



CHAPTER 3

How to Understand Race, Racism, and White Supremacy

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing
can be changed until it is faced.*

—JAMES BALDWIN

As a person of color, learning about the impact that white supremacy has had on my life has given me an intellectual framework to talk about racism and has made me feel more empowered. I've acquired language to describe what I've experienced and seen in schools for decades. This learning has also opened my eyes to moments when I contributed to perpetuating white supremacy. Whether because I'd internalized the messages of white supremacy, or because I wasn't aware of what I was doing, learning has allowed me to see places and times when I became complicit in oppressing others. This has been (and continues to be) a painful experience—but one that is ultimately liberating. As I know better, I do better. Learning about white supremacy and racism has been a stepping stone to healing.

If you're committed to coaching for equity, then when you observe a teacher, or lead a department in creating policies, or when you are in conversation with colleagues about students, you'll need to know what racial inequities look and sound like and how to talk about them. Beyond a professional commitment, we all need to learn more about white supremacy and racism—whether because we are committed to leading equitable organizations, or to heal from the damage of white supremacy, or to live a morally aligned life in which we recognize the interconnectedness

of all beings. White supremacy affects people all over this planet—whether or not you live or work around people of color. We need to understand what this means, how it affects everyone, and how this came to be. This learning will allow us to construct and traverse bridges of authentic connection.

Depending on our identity markers and life experiences, we also have different things to learn. Learning about white supremacy and racism will be a lifelong commitment for all of us. There's no level of "wokeness" at which we graduate or retire. We may need to take a sabbatical from learning—cognitive understanding needs to be balanced with psycho-social/spiritual healing or else we risk physical and emotional exhaustion and malaise. People of color live racism and white supremacy every day and may feel like we have less to learn and need more breaks—at least this is true for me. And then after a break, we'll return to learning—to reading and listening and deeper levels of understanding.

In this chapter, I'll explain how the idea of "whiteness" came to be, how white supremacy was established, and how it's affected our country and education system. I'll also define racism. I've tried to keep this chapter succinct and hope that it can be used as a shared text for discussion. If this had existed when I coached Stephanie, I might have given her sections to read—such as the section called "What Is Racism?" or the section on the power of language in this chapter. I hope the content of this chapter generates interest in a deeper exploration of these concepts and history. In Appendix F: Resources for Further Learning, you'll find suggestions to continue learning.

Pause and Process

Before you read this chapter, take a few minutes to acknowledge any feelings that are arising. Name them. Notice how your body feels as you name and gently explore those emotions. See if you can sense the feelings and questions that are hiding on the edges of your consciousness—the ones you aren't ready to name or admit. Can you invite them out to be seen?

Given your identity markers, how do you think this chapter might impact you? What comes up for you when engaging in this kind of learning?

What do you hope to get in this chapter? What do you hope to learn?

For most of you, I anticipate this chapter will stir up strong feelings and be a hard read. Plan now for how you can take care of yourself after you finish. Can you plan to take a walk? To talk with a friend? To do something that nourishes your spirit?

What Is White Supremacy?

Let's start with a foundational concept: Racism wouldn't exist without white supremacy. *White supremacy* is the ideology that white people are superior. This ideology began with the transatlantic slave trade and has been institutionalized for over 500 years in the United States and in white settler societies including in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and South Africa. It manifests in a myriad of forms and affects the lives of everyone in the world in innumerable ways. In many countries, white supremacy manifests in the legal system, in who owns property, in what we see on TV, in who has access to higher paying jobs and good medical care, in who and what we find beautiful, in who lives where, in the words that we use, in which schools receive more funds, in how teachers "manage" students, and in much more. You can't understand racism without understanding white supremacy, so let's deconstruct it.

Where Did "White People" Come From?

Human beings have long categorized ourselves and others into groups based on religion, tribe, and even clothing. But categorizations based on complexion are relatively recent. It's hard to imagine that someone coined the term "white" because the concept is now one that is so fundamental to how we see the world—but the term and concept have been in use for less than 500 years. In 1619, when the first Africans were abducted and taken to Virginia as slaves, there were no "white" people. It wasn't until the 1680s that this term was used in colonial records. It was, however, during those first decades in the new colonies that the concept of *white people* was established—as a way to describe the superiority of Europeans, and people of European decent, over Africans.

"White" came to mean anything that was not African and anyone who was not of European origin. By the early twentieth century, in some states in the United States, just one drop of "black blood" made someone "colored." But whiteness has had shifting boundaries. For many years, Irish, Italian, and Jewish people were not considered "white" by other Europeans, and they faced discrimination because of their perceived racial status. Some Europeans and mixed-race people chose to identify as white so that they could receive the privileges of being white. My maternal grandfather, a Jew from Eastern Europe, was born with the name Solomon Skolnik. Because of the anti-Semitism he experienced, he changed his name in the 1930s to Frank Carlson. While this didn't completely eliminate the discrimination he experienced, it did reduce it. This was a privilege available to him—the privilege of skin color.

Just to be sure we're clear on one fact: *There are no racially-based biological differences between human beings.* There is no gene or cluster of genes common to all blacks or all whites. Classifying people into "races" has no scientific basis. *Race is a social construct.* A small group of men who sought wealth and power created the categorization of people into races as a way to elevate their superiority. They based this categorization on the amount of melanin in skin, so that they could dehumanize Africans, enslave them, and exploit their labor. Race is not real; whiteness is a creation. Racism, however, is very real.

