1

Introduction

No one ever talks about the moment you found out that you were White. Or the moment you found out you were Black. That's a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything.

— Toni Morrison

A FEW YEARS AGO, we were invited to be a part of the planning team supporting a national anti-racism conference in the Seattle area. We felt honored to be the only two white women selected by a Black man to serve on the local executive leadership committee. We love this conference, and the fact that we were chosen for this important role said a lot in our minds about how awesome we are and how different (and let's be honest, how much better) we are than other white people.

This started out as a collaboration run by a multiracial team and ended up with us micromanaging and trying to take control of every aspect of the planning process. With little provocation, we convinced one another that we had to take over for the "good of the conference." After all, if we didn't oversee and double-check each committee's work, send out all of the emails, plan the agendas for our meetings, and call the conference organizer whenever we felt we needed to, who would?

While we understood how to follow the leadership of Black people in theory, when it came to our actual practice, we actively exhibited the white supremacy behaviors described by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun in their article *White Supremacy Culture*,

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such as hoarding information, creating a sense of urgency, believing there is only one right way (the white way), thinking we were the only ones who knew the right way, and feeling a right to our comfort. At the same time, we opportunistically held onto the dichotomous idea that we were good people and, therefore, we couldn't possibly be oppressive.

This left many of the People of Color (PoC) we were supposed to be partnering with shaking their heads in frustration and saying, "What's up with white women?!" Although, to be honest, they already knew the answer.

Despite the fact that we joined the committee with years of experience in anti-racism work, we still resisted hearing any critical feedback from our colleagues during the planning of the conference. With time, we became more self-reflective, self-aware, open, and honest about our assumptions and behaviors on this team. Our hope in writing this book is to help both ourselves and other white women identify our racism more quickly, receive critical feedback more openly, and recover and make amends more graciously.

We write this book as a love letter to our white sisters. We hope it will help you recognize how we can engage in our everyday lives, work, and activism more effectively, and ultimately contribute, in many small ways, to our collective liberation. We hope it will help you sleep easier, knowing your actions are better aligned with how you see yourself and the core values that guide you. After all, the movement for social justice needs us to be brave, wide awake, and well-rested.

We also write this book as an offering to the People of Color who love, live with, work with, or simply have to interact with white women. Should you choose to read further, we hope this book will name and help explain some of the patterns you've witnessed in white women. We understand and own the harm that we inflict upon you regularly and humbly invite you to read these pages, not as a rationale for our behaviors, but as a window into our individual and collective journeys toward liberation.

We are at a particular moment in the United States when the

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need for white women to understand and effectively navigate multicultural partnerships has become a regular part of the public discourse. We've seen countless news stories of white women threatening Black lives by calling the police on Black people for anything from telling them to leash their dogs, to selling water, to sitting in a Starbucks. In the 2020 election, white women recently provided an even larger base of support for Donald Trump than in 2016. We have also shown up in large numbers at Black Lives Matter protests and worked to mobilize our siblings across the country to oppose racist violence.

At the same time as we're seeing heightened awareness of racism, we are experiencing a public reckoning with sexism as witnessed in the Women's March, #MeToo, and the upsurge in intersectional feminism. In all of these instances, white women have both hindered and helped to advance social justice.

This book explores the ways in which white women in the United States are positioned in a hierarchy between white men and People of Color, a buffer zone, due to our racial privilege and gender marginalization. We'll examine how we internalize beliefs about our own inferiority due to sexism and, at the same time, internalize our racial superiority. Using theory, history, and true stories shared in focus groups, we highlight patterns in white women's behaviors used to survive sexism in a patriarchal society and strategies we've developed to get ahead despite barriers. We'll explore how these same patterns have been used to sabotage People of Color, resulting in deep conflicts and pain, as we prioritize our access to privilege. The heart of this book is a model of identity development where we name six distinct phases to explain the different ways white women navigate both sexism and white privilege: Immersion, Capitulation, Defense, Projection, Balance, and Integration.

