

through the chatter with more humor, insight and clarity. No matter the issue, Ijeoma's thinking is always essential reading."

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and co-producer of *Dis/orient/ed Comedy*

"Oluo has created a brilliant and thought-provoking work. Seamlessly connecting deeply moving personal stories with practical solutions, readers will leave with inspiration and tools to help create personal and societal transformations. A necessary read for any white person seriously committed to better understanding race in the United States."

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"Everyone should be paying attention to Ijeoma Oluo."

—*The Root*

"Ijeoma Oluo has emerged as one of Seattle's strongest voices for social justice. . . . Best of all, she gets her message across with incisive wit, remarkable humor and an appropriate magnitude of rage."

—*Seattle magazine*

**So you
want
to talk
about
race**

Ijeoma Oluo



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Seal Press
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
sealpress.com
@SealPress

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition: January 2018

Published by Seal Press, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Seal Press name and logo is a trademark of the Hachette Book Group.

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Print book interior design by Linda Mark.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Oluo, Ijeoma, author.

Title: So you want to talk about race / Ijeoma Oluo.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY: Seal Press, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017041919 (print) | LCCN 2017043938 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781580056786 (e-book) | ISBN 9781580056779 (hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: United States—Race relations. | Intercultural communication. | BISAC: SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / African American Studies. | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Black Studies (Global). |

POLITICAL SCIENCE / Political Freedom & Security / Civil Rights.

Classification: LCC E184.A1 (ebook) | LCC E184.A1 O454 2018 (print) |

DDC

305.800973—dc23

LC record available at [https://lcn.loc.gov/2017041919ISBNs:978-1-58005-677-9\(hardcover\),978-1-58005-678-6\(e-book\)](https://lcn.loc.gov/2017041919ISBNs:978-1-58005-677-9(hardcover),978-1-58005-678-6(e-book))

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Is it really about race?

“I MEAN, I JUST FEEL LIKE WE WOULD HAVE GOTTEN further if we’d focused more on class than race.”

I’m sitting across from a friend at a coffee shop near my house. He’s a good friend—a smart, thoughtful, and well-meaning person. I always enjoy his company and a chance to talk with someone who is also interested in world events. But I’m tired. I’m tired because this is the conversation I’ve been having since the 2016 election ended and liberals and progressives have been scrambling to figure out what went wrong. What was missing from the left’s message that left so many people unenthusiastic about supporting a Democratic candidate, especially against Donald Trump? So far, a large group of people (mostly white men paid to pontificate on politics and current events) seem to have landed on this: we, the broad and varied group of Democrats, Socialists, and Independents known as “the left,” focused on “identity pol-

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itics” too much. We focused on the needs of black people, trans people, women, Latinx people. All this specialized focus divided people and left out working-class white men. That is the argument, anyways.

It’s what I and many others have heard throughout the very long presidential campaign; it’s what I heard last campaign and the one before that. It’s what every other white dude in my political science classes in college had to say.

And although I’m tired, because I have just had this conversation with multiple people for multiple hours the evening before, here I am having it again, hearing what I’ve always heard: the problem in American society is not race, it’s class.

“Surely, if you improve things for the lower classes, you improve things for minorities,” he adds, seeing the disappointment and weariness on my face. But I’m going to go ahead and engage in this conversation, because if I can just make some progress with one well-meaning white dude about why class will never be interchangeable with race, I’ll feel a little better about our social justice movements.

“If you could do that—if you could improve things for the lower classes—it would,” I say, “But how?”

When he then recites the standard recommendations of strengthening unions and raising minimum wages I decide to jump to the point: “Why do you think black people are poor? Do you think it’s for the same reasons that white people are?”

This is where the conversation pauses. This is where I see my friend first look at me puzzled and then try to come up with ways to push back. I continue on, since I’ve already gone this far.

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“I live in a world where if I have a ‘black sounding’ name, I’m less likely to even be called for a job interview. Will I equally benefit from raising minimum wages when I can’t even get a job?”

My friend recalls that study, acknowledging that the discrimination I’m referencing is indeed a real thing that happens.

“If I do get a good job and do what society says I should do and save up and buy a house—will I benefit equally when the fact that I live in a ‘black neighborhood’ means that my house will be worth far less? Will I benefit equally when I’m much more likely to get higher mortgage rates from my bank, or predatory loans that will skyrocket in cost after a few years causing me to foreclose and lose my home and equity and credit, because of the color of my skin?”

I’m on a coffee-and-frustration–fueled roll now.

“If I am able to get what is considered a decent wage for the ‘average’ American, but my son is locked up in jail like one in three black men are predicted to be, so I’m raising my grandkids on my meager salary, will stronger unions really raise me out of poverty?”

“If I’m more likely to be suspended and expelled from school, because even since preschool my teachers are more likely to see my childhood antics as violence and aggression, will a reduction in student loan costs help me when I was pushed out of education before completing high school?”

I’m ranting now, I’m talking fast to get it all out. Not because I’m angry, because I’m not, really. I know it’s not my friend’s fault that what he’s saying is the prevailing narrative, and that it’s seen as the compassionate narrative.

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But it’s a narrative that hurts me, and so many other people of color.

My friend pauses and says, “Well, what are we supposed to do then? Nothing? Can’t we focus on this first to get everybody behind it and then address the race stuff?”

To which I sigh and say, “That’s the promise that’s been made to us for hundreds of years. Those are the words of every labor movement that managed to help white America so much more than everyone else. Those are the words that ‘move everybody forward’ but in the exact same place, with the exact same hierarchy, and the exact same oppressions. Those words are why the wealth gap between whites and blacks is just as bad as it was when Dr. King was leading marches. We’re still waiting. We’re still hoping. We’re still left behind.”

RACE AS WE KNOW IT IN THE US IS CLOSELY INTEGRATED with our economic system. The system of racism functioned primarily as a justification for the barbaric act of chattel slavery and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. You cannot put chains around the necks of other human beings or slaughter them wholesale, while maintaining social rules that prohibit such treatment, without first designating those people as somewhat less than human. And later, the function of racism was somewhat repurposed as a way of dividing lower classes, still with the ultimate goal of the economic and political supremacy of white elites.

Yes, like many say, race is a social construct—it has no bearing in science. Many believe that because race was created by our economic system—because it is a lie told to justify a

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crime—a unilateral improvement of conditions for lower classes would address the economic and social disparities around race. Money is also a social construct—a series of rules and agreements we all made up while pretending that these pieces of paper are worth our entire lives. But we cannot simply stop thinking of money and it will cease to enthrall us. It has woven its way into every part of our lives. It has shaped our past and our futures. It has become alive.

Race has also become alive. Race was not only created to justify a racially exploitative economic system, it was invented to lock people of color into the bottom of it. Racism in America exists to exclude people of color from opportunity and progress so that there is more profit for others deemed superior. This profit itself is the greater promise for nonracialized people—*you will get more because they exist to get less*. That promise is durable, and unless attacked directly, it will outlive any attempts to address class as a whole.

This promise—*you will get more because they exist to get less*—is woven throughout our entire society. Our politics, our education system, our infrastructure—anywhere there is a finite amount of power, influence, visibility, wealth, or opportunity. Anywhere in which someone might miss out. Anywhere there might not be enough. There the lure of that promise sustains racism.

White Supremacy is this nation's oldest pyramid scheme. Even those who have lost everything to the scheme are still hanging in there, waiting for their turn to cash out.

Even the election of our first black president did not lessen the lure of this promise to draw people to their support of racism. If anything, the election strengthened it. His election

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was a clear, undeniable sign that some black people could get more, and then what about everyone else's share? Those who had always blatantly or subconsciously depended on that promise, that they would get more because others would get less, were threatened in ways that they could not put words to. But suddenly, this didn't feel like "their country" anymore. Suddenly, they didn't feel like "their needs" were being met.

But aside from that one, mostly symbolic, change of the race of our president, not much else had changed. The promise of racism has still held true: in just about every demographic of socio-political-economic well-being, black and brown people are consistently getting less.

We, people of color, of course are not the only people who have gotten less. Even without the invention of race, class would still exist and does exist even in racially homogenous countries. And our class system is oppressive and violent and harms a lot of people of all races. It should be addressed. It should be torn down. But the same hammer won't tear down all of the walls. What keeps a poor child in Appalachia poor is not what keeps a poor child in Chicago poor—even if from a distance, the outcomes look the same. And what keeps an able-bodied black woman poor is not what keeps a disabled white man poor, even if the outcomes look the same.

Even in our class and labor movements, the promise that you will get more because others exist to get less, calls to people. It tells you to focus on the majority first. It tells you that the grievances of people of color, or disabled people, or transgender people, or women are divisive. The promise that keeps racism alive tells you that you will benefit most and others will

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eventually benefit . . . a little. It has you believing in trickle-down social justice.

Yes, it is about class—and about gender and sexuality and ability. And it's also, almost always, about race.

Talk about race is inevitable in today's society, but it often doesn't seem to get much farther than an argument about whether or not something is about race. Talk about race can feel like a horribly depressing rendition of "who's on first?" While some argue that these issues of racism must be addressed, others argue that these issues are not race issues, and after much frustration trying to determine whether or not the yet-to-be-had conversation is indeed about race, somebody gives up and walks away, leaving the original issue untouched.

In the day-to-day, determining whether or not an issue is about race can be difficult—not only for white people, but for people of color as well. Rarely is there only one factor or viewpoint in a serious issue. Things are never cut-and-dry. And because we have come up in a society where talking about race is just not something you "do" in polite company, we don't have a lot of practice in putting words to racial issues. But it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about race when we can't even agree that something is about race. And we have to start somewhere. If you are looking for a simple way to determine if something is about race, here are some basic rules. And when I say basic, I mean basic.

1. It is about race if a person of color thinks it is about race.
2. It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of color.

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3. It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of color.

Now, looking at this short list, it's easy to think—hey, that is far too broad, almost *anything* can fall under those categories! And it's true, almost anything can fall under these categories. Why? Because race impacts almost every aspect of our lives. Let's look a little deeper.