Using the categories of "white people" and "people of color" is problematic because identity is very complicated. However, these terms are shorthand for conveying the general meaning of who has power and who does not. They are limited as categories and deserve more exploration. Often the intersections of our identities help us gain a much richer understanding of our privileges and of the discrimination, biases, and oppression we experience. For example, you may have racial privilege (if you are of European decent) but you may lack other privilege based on other identities (if you are female-identified, and disabled, and from a low-income background). These intersections, and the experiences of all groups of marginalized people, deserve attention. In this book, I focus on racial equity—with some acknowledgment of experiences that intersect with other identity experiences.

Author Paul Kivel offers useful insight on whiteness:

It is critical to remember that racism doesn't exist without white supremacy, and white supremacy doesn't exist without the concept of whiteness. Racism is based on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white. (1996, p. 19)

A Brief History of the Origins of White Supremacy

As we study history, we will learn that race is a social and political construct designed so that a small group could amass a lot of wealth. Understanding history is empowering. Here's a brief timeline of the mess that's brought us to where we're at now (for more of this history, see Zinn, 1980, and Kendi, 2016):

- In the fourth century BCE, Aristotle created theories justifying Greek slave-holding and superiority. The Romans and early Christians adopted these

beliefs. In the ancient world, ethnic, religious, and color prejudice existed, but *races* such as White Europeans and Black Africans did not.

- In 1377, the Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldun, wrote extensively about the inferiority of the "Negro nations" (and the Slavs—the origin of the word "slave") and argued for their enslavement.
- In 1415, Portuguese royalty gained control over trade routes into Sub-Saharan Africa. They subsequently published the first European book that justified the enslavement of Africans based on racist ideas.
- In 1444, the first Portuguese ships carrying enslaved Africans arrived in Europe. Slave-trading was defended as a Christian missionary expedition.
- In the 1400s, the Portuguese wrote extensive denigrating narratives about Africans, describing them as animals and as savages who desperately needed religious and civil salvation. Portuguese explorers, agents, and slave traders circulated these writings extensively. Meanwhile, the Portuguese royalty's profits skyrocketed as the exploitation of African land and people increased. Remember this: European royalty got very, very rich from enslaving Africans.
- In 1481, the Portuguese built Elmina, a massive fort on the coast of Ghana, which became West Africa's largest slave-trading post.
- In 1492, Columbus landed in the West Indies. Right from the start, Spanish colonists transferred their racist perceptions of Africans onto the indigenous people they encountered. The enslavement, exploitation, and genocide of the indigenous people of the continent known as America began.
- Spanish colonists wanted to mine gold and to plant and process sugar in the "new world," but they required laborers. Millions of indigenous people died from disease, resistance, and brutality. Spanish capitalists and religious leaders argued for the enslavement of Africans.
- Simultaneously, Europeans traveling in Africa disseminated stories about uncivilized, sexualized, animalistic African people. These narratives circulated widely in Europe as the slave trade picked up.
- In 1619, the first African slaves were taken to Virginia. The Virginians employed racist ideas to legalize and codify slavery. In the 1630s, the Puritans in New England followed suit.
- In the 1680s, "White," as a language of race, appeared in the lexicon of those of European descent living in Virginia, and then appeared for the first time in Virginia law in 1691. Wealthy Virginian landowners legislated "the whites" as a new class of people into existence. They gave whites certain rights and took other rights from blacks.

Racism is the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates

Colonization

Colonization played a monumental role in the creation of a system of white supremacy and its legacy lives on: it's another key concept to define.

Colonization is a system of power that's based on beliefs of one group's superiority over another. In the last 600 years, colonization has been based on the notion that people of European origin had the right to dominate other lands and cultures because as white people, they were smarter, more "civilized," and more deserving. This continued a legacy that began perhaps a thousand years prior and that had been justified with Christianity. The Celts of the British Isles and western Europe were colonized by Christians. Beginning in the 1500s, European colonizers destroyed cultural practices of indigenous people (in the Americas, Africa, Australia and New Zealand, and parts of Asia and the South Pacific) including their languages and religious/spiritual practices, and forced them to adopt the colonizer's religion and language, and provide their labor—for free. Over time, many of the colonized internalized the beliefs and practices of the colonizer, and the brutality of the system became obscured.

In the United States, we rarely remember that we are on stolen lands, lands that were taken through blankets intentionally infected with smallpox, through broken treaties, and through outright genocide. These lands were taken when the people who had been here for thousands of years were removed, forcibly marched across the country, and corralled into "reservations." Our lack of memory, and the intentional distortion of truth, has led to the macabre. Take Thanksgiving, for example, a holiday supposedly based on a feast that white Plymouth settlers shared with Native American people after their first harvest. This is typically celebrated with a big meal and family gathering. However, while there's little evidence that this historical feast actually occurred, there is plenty of evidence of the massacres that the white settlers perpetrated on the native peoples of the Plymouth region, and of the decimation of the indigenous people of this hemisphere. History has been sanitized, and the brutality of colonialism has been erased. This perpetuates the power of white supremacy.

