

WHITE FRAGILITY

WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

For example, although we are taught that women were granted suffrage in 1920, we ignore the fact that it was white women who received full access or that it was white men who granted it. Not until the 1960s, through the Voting Rights Act, were all women—regardless of race—granted full access to suffrage.

INTRODUCTION WE CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

racism ended in 1865 with the end of slavery.

If, however, I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth. One of the greatest social fears for a white person is being told that something that we have said or done is racially problematic. Yet when someone lets us know that we have just done such a thing, rather than respond with gratitude and relief (after all, now that we are informed, we won't do it again), we often respond with anger and denial. Such moments can be experienced as something valuable, even if temporarily painful, only after we accept that racism is unavoidable and that it is impossible to completely escape having developed problematic racial assumptions and behaviors.

This book is intended for us, for white progressives who so often—despite our conscious intentions—make life so difficult for people of color. I believe that *white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color*. I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist, or is less racist, or in the “choir,” or already “gets it”. White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because, to the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual antiracist practice. White progressives do indeed uphold and perpetrate racism, but our defensiveness and certitude make it virtually impossible to explain to us how we do so.

CHAPTER 1 - THE CHALLENGES OF TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

Our understanding of ourselves is necessarily based on our comparisons with others. The concept of pretty has no meaning without the concept of ugly,

We come to understand who we are by understanding who we are not.

The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable.

CHAPTER 2 - RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

RACISM

Prejudice is pre-judgment about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs. Prejudice consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little or no experience and then are projected onto everyone from that group. Our prejudices tend to be shared because we swim in the same cultural water and absorb the same messages.

Discrimination is *action* based on prejudice.

When a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism,

Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society. It is not limited to a single act or person.

People of color may also hold prejudices and discrimination against white people, but they lack the social and institutional power that transforms their prejudice and discrimination into racism

Scholar Marilyn Frye uses the metaphor of a birdcage to describe the interlocking forces of oppression. If you stand close to a birdcage and press your face against the wires, your perception of the bars will disappear and you will have an almost unobstructed view of the bird. If you turn your head to examine one wire of the cage closely, you will not be able to see the other wires. If your understanding of the cage is based on this myopic view, you may not understand why the bird doesn't just go around the single wire and fly away. You might even assume that the bird liked or chose its place in the cage.

But if you stepped back and took a wider view, you would begin to see that the wires come together in an interlocking pattern—a pattern that works to hold the bird firmly in place. It now becomes clear that a network of systemically related barriers surrounds the bird. Taken individually, none of these barriers would be that difficult for the bird to get around, but because they interlock with each other, they thoroughly restrict the bird. While some birds may escape from the cage, most will not. And certainly those that do escape will have to navigate many barriers that birds outside the cage do not.

The birdcage metaphor helps us understand why racism can be so hard to see and recognize: we have a limited view. Without recognizing how our position in relation to the bird defines how much of the cage we can see,

Individual whites may be “against” racism, but they still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group.

WHITENESS AS A POSITION OF STATUS

Whiteness obscures racism by rendering whites, white privilege, and racist institutions invisible. Robinson is often celebrated as the first African American to break the color line in playing in major-league baseball. While Robinson was certainly an amazing baseball player, this storyline depicts him as racially special, a black man who broke the color line himself. The subtext is that Robinson finally had what it took to play with the whites, as if no black athlete before him was strong enough to compete at that level. Imagine if instead, the story went something like this: “Jackie Robinson, the first black man whites allowed to play major-

league baseball.” This version makes a critical distinction because no matter how fantastic a player Robinson was, he simply could not play in the major leagues if whites—who controlled the institution—did not allow it were he to walk onto the field before being granted permission by white owners and policy makers, the police would have removed him.

Again, racism is a structure, not in event.

Race scholars use the term *white supremacy* to describe a sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefit those defined and perceived as white. This system of structural power privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group. If, for example, we look at the racial breakdown of the people who control our institutions, we see telling numbers in 2016-2017:

- Ten richest Americans: 100 percent white (seven of whom are among the ten richest in the world)
- US Congress: 90 percent white
- US governors: 96 percent white
- Top military advisors: 100 percent white
- President and vice president: 100 percent white
- US House Freedom Caucus: 99 percent white
- Current US Presidential cabinet: 91 percent white
- People who decide which TV shows we see: 93 percent white
- People who decide which books we read: 90 percent white
- People who decide which news is covered: 85 percent white
- People who decide which music is produced: 95 percent white
- People who directed the hundred top grossing films of all time, worldwide: 95 percent white
- Teachers: 82 percent white
- Full-time college professors: 84 percent white
- Owners of men's professional football teams: 97 percent white

The example of child publicly calling out a black man's race and embarrassing the mother illustrates several aspects of white children's racial socialization. First, children learn that it is taboo to openly talk about race. Second, they learn that people should pretend not to notice undesirable aspects that define some people as less valuable than others (a large birthmark on someone's face, a person using a wheelchair). These lessons manifest themselves later in life, when white adults drop their voices before naming the race of someone who isn't white (and especially so if the race being named is *black*), as if blackness were shameful or the word itself were impolite. If we add all the comments we make about people of color privately, when we are less careful, we may begin to recognize how white children are taught to navigate race.