It is about race if a person of color thinks it's about race. This may sound at first like I'm asking you to just take every person of color's word for it, as if they are infallible and incapable of lying or misinterpreting a situation. But the truth is, whether or not someone is fallible is beside the point. We are, each and every one of us, a collection of our lived experiences. Our lived experiences shape us, how we interact with the world, and how we live in the world. And our experiences are valid. Because we do not experience the world with only part of ourselves, we cannot leave our racial identity at the door. And so, if a person of color says that something is about race, it is—because regardless of the details, regardless of whether or not you can connect the dots from the outside, their racial identity is a part of them and it is interacting with the situation. Note, if you are a white person in this situation, do not think that just because you may not be aware of your racial identity at the time that you did not bring race to your experience of the situation as well. We are all products of a racialized society, and it affects everything we bring to our interactions.

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Something can be about race, and that doesn't mean that it is *only* about race. When I talk about being followed in a store by a white clerk, it is about race, because regardless of the clerk's intention I'm bringing with me my entire history of a black woman who is routinely followed around by staff or security when I shop in stores. This clerk herself may not be thinking of my race at all when she's following me, she may just be an overeager trainee, or maybe she suspects everybody of stealing and follows all customers regardless of race. But she, for her possibly innocent intentions, is also bringing her white identity into the interaction, as someone who is not regularly followed by store personnel and therefore would be unaware of the impact it would have on me to, once again, be followed around a store by a white clerk. She too is making it about race whether she knows it or not. But while this issue is about race and the racial aspects should be addressed, it's also about training—as aggressively following customers of any race is bad business. It can be about all of these things, and it is.

It is about race if it disproportionately or differently affects people of color. Often, when talking about issues of race I will receive messages from white people stating that what I'm talking about is not about race because they, a white person, too suffer from said issue. Poverty cannot be about race if there are poor white people. Incarceration cannot be about race if there are incarcerated white people, and so on. Many white people who themselves often suffer from the same hardships that many people of color suffer from feel erased by discussions of racial oppression.

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In contrast, I'll also often hear from white people (often the very same white people) about successful black people that obviously debunk the theory that hardships are race-based. How can poverty be about race if Oprah exists? How can there be lack of representation in the entertainment industry when Beyoncé wins all the awards? Setting aside the fact that the racial exceptionalism of people of color does not detract from, but instead adds to, arguments of racial inequality (because honestly, we don't have to name a few successful white people to argue that they are doing comparatively well in society—there are enough that they don't even stand out), these arguments are a pretty extreme oversimplification of how racial oppression works.

Racial oppression is a broad and cumulative force, it is not a system that puts all its eggs in one basket. And racial oppression will interact with many other privileges and disadvantages to produce a myriad of effects. So yes, you can have a black athlete who won the genetic lottery and combined it with a superhuman amount of dedication and then sprinkle him with a lot of luck and he will turn into a professional superstar earning tens of millions of dollars a year. And yes, you can have a white man born to riches who loses everything he has in the stock market and winds up living in the streets. And you can have a beautiful white woman born with disabilities that set her at a distinct socioeconomic disadvantage, and an able-bodied black woman who was able to claw her way to middle-class comfort, but when it's all tallied up the end result will still show, more often than not, measurably different outcomes for people depending on race. There are very few hardships out there that hit only people of color and not

white people, but there are a lot of hardships that hit people of color a lot more than white people.

As I said earlier, just because something is about race, doesn't mean it's only about race. This also means that just because something is about race, doesn't mean that white people can't be similarly impacted by it and it doesn't mean that the experience of white people negatively impacted is invalidated by acknowledging that people of color are disproportionately impacted. Disadvantaged white people are not erased by discussions of disadvantages facing people of color, just as brain cancer is not erased by talking about breast cancer. They are two different issues with two different treatments, and they require two different conversations.

It is about race if it fits into a broader pattern of events that disproportionately or differently affect people of color.

When I was in an abusive relationship, it was not just about one incident. It wasn't about the time he called me stupid, or the next time, or the next time. It wasn't about the time he threw our dishes in the trash because he didn't like how I washed them. It wasn't about the time he said he didn't want my friends to come over because he was sure they thought they were better than him. It wasn't about the time that he didn't talk to me for hours because I'd accidentally erased an important message on the answering machine.

Actually, it was about those times, but it wasn't about just one time, it was about all of them. I'd try to talk about it with him, to bring it up. "It's not okay to call me stupid," I'd say. "So I lose my temper once and now I'm abusive?" he'd reply. And before I knew what was happening, I'd be on the

defensive, trying to defend my right to a relationship free of abuse. Trying to say that no, calling a person stupid once did not qualify as abuse, but calling a person stupid a few times a week did. To him, it was just an individual incident, and the next abuse was also an individual incident, to be forgotten as quickly as the words left his mouth. To me, it was a daily onslaught of emotional pain. But whenever I tried to step back and look at the big picture, he'd pull me down to look at a tiny piece: "See this? It's so small. Why would you get upset about this little thing?" I could not address abuse in my relationship because I was too busy defending my right to even call it abuse.

Often, being a person of color in white-dominated society is like being in an abusive relationship with the world. Every day is a new little hurt, a new little dehumanization. We walk around flinching, still in pain from the last hurt and dreading the next. But when we say "this is hurting us," a spotlight is shown on the freshest hurt, the bruise just forming: "Look at how small it is, and I'm sure there is a good reason for it. Why are you making such a big deal about it? Everyone gets hurt from time to time"—while the world ignores that the rest of our bodies are covered in scars. But racial oppression is even harder to see than the abuse of a loved one, because the abuser is not one person, the abuser is the world around you, and the person inflicting pain in an individual instance may themselves have the best of intentions.

Another analogy: imagine if you were walking down the street and every few minutes someone would punch you in the arm. You don't know who will be punching you, and you don't know why. You are hurt and wary and weary. You are

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trying to protect yourself, but you can't get off this street. Then imagine somebody walks by, maybe gesticulating wildly in interesting conversation, and they punch you in the arm on accident. Now imagine that this is the last straw, that this is where you scream. That person may not have meant to punch you in the arm, but the issue for you is still the fact that people keep punching you in the arm.

Regardless of why that last person punched you, there's a pattern that needs to be addressed, and your sore arm is testimony to that. But what often happens instead is that people demand that you prove that each person who punched you in the arm in the past meant to punch you in the arm before they'll acknowledge that too many people are punching you in the arm. The real tragedy is that you get punched in the arm constantly, not that one or two people who accidentally punched you in the arm might be accused of doing it on purpose. They still contributed to the pain that you have endured—a pain bigger than that one punch—and they are responsible for being a part of that, whether they meant to or not. And if you just punched somebody in the arm that would not be the time to talk about how important it is to protect your right to gesticulate wildly, even if sometimes you accidentally punch people. Once you know that your wild gesticulation is harming people (even if you've been raised to believe that it's your god-given right to gesticulate as wildly as your heart desires without any thought of consequences), you can no longer claim it's an accident when somebody gets hit.

As long as race exists and as long as racial oppression exists, race will touch almost every aspect of our lives. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Race is more than just pain and op-

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pression, it's also culture and history. Personally, my blackness is a history of strength, beauty, and creativity that I draw on every day; it is more than the history of the horrors that racism has wrought. My blackness has its own language, its own jokes, its own fashion. My blackness is a community and a family and I'm very grateful for it. Humans are resilient and creative beings, and out of a social construct created to brutalize and oppress, we've managed to create a lot of beauty. We can fight racial oppression while still acknowledging and appreciating that.

While just about everything can be about race, almost nothing is completely about race. It is important that we are aware of the different factors in any situation of oppression or conflict (please see the chapter on intersectionality for more very important discussion on this). A lot of people feel like acknowledging race in a problem will make that problem only about race, and that will leave a lot of people out. But race was designed to be interwoven into our social, political, and economic systems. Instead of trying to isolate or ignore race, we need to look at race as a piece of the machine, just as we'd look at class or geography when considering social issues. Race alone is not all you need to focus on, but without it, any solution you come up with just won't work. We live in a complex world, and when looking at socioeconomic problems in our society, we simply cannot come to a viable solution without factoring in race.

We like to filter new information through our own experiences to see if it computes. If it matches up with what we have experienced, it's valid. If it doesn't match up, it's not. But race is not a universal experience. If you are white, there

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is a good chance you may have been poor at some point in your life, you may have been sick, you may have been discriminated against for being fat or being disabled or being short or being conventionally unattractive, you may have been many things—but you have not been a person of color. So, when a person of color comes to you and says “this is different for me because I’m not white,” when you run the situation through your own lived experience, it often won’t compute. This is usually where the desire to dismiss claims of racial oppression come from—it just doesn’t make sense to you so it cannot be right.

But if you are white, and you are feeling this way, I ask you this: is your lived experience real? Are the situations you’ve lived through real? Are your interpretations of those situations valid? Chances are, if you are using them to decide whether or not other situations and opinions are valid, you think they are. So if your lived experience and your interpretation of that lived experience are valid, why wouldn’t the lived experience of people of color be just as valid? If I don’t have the right to deem your life, what you see and hear and feel, a lie, why do you have the right to do it to me? Why do you deserve to be believed and people of color don’t?

And if you are a person of color, know this: the world will try to tell you that what you are seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling is wrong. The world will tell you that you do not know how to interpret what is happening to you and to your community. But you are not wrong, and you have just as much right to be heard and believed as anybody else. If you think it’s about race, you are right.

| two |

What is racism?

IT WAS AN ARGUMENT WITH A COWORKER THAT STARTED where many arguments with coworkers start nowadays, on the Internet. This coworker had posted a meme about how poor people should be given drug tests if they want to get welfare benefits. You know the kind of post I’m talking about, one that sends a message like “If I need a drug test to get a hardworking job, you should have one to get the free stuff my hardworking tax dollars are paying for.”

I’ve seen these memes countless times and they are never anything less than a gut punch to me. I pointed out that as someone who had grown up on welfare and was subjected to this attitude her entire childhood, this sort of stigmatization really hurts poor people who are just trying to survive. Poor people shouldn’t have to prove how much they deserve to have a roof over their heads and feed their children.