Remember Resistance

Here's something else that those in power have not wanted us to know or remember: people have *always* resisted oppression and dehumanization and white supremacy. Always. From the moment that Columbus set foot on the island of Cuba and that Spanish exploiters began enslaving the natives, the Tainos resisted, as did the indigenous inhabitants of Jamaica and Mexico and Peru and Florida and across the Americas; indigenous resistance to colonialism continues to this very day. Africans fought back when they were captured in their villages, as they were forcibly marched to the west coast of Africa, on ships on the Atlantic, in the field and the house, and in more ways than we'll ever be able to catalogue.

In modern history, resistance has taken myriad forms and has been unceasing. Some of this history we know, some we don't, because as the African proverb reminds us, until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. It has served white supremacy to repress these stories and to keep them from us. But you don't have to look very far, even in traditional history narratives, to find the stories of those who resisted and refused to internalize messages of inferiority. You can find them in history books, in memoirs, and in the stories of train porters and strawberry pickers and church goers. We can, and must, look to these people for inspiration and courage. Just because their stories aren't taught in eighth grade standards doesn't mean they didn't exist.

Perhaps people are color *are* more "defiant"—perhaps we should proudly wear this label; our ancestors resisted annihilation and subjugation, and perhaps when we are called "defiant," we should stand taller. Perhaps defiance is an assertion of our rights and existence, a healthy challenge to white, patriarchal, capitalist authority—a cause for celebration and appreciation, not grounds for suspension. The history of our resistance has been intentionally obscured from people of color and from people of European decent as well—from those who also resisted and from those who were passive. Our journey to justice and liberation will require that we excavate those stories and celebrate them. The knowledge of our resistance can fuel our courage and commitment.

Pause and Process

- Which feelings are coming up in this reading? Are they different from the ones that you noticed in the beginning of the chapter?
- How, and from whom, have you learned about racism?
- What has this learning journey been like?
- What might you gain from continuing this learning journey?

A definition of racism is what Stephanie wanted when she asked me, “Do you think I’m racist?” Defining racism, and a racist person, is essential to transforming schools and building a more just society. For so long, our image of a racist has been of a cross-burning, cloaked Klansman. Or of a skinhead with a swastika tattooed on his forehead. By defining racism in these ways, a lot of us have been relieved from taking responsibility for the racism that we consciously and unconsciously act on.

The Short Definition

While there’s debate about how to best define racism, there’s also general agreement about the following:

- Racism is a system of oppression that emerges from beliefs that one race is superior to another based on biological characteristics.
- The only racist system that has ever existed is one based on the ideology of white supremacy; this system is designed to benefit and privilege whiteness by every economic and social measure.
- Racism is prejudice plus power: in the United States (and in many places in the world), institutional power is held by white people.
- A racist is someone who consciously or unconsciously upholds a system and culture of white supremacy.

Based on this definition, there is no such thing as “reverse racism.” While people of color can show prejudice against white people, this form of discrimination doesn’t come with systemic privilege. It’s not institutionalized.

Let’s explore a couple of ways to further define and understand racism: Racism as a policy and practice and racism as a toxic pollutant.

Racism as Policy and Practice

The dominant narrative about racism has long been that racist *ideas* produced racist *policies*. A *racist idea* is believing that African or Black people are inferior, uncivilized, fit for hard labor, and so on; a *racist policy* is slavery or segregation. According to this interpretation of history, beliefs about racial difference preceded slavery. White people feared African people and looked down on them, and essentially said: “Enslaving you is justified because you’re almost an animal, you’re very strong, and you’re built for work. Also, we’ll give you Christianity, which will at least save your soul.”

In his book, *Stamped from the Beginning* (2016), Ibram X. Kendi turns this notion on its head. Kendi critiques what he calls the “popular folktale of racism: that ignorant and hateful people had produced racist ideas, and that these racist people had instituted racist policies (p. 9).” Kendi makes a brilliant 600-page case for how America’s history of race relations began with racial discriminatory policies, which led to racist ideas, which led to ignorance and hate. Sequencing racism in this way is essential to how we understand and dismantle it.

Kendi continues this exploration in his moving and thought-provoking *How to Be an Anti-Racist* (2019). In this book, he proposes that we stop thinking of “racist” as a pejorative and start thinking of it as a simple description. You are either racist or you’re anti-racist, Kendi argues; you are either upholding white supremacy, or you’re actively participating in taking it apart. He urges us to focus exclusively on policy, arguing that the solution to racism will start with policies, not ideas. He suggests that antiracist ideologies will emerge once we are bold enough to enact an antiracist agenda that would include criminal-justice reform, more money for black schools and black teachers, and a program to fight residential segregation.

When I reflect on research about the positive impact on black children from having just one black teacher, I’m convinced by Kendi’s arguments. I also know that the outcomes for black and brown children would be different in schools if there were clear and concrete policies around who is sent to the office for what (for example, “defiance” should not be criteria for an office referral), for how children are tested for learning differences, and for what literature is assigned in eighth grade. Different educational policies would make a tremendous difference in the lives of black and brown kids in school.

Then I reflect on the way teachers (black, white, and of color) have spoken to my black son, how their perception of his defiance distorted the relationship they built with him, and how that impacted his sense of belonging and psychological safety. While perhaps some policies could have buffered him from the impact of these beliefs, I also know that we must address the thinking, feeling, and believing of anyone who works in a school if we intend to change the experience and outcomes for children of color.

I’m also troubled by Kendi’s proclamations of binaries and absolutism. Binaries are dangerous and lead to righteousness. Thinking in binary ways has gotten us into the mess we’re in today because we can’t and haven’t acknowledged the interconnectedness of all things, the gray zones and the both/and. The path out of the situation we’re in now requires that we avoid the emotional comforts of a simplification of history or humanity or thinking. That’s what binaries provide, and the world is too complex.

