting, we need a collaborative space in which to problematize and debrief our actions with others who are engaged in similar struggles. Otherwise, we fall victim to the myth of the lone hero described by Barnett (2013) who, as a white woman struggling to connect with her black students at a school in Bedford Stuyvesant, did “what I had been socialized to do as a good White woman: suffer silently, turn the rage inward, and strive for perfection. Resent those around you for not seeing your suffering, but don’t ask for help. *Never* ask for help. To ask for help is to admit weakness, to admit that you – *gasp*!- have needs. Let the resentment grow. I kept my struggles to myself” (p. 148). Feeling like this is a harbinger of the demoralizing death of anti-racist activism.

When meeting with mostly white groups to introduce the topic of whiteness we usually begin by identifying three core elements of white identity.

* A conviction that you don’t see race, that you have a color blind view of the world
* A belief that being white does not constitute a racial identity because only people of color are raced
* The opportunity to opt in and out of engaging with race

**Color Blindness**

Almost two decades ago Bonilla-Silva (2003) named color-blindness as the enactment of racism without racists. A color blind view of the world appeals to many whites for its emphasis on the fundamental humanity shared by all people. It is a conscious adoption of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s dictum that we should judge people not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. Whites are often very proud of saying that they don’t see color, that they take people as they come, give everyone the benefit of the doubt, and then make individual judgments about people that are unaffected by race as they interact with them in particular settings. A majority of the contributors to a recent anthology on teaching race (Brookfield, 2019) identified the enduring permanence of the color blind perspective as the biggest pedagogic challenged they faced.

Why should color blindness be a problem? Isn’t it admirable to avoid stereotyping people and to put learned prejudices aside so you can focus instead on the unique humanity of each individual you encounter? Well, if this were truly what was happening then both of us would be overjoyed. But the color blind perspective has two major flaws. First, it implies that whites can indeed quickly learn to stop stereotyping, bracket their biases and see people in an un-raced way. Second, it assumes a level playing field is in place in which whites interact with people of color as moral and political equals.

Let’s take the issue of being able to detach yourself from a race-based view of the world. Our position is that the ideology of white supremacy is so all enveloping that only hermits permanently cut off from all human interaction and all media could escape its influence. So, despite whites saying that they see only people, not color, we don’t believe this to be true. To take ourselves as examples, we have both been socialized in a world in which white supremacy underscores how we think people should behave and institutions should function. Even though we have spent decades trying to uncover this ideology in ourselves, and to identify racism in the contexts through which we move, we are still held hostage to our white supremacist conditioning. We hope we’ve got better at detecting its influence and in calling it out when we see it in play. But its frame will never leave us and we come smack up against it every day of our lives.

Now let’s think about the fact that racial exchanges don’t happen in a flat, neutral terrain. Even if the two of us could remove all biases, stereotypes and prejudices from our mental frameworks, we would still be moving through an asymmetrical world. Access to jobs, health care and education are so disproportionately advantaged in favor of whites that the ‘breaking news’ cable TV headline that we *should* see every day ought to read “revolution has still not broken out despite massive racial inequality”. Across the country incarceration rates for black and brown people are astoundingly disproportionate and the last few years have highlighted regular shootings of people of color by white police, with no accountability being exercised. There is clear racial segregation in housing, and even in ‘integrated’ public schools in our own city of St. Paul a color line clearly exists. Add to this the demonization of black and brown immigrants as disease ridden terrorists, rapists and hardened gang criminals, and it seems impossible for whites not to realize they live in a deeply racist world in which they are disproportionately advantaged. So what keeps intact the idea of American democracy as a level playing field in which hard work ensures that all, irrespective of color, have equal access to the same opportunities? Two words - ideological manipulation.

Dominant ideologies are what secure consent to structural injustice and what stop revolution breaking out when objective statistics and personal life experiences combine to present a world that is clearly unequal. Capitalist ideology promotes the idea that anyone can go from rags to riches if they show enough entrepreneurial spirit and if they work hard enough. Democratic ideology proclaims we live in a world where people’s opinions direct legislative acts, where everyone has free speech, and where the people’s will is always enacted. And white supremacy supports the view that continued white dominance is just a fact of life because, let’s face it, whites are just more intelligent, calm, rational and objective than people of color. Whites think better and make better decisions, so it’s natural that they should end up occupying positions of power and authority.

When whites say to people of color that they don’t see race, they will come across as naïve in a world where institutions and systems are *structured* around ensuring the continued dominance of one racial group. We have both worked for predominantly white institutions that proclaim a valuing of every person’s dignity and we’re happy to aspire to that value. But we have also pointed out to those institutions that because of the white supremacy embedded in the way they function, the dignity of institutional members of color can only be enacted if there are radical structural changes in admissions, financial aid, assessment systems, governance, curricula and performance appraisal.

We believe that a white person who tells people of color that they don’t see color is making a mistake it’s hard to recover from, particularly if that person thinks that now they will be seen as a trusted ally. As a white person you may feel the world is unraced, but you should assume that a person of color sees it in exactly opposite terms, that *everything* is seen through the lens of race. One of the most damaging dynamics we’ve observed in multiracial groups is whites saying that they’re non-racist and expecting people of color to take them at their word - and then bristling at any suggestions that they lack a full awareness of their racism. Even though we write books like this, give presentations, try to leverage our privilege, work on consciousness raising, demonstrate, advocate, mentor and teach courses around racial issues, neither of us expects to be trusted by colleagues of color.