There are a few ways to react when somebody tells you that your language is unintentionally hurting them. And while I was hoping for a quick apology or maybe just a quick correction, my coworker decided to double down on her claims—and add that she thought that poor people should also be sterilized because “a lot of women take advantage of the system by having more kids to get more money.”

Suddenly it was like I was on a TV talk show circa 1984 talking about Welfare Queens. I honestly didn’t think that people really believed that myth anymore. A myth that was used to dehumanize a generation of welfare recipients. And, as someone who wouldn’t have existed had there been forced sterilization of poor people, I took offense to this comment. In addition, as someone aware of our country’s racist history of forced sterilization of women of color, I knew how dangerous statements like these can be.

The discussion became heated quite quickly as my coworker tried to both state that she had not intended to offend me or my brother (who also worked at the same company and was witnessing this argument online), but maybe I needed to be “less angry,” because this was why people like me got a bad reputation. Note: “people like you” is a good warning that a conversation is about to head into pretty racist territory. Shit got pretty intense (black-on-black crime was even brought up, I believe), and an entire evening was dedicated to an emotionally draining, and ultimately fruitless, conversation.

The next day, I was talking to a friend about the incident. I was still very upset about what had happened the night before. Believe it or not, I, like most people, really do just want to live in peace and not have four-hour-long arguments about

race and poverty on the Internet. And it is always a bit of a gut punch to realize that someone you have been sitting next to for months or even years secretly harbors views that deny your basic humanity as a black woman. No matter how many times it happens, I have yet to get used to it.

“It’s really difficult to realize that you’ve been sitting next to someone capable of racism like that,” I explained over coffee.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ijeoma,” my friend interrupted, literally putting a hand up to stop me from speaking further, “let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, stunned and confused.

“You can’t just go around calling anything racist. Save that word for the big stuff. You know, for Nazis and cross burnings and lynchings. You’re just going to turn people off if you use such inflammatory language.”

I really *really* wanted this to just be a matter of misunderstanding. I really wanted this to be a case where perhaps he just didn’t know how harmful everyday racism is, and once he did, he would change his mind. I tried to explain the real danger of unchecked racism and microaggressions to people of color. But he wasn’t going to hear it. There was “real racism” as he defined it, which was a post-reconstruction era horror type of racism, and there was whatever I was talking about (which he wasn’t comfortable categorizing but he was pretty sure wasn’t that big of a deal)—the day-to-day reminders that I’m less than, that I should just learn to get over or find a more pleasant way to confront. He went on to discuss how his grandma, for example, said some racist things, but she was a kind person and it would be cruel to call a harmless old lady racist and would only make her more

racist. It seemed far more important to him that the white people who were spreading and upholding racism be spared the effects of being called racist, than sparing his black friend the effects of that racism.

No matter what I said, no matter how I described the effects that this sort of racism had on me and other people of color, he was not going to accept me using the word “racist” to describe it.

That was when I learned that this was not a friend I could talk to about this really important part of my life. I couldn’t be my full self around him, and he would never truly have my back. He was not safe. I wasn’t angry, I was heartbroken.

We couldn’t talk about the ways in which race and racism impacted my life, because he was unwilling to even acknowledge the racism that was impacting my life and he was unable to prioritize my safety over his comfort—which meant that we couldn’t talk about me.

PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST TELLING SIGNS THAT WE have problems talking about race in America is the fact that we can’t even agree on what the definition of racism actually is. Look at almost any discussion of race and racism online, and you’ll see an argument pop up over who is racist, who isn’t, and who has the right to claim they are suffering from racism. The most common definitions of racism (in my own summation) are as follows: (1) Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race. Or (2) Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power. While these two definitions

are very close to each other in many ways, the differences between these two definitions of racism drastically change how you look at and address racism in America.

For the purposes of this book, I’m going to use the second definition of racism: a prejudice against someone based on race, when those prejudices are reinforced by systems of power. And this is a definition I recommend you use in your day-to-day life if your goal is to reduce the systemic harm done to people of color by racism in America. Let me explain why.

When we use only the first definition of racism, as any prejudice against someone based on race, we inaccurately reduce issues of race in America to a battle for the hearts and minds of individual racists—instead of seeing racists, racist behaviors, and racial oppression as part of a larger system.

There are a lot of individual, unapologetic racists out there. They’re easy to spot—they’re the people sharing the Obama = monkey memes. They are the people sewing swastikas to their jackets and talking about “White Genocide.” This book is not for them and they are not my primary concern. This book will not tell you how to get unabashed racists to love people of color. I’m not a magician. Furthermore, many of those people have very little real power on their own and tend to stay on the fringes of society. We, as a society, like our racism subtler than that. What special power virulent racists do have can often be thwarted by just staying away from wherever you see “Obama is a Muslim” signs.

What is important is that the impotent hatred of the virulent racist was built and nurtured by a system that has much more insidiously woven a quieter, yet no less violent, version of those same oppressive beliefs into the fabric of our society.

The truth is, you don't even have to "be racist" to be a part of the racist system.

The dude shouting about "black-on-black crime" is reinforced by elected officials coding "problem neighborhoods" and promising to "clean up the streets" that surprisingly always seem to have a lot of brown and black people on them—and end with a lot of black and brown people in handcuffs. Your aunt yelling about "thugs" is echoed in our politicians talking about "super-predators" while building our school-to-prison pipelines that help ensure that the widest path available to black and brown children ends in a jail cell. But a lot of the people voting for stop-and-frisk crime bills or increased security in schools would never dream of blaming racial inequity on "black-on-black crime" or calling a young black man a "thug."

In contrast, a lot of the racists holding "white power" signs aren't even registered to vote. It's the system, and our complacency in that system, that gives racism its power, not individual intent. Without that white supremacist system, we'd just have a bunch of assholes yelling at each other on a pretty even playing field—and may the best yeller win. But there is no even playing field right now. Over four hundred years of systemic oppression have set large groups of racial minorities at a distinct power disadvantage. If I call a white person a cracker, the worst I can do is ruin their day. If a white person thinks I'm a nigger, the worst they can do is get me fired, arrested, or even killed in a system that thinks the same—and has the resources to act on it.

Looking beyond the differences in impact of these two definitions of racism, how we define racism also determines

how we battle it. If we have cancer and it makes us vomit, we can commit to battling nausea and say we're fighting for our lives, even though the tumor will likely still kill us. When we look at racism simply as "any racial prejudice," we are entered into a battle to win over the hearts and minds of everyone we encounter—fighting only the symptoms of the cancerous system, not the cancer itself. This is not only an impossible task, it's a pretty useless one.

Getting my neighbor to love people of color might make it easier to hang around him, but it won't do anything to combat police brutality, racial income inequality, food deserts, or the prison industrial complex.

Further, this approach puts the onus on me, the person being discriminated against, to prove my humanity and worthiness of equality to those who think I'm less than. But so much of what we think and feel about people of other races is dictated by our system, and not our hearts. Who we see as successful, who has access to that success, who we see as scary, what traits we value in society, who we see as "smart" and "beautiful"—these perceptions are determined by our proximity to the cultural values of the majority in power, the economic system of those in power, the education system of those in power, the media outlets of those in power—I could go on, but at no point will you find me laying blame at the feet of one misguided or even hateful white person, saying, "and this is Steve's fault—core beliefs about black people are all determined by Steve over there who just decided he hates black people all on his own." Steve is interacting with the system in the way in which it's designed, and the end result is racial bigotry that supports the continued oppression of people

of color. Systemic racism is a machine that runs whether we pull the levers or not, and by just letting it be, we are responsible for what it produces. We have to actually dismantle the machine if we want to make change.

So a good question to ask yourself right now is: why are you here? Did you pick up this book with the ultimate goal of getting people to be nicer to each other? Did you pick up this book with the goal of making more friends of different races? Or did you pick up this book with the goal of helping fight a system of oppression that is literally killing people of color? Because if you insist on holding to a definition of racism that reduces itself to “any time somebody is mean to somebody of a different race” then this is not the book to accomplish your goals. And those are real and noble goals when we call them what they are—we really should be more kind to each other. But when I look at what is putting me and millions of other people of color at risk, a lack of niceness from white people toward me and people who look like me is very far down the list of priorities.

However, if you came with the second intention—to fight the systemic oppression that is harming the lives of millions of people of color—then you are who I have written this book for. But either way, I encourage you to keep reading, because understanding the truth about racism in America might help you make more friends of different races, too—and they have a better chance of being *real* friends who will feel safe with you.

If you are not yet convinced that the definition of racism as racial prejudice backed by systems of power is the one to go with, I’m fairly confident that the rest of the chapters in this

book will do the trick. When reading the subsequent chapters, remember that the concepts and issues discussed in the book were not born from the ether, nor are these racial oppressions the work of a bunch of random white people waking up each morning and saying to themselves, “Today I will do what I can to oppress a person of color” coalescing into the creation of a society with racial disparities of socioeconomic well-being so large and entrenched that they trap multiple generations in the same expectations of success or failure. We live in a society where race is one of the biggest indicators of your success in life. There are sizable racial divides in wealth, health, life expectancy, infant mortality, incarceration rates, and so much more. We cannot look at a society where racial inequity is so universal and longstanding and say, “This is all the doing of a few individuals with hate in their hearts.” It just doesn’t make sense.

We cannot fix these systemic issues on a purely emotional basis. We must see the whole picture. How do you fix the school-to-prison pipeline on an emotional basis? How do you fix an economic system that values the work done traditionally by white males over that done by women and people of color on an emotional basis? How do you change an education system tailored almost exclusively to the experiences, history, and goals of white families on an emotional basis? How do you address an overwhelmingly white system of government on an emotional basis? We can get every person in America to feel nothing but love for people of color in their hearts, and if our systems aren’t acknowledged and changed, it will bring negligible benefit to the lives of people of color.