We need policies that buffer us from the impact of white supremacy *and we need more*. We need to recognize how racism has affected our hearts, minds, bodies, and relationships as well as the social fabric of our communities, and we need to attend to this harm and heal from it. Policy can't do that. Kendi's arguments are rational and logical, and they are a great contribution toward justice, but we are thinking-feeling-physical beings. As Patrisse Cullors, one of the founders of Black Lives Matter, says, "We can't policy our way out of racism" (OnBeing, 2017).

Racism as a Toxic Pollutant

Dr. Beverly Tatum, author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* offers a useful analogy for racism. She writes:

[Racism] is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in . . . if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing in the air? (1999, p. 6)

Expanding on Tatum's analogy, I equate racism with a toxic substance that's not only in the air but has also seeped into the soil in which we plant crops and into the water system from which we drink. It's virtually impossible to avoid ingesting it, and we've been doing so since we were born. Our parents and grandparents breathed in these poisons and drank water and ate food that was putrid with racism. Racism coats our arteries; it is etched into our neural pathways, distorting our thoughts. Our physical, emotional, and social bodies are toxic with the poison of racism. And by "we" I mean all of us—people of color and white people. Some people of color unwittingly internalize notions of white supremacy despite the fact that doing so contributes to our own marginalization. Everyone learns explicit and implicit stereotyped messages in families, schools, and communities. We learn these stereotypes, and we act on them consciously and unconsciously.

But we have choice. Choice is the ultimate freedom afforded by human consciousness. Just like we have choices about what we eat, drink, and breathe, we have choices about the mental and emotional toxins that we ingest. When the air is smoggy, we can wear a mask—and we can find clearer air. We can choose food that is less toxic; we can purify our water; we can take supplements that cleanse our system of toxins.

As we attend to our individual well-being and health, we must address the root cause—we must understand who is contaminating the air, soil, and water; we must warn others of the contamination; and we must demand change. It may not be our fault that we live in toxic systems, although some people do seem to make

an active choice to live in a toxic environment. However, it is our responsibility to call attention to when our friends and loved ones ingest these poisons and when we see them spreading the poison to others; it is our responsibility to clean them up. We have a choice about where we live, what we breathe, and how we respond to the toxins in our world.

Pause and Process

- How does this analogy of racism as a pervasive toxin sit with you? Is there another analogy that you can think of or that you've heard that helps you understand racism?
- What comes up for you to think that you've been ingesting racist ideas all your life?
- Can you identify some of the choices that you've made to become more conscious of your role in perpetuating racism?

Let's return to this fact: Race and ethnicity are social constructs—elements of a system developed by humans to categorize people who "appear" to share common features. The amount of melanin that you have in your skin signals something to the world about the societal norms that will be applied to your presumed race. Race is an inaccurate social construction to describe who you really are, but your perceived race and the race you perceive of others matters a lot in society because of white supremacy. Racism is the construction of "races" from particular biological characteristics that people have, and the use of this construction to lift up certain groups in society into a dominant class and keep other groups in an oppressed class.

Racism is embedded into structures including schools, government, social programs, and the legal system. If we intend to permanently rid our individual systems of the toxins of racism, we'll need to transform those structures as well. The foundations and walls of those structures are saturated with toxic mold spores. Our individual mindsets and behaviors will never be truly rid of the toxicity of racism if we're in poisonous environments. That's not to say that you can't purge yourself of a lot of toxicity—you can become acutely aware of when you are ingesting racist poison and when you're acting on it and contaminating others. But it takes daily practice to examine your own mind, heart, and behaviors for white supremacy. Ultimately, we'll only be healthy, whole, and free if we dismantle the systems in which white supremacy is lodged. It took 600 years for us to get where we are

today—it might take a while to dismantle corrupted systems and to rid our minds of contaminants. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't take immediate action to start changing things; it means we're in for a long journey.

Repeat this over and over: *Greed* gave birth to racial categorization and white supremacy. Racial classification and white supremacy were created to justify the unfettered brutality required of slavery and colonialism. And in the last 500 years, the concept of race and white supremacy has served the social, political, and economic interests of dominant groups. We've been indoctrinated into a belief that racism is just the way things are. It'll take us a while to internalize that categorizing people into races was invented by fifteenth-century European royalty, explorers, and burgeoning capitalists in their quest for wealth.

It is a liberating concept to remember that human beings have not always been racist. Yes, human beings have a tendency to sort each other into categories, but sorting by the amount of melanin in a person's skin and by phenotypical features is a relatively modern practice. Racism has been perpetuated by normalizing it and suggesting that it's just something human beings do. Unless we remember that racism was created, it can seem like something humans are destined to do—but that's just not true. The way we think about what racism is creates the mental models in which we can get out of the mess we're in. If we recognize it as something we created, we can dismantle it and create something new.

Pause and Process

- Which ideas were familiar to you in this section on racism? Which ideas were new?
- What questions has this section left you with?
- How do you think your sense of your own racial identity affected how you read this section? How might someone from a different racial identity have experienced it?

How Racism Manifests in Schools

The education system in the United States (and in many developed countries) was not designed to serve all students well. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed an educational system with different tracks for, in his words, “the laboring and the learned.” Scholarships would allow a select few of the laboring class to advance by “raking a few geniuses from the rubbish.”