The Canyon We Must Cross

Imagine standing on the edge of a canyon. Our internalized sexism and white superiority tell us to hold our ground and stay "safe." This false sense of safety is a mindset that exploits people

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and the planet and will ultimately lead to physical, spiritual, and psychological destruction that actually makes us far less safe. On the other side of the canyon are our core values of justice, love, authentic relationships, and shared wisdom, to name a few. On that other side exists collective liberation—a concept we can easily say but not so easily envision—where we recognize the deep interconnection necessary to our survival as a species. The gap between feels like a frightening space. It is a space of practicing new ways of being and often failing in this practice. A space where we risk losing friendships and family who prefer the false comfort and dehumanization of racist systems designed to serve white people.

The canyon between our actions and beliefs can manifest like this: I value equity and relationship, but when I disagree with a Person of Color, I do so in a way that intentionally re-centers my white privilege in lieu of equity. For instance, a Chinese American man points out that our new policy might exclude communities who don't speak English. Instead of asking questions for more understanding, I defend my decision and may reiterate that there is a time crunch, or that there are "rules" that need to be followed. While I may cloak my assertions in kindness and high regard for him and for all of the communities we serve (how I want to see myself), there is no doubt my arguments are meant to remind this man that I know more and better understand how systems work (how I am actually behaving).

White women stand on the edge of that canyon and decide whether we're willing to leap across or stay put. We feel the allure of staying where we are and the stronger pull to live in a place aligned with our core values. In making the jump, we realize the canyon isn't nearly as wide, or scary, or dangerous. It is merely a small crack in the earth. This book is a product of our experiences of trying to recognize and jump over those cracks, of understanding what keeps us frozen on one side and learning how to take an uncertain leap toward liberation. The beauty of our friendship and alliance as the authors of this work is that it allows us the option of holding hands and leaping over together.

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Working in Relationship

The authors, who are both white women, first met over fifteen years ago when Tilman's younger son was in Ilsa's fifth-grade class. We remember this time differently. For Tilman, Ilsa provided a safe haven for her child while she worried about retaliation because of her activism in the school. Ilsa was in her third year of teaching fifth grade, still overwhelmed by, well, everything, and just happy to have a parent supporting her social and environmental justice agenda. We both saw something in the other that drew us together.

Our friendship and deep love for one another grew over time, as we worked separately and collaboratively as racial equity consultants and community activists. We partnered for many years in an anti-racist educator's organization we co-created with other white women called WEACT, The Work of European Americans as Cultural Teachers. Tilman has seen Ilsa through the start and growth of her business, Cultures Connecting, with Dr. Caprice Hollins. Ilsa has seen Tilman through her work for racial justice in early childhood education as a coach, educator, and manager in nonprofits and government agencies.

Our relationship is based on a shared passion for uprooting systems of oppression, coupled with a fair amount of self-deprecating humor. We hold each other as mentors, asking ourselves in critical moments, "What would 'Tilsan' do?" We remind one another of the mantra we created together with our friend MG: "Stop, Take a Breath (STAB)", where we engage in the healthy processing of reactivity and anger in our bodies.

By working together, we intentionally counter the sexist and racist competition so common among white women. Instead, we refer to ourselves as "accountabilibuddies," holding up a mirror for one another in our efforts to counter systems of oppression.

As two white women learning and practicing together, we sometimes notice a gap between our core values and our actions, as evidenced by our experience planning the conference. Ilsa remembers sharing a long, self-righteous email she'd written to a Black woman in reaction to what she saw as an uninformed

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critique in one of her workshops. Tilman lovingly responded that, no matter what the critique was from the Black woman, Ilsa's multiple links to articles and attempts to prove herself more knowledgeable than this woman weren't the best cross-cultural practice and were probably rooted in anti-Blackness. Gulp. Now I'll enjoy a slice of this humble pie and do something entirely different next time.

At one point when we were working on our book, Ilsa gently pointed out to Tilman, "You seem to have a lot of white women you don't get along with." Hmmm. Yep, I'll be thinking about that for years to come.

This book would not have existed without our third Circle Belle (our band name if we had a band), MG Lentz. They helped co-create the identity development model that is the foundation of this book. Though they chose not to co-author the book, they helped create the framework and continue to inform our thinking.