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Furthermore, ignoring the factor of institutional support of racial bias as a component of racism means that we erase the real harm done by that institutional support. When we say, “all racial prejudice is equally harmful,” we are denying a large portion of the harm done to people of color and cutting ourselves off from opportunities to repair that harm. But when we acknowledge racism as a part of a system, instead of being limited to our ability to win over racists, we can instead focus on how our actions interact with systemic racism. No, the problem isn’t just that a white person may think black people are lazy and that hurts people’s feelings, it’s that the belief that black people are lazy reinforces and is reinforced by a general dialogue that believes the same, and uses that belief to justify not hiring black people for jobs, denying black people housing, and discriminating against black people in schools.

We have to remember that racism was designed to support an economic and social system for those at the very top. This was never motivated by hatred of people of color, and the goal was never in and of itself simply the subjugation of people of color. The ultimate goal of racism was the profit and comfort of the white race, specifically, of rich white men. The oppression of people of color was an easy way to get this wealth and power, and racism was a good way to justify it. This is not about sentiment beyond the ways in which our sentiment is manipulated to maintain an unjust system of power.

And our emotions, ignorance, fear and hate have been easily manipulated to feed the system of White Supremacy. And we have to address all of this, our emotions, our ignorance, our fear, and our hate—but we cannot ignore the system that

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takes all of that, magnifies it, and uses it to crush the lives and liberty of people of color to enrich the most privileged of white society.

WHILE ALL OF THE ABOVE MAY MAKE SENSE AS YOU ARE reading it now, I understand that it does little to help in conversations where people are entrenched in their definition of racism that does not consider systems of power. So how do you move forward in discussion of race when accusations of “reverse racism” and “racism against whites” start flying?

First off, understand that this is almost always a defensive reaction to feelings of fear, guilt, or confusion. This is an attempt either to move conversation to a place where the person you are talking to is more comfortable, or to end the conversation completely.

Consider restating your intention in engaging in this conversation and ask the person you are talking to to confirm what they are talking about: “I am talking about issues of systemic racism, which is measurably impacting the health, wealth, and safety of millions of people of color. What are you talking about right now?”

Often, if somebody is just trying to use “reverse racism” arguments to shut you down, this is where they will just repeat themselves or claim that you are a hypocrite if you will not shift the conversation instead to the grievances against them that they just decided to bring up. If this happens, it is pretty obvious that you aren’t actually having a conversation and it is probably best to walk away and maybe try again later if productive conversation is actually your goal.

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But if somebody does want a productive conversation and genuinely believes that being called “cracker” is the same as being called “nigger” and feels angry and invalidated by the insistence that both do not meet your definition of racism, they will say so. This is an educational opportunity. This is a great way to let that person know that you do hear them, and that your experiences do not erase theirs because even though their experience is valid, it is a different experience.

A response I’ve used is, “What was said to you wasn’t okay, and should be addressed. But we are talking about two different things. Being called “cracker” hurts, may even be humiliating. But after those feelings fade, what measurable impact will it have on your life? On your ability to walk the streets safely? On your ability to get a job? How often has the word “cracker” been used to deny you services? What measurable impact has this word had on the lives of white Americans in general?”

In all honesty, from my personal experience, you are still not likely to get very far in that conversation, not right away. But it gives people something to think about. These conversations, even if they seem fruitless at first, can plant a seed to greater understanding.

If you want to further understanding of systemic racism even more among the people you interact with, you can try to link to the systemic effects of racism whenever you talk about racism. Instead of posting on Facebook: “This teacher shouted a racial slur at a Hispanic kid and should be fired!” you can say all that, and then add, “This behavior is linked to the increased suspension, expulsion, and detention of Hispanic youth in our schools and sets an example of behavior

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for the children witnessing this teacher’s racism that will influence the way these children are treated by their peers, and how they are treated as adults.” I do this often when I’m talking about racism, and pretty regularly somebody will comment with something like, “That’s an aspect of this situation I hadn’t considered, thank you.”

If you hear someone at the water cooler say, “black people are always late,” you can definitely say, “Hey, that’s racist” but you can also add, “and it contributes to false beliefs about black workers that keeps them from even being interviewed for jobs, while white workers can be late or on time, but will always be judged individually with no risk of damaging job prospects for other white people seeking employment.” That also makes it less likely that someone will brush you off saying “Hey, it’s not that big of a deal, don’t be so sensitive.”

Tying racism to its systemic causes and effects will help others see the important difference between systemic racism, and anti-white bigotry. In addition, the more practice you have at tying individual racism to the system that gives it power, the more you will be able to see all the ways in which you can make a difference. Yes, you can demand that the teacher shouting racial slurs at Hispanic kids should be fired, but you can also ask what that school’s suspension rate for Hispanic kids is, ask how many teachers of color they have on staff, and ask that their policies be reviewed and reformed. Yes, you can definitely report your racist coworker to HR, but you can also ask your company management what processes they have in place to minimize racial bias in their hiring process, you can ask for more diversity in management and cultural sensitivity training for staff, and you can ask what

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procedures they have in place to handle allegations of racial discrimination.

When we look at racism as a system, it becomes much larger and more complicated than it seemed before—but there is also more opportunity to address the various parts of it. And that is what the rest of this book attempts to at least begin to do, chapter by chapter. So now that we know what racism is, let's get to work.

| three |

What if I talk about race wrong?

WHEN MY WHITE MOTHER GAVE BIRTH TO ME, AND later my brother, in Denton, Texas, she became the subject of a lot of racial commentary in her conservative southern community. But surprisingly, my mother and I had our first really substantive conversation about race late in my life, when I was thirty-four years old. I was well into my career in writing about culture and social justice and my opinions and identity around race were pretty well documented by then. But the truth is, like many families, our conversations growing up mostly revolved around homework, TV shows, and chores.

While I was growing up, my mother had given the obligatory speeches that all parents of black children must give: don't challenge cops, don't be surprised if you are followed at stores, some people will be mean to you because of your beautiful brown skin, no you can't have the same hairstyle as

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your friends because your hair doesn't do that. But those conversations were one-offs that ceased to be necessary once we were old enough to see the reality of race for ourselves.

Having a white mother, my siblings and I likely had even fewer conversations about race than black children raised by black parents, because there was a lot about our lives that our mother's whiteness made it hard for her to see. My mother loved our blackness as much as was possible for any nonblack person to do, she loved our brown skin, our kinky hair, our full lips, our culture, and our history. She thought we were beauty incarnate.

Our mom never thought that our blackness would hold us back in life—she thought we could rule the world. But that optimism and starry-eyed love was, in fact, born from her whiteness. It was almost impossible for her to see all of the everyday hurdles we had to jump, the tiny cuts of racism that we endured throughout our lives. For our mom, we were black and beautiful and smart and talented and kind—and that's all that mattered. And in the confines of our home, it *was* all that mattered. But as we left home, and our mom began to see us interact as adults with the real world, she began to suspect that there was more to being black in this world than she had previously thought. I could tell that this made my mom uncomfortable, to know that the babies that she had birthed from her own body had entire universes she couldn't see, so the more that my world and my career became focused on race, the less my mom acknowledged it. She just really didn't know what to say.

It was in this context that I received a voicemail from her one evening in 2015. It had the same unnecessary enthusiasm

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that all my mom's voicemails seem to have, but the topic was definitely new.

"Ijeoma, call me. I've had an epiphany. About race. It's important."

I talk about race for a living, which means I have had a *lot* of uncomfortable conversations on the topic. Quite often, well-meaning white people will attempt to show me how much they "get it" by launching into racial dialogues filled with assumptions, stereotypes, and microaggressions that they are completely unaware of. I have cringed my way through so many of these discussions that you'd think they would have less effect on me. And while that is in some ways true—these conversations have become a bit easier with time—I was in no way ready to have this conversation with my mom. This is not because my mom means any harm or is in any way a worse offender than those who approach me after speaking engagements or readings (she's not), it's just—she's my *mom* and nobody likes to discuss race with their mom.

Here's the thing about my mom, my mom is the kindest, most generous person I've ever known. And she is a wonderful mother and grandmother, beloved by just about all who meet her. But she's also exhausting. My mother does not think before she speaks, nor does she at least take the time to collate her subjects before shouting ten different conversations at you (she refused to get hearing aids for a very long time, so when I say "shouting" I mean shouting). My mom is at times a nonsensical tornado of emotion, enthusiasm, and whimsy. A conversation with her about grocery shopping (which will inevitably wander to a conversation on organic gardening, which will remind her of a joke about potatoes she heard but

cannot remember the punchline for) can utilize all of my patience and conversational skills. I love my mom dearly, but I have been rolling my eyes at her for thirty-six years—I am forever a bratty teenager in her presence.

I was trying to think of anything I'd like to do less than call my white mother to hear her epiphany about race, when she did what all mothers do—she immediately called back, and kept calling, until I picked up the phone.

“Did you get my message?” she asked.

“Yes,” I sighed, “You had an epiphany?”

“OK,” she dove in before I could run away, “So I was telling a joke at work, and it had a black punchline—not like, a punchline *about* black people, but a punchline *for* black people . . .”

This is the part of the conversation where I start cringing. I need you to hear my mom's chipper Kansas accent as she says this.

“ . . . and this coworker of mine, he's black, says, ‘What do you know about being black?’”

This is the part of the conversation where I'm inhaling sharply. I really don't want to know what happens next because I cannot imagine any way that it is good.

“Like, he was challenging me, you know? Probably thinking, ‘this white bitch.’”

At this point I'm regretting the invention of the telephone.

“And I was so mad, I was like, this man doesn't know me. He doesn't know what I went through, he doesn't know that I have three black kids.”

I'm at this point holding the phone a good six inches away from my ear in the hopes that it will make this conversation

less painful. Please tell me she didn't actually say these things to this man.

“But then I realized . . .”

Oh no.

“ . . . that he's probably gone through so much racism in his life, he doesn't know who the good white people are.”

What is she saying? WHAT IS SHE SAYING? HAS SHE NOT READ ANY OF MY WORK? Please let the earth open up and swallow me so I can get out of this conversation.

“And if I were black, I'd probably be really angry all the time, too.”

Aaannnd we've now officially entered the worst conversation in the world. I'm talking with my white mom about race. Why can't we be talking about, I don't know—her sex life, or *my* sex life, or my period, or why I'm an atheist—*anything* but this.

“So now I'm not angry at him anymore. I'm just going to go to him tomorrow and explain that I have three black kids and I understand where he's coming from.”