CHAPTER 4 - HOW DOES RACE SHAPE THE LIVES OF WHITE PEOPLE?

White People: I don't want you to understand me better; I want you to understand yourselves. Your survival has never depended on your knowledge of white culture. In fact, it is required for ignorance

-Ijeoma Oluo

BELONGING

As I move through my daily life, my race is unremarkable. I belong when I turn on the TV, read best-selling novels, and watch blockbuster movies. I belong when I walk past the magazine racks at the grocery store or drive past billboards. I belong when I see overwhelming number of white people on lists of the “Most Beautiful.” I may feel inadequate in light of my age or weight, but I will belong racially. For example, in 2017, singer Rihanna introduced a makeup line for women of all skin colors. Gratitude from women of color poured in. Many of their tweets included the exclamation “Finally!” These are tweets I have never needed to send.

CHAPTER 5 - THE GOOD/BAD BINARY

As African American scholar and filmmaker Omowale Akintunde says: “Racism is systemic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality. For most whites, however, racism is like murder: the concept exists, but someone has to commit it in order for it to happen. This limited view of such a multilayered syndrome cultivates the sinister nature of racism and, in fact, perpetuates racist phenomena rather than eradicates them.”

CHAPTER 6 - ANTI- BLACKNESS

Anti-blackness is a complex and confusing stew of resentment and benevolence, for we also use Blacks to feel warmhearted and noble. We are drawn to those who cast their eyes downward in our presence, the ones we can “save” from the horrors of their black lives with our abundance and kindness. Consider an example I often used in my presentations: *The Blind Side*, a hugely popular movie for which Sandra Bullock received an Academy Award. This film is a cogent example of whites as the racially benevolent side of the coin. The film is based on the “true” story of a family—the Tuohys—who rescued Michael Oher, a black man who came from an impoverished family circumstances and who went on to become an NFL player. Although the movie was popular with white audiences, many problematic racial narratives are reinscribed in the film. In fact, there are no black characters who do *not* reinforce negative racial stereotypes. Oher himself is portrayed as a child like gentle giant who lives in abject poverty. Sprinkled in are his drug-addicted single mother with multiple children from unknown fathers, the incompetent welfare worker, the uppity lawyer, and the menacing gang members in his drug-infested and crime-ridden neighborhood.

In one pivotal scene, Oher returns to his former neighborhood. As he walks down the street, he is surrounded by a gang that tries to intimidate him. While he considers his limited options, Mrs. Tuohy arrives and confronts the gang members, who quickly back down and retreat. Rescued by Mrs. Tuohy, Oher is returned back to safe white suburbia. The scene makes it clear: the only way Oher could be saved from the terrors of his own black community is through the benevolence and bravery of a white family.

In the film, white professionals discuss Oher as if he were developmentally disabled (he certainly comes off as such—he is passive and inarticulate throughout the movie). His teachers note that on his IQ test, he scored in the bottom percentile in “ability to learn” but in the top percentile in “protective instinct”! As a professor of education who has never heard of a testing measure “protective instinct,” I’ve been unable to find evidence of this bizarre measurement. It is highly problematic that Oher, as a black male, is portrayed as severely lacking in intellectual abilities but exceptional in something instinctual. His limited intellectual capacity is reinforced throughout the film, for example, when the youngest child of the Tuohy household has to teach Oher how to play football.

According to the film, Oher is never able to understand the rules of the game, so Mrs. Tuohy appeals to his “protective instinct” by telling him to pretend one of his new white family members is going to be hurt. Once his instincts are engaged (rather than his intellect), he's unstoppable on the field. In a particularly insulting scene, the white child who tried unsuccessfully to teach Oher how to play football sits at a table negotiating a contract for him with powerful adult men while Oher sits in the background, mute.

This film, told from the white perspective and enthusiastically received by audiences, reinforces some very important dominant ideologies:

- White people are the saviors of black people.
- Some black children may be innocent, but black adults are morally and criminally corrupt.
- Whites who are willing to save or otherwise help black people, at seemingly great personal costs, are noble, courageous, and morally superior to other whites.
- Individual black people can overcome their circumstances, but usually only with the help of white people.
- Black neighborhoods are inherently dangerous and criminal.
- Virtually all Blacks are poor, incompetent, and unqualified for their jobs; they belong to gangs, are addicted to drugs, and are bad parents.
- The most dependable route for black males to escape the “inner city” is through sports.
- White people are willing to deal with individual “deserving” black people, but whites do not become part of the black community in any meaningful way (beyond charity work).

Of course, Oher also brings redemption to the whites who saved him. The film ends with a voiceover from Mrs. Tuohy, a Christian, claiming it was God's will that his boy be saved (presumably because his talent on the field made him more profitable and thus valuable to white people). The Tuohy's, of course, are the good whites, who have to deal with the prejudice of the individual bad whites they encounter at the country club and other places. In this way, the racist = bad/not racist = good binary is also reinforced. The film is fundamentally and insidiously anti-black.

Handwritten Notes

Target – color of my red shirt – not b/c color of my skin