From our conversations with MG, we developed a workshop for white women to gather and explore the unique intersection of our identities. What started in the spring of 2012 as a one-day session looking at the model we'd created quickly shifted to a two-day intensive with deep self-awareness work around how the interlocking experiences of sexism and white privilege have harmed us, and how we've harmed others. We collectively grew our knowledge of where white women are positioned in the United States in our ability to access institutional power. And we shared new skills and strategies to improve our relationships with People of Color and one another and address institutional oppression. The wisdom shared in these workshops by hundreds of women over the years greatly informs the content of this book. Many of the women who first met in these workshops have also stayed connected, continuing to grow and advocate for change together.

A Push

There is also no way we could have written this book without the insights from Women of Color. Inez Torres Davis, a Mujerista-Indigenous woman, wrote us,

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> So often white women use their own victimization as a wild card to get them out of the mess, an almost-free pass that means they don't have near as much work to do around their privilege as white men have! I refuse to allow you to be ignorant of the blood that marks the places where white women scrape from themselves their need to do their own work. That smear, that blood contains both of our DNA.
>
> My suffering at the hands of white women runs deep. White women push me out of their way expecting me to see their shove as a push in a better direction.

We listened. And we examined the behaviors white women display that are not only irritating but harmful to People of Color. At first, we wanted to excuse ourselves from this group of white women who cause the suffering Inez named, to see ourselves as the exception to the rule. The idea that we were oppressive was especially challenging to see in ourselves because we understood through personal experience the damage of oppression that sexism has on our lives. Then we felt confused because as good people doing good things, how was it possible we didn't have insights into the ways we were harming others? We had internalized that our push *was* in a better direction.

Instead of stopping with a defensive posture, assuming we were different, or granting ourselves "good one" status, we became curious about what we were missing. What is this chasm that is so hard for us to acknowledge and so obvious to Women of Color?

Along with thousands of others, we benefited from the wisdom of our mentor, Dr. Peggy McIntosh, whose seminal work, *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, provided that moment Toni Morrison names when we realized we were white and had to renegotiate everything. Dr. McIntosh's insight, "After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from Women of Color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as

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oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way," launched us into an investigation of how we can both experience sexism and internalize a sense of superiority. Dr. McIntosh also helped us to see that our oppressive beliefs and behaviors have everything to do with history and socialization, and very little to do with whether or not we are good people.

At the same time as we recognized we were missing pieces of the puzzle related to our privilege, we noticed that any conversation about sexism in racial justice circles was immediately shut down as trying to wiggle out of responsibility. We were getting the message loud and clear, "Do not equate your experiences with sexism with racial oppression," with which we whole-heartedly agree with and readily avoid. While we do share some gender issues, racism creates vast chasms in how sexism plays out in the lives of Women of Color compared to white women.

However, having to check our experiences with sexism at the door also felt like we were missing a piece. We wanted a way to talk about both sexism and racism that didn't rely on comparison or competition. How were we carrying the pain of sexism with us, in our minds and bodies, and how was this informed by our white privilege? How was our whiteness informing our experiences with patriarchy? We began conversations with other white women about what it would mean to examine sexism alongside, rather than instead of, internalized white superiority.

Focus Groups

White privilege allows white women to ignore or minimize racial dynamics most of the time, and many avoid conversations about race and racism. Because of our work as anti-racist organizers and consultants, we have had the unique opportunity to regularly witness, and often facilitate, explicit conversations about racism and white privilege. This means we see and hear white women talk about race in our everyday lives far more often than most white people do. In creating the identity development model, we drew extensively from our experiences in workshops to illuminate white women's patterns when we engage in race conversations.

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To further develop our understanding of the model we were creating, not depend solely on People of Color to educate us, and better illustrate what we saw as each stage of identity development, we formed a focus group of white women in Seattle that included Mallory Clarke, Johanna Eager, Katy Greenleaf, Chris Schafer, and Terrie Yaffe. We met monthly for two hours over six months. This group was intentionally composed of women of different ages, sexual orientations, religions, and class backgrounds. Some had attended our workshops, and all had been involved in anti-racism work through their jobs, relationships, and community activism.