The first public schools on the east coast of the United States existed to socialize white male children in religion and morality. Children from wealthy families were educated at home by tutors, and later sent to boarding school, often in Europe. Missionary schools were established as a mechanism to convert Native children. After the Civil War, the Freedman's Bureau established schools in the South for black children.

Industrialization created the need for universal education in the United States (as it had in Europe), and in 1918, schooling became compulsory through elementary school. Schools focused on efficiency, results, and creating compliant future laborers. The architects of the education system described schools as factories, and children as “raw products” that “are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life.” (Cubberley, 1916). Our school calendar; the “cells and bells” that we find in just about every school; and the emphasis on testing, order, and control come from an education model designed to advance capitalism. Capitalism, remember, birthed the ideology that white people are superior and that people of color exist to serve their masters.

Education in the United States has never been a right included in the Constitution, and from the beginning, our education system sorted people by race, gender, and class. Remember, also, that the United States was not founded on principles of equity and justice—“We the People” only included *some* people. Access to opportunity has never been equitable or fair. This is a difficult history we're contending with—and it's why our work can feel fundamentally conflicting and contradictory at its core. And we're not alone in this conflict—it's one confronting educators all over our world.

Grappling with this history raises the question of purpose. What do we see as the purpose of education? What is our ultimate goal as educators? The solution to educational inequity is not to help students navigate a dysfunctional system that was never designed for them. *We can't use the same structures and systems if we want different results.* And yet, changing those systems will take time. What can we do right now for our kids who are forced to endure “cells and bells,” order and control, and standardized tests?

In order to create something new, we'll need to thoroughly deconstruct the systems we've been indoctrinated into—we'll need to unearth the mental models that we've worked from, and question everything. Yes, there have been education “reformers” and schools that attempted to interrupt the status quo—and some of those have been honorable and others have inadvertently replicated the status quo. We'll have to question how we do schooling and for what purpose.

As we construct a vision of education for liberation, and as we learn skills to provide our students with a more-equitable education tomorrow, we must do our own learning. We can start by identifying the ways that racism manifests in schools and classrooms. Table 3.1: The Manifestation of White Supremacy outlines a handful of indicators of white supremacy in schools. This is not intended to be a comprehensive description, but a resource to get us thinking. Appendix B: The Equity Rubric is a more expansive resource to describe what equity is, and isn't, in schools.

Table 3.1 The Manifestation of White Supremacy

| In our society, the ideology of white supremacy manifests in: | In schools, the ideology of white supremacy manifests in: |
|---|---|
| Institutions, systems and policies including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social, political, economic, legal, and financial systems• Slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow segregation, and redlining | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discipline policies• The school calendar• Graduation criteria• Curriculum• Textbooks that center the experience of white people and erase the brutality of white supremacy• Tracking• Uniforms• The strict regulation of children's bodies |
| Cognition, attitude, and emotional responses including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prejudice• Values of dominant culture• Implicit or unconscious bias• Deficit thinking• Internalized oppression• Stereotyping• "White fragility" | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• These kids can't . . .• They need me to save them.• I'm afraid of those kids.• I need to not be like other immigrants.• Asians are just good at math.• Respect looks like a child making eye contact with an adult.• Those parents don't value education.• I feel like I'm being attacked when I get feedback on my communication. |
| Behaviors and actions including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Genocide and violence• Bigotry and discrimination• Microaggressions | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The criminalization of student behavior• Insisting that only English be spoken• Incorrectly pronouncing names; giving students nicknames |
| Outcomes including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Racism• Inequality, inequities, and disproportionality• White privilege | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School-to-prison pipeline• Graduation rates• College admissions• Access to opportunities |

Racial disparities are evident in education in several categories: access to opportunities; criminalization of student behavior; and outcomes including test scores, grades, and graduation rates. What follows is not intended to be a comprehensive list of the inequities we can find in school but rather a big handful of data points that hopefully provoke reflection and further inquiry. Although African American and Latinx students are more likely to receive lower grades, score lower on standardized tests, and drop out of high school, and less likely to enter and complete college than their white counterparts, the data on student achievement is problematic. For that reason, I've chosen to provide you with some data on access to opportunities and the criminalization of student behavior as a way to gain greater understanding of the indicators of racial inequities in school.

Access to Opportunities

- Students of color are less likely to have qualified teachers—teachers who have been prepared to teach (Goldhaber et al., 2015).
- Black, Latinx, and Native American youth have less access to honors and advanced placement (AP) classes than white youth. They are less likely to enroll in advanced science and math classes, which can reduce their chances of being admitted to a four-year college, many of which require completion of at least one high-level math class for admission (Klopfenstein, 2004).
- Black and Latinx students are less likely to be identified as gifted and talented. Black and Latinx third-grade students are half as likely as whites to participate in gifted and talented programs. In contrast, children of color are more likely to be identified as requiring special education services by teachers (Grissom and Redding, 2016).

Criminalization of Student Behavior

Educators frequently notice misbehavior among black students while ignoring the same behavior in white students. Black students are seen as troublemakers and disciplined more harshly than their white counterparts who are granted leniency.