We always counsel those whites we work with not to get hung up on assessing how much they are trusted by folks of color. Instead, they should have as their starting point an expectation of *not* being trusted. They should accept that, like the two of us, they will make many mistakes, say the wrong things, and act in racist ways. How could they (and we) *not* do this having been raised under white supremacy? If somewhere down the line a person of color tells you they trust you, then accept that as a recognition of your good work. But don’t think you’re not being effective if that acknowledgment never comes.

**Whiteness is a Racial Identity**

When we ask white people about the moment when they first become aware of their white identity we are often met with bemusement. Equally, the questions ‘what does it mean to be white?’ or ‘what role does your whiteness play in your life?’ are viewed almost as nonsensical. This is because many whites don’t believe they have a racial identity and that whether or not they are white has absolutely nothing to do with where they are in life, or how they conduct themselves.

The belief that whiteness does not constitute a racial identity is a building block of white supremacy. It’s part of what is often referred to as white normativity; the idea that the norms and standards by which we judge what is acceptable in the world are colored white. And it’s something that whites don’t usually think about unless, like the white mothers of children of color who have to navigate norms of whiteness (Chandler, 2016), something in your experience requires you to do so. Under white normativity race is something exhibited only by those with skin not colored white. This is because whiteness is viewed as the universal standard, the de-facto center, the common sense way the universe should look when it’s working as normal. Under white supremacy leadership looks white, authority looks white, experts look white and what counts as legitimate knowledge and acceptable logic are all constructed by whites. The power of white supremacy is making this seem unremarkable, obviously correct and just the way things are.

If you accept this perspective on life, then race is not something you need to attend to. If being white means you don’t have a race, then it’s easy to compartmentalize any discussion of race as something appropriate only for people of color. In this way it’s quite possible to attend a training on diversity, inclusion or cultural competence, without ever really thinking about what it means to be white. You can leave such a training thinking that race is something that others have. If you spend your life in predominantly white environments surrounded by people who look like you, then it’s not surprising that you’d think that race is something ‘out there’, evident in neighborhoods you don’t frequent, streets you don’t walk on, and company you don’t keep.

This perhaps explains why in so many predominantly white environments the ‘experts’ who come to run workshops and do training around diversity are people of color. Whites assume that the only people who can teach about race are people of color, since they’re the only ones with a racial identity! The fact that whiteness is itself a racial identity is never considered. This is probably also why diversity offices in predominantly white organizations are typically headed by the only person of color in the senior leadership team. If race is something you see only people of color having, then it makes sense to have such a person in charge of diversity because they have the ‘race’ that they’re going to teach whites (who don’t have race) about.

We both feel that diversity initiatives are best run by a multiracial team in which whites are involved. This allows the team to talk in public about their own racial dynamics, thereby demonstrating that whites are just as raced as any other group. We believe that because whiteness is a racial identity, and because that identity is generally supported in a racist world, whites need to be in the mix whenever conversations about race are held.

**Opting In and Out of Race**

Whites who don’t believe themselves to be raced and who live mostly in white environments can in effect decide when to opt in or out of thinking about, or dealing with, race. This is a luxury denied most people of color who have to navigate a white world for large portions of every day. So the problem of race is a *white* problem. White racist structures, policies and practices continue to endure partly because whites don’t see how those structures are maintained to disadvantage people of color. The race ‘problem’ is obviously a problem of the systematic marginalization and diminishment of people of color, but it’s just as much a problem of how good white people (Sullivan, 2014) who consider their actions to be prompted by morality and compassion don’t see how white supremacy keeps racism in place.

Thinking that you can move in and out of dealing with race is partly a reflection of the individualistic mythology so much a part of American culture. It’s easy to push thinking about race to the corners of your world if you think that being racist is all a matter of individual choice. Unless you put structural racism at the center of your analysis you can view racism as a matter of personal conduct, of whether or not you have bad thoughts, say bad things, and treat people unfairly. Many of the diversity and inclusiveness trainings we’ve attended, and no doubt some we’ve conducted ourselves, have fallen into this trap. Attention focuses on catching the implicit biases, prejudices and stereotypes you carry in your head that structure your interactions with people, or the micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010) you enact that, without you intending it, demean people of color. We both think such trainings can be helpful and have led them ourselves. But without an awareness of structural racism their effect is limited. People could attend a diversity institute and come away with a determination to purge elements of racism from their personal behavior but with no awareness of how systemic racism is maintained.

If you believe that you’re a moral, compassionate person and that racism is all a matter of individual choice then you can think you have an anti-racist identity without doing any of the heavy lifting to fundamentally restructure the world in which you live. You can feel virtuous about addressing the learned racist stereotypes and instincts you discover in yourself without engaging in the fundamentally necessary collective organizing that brings about change. This is why helping people to think structurally, not individualistically is so crucial. A structural worldview always seeks to understand individual personal experience as being at least partially socially formed. To adapt two well-known slogans, a structural perspective holds that the personal is structural and that we should think locally and act structurally. The two of us try to prioritize our efforts to spend the greatest time and energy working for structural changes. This is because in the institutions we have worked for people constantly change, but habitual practices and policies endure. As educators we love to see individual hearts and minds change, but as activists we believe the most important thing is to force structural change.