We also asked white women who attended the White Privilege Conference, a national anti-racism conference founded by a Black man, Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr., to form two focus groups at the 2014 event. Each of these groups was composed of diverse white women who had been involved in anti-racism scholarship and activism across the country for years. The participants were Beth Applegate, Robin DiAngelo, Ilana Marcucci-Morris, Peggy McIntosh, Laura Moore, Dena Samuels, Christine Saxman, Shelly Tochluk, and Beth Yohe. These groups each met for two hours to discuss how they saw race and gender intersecting in their lives.

When we formed the focus groups, we imagined the participants' stories would give life to the model. Instead, we found listening to and rereading their experiences and insights made the book far more of a collaborative project. Many times, they spoke to an idea we had never considered, and an entire subsection of the book emerged as a result. As we describe the stages of the model, we have embedded their stories. They are the heart of our work, and we are deeply grateful for the risks they took in opening up with us.

Throughout the book, we refer to each of these women by their first name unless they requested to be anonymous (except for the two Beths, because writing Beth O. and Beth A. feels too much like elementary school). You can read a little more about each of their backgrounds and identities in the appendix, and you probably should because they are all awesome.

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The Power of Language

We thought a lot about what pronouns to use for white women throughout the book. We landed on using "we" (occasionally "she" or "her") when referring to any person who identifies as a white woman. This is to be clear we are including ourselves, the authors, in all of the phases and behaviors we describe. This does not mean *all* white women demonstrate *all* the patterns we identify. We invite white women readers to notice when you have a strong reaction to being seen as part of the "we." We also do not assume all readers of the book identify as white or women, and we're glad you're choosing to join us in our exploration.

It is our hope this text will be accessible to as many people as possible. We know people can mean different things with the same words, which can get confusing and sometimes obstruct understanding. We have unpacked terminology as we use it throughout the text. You can also find our operating definitions of sexism, internalized oppression, internalized superiority, racism, white privilege, and other important concepts in the appendix.

Acknowledging Our Lens

We recognize that factors beyond race and gender also shaped the way we approached and interpreted white women's experiences and want to be transparent in the lenses we bring. Tilman's Norwegian and English ancestry influences her value of stoicism, her sense of scarcity, her tendency to compartmentalize emotions, and her genuine fondness for slapstick humor. Ilsa's German, Polish, French, and Romanian ethnicity, as well as growing up in the Midwest, informs her sense of timeliness, her taste for sarcasm, and her desire to avoid conflict but willingly gossip. The authors are both cisgender, US born, and not experiencing disabilities. Tilman comes from an upper-class background and Ilsa from a working-class background. Tilman is heterosexual and Ilsa is queer, and both are in long-term relationships with cisgender white men. Tilman is spiritual and Ilsa an atheist, and both come from Christian-based families. Tilman is the mother of two sons,

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and Ilsa is the mother of Wentworth P. Merryweather, a very good dog.

No model of identity development will capture every person's experiences, and we did not attempt to create a comprehensive guide for all white women. Our focus groups did not include white trans* or gender-nonconforming women, and we don't assume they experience all aspects of internalized sexism in the same way as white cis women. Nor do we have stories from white women living in extreme poverty or those with disabilities, who may experience white privilege and sexism differently. At the same time, we believe all white women will likely see some reflection of themselves in the phases of the model we developed. People of Color and white men may also identify with some of the behaviors we've highlighted. Rather than limiting the conversation to only those who see this model as a full-length mirror of their experience, it is instead our intention to create a window to deepen and broaden future work.

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2

A Power Analysis: White Women and Institutional Access

The economic system and driver of policy in the United States is capitalism, and this particular system that values capital, wealth, and accumulated assets, was created by and for white men via colonization, genocide, and slavery. Wealthy white men's historic exploitation of people and the environment put them in the position to create institutions that protect the capitalist system and their related interests to this day. Every institution in the US, both formal and informal, including health care, government, criminal justice, education, banking, and many others, is run on policies, structures, time, and resources designed to maintain white male power.

One need only do this simple exercise created by Dr. Joy DeGruy to recognize this truth.[1] List white-controlled institutions in the US and the negative impacts they have on Communities of Color. Next list People of Color-controlled institutions and the negative impact of these on white communities. It is likely your first list includes life-changing outcomes such as poor education, mass incarceration, and even death, while the second list consists primarily of individual exclusions or discomfort, such as not being able to attend an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or not having some businesses you go into cater to you (such as a barber or restaurant). This provides a simple illustration of why "reverse racism" doesn't exist when we understand

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racism in the context of institutional benefits rather than individual discrimination.