- Black preschool students are more likely to be suspended than students of other races and are more likely to be suspended for minor disruptions and misbehaviors including wetting their pants, kicking off their shoes, and crying. Black students make up just 18 percent of children in preschool but represent nearly half of preschool children suspended (Smith and Harper, 2015).
- At five years old, black boys are perceived as being threatening. A 2016 study showed that white people begin to perceive black boys as threatening at five years

old, associating them with adjectives such as “violent,” “dangerous,” “hostile,” and “aggressive” (Todd, 2016).

- Black students are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). This is even more pronounced in 13 states in the U.S. South, where 55 percent of the 1.2 million suspensions involving black students nationwide occurred (Smith and Harper, 2015).
- Black girls are more likely than all other female students and some groups of boys to be suspended or expelled (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014).
- Students of color are more likely to attend schools with a greater police presence, increasing the odds that they will enter the criminal justice system. The presence of law enforcement on school campuses also increases the risk of such students being exposed to police violence (Javdani, 2019).
- Overt and unconscious biases against black and brown children lead to high suspension rates and excessive absences; to not reading at grade level by third grade and falling behind academically; to the “achievement gap” and eventually to dropping out of school (Bowman, 2018).

The Power of Words and the Language of Oppression

Let's return to the term *at-risk* that Stephanie used to describe her students—and let's examine the language we use. When used as an adjective for people, “at-risk” is problematic and inaccurate. Every person and every community has strengths, resources, and resilience, and this label is stigmatizing. Although many of us have used the term “at-risk,” it's time to adopt new language.

An alternative to “at-risk” might be the term *historically underserved*. This phrase acknowledges external forces that have not served an individual student or population well. Many children of color in our schools have been “underserved”—they don't receive the services and support that they deserve, that their white counterparts receive. They are not “underachieving”—they haven't been given access to the same experiences and quality of education as children who are “achieving.” Although I sometimes use this term, it also feels vague and abstract, and it doesn't point the finger directly at those who are responsible for exploiting communities, or at those who created the conditions in which people were underserved.

The term *underserved* can sound like an accident or an error of omission—and there was nothing accidental about what happened to communities that have been “underserved.” I've stopped using this term because it obscures historical truths.

We can also talk about groups of people as being *disenfranchised*, which means to be denied rights or privileges. Traditionally, disenfranchisement means being stripped of the right to vote, but it can be used to describe the experience of not belonging or feeling powerless. I use this word when I'm sure that those I'm speaking to understand the definition.

The term *marginalized communities* is perhaps a better way to refer to groups that have been underserved or disenfranchised. Marginalized groups are denied full access to rights, opportunities, and resources that are normally available to members of a different group. Marginalization prevents people from participating fully in social, political, and economic life, and can block them from human rights.

Another useful term is *othered*. Othering encompasses many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identity. When we “other” someone, we dehumanize them—we say they are fundamentally different from us. People are othered because of the groups to which they belong. When people “belong,” they are socially positioned in way that gives them access to power and resources; this belonging is usually to a group-based identity. To be “othered” is to be perceived as “not belonging.”

How Words Lead to Liberation

Words convey tremendous power. Examine the words you use about yourself and others. Are the words disparaging, dehumanizing, narrow, and constricted? Do they focus on the negative, the deficits, the missing holes? When a word points to a problem, where is the blame placed? On the child or their family or community? On their school? Or on white supremacy, colonization, and capitalism? Which words and phrases place responsibility on broader socio-political institutions and on the historical events that resulted in the suffering of some communities? These words lead to justice. Which words direct us to envision a transformed world, a beloved community? These words lead to liberation.

Systems of oppression maintain their power by intentionally teaching misinformation. Misinformation is communicated through the language we've been taught and that we use. If we want to transform systems of oppression, we need to scrutinize the language we use. It's going to be a dizzying journey to uproot the language that has divided and dehumanized us, and it's a necessary step on the path to justice and liberation. I know that sometimes examining language can feel trite, contrived, nit-picky, or exhausting. And it's necessary. The risks are high when we

don't examine our language, as author and researcher, Brené Brown, reminds us: "Dehumanizing language is always the beginning of violence." Get comfortable with discomfort and strengthen your patience muscles: this will be a journey.

Effective communication relies on shared definitions. Words convey worlds of meaning. It's our responsibility when we use words to use them with wise intention. Here are some questions to explore when considering words:

- Who put the word or term out there? In what context did the word originate? What was the motivation and intention behind using that word?
- How has the term been used? Who has used it? If it's been used to describe a group of people, how do those people feel about that word? Do they use that word to describe themselves? How do they feel about other people using that word?
- How accurate is the word?
- Whose experience is centralized by using a term and whose experience is diminished?
- What is the relationship of institutionalized power to the word and who has been harmed by it?

I know you might be thinking: *These are a lot of dense questions to consider about words, and if I considered all of these, I'd be rendered speechless.* I hear you. However, white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy have shaped our language; the words we use reveal and create the way we think. If we want to think differently, and create a different reality, we need to examine and change our language.

Language helps us clarify problems and point at the people and systems that are responsible for suffering. And language is a means through which we can imagine and create alternatives to our current reality. Word choice broadens our imagination. Let's be intentional about our language, and let's use language that creates liberated minds, bodies, hearts, and communities. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said: Language does not just describe reality. Language creates the reality it describes.

More Words to Eliminate

While we're examining problematic words that are commonly used in education, here are some more that should be removed from our vocabulary because they are inaccurate and dehumanizing: *disadvantaged kids*, *underachieving students*, *crime-ridden*, *ghetto*, *broken homes*, *drug-infested*, *juvenile delinquent*, and *drop-outs*.