And here is where I shouted “NOOOOOO!” like in those movie scenes where your buddy is about to open a car door that will so obviously set off a bomb that will kill him.

As uncomfortable as this conversation was, it needed to happen. The initial discussion led to a very long talk about race and identity and the differences between being a white mother who has loved and lived with black people, and *being* an actual black person who experiences the full force of a white supremacist society firsthand. She asked if she at least got black credit for doing my hair for all of those years. I said no. She asked why I didn't identify as “part white” when my

mother, her, was white. I explained that while I had definitely inherited light-skin privilege due to my mixed heritage I did not feel that whiteness was something that any person with brown skin and kinky hair could inherit, because race doesn't care what your parents look like—just look at all the light-skinned slaves sold away from their black mothers by their white fathers. We talked about how to discuss race without placing undue burden on people of color to educate you. We talked about when to not discuss race (say, in the middle of the workday when your black coworker is just trying to get through a day surrounded by white people). We ended the conversation exhausted and emotional, but with a greater understanding of each other.

After this conversation, the way in which my mom interacted with me changed in ways that I was not expecting. She still calls me to talk about work drama, but also this funny movie she saw, and also perhaps her dream of us all building a cabin in the woods together one day. I still roll my eyes like the thirty-something teenager that I am throughout most of our conversations. But my mom has become more fearless in her support of my work, now that she better understands the role she can play. My blackness is no longer a barrier between us, a symbol of my world that she does not have access to and therefore must avoid fully acknowledging. My mom has shifted her focus on race from proving to black people that she is “down” to pressuring fellow white people to do better.

My mom is now an outspoken advocate for racial equality in her union. And now that the awkwardness has passed, and now that my mom and I have a better understanding of

each other, I can talk with her more freely about my life and my work. And while one conversation did not do all of that on its own, it opened up a new way of seeing each other and how we can truly come together as a black daughter and her white mother. So for all its awkwardness, the outcome of that conversation makes me so glad we talked. I'm also glad we talked because I'm pretty sure our conversation stopped my mom from leaving her next conversation with her coworker in tears or being dragged into HR.

NOT ALL OF US ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS on race with white people willing to take the emotional risk of investigating the role they play in upholding racism. Not all of us are lucky enough to leave an office discussion on race with no worse than a snide comment and a slightly bruised ego. These conversations, when done wrong, can do real damage. Friendships can be lost, holidays ruined, jobs placed in jeopardy. For this reason, many people avoid the topic of race altogether and recoil when it's brought into conversation.

But you are reading this book because you realize that we *have* to talk about race. Race is everywhere and racial tension and animosity and pain is in almost everything we see and touch. Ignoring it does not make it go away. There is no shoving the four hundred years' racial oppression and violence toothpaste back in the toothpaste tube.

In fact, it's our desire to ignore race that increases the necessity of its discussion. Because our desire to not talk about race also causes us to ignore race in areas where lack of racial consideration can have real detrimental effects on the lives

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of others—say, in school boards, community programs, and local government. And while it may seem that people of color always need to “put race in everything,” it’s the neglect of the specific needs of people of color, which exist whether you acknowledge them or not, that necessitate it in the first place.

As a black woman, I’d love to not have to talk about race ever again. I do not enjoy it. It is not fun. I dream of writing mystery novels one day. But I have to talk about race, because it is made an issue in the ways in which race is addressed or, more accurately, not addressed. When my employer enforces hairstyles in their dress code that ignore the very specific hairstyle needs of black women (see military restrictions against small braids, for example), then my employer is making race an issue in their attempts to ignore it. When my son’s school only has parent-teacher conferences during school hours, they are making race an issue by ignoring the fact that black and Latinx parents are more likely to work the type of hourly jobs that would cause them to lose much-needed pay, or even risk losing their employment altogether, in order to stay involved in their child’s education. When I take my kids to movies and none of the characters they see look like them, it’s the studio that is making it about race when they decide to make up entire universes in which no brown or black people exist. I just want to go to work, educate my kids, and enjoy a movie.

The truth is, we live in a society where the color of your skin still says a lot about your prognosis for success in life. This is the reality right now, and ignoring race will not change that. We have a real problem of racial inequity and injustice in our society, and we cannot wish it away. We have to tackle this

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problem with real action, and we will not know what needs to be done if we are not willing to talk about it.

So let’s all get a little uncomfortable. If my mom and I can do it, so can you.

YOU’RE GOING TO SCREW THIS UP.

You’re going to screw this up royally. More than once.

I’m sorry, I wish I could say that reading this book would guarantee that you’d never leave a conversation about race feeling like you’ve gotten it all wrong and made everything worse. But I can’t. It’s going to happen.

It’s going to happen, and you should have these conversations anyway.

So now that I’ve thoroughly bummed you out, let’s work on what we can do to lessen the number of times you screw this conversation up, minimize the amount of damage you do, and maximize the benefit to all involved. Here are some basic tips that will increase your chance of conversation success, or at least decrease your chance of conversation disaster:

- 1) **State your intentions.** Do you know why you are having this particular conversation? Do you know why this matters to you? Is there something in particular you are trying to communicate or understand? Figure it out before moving forward and then state what your intentions are, so that the people you are talking with can determine whether this is a conversation they are willing to join. Very often, these

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attempts at conversation fail because two people are entering with two very incompatible agendas and proceed to have two very different conversations, and that doesn't become clear until it blows up in anger and frustration.

- 2) **Remember what your top priority in the conversation is, and don't let your emotions override that.** If your top priority is understanding racism better, or addressing an incident involving race, or righting a wrong caused by racism, don't let the top priority suddenly become avenging your wounded pride if the conversation has you feeling defensive.
- 3) **Do your research.** If you are going to be talking about an issue you are not familiar with, a quick Google search will save everyone involved a lot of time and frustration. If terms or subjects come up that you are not familiar with, you can ask for some clarification if you are in person, but know that if you are a white person talking to a person of color—it is never their job to become your personal Google. If you are online and these topics or terms come up, you can Google faster than it takes to hold up the entire conversation begging people to explain things to you. Even if you are a person of color, making sure you understand more about the topic you are trying to address, beyond your immediate experience with it, will give you more confidence in your conversation and will help you get your point across.
- 4) **Don't make your anti-racism argument oppressive against other groups.** When stressed, when angry,

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when tired, or when threatened, our worst selves can come out. It is fine to be angry, there is a lot about racism to be angry about. And it is fine to express that anger. But it is never okay to battle racism with sexism, transphobia, ableism, or other oppressive language and actions. Don't stoop to that level, and don't allow others to. We must be willing to fight oppression in all of its forms.

- 5) **When you start to feel defensive, stop and ask yourself why.** If you are talking about race and you suddenly feel the need to defend yourself vigorously, stop and ask yourself, "What is being threatened here? What am I thinking that this conversation says about me?" and "Has my top priority shifted to preserving my ego?" If you are too heated to ask yourself these questions, at least try to take a few minutes away to catch your breath and lower your heart rate so that you can. This is something that happens to people of all races, and not only can it stop us from hearing things that need to be said, it can stop us from saying what we really mean to say.
- 6) **Do not tone police.** Do not require that people make their discussions on the racial oppression they face comfortable for you. See chapter 15 for more details.
- 7) **If you are white, watch how many times you say "I" and "me."** Remember, systemic racism is about more than individuals, and it is not about your personal feelings. If you find yourself frequently referring to your feelings and your viewpoint, chances are, you are making this all about you.

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- 8) **Ask yourself: Am I trying to be right, or am I trying to do better?** Conversations on racism should never be about winning. This battle is too important to be so simplified. You are in this to share, and to learn. You are in this to do better and be better. You are not trying to score points, and victory will rarely look like your opponent conceding defeat and vowing to never argue with you again. Because your opponent isn't a person, it's the system of racism that often shows up in the words and actions of other people.
- 9) **Do not force people of color into discussions of race.** People of color live with racism each and every day with no say over when and how it impacts their lives. It is painful and exhausting. When people of color have the rare luxury to choose to not engage in additional dialogue about race, do not deny them that. Even if this discussion is really important to you, you never have a right to demand it. There will be other opportunities.

These tips should help you have more healthy and productive conversations on race and racism. Look through the list and try to recognize where you have had trouble in the past and make a concerted effort to practice the tips that may address where things have gone wrong.

But even with all of your practice, and with the best of your intentions, there will be times where this all goes to shit. There will be times where you truly lose the plot and you aren't sure what has happened, but you do know that you have really messed it up.

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It is important to learn how to fail, to learn how to be wrong in a way that minimizes pain to you and others and maximizes what you can learn from the experience. Here are some tips for when your conversation on race has gone very wrong:

- 1) **Stop trying to jump back in when a conversation is beyond saving.** When things have gone really wrong and everyone is upset, and every additional word feels like a knife in the chest, stop trying to force a resolution. I know that it is very hard to leave an emotional conversation unfinished. It is hard to leave feeling unheard or misunderstood. A resolution can still happen, provided you haven't already burned all the conversational bridges around you, but not right now. It's obvious, by how things have been going, that you are not in a state to find a whole new, productive path for this conversation. Step away, and take some time to calm down. Then think about where things went wrong, and what, if anything, can be done to revisit that conversation later in a productive and healthy way.
- 2) **Apologize.** If you can see where you screwed up, where you made assumptions, where you got overly defensive, where you hurt someone—own up and say sorry. And mean it.
- 3) **Don't write your synopsis of this conversation as "the time you got yelled at."** Remember why you had been in this conversation. Remember what the core issue was. Do not revise it in your mind so that

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race with other white people. Stop pretending that you are exempt from the day-to-day realities of race. Take some of the burden of racism off of people of color. Bring it into your life so that you can dismantle racism in the white spaces of your life that people of color can't even reach. People of color, talk to your people about race. Feel the therapeutic effects of honest and safe conversation about race. Examine and confront your internalized racism. Make space to heal and rejuvenate.

Take care in your conversations, remember that you are dealing with the real hurt of human beings. But be brave in that care, be honest in that care. These conversations will never become easy, but they will become easier. They will never be painless, but they can lessen future pain. They will never be risk-free, but they will always be worth it.