We base our definition of racism on that of the legacy of activists from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond: "Institutional Power + Prejudice against subordinated members of targeted racial groups (Blacks, Latinx, Native Americans, Asians) by members of the agent racial group (whites). This happens at the individual, cultural, and institutional level. Racism can involve both conscious action and unconscious collusion. In other words, it need not be intentional."

Given that US institutions were created by white men to serve the needs of white men, it makes sense that white men more easily and inequitably access these systems. They were literally built to do so.

Why is access to institutions important? This has meant being able to build wealth off of the exploitation of unpaid or underpaid individuals, owning land taken from the Indigenous inhabitants, and getting 95 percent of Veteran's Administration home loans after WWII (just a few of many examples). The ease with which people can access institutions in this country determines daily experiences, including how you are educated, how you are protected or not protected, where you get to live, where you get your food, if you have potable water to drink and use, and what kind of medical services you do or don't receive. For those of us who have relatively easy access, many of these things can be taken for granted. But for people who do not have easy—or any—access, life is proportionately more difficult and dangerous.

Navigating Sexism

Sexism creates barriers to accessing institutional power for women. National statistics show that violence against cisgender women is a genuine threat to our daily lives, with an even higher risk for trans* and gender nonconforming women. For example, in the National Center for Transgender Equality's 2015 US Transgender Survey, almost one in ten Black respondents had been physically attacked for being transgender in the past year, with the compounding factors of both racism and transphobia.[2]

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Sexism can also lead to lower pay and/or lack of access to employment, health care, childcare, and education. The recent #MeToo movement, founded by an African American woman, Tarana Burke, has cracked open the door of our collective understanding of how men, and predominantly white men, have created barriers to institutional access for women by using sexist tactics. While sexual harassment is being illuminated in the United States more in recent years with the Women's March and #MeToo campaign, most women have always known that sexism is real. Therefore, women must have strategies to survive individual acts of sexism, systems that thrive off of our underpaid or unpaid labor, and our disproportionate lack of access to resources to get through our lives.

When we don't recognize that sexism comes in the form of institutional barriers, women are more likely to believe they, and other women, are personally to blame for any mistreatment or lack of progress they make. Women applying principles of male dominance and oppression to themselves and/or other women is called internalized oppression. The People's Institute of Survival and Beyond defines internalized oppression as "a multigenerational, disempowering, dehumanizing process that creates dependency [in this case on white men]. It manifests itself as rage/fear, shame, denial, self-hatred, worthlessness, self-destruction, exaggerated visibility, and exaggerated invisibility. It eats away at one's humanity and sense of well-being, and comes in the form of adaptation, distancing, assimilation, colorism, tolerance, protectionism and mimicry, and instant gratification."[3] Any group or individual experiencing oppression can demonstrate the internalization of their oppression to different degrees at different times. Throughout the book, we'll further explore the dynamics of white women's internalized sexism in regard to ourselves and how we see and treat other women.

Benefiting from White Privilege

While sexism is integral to white women's experiences, so is whiteness. The idea that "white is right" can permeate our interactions and our assumptions about ourselves, leading to internalized

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superiority in our beliefs and actions toward People of Color. In other words, we may come to believe that our socially and politically superior status as white people is normal and deserved.

White women as a whole have more intimate access to white men. They are our fathers, brothers, uncles, and sons. Much of our access to power is dependent on how well we can work with or around white men. Our strategies, both conscious and unconscious, in relationship to white men include paying extra attention when they are speaking, asking a question rather than giving a direction, deferring to white men even when we think they are wrong, backing off from our arguments if we sense they are getting irritated or angry, laughing at their jokes, and crying when we feel misunderstood, helpless, or afraid of what is to come. These strategies are important to our safety and advancement, whether we are cognizant of using them or not. They can be effective ways to deal with the concrete reality of interpersonal, cultural, and institutional gender discrimination and violence.