These are all terms that have been slapped onto black and brown communities and that have perpetuated their representation as places of problems and as people who are fundamentally flawed. Labeling people or communities with these terms narrows our perceptions, reduces people to problems, and perpetuates systemic oppression. If you use these terms and you're not sure what's wrong with them, I encourage you to do some research (google: *What's wrong with using "ghetto"*) and talk to others to understand why they're problematic and to learn alternatives.

Let's also stop using "minorities" when talking about people of color. The term *minority* implies being not-white, which then centers whiteness as the norm. It's also an inaccurate term. People of color are the global majority, and according to census projections, by 2043, the majority of people in the United States will be people of color. White people are already less than 50 percent of the population in California and Texas (just as they were two hundred years ago, before these regions were colonized). *Minority* is imprecise and diminishing to people of the global majority—and I do like the term *global majority*. It's accurate and empowering. One last suggestion: There's a difference between saying, "People who live in poverty," and "poor people." The first describes conditions; the second describes people. Use the phrase *people who live in poverty*.

While we're talking about how to name people, there are some other terms to eliminate. Describing human beings as "illegal" is inaccurate and hurtful; it's also used by those arguing for xenophobic and racist immigration policies. *Actions* can be illegal—*people* are not illegal. In its place, use *undocumented immigrants*. Finally, "Hispanic" is an inaccurate term in the way it's usually used. *Hispanic* refers to people who speak Spanish and/or are descended from Spanish-speaking populations. *Latino*, *Latina*, and the gender-neutral term *Latinx* refer to people who are from or who descended from people from Latin America.

In education, we regularly use words that originate in an economic system (capitalism) whose goal it is to amass wealth and extract profit at any expense, a system that originated in mass exploitation and systematic violence. Words such as *asset*, *value-add*, *investment*, and *accountability*—all frequently used in schools—derive from capitalist economics. When we talk about *using* or *managing* people, we're engaging a transactional mindset, viewing people as objects and resources. Our intent may not be to think about people as objects, but subconsciously we reinforce that concept. We also use a lot of militarized language when talking about schools and education such as: *in the trenches*, *soldiering on*, *plan of attack*, *first line of defense*, *go to battle for*, *stand in the line of fire*, and *on the frontlines*. Schools are not armies; children are not soldiers. Language like this is also dangerous and objectifying.

Finally, a word used with astounding frequency and harm is *dark* when associated with something confusing, dangerous, upsetting, troubling, or anything negative, as in: “That was a dark period in my life,” or “This movie uses dark humor.” This is often used in contrast to “light,” which is used to describe hope, clarity, healing, purity, and so on. A study was done through UC Berkeley of 11 million words that most people use over their lifetime. Some 40–50 percent of the time, they found that the word *black* was used to mean something negative (powell, 2015). While perhaps we’ve reduced how often we use the word *black* to mean something dangerous, illicit, or inferior (as in: “She was in a black mood: “He’s the black sheep of the family”; and “I bought that on the black market”), we still use the word *dark* for the same purpose. Using language like this perpetuates negative associations of dark-skinned people. And no, there’s nothing wrong with darkness per se—it is beautiful and mysterious—but *we don’t talk about darkness in that way*. We use the word *dark* to mean danger. Then we’re surprised that we’ve internalized so much unconscious bias about dark skinned people. Let’s stop using it.

There are so many words that I feel irresponsible for not naming that need to be eliminated from our vocabulary including *lame*, *gypped*, *fag*, *thugs*, *gangbangers*, *delinquents*, *inner city*, and *retarded*. Words have created tremendous suffering in our world. It’s time we scrutinize and scrub our language of the violence of oppression. It’s time we begin using and teaching language of liberation. (And again, if you’re not sure what’s wrong with using these words, google it).

When white Americans frankly peel back the layers of our commingled pasts, we are all marked by it. We . . . are marred either by our connections to the specific crimes and injuries of our fathers and their fathers. Or we are tainted by the failures of our fathers to fulfill their national credos when their courage was most needed. We are formed in molds twisted by the gifts we received at the expense of others. It is not our “fault.” But it is undeniably our inheritance.

—Douglas A. Blackmon, 2008, pp. 394–395

It’s Time to Take Action

Racism has hurt and dehumanized everyone. People of color have opportunities limited by barriers, and our experiences and identities are marginalized. White people have also suffered from being a part of a racist system. In being grouped as “white” (and in identifying themselves as “white”), many white people have lost a connection to their ethnic group and may not know much about their cultural backgrounds and histories. Their identity is based on not being something—not

being black, not being a person of color—and being superior to others because of their race. This has created a great deal of unconscious identity insecurity and confusion. Furthermore, white people participate in a system in which they gain advantages that, as individuals, they may not have earned—this can generate feelings of guilt and shame. I believe that many white people recognize the damage done to their integrity and morality by participating in and benefiting from white supremacy. They recognize that they cannot be whole until the injustices of the past and present are reckoned with and until they no longer reap unearned privileges as a result of the classification systems of past and present white supremacists.