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“IT WAS ONE OF THE MOST DISGUSTING MOMENTS OF my presidency,” George W. Bush declared earnestly to Matt Lauer.¹ Two years after his presidency, during which he started two wars that cost hundreds of thousands of lives and destabilized an entire region of the world, the former president was talking about the moments that had stood out to him. And there, in his list of “the most disgusting moments” was the time that Kanye West said that George W. Bush doesn’t care about black people.

In his book *Decision Points*, Bush talks further about how hurt he was by Kanye’s accusation. It was, in his words, an all-time low of his presidency: “I faced a lot of criticism as president. I didn’t like hearing people claim that I lied about Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction or cut taxes to benefit the rich.

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But the suggestion that I was racist because of the response to Katrina represented an all-time low.”

I remember at the time feeling shocked and a little amused by this. After all the atrocities that George W. Bush saw in his presidency (terror attacks, unjust wars resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths, the largest recession since the great depression, and so much more) having someone insinuate that he was racist was the all-time low. How out-of-touch. How self-centered. I remember thinking that it was yet another sign that the former president was a weird emotional child who was not at all qualified for the presidency (this was, of course, before Donald Trump showed us all what “weird, emotional child not at all qualified for the presidency” really looks like). But I thought of this mostly as a funny aberration.

That was, of course, until I started writing about race.

If you write about race or talk about race, you will quickly realize that GWB’s reaction to the insinuation of racism is disturbingly common. To many white people, it appears, there is absolutely nothing worse than being called a racist, or someone insinuating you might be racist, or someone saying that something you did was racist, or somebody calling somebody you identify with racist. Basically, anytime the label of racist touches you at all, it’s the worst thing to happen to anybody anywhere.

I remember once after sharing an article on Twitter about racism in the US, when a white Canadian tweeted back, “You should move to Canada, we aren’t racist here.” I pointed out that, according to recent news of the reluctance of government officials to fully investigate the murders of dozens of indigenous women, the controversy over “carding” of black

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Canadians by police, and the testimony of my Canadian friends of color—Canada was plenty racist. This white Canadian stranger kept insisting that no, there was no racism in Canada because he had not seen it. When some of my Canadian friends chimed in with helpful links about high-profile incidences of racism and investigations into systemic racism in Canada, the white Canadian continued to insist that they were wrong, and that racism doesn't exist in Canada.

I pointed out the irony of stating that racism doesn't exist, while talking over, belittling, and denying the lived experiences of Canadians of color.

His response was quick: "Are you calling me racist? YOU CUNT."

Mr. Friendly White Canadian then proceeded to harass me on social media for weeks, until his account was suspended. For hours each day he sought out anyone who commented on one of my Tweets, informing them that I was a "reverse-racist" who "hated white people" and "loved calling innocent people racists." After I blocked him on Twitter, he would log on from other accounts he created just to continue the harassment. He did not appear to be, from his Internet history, a professional troll or serial harasser. Something about my insinuation that his actions may be racist had triggered a deep rage inside of him, and he was going to make me pay.

This is perhaps a slightly more extreme example of the racial confrontation formula: a white person does something racially insensitive and harmful, it is pointed out to them, and they go nuclear. People have tried to get me fired from gigs, have tried to organize protests of my public events, have sent

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me threatening emails—all for pointing out how their actions are hurting others.

And I'm not alone. When I asked a group of people of color what they feared most when talking about racism, their number-one concern was retaliation. One friend knows of at least two websites dedicated to smearing her because she called a white woman's language racist. One friend was fired from a job after a Facebook argument in which she said an associate was acting racist. One friend was subject to a months-long campaign to turn her community against her after stating that someone's actions were insensitive to people of color. Countless friends have had emails sent to their employers and educators by white people incensed that someone would insinuate that their actions are racist.

Even when the words "racist" or "racism" are never said—even the slightest implication can shift the entire conversation from "Hey, this hurts people of color" to "DID YOU JUST CALL ME RACIST? I AM NOT RACIST! I AM A GOOD PERSON HOW DARE YOU?"

It's not as if it's easy for people of color to call out racism. When we decide to talk about these things, not only are we having to confront our own feelings of hurt, disappointment, or anger, we know that we are also risking any of the above reactions and more. When we decide to talk about racism, we know that it could indeed end our friendships, our reputations, our careers, and even our lives. The response to our complaints of racism or racial insensitivity are not always met with such violent reactions, but no matter what, it is never a pleasant conversation for people of color to have. I do not know a single person of color who does not broach these

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conversations with a very heavy heart, and they almost always leave with one even heavier.

So why do we talk about racism if it's so risky and so painful?

Because we have no choice. Because not talking about it is killing us. Because for far too long, the burden of racism has always been on us alone. If you are white, and you are reading this and wondering why we bother if these conversations are as bad as I say, think of how bad the alternative—continued, unchecked racism—would have to be in order to get you to risk that much, and you'll know a little more about the reality of life for people of color.

THIS CHAPTER IS FOR WHITE PEOPLE. OF COURSE, NON-white people will read it as well, and I hope that it is informative to most and perhaps validating to others. But I am aiming this chapter at you, the white person who is afraid of being called racist. Who may well be avoiding further investing in the fight for racial justice because you know that one wrong move may have you labeled as a white supremacist. If you see even a little bit of yourself in this, you need to keep reading. If you are convinced that you are past all of that, you should probably still keep reading—because these defensive impulses run deep and may take you by surprise, just when you thought you had gotten past all of your discomfort around race.

Who are you?

You are, at times, kind and mean, generous and selfish, witty and dull. Sometimes you are all of these things at once.

And if you are white in a white supremacist society, you are racist. If you are male in a patriarchy, you are sexist. If you are

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able-bodied, you are ableist. If you are anything above poverty in a capitalist society, you are classist. You can sometimes be all of these things at once.

You do, as Walt Whitman said, contain multitudes.

I know that the above is all that some people need to chuck this book out a window. "Typical," some might say, "Another Social Justice Warrior who thinks all white people are racist." But you've come this far and already invested so much in this process—please, consider sitting with your discomfort for a while longer, and see where this chapter takes you.

We like to think of our character in the same way it is written in our obituaries. We are strong, brave, and loyal. We are funny and creative. We are what we strive to be. While if we sit and reflect, we can provide a more nuanced description of ourselves, in our day-to-day lives our self-esteem reads in synopsis: "Mary was a kind and loving mother. An avid gardener."

But life is a series of moments. And in reality we are both the culmination of those countless moments, and each moment individually in time.

Say you get drunk in a bar and punch a stranger in the face, spend the night in jail, realize that your life has taken a turn for the worse, get treatment, stop drinking, and dedicate your life to anti-violence work. To the person that you punched that night, you may forever be the person who assaulted them. The person who made them scared to go into bars for a while. The person who made them feel violated. To the people you have helped since, you may always be a hero. The person who made them safer in the world.

These are both who you are, they are both valid and do not cancel each other out. If you run into the person you

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punched years later, they may well still be afraid of you, they may react with anger. They will treat you like someone who punched them, because you are. And even if you respond to that anger and fear like someone who abhors violence, because that is also who you are, you have no right to demand that they see you differently.

Why all of this talk about the ways in which we can all be both an abuser and a healer? Because you have been racist, and you have been anti-racist. Yes, you may now be insisting that you do not have a racist bone in your body, but that is simply not true. You have been racist, and will be in the future, even if less so.

You are racist because you were born and bred in a racist, white supremacist society. White Supremacy is, as I've said earlier, insidious by design. The racism required to uphold White Supremacy is woven into every area of our lives. There is no way you can inherit white privilege from birth, learn racist white supremacist history in schools, consume racist and white supremacist movies and films, work in a racist and white supremacist workforce, and vote for racist and white supremacist governments and not be racist.

This does not mean that you have hate in your heart. You may intend to treat everyone equally. But it does mean that you have absorbed some fucked-up shit regarding race, and it will show itself in some fucked-up ways. You may not know why you clutch your purse a little harder when a black man walks by you, but in the moment you do, you are being racist. You may not know why when you see a bad driver on the road and you recognize they are Asian a little voice inside you goes "Aha!" but in that moment, you are being racist. You may not

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know why you are pleasantly surprised that the Latinx person you are talking to is "so articulate" but in that moment, you are being racist.

And that racism informs a lot of your decisions in ways that you are not aware. It informs how you vote, where you spend your money, whom you hire, what books you read, whom you socialize with, what social concerns you will pay attention to. And that racism does real harm to real people, both immediately and systematically. To the person you harmed in that racist moment, you may forever be the person who harmed them, because you did. You may also be other things to them—you may also be a friend, a coworker, or a neighbor. And you can decide that you don't ever want to be a racist to anyone else, and you can work toward that goal, but you cannot tell someone to deny the harm you've done to them.

And that sucks. It sucks to know that to some people you will forever be the person who harmed them. It sucks to know that someone you have harmed in the past may one day read in your obituary "John was a generous and loyal friend to all he met" and disagree. You've tried so hard to be a good person, but your intentions cannot erase the harm that your actions cause.

This is real harm that has been done and you have to accept that if you do not want to continue harming people by denying their lived experiences and denying your responsibility. This does not mean that you have to flog yourself for all eternity. The pain you've caused is real, and if you have a conscience, the recognition of that will likely sting a little whenever you think about it. But everything else you've done, all of the effort you've made to be a better person, that is just as

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valid and deserves equal billing in your obit. Your mistakes or your achievements will never on their own define you. But you can only do better if you are willing to look at your entire self.

All of this is to say that if you have been called racist, or something you have done has been called racist, by a person of color, you cannot simply dismiss it outright—even if that accusation is in direct opposition to all that you try to be. Not if you are truly committed to racial justice.