Many white women can relate to using these relationships to get our everyday needs met. When Tilman needed a car, she knew that she would receive better service and ultimately a better price if her husband Michael bought it. To do this, she and Michael found a car online, and Michael went to buy it alone. He returned in a short time with the car and a good price.

In the study "Race and Gender Discrimination in Bargaining for a New Car," which examined negotiations for more than 300 new cars, it was found that Chicago car dealers offered Black and female testers significantly higher prices than the white males with whom they were paired, even though all testers used identical bargaining strategies.[4] A 2015 study in the *New York Times Economic Review* showed that Black people pay an average of $662 more than white people when buying cars.[5] So, it makes good economic sense for white women to rely on white men in our lives to purchase automobiles.

Another way white women benefit from proximity to white men is that we learn how to behave in ways to help us gain power and control in the workplace. We have emulated and internalized

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the lessons on white male cultural norms, values, and behaviors that help us navigate institutions. Some of these norms include prioritizing hierarchy, timeliness over relationships, strict control of and limited access to information, and either/or thinking. If we've used these tools to successfully navigate sexism and gain controlling positions in our jobs, we may feel simultaneously entitled to sustain this control and concerned about losing it.

This explains why white women in organizations with a mission statement focused on racial justice may be able to "talk the talk" but are unwilling to give up any of the benefits of whiteness and "walk the walk" of said mission. Some resulting behaviors can include micromanaging people's work activities and communication, taking over meetings with rigid and intense speech and expectations, creating a sense of urgency that doesn't allow for multiple perspectives, and interjecting our opinions and synopses even when not asked for or needed. We may make performative gestures toward racial justice and signal to others how different we are from other white people (who are obviously the problem) without doing anything to challenge the status quo of the workplace, especially if this would mean risking our jobs.

While white women can gain power through our relationships with white men, we also pay a price for this power. In 1988, Deniz Kandiyoti coined the term *patriarchal bargain* in her article "Bargaining with Patriarchy."[6] The term refers to a woman's decision to conform to the demands of patriarchy to gain some benefit, whether it is financial, physical, psychological, emotional, or social. The trade-off for us is that we often abdicate our inherent power, rights to sovereignty, and intelligence to cash in on the presumption of protection and ease. It leads us to believe that men have our backs when this is not often true. As Jaime Phlegar wrote, "One problem with patriarchal bargains is that they pressure women into internalizing patriarchal ideologies and, thus, either knowingly or unknowingly recreating patriarchy every day. Even if some of these bargains are 'easy' for women to make—even if they do not bring immediate harm to women's own lives or if they make an individual woman's life easier in the short

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term—it reinforces a system of oppression for all women. There is an individual gain, but a collective loss."[7]

It is important to understand that not all white women want or have close relationships with white men who provide this transactional pathway. This may be influenced by class, religion, immigrant status, disability, age, sexual orientation, or other areas of personal identity. For example, straight women of all races can leverage sexual attraction with white men, resulting in different levels of access to privilege and power. They may also be less likely to risk challenging a straight white man than queer women because they've internalized the value of not endangering potential partnerships. (This is true whether either party is currently in a relationship.)

Occupying the Buffer Zone

White women's position in the hierarchy of institutional access lies between white men and People of Color. We are the nurses, teachers, realtors, office managers, nonprofit staff, and nonprofit directors. This creates a dynamic that encourages and rewards white women to act as enforcers of policies and practices for white men and institutions. In other words, white men make the rules and white women make sure everyone follows the rules. One simple example of this is a pattern we've noticed while teaching adults over the past twenty years. White women are the population most likely to ask questions about instructions on an assignment. Asking, "Are we doing this right?" is usually followed by Helpful Holly explaining the instructions again to everyone in her group.

A more damaging trend of enforcement is how white women middle managers in nonprofits control the flow of information and materials to People of Color and poor people while insisting they are following the regulations set out by funding institutions. We've witnessed many executive directors who won't stand up for racial justice if it means upsetting donors or board members.