Learning about racism allows us to see the false mental models that underlie our daily actions. White supremacy has maintained its power by integrating itself into the fabric of our culture, into our hearts and minds, and into all institutions, and by doing so, it has become invisible. White supremacy feels normal; we experience it as the “natural” way of things. In order to dismantle systems of oppression, including white supremacy, we need to see those systems for what they are—to see what they’re made of and how they are made, and to see that they are constructed by people. Patriarchy is a construct. Heterosexuality is a construct. These are constructs to which people have attached meaning and values, but each of these are ideas. Things that have been constructed can be deconstructed. In learning about racism and how it was constructed, we’ll see how we’ve all been hurt and how we’ve harmed others, and we’ll see how we can transform our minds, relationships, schools, and world.

Finally, learning about racism is healing, and healing can lead to liberation. In order to heal, you must recognize the wounds in yourself—the ways in which you’ve been hurt by racism and white supremacy, and the ways you’ve hurt others. As you unlearn stereotyped racial messages you’ve internalized about yourself and others, you’ll step deeper into a healing process. Learning about racism is a learning journey that will never end—there will always be more layers to understand and explore. And it will be painful. But it will be worth it.

A Note for White People

People of color are often leaned on to explain race and racism—and sometimes we’re willing to do just that (often we have to), and sometimes it gets very tiring. Fortunately, there are an increasing number of excellent resources available to help you learn about race, racism, and white supremacy (see Appendix F: Resources for Further Learning for my recommendations). Know that people of color appreciate that you are learning, and also know that we’re not going to give you awards for

doing so. Do this learning for your own healing and liberation, for your community and your children, and for the global majority.

I imagine this chapter might have been hard to read. I hope you will now take a break from reading to tend to your body, heart, mind, and spirit. How could you replenish the reserves of energy that it took to read this chapter? What helps you reconnect with your courage? With joy? With hope? Who could you reach out to and talk to and be with?

A Note for People of Color

This chapter was hard for me to write. I experienced intense waves of rage and grief as I worked on it. I imagine it might have been hard to read. I hope that you will now take a break from reading to tend to your body, heart, mind, and spirit. How could you replenish the reserves of energy that it took to read this chapter? What helps you reconnect with your sense of power? With joy? With hope? Who could you reach out to and talk to and be with? How might you tap into the strength of your ancestors?

If we were sitting next to each other right now, know that I'd reach over and hold your hand. I wouldn't say anything, I wouldn't make eye contact. I'd just hold your hand and think: *I'm here with you. I'm here with you in this storm of emotion.* And in that moment, that would be what I could offer. My presence. For whatever it's worth: I'm here with you.

Before You Go . . .

Read the following prompts and select two or three that feel most valuable to you based on where you are in your learning journey. Spend meaningful time considering your reflection before moving on.

REFLECT ON THIS CHAPTER

- Which emotions were most present for you in this chapter? How did you engage with those feelings?
- At which points in this chapter did you experience cognitive dissonance (a conflict between what you hold to be true and new information)?
- How do you think your identity markers (including your race) affected how you read this chapter? What do you think it was like for someone of a different race to read this chapter?

TO DO

How could you start, continue, or deepen your learning about white supremacy and racism today? What could you read or do next (see Appendix F: Resources for Further Learning) to continue this learning? How might you determine what you need to learn more about? What learning are you avoiding? What learning might provide healing? Who could be a thought partner or critical friend for you as you make these decisions about what to learn next?

Principles of Transformational Coaching

- Compassion
- Curiosity
- Connection
- **Courage**
- Purpose

Courage: We draw on deep sources of courage, and face our fears, and act with courage every day. We don't wait until we know everything, or have every detail worked out to do something. We take action and course-correct when necessary. We act with healthy urgency. We know that just as people created inequitable systems and just as we have adopted the mindsets from those systems, people can create new systems and can adopt new mindsets. This gives us the energy to take risks.

If you haven't read *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates, it's a must-read. In it, Coates writes:

It does not matter that the "intentions" of individual educators were noble. Forget about intentions. What any institution, or its agents, "intend" for you is secondary. Our world is physical . . . A great number of educators spoke of "personal responsibility" in a country authored and sustained by a criminal irresponsibility. The point of this language of "intention" and "personal responsibility" is broad exoneration. Mistakes were made. Bodies were broken. People were enslaved. We meant well. We tried our best. "Good intention" is a hall pass through history, a sleeping pill that ensures the Dream.

Read that passage again. And again.
Now answer these questions:

- What kind of courage can you generate within yourself to look at the difference between your intentions and actions?
- How do you suspect your intentions have been received by others?
- When and where might your intentions have inadvertently contributed to harming others?



CHAPTER 4

How to Talk About Race

*If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time,
but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.*

—LILA WATSON, INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN ARTIST,
ACTIVIST AND ACADEMIC

With more background knowledge about race, racism, and white supremacy, we can get back to the conversation I had with Stephanie, the conversation I described in Chapter 2. Remember: Stephanie was a new ninth-grade English teacher, a white woman teaching black and brown students in Oakland, California. It was mid-November, Stephanie was overwhelmed and sad, and her students weren't learning much in her class. Once I tell you what happened, I'll unpack my decision-making, and then I'll share some thoughts about when and how to talk about race.

Let's first re-ground in the phases of Transformational Coaching. In the second phase, we aim to recognize the impact that white supremacy and a lack of cultural competence has on a teacher's or leader's practice, and we aim to guide the client to this recognition as well. We also strive to help our client identify the impact that their lack of knowledge and skill has on their students, as well as on themselves. We want to build their buy-in to change in this phase, and we need to do this without casting blame and judgment, but with helping the client see that their liberation and the liberation of those they serve is interconnected. We want to