Now is an opportunity to learn more about yourself, to see yourself and your actions more clearly, so you can move toward the person you truly want to be. The question is: do you want to *look* like a better person, or do you want to *be* a better person? Because those who just want to look like a better person will have great difficulty with the introspection necessary to actually be a better person. In order to do better we must be willing to hold our darkness to the light, we must be willing to shatter our own veneer of “goodness”

So if you’ve been confronted with the possibility of your own racism, and you want to *do the work*, here are some tips:

- **Listen.** First and foremost, if someone is telling you something about yourself and your actions and you feel your hackles raising, take that as a sign that you need to stop and listen. If your blood pressure rose too quickly to really hear what was being said, take a few deep breaths, ask the person to repeat themselves if necessary, and listen again. Don’t add to what the person is saying, don’t jump to conclusions, don’t immediately think “Oh you think I’m a monster now,” just try to actually hear what they are trying to communicate to you.

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- **Set your intentions aside.** Your intentions have little to no impact on the way in which your actions may have harmed others. Do not try to absolve yourself of responsibility with your good intentions.
- **Try to hear the impact of what you have done.** Don’t just hear the action: “You consistently speak over me in work meetings and you do not do that to white people in our meetings.” That is easy to brush off as, “I just didn’t agree with you,” or, “I didn’t mean to, I was just excited about a point I was trying to make. Don’t make a big deal out of nothing.” Try to also hear the impact: “Your bias is invalidating my professional expertise and making me feel singled out and unappreciated in a way which compounds all of the many ways I’m made to feel this way as a woman of color in the workplace.”
- **Remember that you do not have all of the pieces.** You are not living as a person of color. You will never fully understand the impact that sustained, systemic racism has on people of color. You will never be able to fully empathize with the pain your actions may have caused. Nothing will get you there. Do not discount someone’s complaint because their emotions seem foreign to you. You may think that someone is making a mountain out of a molehill, but when it comes to race, actual mountains are indeed made of countless molehills stacked on top of each other. Each one adds to the enormity of the problem of racism.
- **Nobody owes you a debate.** It is very hard on people of color to call out racism. Sometimes, that is the most they can do. And while you may really want to get it all

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sorted out right then and there, understand that when you ask to “talk it out” you are asking for more emotional labor from somebody who is already hurt. It is nice if you get it, and you should be grateful, but it is not owed you. You can still give this serious thought. You can still look deep inside yourself, you can still Google for more insight (remember, it’s highly unlikely that anything you’ve done has not been done before), even if the person who brought this to your attention does not want to engage further.

- **Nobody owes you a relationship.** Even if you’ve recognized where you’ve been racist, worked to make amends, and learned from your mistakes, the person that you harmed does not owe you a relationship of any kind. In a hostile world, people of color have the right to cut off contact with people who have harmed them. They do not have to stick around to see all the progress you’ve made.
- **Remember that you are not the only one hurt.** Yes, it hurts to know that somebody thinks you are being racist. But you were not the first one hurt here—it is the deep hurt of racism that forced this person to confront you. Do not make this about your pain at being called out.
- **If you can see where you have been racist, or if you can see where your actions have caused harm, apologize and mean it.** Think about how you can make amends if possible, and how you can avoid those same harmful actions in the future. If you cannot see where you have been racist, take some more time to seriously consider the issue some more before declaring your actions “not

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racist.” There have been conversations I’ve had about race with white people that ended in absolute denials, only to have that white person come back to me months later to say that they finally realized that their actions were racist and they were sorry for the harm they had caused, not only by their actions, but by their vigorous denial of my experiences.

- **If, after a lot of careful thought, you still do not see your actions as racist and feel strongly that this is simply a misunderstanding, do not then invalidate that person’s hurt.** A true misunderstanding isn’t so just because your intentions were not racist. A true misunderstanding is when your actions do not actually have a racist impact even though somebody thinks they might. If I hit you but do not intend to hit you, that is not a misunderstanding about whether or not I hit you. The situation you are in may be a misunderstanding—it does happen, even if it happens less often than you think. But even if it is, the pain of the person confronting you is real. Do not deny that. Do not call it silly. Explain your viewpoint if you feel it’s necessary, and hope that explanation sheds light that helps that person see the situation the same way that you do, but don’t deny someone’s lived experience. Your goal is to find out if you are being racist, not to prove that you aren’t, and to resolve a painful situation if possible.

This is not an easy process, and it is not at all fun. And at times, it seems never-ending. At times it may seem like no matter what you do, you are doing something wrong. But

you have to try to adjust to the feelings of shame and pain that come from being confronted with your own racism. You have to get over the fear of facing the worst in yourself. You should instead fear unexamined racism. Fear the thought that right now, you could be contributing to the oppression of others and you don't know it. But do not fear those who bring that oppression to light. Do not fear the opportunity to do better.

Talking is great, but what else can I do?

“I’M SURE IF WE COULD JUST TALK ABOUT IT, YOU’D have me all straightened out.”

This was the stubborn insistence from a theater director who had just finished loudly repeating “nigger” to a group of people of color at what had at first been a wonderful dinner discussing an upcoming art project and how we could ensure that it would be inclusive. A lot of painstaking effort had gone into making sure that the people of color (many queer and trans) felt safe in this environment. It is very hard as a person of color to feel comfortable in Seattle, especially in the upper echelons of the local art scene. But we were bringing a different show to this theater, one that focused on voices of color and hoped to bring in a community of color.

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So we had gathered for dinner to talk about how we could accomplish this.

Everything had been going well, until one of the theater directors, a white man, decided after what was likely a few too many drinks to tell a story that he felt required him to say “nigger” loudly and repeatedly, without warning. Each time he said it, people of color at the table flinched as the word hit. It wasn’t just the word “nigger”—we’ve all heard it. It was the fact that it had come after we’d let our guard down, after so much effort to let us know we were safe.

The dinner ended very quickly after that.

Once it was over, the head of the group that was going to be performing let the director know that what had just gone down was unacceptable and that they would not feel comfortable performing unless the staff of the theater underwent racial justice and awareness training to ensure that this would not happen again.

The director looked at me pleadingly. He didn’t need training. He knew a lot of black people. He grew up with black people. He was practically black himself. He just needed to talk. With me. He repeatedly insisted that if I could just sit with him in a bar and talk this out with him, whatever had caused him to drunkenly repeat “nigger” at a dinner table surrounded by people of color would never happen again.

But I did not want to talk with this man, especially not over drinks. I had just been talking with this man, we all had. We had just spent hours talking about racial and social justice, and he still decided to say “nigger.” I wanted this man to take some action for change.

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IF YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE, THERE IS PLENTY OF opportunity. There are countless memes you post, tons of outrage you can share, limitless “thought exercises” you can participate in. But it is easy to get caught up in this talk and think you are doing so much more than just that—talk.

While many people are afraid to talk about race, just as many use talk to hide from what they really fear: action. The more that I write about race, the more I’ve been surrounded by this talk disguised as action. From the white men using my Facebook and Twitter feeds as their own virtue signaling playground, to the white women sending me five-paragraph-long emails letting me know how the racial oppression of people of color makes them feel personally—I’ve seen how addicted people can get to the satisfaction of knowing they are saying all the right things, that they are having “deep conversations”—so addicted that it becomes the end-all and be-all of their racial justice goals.

I write about concepts that I think people are not understanding. I write about pieces of the puzzle that I think people aren’t seeing. I write from perspectives that I think many people don’t get to hear. I do not do this just to increase general knowledge. I do not do this just to make people feel better. I do this in the hopes that what I write and say, and what others write and say, will inform and inspire action.

But so often, that is missed.

Recently I was explaining online and on a local radio station why I will not be participating in a local protest march focusing on women’s issues. I had been asked to speak, and told how very important it was that the event have speakers who were

women of color, especially in a predominantly white area like Seattle. I asked what the commission for speaking was, and was told that speakers were expected to donate their time and services. I declined the invitation.

When I wrote about why I would not be participating in the march, I explained that I could not ignore how much the economic exploitation of women of color had contributed to the racial oppression of women of color. And I did not believe that women of color should be asked to put forth the emotional and mental labor of discussing their racial oppression to a majority white audience for free, especially an event with a large budget like this one. I was very careful in my explanation of why I felt that this ask was problematic, and how important it is for us to not further exploitation and oppression within our movements.

It wasn't long before I got a message in response from a white woman I didn't know. She understood that I didn't want to work for free, but she didn't understand how asking for that work had been exploitative. Could I please take the time to explain to her further, personally (and, I'm assuming, for free), so she could understand?

She is not alone. Countless people read my work about racial justice and instead of taking action, want to shake that Etch A Sketch like it never happened and ask for the same conversation all over again.

I've lost count of the times I've had to end a conversation with someone about race, because instead of listening and engaging they were trying to deny my experiences as a woman of color and bully me into agreeing with them, only to have them reach out later that day to ask me to join them for coffee in order to "talk some more" about the subject. After a few

times of agreeing to "talk some more" and once again finding myself "talked over" I realized that "talk" was all they wanted to get out of it.

At least once a week an organization will ask me to come talk, free of charge, to them about race. They are big fans of my work and just want to be able to have their own private conversations with me. "We would like a safe space to really get educated," one said. These are people who have read my work, had likely stopped by on social media to "like" posts and leave encouraging comments. These are people who have read my words on the mental, physical, and financial exploitation of black people and especially black women and the way in which it contributes to oppression. They have read the pain in my stories, and it resonated with them enough that they wanted me to repeat it all on demand, for free. This is talk that will make them sad, make them frustrated, make them cry. But it won't make them take action. They want to feel better, but they don't want to *do* better.

Words matter, and I'm not just saying that because they are my job. Words help us interpret our world, and can be used to change the way in which we think and act. Words are always at the heart of all our problems, and the beginning of all our solutions.

We cannot understand race and racial oppression if we cannot talk about it. And we can never stop the racial oppression affecting millions of lives in this country if we do not understand how and why it has been able to hold such power over us for hundreds of years.

But understanding, on its own, will never equal action. There are a lot of complex issues out there that many of us

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have talked a lot about and understand fairly well. Take, for example, global warming. The vast majority of Americans believe in global warming and understand that it is likely brought on by pollution. And while we talk about global warming and worry about global warming, most of us go about our days the same as we did before we ever heard the term because it's just easier to talk than to do. And global warming continues.