Paul Kivel refers to this position as the "buffer zone." He says,

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"People in the ruling class—those who are the top of the economic pyramid—have never wanted to deal directly with people on the bottom of the pyramid but have wanted to prevent them from organizing for power. Therefore, they have created a space that protects them from the rest of the population. I call this space the *buffer zone*."[8]

For example, in the book *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai points out how wealthy white men used the myth of Filipino men taking jobs and then dating white women to justify violence in the late 1920s and '30s. Ngai writes, "Thus anti-Filipino hostility was a site where ideas about gender, sexuality, class, and colonialism intersected in violent ways and, moreover, informed the construction of the racial identity of both European and Filipino migrants. That process gave immigrant workers from southern and eastern Europe a purchase on whiteness, which was part of their own Americanization. By contrast, Filipinos were denied their American acculturation and reclassified into an identity that combined racial representations of Negroes and Orientals."[9]

In many ways, this narrative blamed white women when poor white men attacked Filipino men. This was a continuation of othering rooted in the myth of the Black man as rapist. It is one example of how American racial identity has been intentionally constructed and how the "need to protect white women" has been used to justify racist violence.

Throughout US history, those in the ruling class have utilized tactics of division among those with less institutional access to maintain their position at the top. The concept of the buffer zone helps us better understand how white women protect and insulate white male power, even at our own expense.

White women have relatively less power than white men and relatively greater visibility and proximity to People of Color through our jobs in helping professions. Therefore, it can be easier to identify and villainize individual white women than it is white men. Think about the popular narrative of people who call

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911 on Black people: BBQ Becky, Golfcart Gail, Permit Patty, and Cornerstore Carolyne to name a few. Do white women call 911 more than white men?

White men are more likely to just take matters into their own hands rather than needing systemic backing, as was the case when they hunted and murdered Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery. When white women call the police on Black people, we are using the weaponized institution of white patriarchy to threaten Black lives. The "Karen" trope is sexist only if we don't realize that she is using white male-controlled systems to wield her power. We need to ask ourselves why we feel entitled to control the actions of People of Color and how it is connected to our position in the buffer zone.

Mamta Motwani Accapadi points out the obstacles to holding white women accountable for their racist actions: "While white women are members of an oppressed group based on gender, they still experience privilege based on race. This dual oppressor/oppressed identity often becomes a root of tension when white women are challenged to consider their white privilege by Women of Color."[10] If and when we are challenged about the aforementioned behaviors, we often feign innocence or ignorance and claim to be misunderstood. We might circle back with other white women to gossip about the Woman of Color and ultimately have her expelled from the organization or group. These moments of feeling misunderstood are frequently coupled with tears and/or retribution, thus maintaining our position of power in the hierarchy just below white men.

Any analysis of our white privilege that disregards sexism is incomplete. For example, our friends and activists Evangeline Weiss and Kari Points facilitate workshops for white women that start with the story of Carolyn Bryant and Emmett Till. On her deathbed, Bryant admitted Till never whistled or made any comments to her. However, she was not the one who originally accused him. Her husband's brother was in the store and called Roy Bryant with this story. Living with an abusive husband, Carolyn

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decided to collude with white supremacy, which ultimately led to the brutal murder of Till.

This does not excuse Bryant of responsibility; it complicates the common narrative that focuses more on Carolyn's accusation and rarely mentions that this also came from her brother-in-law. As such, the story as it is typically recounted deflects attention from the underlying issue of white male privilege and the often-violent maintenance of systems of oppression. Again, there are multiple cases in history where sexism and the so-called protection of a white woman were used to justify white men killing Black men and other Men of Color. Yet, even in our activist work for racial justice, we have witnessed white women in the buffer zone receive more critical feedback around our racism than the white men on top.

The dynamic of division and competition to get to the top is key here. The white woman who plays the best enforcer while capitulating to white male egos ends up ahead, at least temporarily. This creates a tension between white women that helps to keep sexism in place, simultaneously disconnects us from People of Color, and, thus, insidiously prevents us from unifying to collectively change this dehumanizing and environmentally destructive hierarchy.

White women can both help and hinder movements for justice in the United States. The model of identity development we created highlights how, as we progress in our self-awareness and knowledge of institutional white supremacy, white women can strive to learn from our past oppressive actions and illuminate creative, mutually liberating ways of being in partnerships across the hierarchical divides.

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