Until we have dismantled the system of White Supremacy and racial oppression, we will always need to talk about it. And I hope that you will use what you've read in this book to talk about it more successfully. And I hope that, as you continue to have these conversations about race, you will see opportunities for action and use what you've learned from your conversations to make that action more effective at dismantling oppression.

Talk. Please talk and talk and talk some more. But also act. Act now, because people are dying now in this unjust system. How many lives have been ground up by racial prejudice and hate? How many opportunities have we already lost? Act and talk and learn and fuck up and learn some more and act again and do better. We have to do this all at once. We have to learn and fight at the same time. Because people have been waiting far too long for their chance to live as equals in this society.

IT IS EASY TO THINK THAT THE PROBLEM OF RACIAL OPPRESSION in this country is just too big. How on earth can we be expected to dismantle a complex system that has been functioning for over four hundred years? My answer is: piece by piece. If you are looking for some small steps you can take

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right now to help create real change in the fight against racial oppression, if you are looking for your little piece of the system you can dismantle, here are some ideas:

- **Vote local.** Your vote will never have more power than in local elections. This is where politicians and city and state officials have to work for your vote. And so often, this opportunity to flex local power is flushed away by those who only vote in big, sexy, national elections. Vote local and demand that anybody asking for your vote (from school board to city council to state senator) make racial justice a top priority.
- **Get in schools.** Do you know what the racial achievement gap is in your school district? Find out, and then ask your school board, principals, and teachers what they are doing to address it. Are your schools erasing the history and accomplishments of people of color from your child's textbooks? Are your children only learning about people of color in February? Let them know that an inclusive education that meets the needs of *all* students is a top priority for you, even if your child is not a child of color.
- **Bear witness.** If you are a white person and you see a person of color being stopped by police, if you see a person of color being harassed in a store: bear witness and offer to help, when it is safe to do so. Sometimes just the watchful presence of another white person will make others stop and consider their actions more carefully.
- **Speak up in your unions.** I've watched with pride these last few years as my mother has leveraged her privilege

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at her union to help make her workplace more inclusive. A longtime union representative, my mom has not let a single meeting go by without asking about the union's goals to promote diversity and inclusivity. When her union wrote racial justice goals into their platform for the year, she called me beaming with pride. Unions have a lot of power to combat racial discrimination and disenfranchisement at work, but only if the union decides to make it a priority.

- **Support POC-owned business.** Economic exploitation is one of the cornerstones of racial oppression. You can help preserve financial independence for people of color by working with and spending your money with POC businesses.
- **Boycott banks that prey on people of color.** The recent housing crash brought many of the racist practices of some of our biggest banks to light, but banks have been exploiting and abusing people of color for hundreds of years. Banks that sell bad loans to people of color should not get your business. Banks that hike up interest rates for people of color should not get your business. Banks that discriminate against people of color should not get your business. If you make these despicable actions by banks too costly, they will stop doing them, but not before then.
- **Give money to organizations working to fight racial oppression and support communities of color.** There are groups out there fighting every day for people of color. They are running after-school programs, giving legal advice, providing job training, providing medical ser-

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vices, fighting school discrimination, and so much more. And this all costs money. Give what you can to groups like the ACLU, SPLC, Planned Parenthood, NAACP, National Immigrant Justice Center, National Council of La Raza, Native American Rights Fund, Native American Disability Law Center, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and more. Reach out to people in your local community to see what local organizations could use your financial support.

- **Boycott businesses that exploit workers of color.** Many businesses rely on cheap labor from people of color working in unhealthy conditions. Boycott businesses that cut costs by cutting out respect and living wages for workers of color.
- **Support music, film, television, art, and books created by people of color.** So much of our cultural representation is white by default. Normalize the work of people of color by financially supporting it and asking your producers, museum owners, studios, radio stations, and publishers for more.
- **Support increases in the minimum wage.** Yes, there are many reasons why so many people of color are so much poorer than white people. But we cannot ignore the fact that a larger proportion of people of color work in lower-wage jobs, and that a raise in those wages will disproportionately help people of color and can help address the vast racial wealth gap in this country.
- **Push your mayor and city council for police reform.** It is almost guaranteed that whatever city or town you live in, its police force can better serve its population of

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color. Ask your mayor what he or she is doing to address racial bias in policing. What training are officers undergoing? Do your officers have body cams? What sort of civilian oversight is there when there has been a complaint of bias, discrimination, or abuse? Put pressure on your city government to make this a priority, and keep that pressure up, otherwise police unions will bully city government into supporting the status quo, even if it risks the lives of black and brown people in your neighborhood.

- **Demand college diversity.** If you are in college, getting ready for college, or have a kid going to college, let your college know that the diversity and inclusiveness of students, curriculum, *and* staff is a top priority for you. Make sure colleges know that you expect any quality higher-education institution to embrace and promote diversity if they expect your tuition money.
- **Vote for diverse government representatives.** Help put people of color into the positions of power where they can self-advocate for the change that their communities need. Support candidates of color and support platforms that make diversity, inclusion, and racial justice a priority.

I know that the issue of racism and racial oppression seems huge—and it is huge. But it is not insurmountable. When we look at it in its entirety, it seems like too much, but understand that the system is invested in you seeing it that way. The truth is, we all pull levers of this white supremacist system, every day. The way we vote, where we spend our money, what we do and do not call out—these are all pieces of the system. We cannot talk our way out of a racially oppressive system. We

Talking is great, but what else can I do?

can talk our way into understanding, and we can then use that understanding to act.

I'll never forget the outrage in 2016 over a district prosecutor who refused to press charges against a cop who was filmed shooting an unarmed black man. People were tweeting their anger at the prosecutor, sharing Facebook posts about how frustrated they were that once again, a cop was going to get away with murder. But when I looked up information for the district attorney, I realized that he was up for reelection later that year. I immediately started replying to the Tweets and messages of frustration that I was seeing: "THIS PERSON IS RUNNING FOR REELECTION—GIVE YOUR MONEY TO HIS CHALLENGER. MAKE AN EXAMPLE OF HIM." Because I already knew that if moral arguments and outrage were going to persuade a district attorney to press charges against an officer for shooting an unarmed black person, we would have seen more than only eighteen officers charged with unlawful death in 2015, in over 1,100 killings of civilians by police that year. But everyone responds to threats to their livelihood. And declining to indict an officer when there is video proof of severe misconduct should be a decision that a prosecuting attorney cannot afford to make.

We saw that action take hold in the March 2015 reelection bid of Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez, who after numerous high-profile police brutality cases where Alvarez was seen as less than responsive—including what many view to be a cover-up and thirteen-month delay in pressing charges in the horrific shooting of seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald, who was shot sixteen times as he walked away from officers—was handed a resounding defeat to challenger

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Kim Foxx. This defeat was the result not only of numerous protests in and around Chicago, but of organized efforts of Chicago activists to support Alvarez's challenger and get out the vote on election day. Not only was a prosecutor that many felt was a defender of police brutality and corruption removed from office, but a warning message was sent to prosecutors around the country: you cannot afford to protect a corrupt and violent police system.

You don't always win the fight at first, but small actions add up, especially when you don't give up. In my hometown of Seattle in 2016, activists were engaged in a fight with the city over plans to build the most expensive new police precinct in the country. In a city with a housing crisis leading to rising homelessness, school funding so poor that the state supreme court has declared that it is in violation of the state constitution, and a rising opioid addiction problem—many balked at the thought of spending \$160 million on a new police building. Add to that the fact that the Seattle Police Department was found by the federal government in 2011 to be practicing widespread abuse against its citizens and put under consent decree to reform its practices, and the fact that the consent decree process still had not been completed as of 2016, many felt that our cops who had been dragging their feet at reform did not deserve a shiny new building with taxpayer dollars.

Yes, we talked about it on social media—spreading the word about why the prevention of this new department headquarters (nicknamed “the bunker”) was important. But we also took action. City council meetings were filled with concerned citizens waiting hours for the public comment period

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to voice their shock that the city would be taking money that could go to so many in need, and giving it to a police system already found to be broken and failing in their promises of reform. At first, it was defeat after defeat. I remember taking my sons with me to a city council meeting where there were so many “Block the Bunker” people there that we were moved into an overflow room. We watched people get up to speak, sixty seconds each, for over two hours, only to have the City Council vote 11 to 1 to move forward with the project. My nine-year-old held his “Black Lives Matter” sign and asked “Why aren't they listening to us?”

But we didn't give up. The bunker was brought up at every public event the mayor or members of the city council attended. Every city council meeting, members of the council had to stare at an ocean of Seattleites wearing “Block the Bunker” T-shirts and holding “Black Lives Matter” signs. When the mayor voiced his intention to attend a highly popular community block party, he was informed by organizers that he could come, but they wanted him to know that they did not approve of his support of the new police headquarters. People wrote to our local newspapers and television stations asking them to increase their coverage of the Block the Bunker movement.

Eventually, the tide began to change. Our major local papers, usually the voice of the status quo, came out against the new headquarters. More city council members voiced their concern. Finally, after almost a year of protest, the mayor announced that he was shelving the \$160 million project. Then activists, partnered with Seattle City Council member Kshama Sawant, were able to get the city to commit a large portion of

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those funds to low-income housing. It was one of the highlights of my year to be able to tell my kids that they had helped bring positive change to our city, that we can accomplish just about anything if we don't give up.

All around the country people are effecting real change with small actions. Change that improves the lives of people of color in their towns and cities and weakens an oppressive system. Racial oppression starts in our homes, our offices, our cities, and our states, and it can end there as well. So start talking, not just problems, but solutions. We can do this, together.

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Acknowledgments

THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE TO THANK. I HAVE BEEN so lucky in my life, I could fill an entire book with the names of those who have helped get me here. It is very stressful to boil down these acknowledgments to a page (or two), but I must try.

My mother, Susan, raised my brother and sister and me on her own, through extreme poverty and heartbreak. With all of the pressures that she was under, all of the ups and downs of being a single parent, not once in my life did I ever feel like she didn't love me. Not once in my life did I ever feel like she didn't believe in me, or that I had let her down. I realize now what a rare gift that is that she gave us. Mommy: Thank you. I love you. And I will change your diapers when you get old, I promise.