

Becoming Antiracist in a Racist Society: White Antiracist Activists

by

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## Introduction

I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively antiracist—they will find themselves carried along with the others.

- Beverly Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*

If I had read Tatum's analogy three years ago, I would have stared blankly at the page in confusion. For most of my life, I stood stationary on the walkway. The issue was not that I was a bigot or White supremacist-- on the contrary, I considered myself always a proponent of equality. I learned that slavery was wrong and that Nazis were "evil," and that no one should be judged by the color of their skin. I knew that racism still existed and I looked at White supremacist groups with disdain for being the source of such a vicious force. I thought to myself, *they're* the problem. If people like them could just stop being prejudiced and hateful, then racism wouldn't exist. In limiting racism to individual acts of bigotry and prejudice, I was moving along the walkway and heading towards the same end (although at a slower pace) as the White supremacists whom I scorned.

Racism is a system that privileges Whites, such as myself, for the color of our skin while it disadvantages people of color.<sup>1</sup> Racism is not solely comprised of

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly D. Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race* (Basic Books, 1999), 7

individual act of bigotry or prejudice and thus, we cannot fight it solely at the individual level. For true change in the racial inequality in our society to occur, we must fight the system.

Whites, being at the top of the system of inequality, have a unique chance to use their position to contribute to the fight against racism.

When I came to understand racism as a system, I came to see the urgent need for Whites to become actively antiracist. As we have been given power through the privilege that so many of us are unaware of, we can use that power to help correct the flawed system rather than perpetuate it. While the need for White antiracist activists in the U.S. is strong, the number of Whites who have decided to actively fight racism is small. In light of this, I developed this project in the hopes that studying the motivations of White people who *have* made that turn could shed light on what is needed for more Whites to do the same.

Although the amount of literature on White antiracists is limited, a few scholars conducted studies that have found invaluable information about activists' racial ideologies, their attitudes on being White, and how their racial self-perceptions affect and influence their work. Most scholars have portrayed an awareness of White privilege as a prerequisite for a White person to become antiracist. In Frankenberg's study of White women, all of the antiracists whom she interviewed were race cognizant and acknowledged the responsibility that White people (including themselves) have for racism.<sup>2</sup> In Jennifer Eichstedt's study, most participants not only acknowledged their White identity and White privilege, but admitted to being racist,

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<sup>2</sup> Frankenberg, but found in O'Brien 1999

and believed they had a responsibility to fight racism.<sup>3</sup> In regards to admitting to one's own racism, Eileen O'Brien goes so far as to say that we should "expect white anti-racists to, like former alcoholics, view themselves as "recovering racists" and be candid and up-front about their own racism."<sup>4</sup>

While recognizing White privilege is an important part of becoming antiracist, authors like Frankenberg and Eichstedt hold that before an individual can recognize her own racial privilege, she must first recognize her own race. This may sound obvious, but for many Whites, recognizing race and its societal implications can be a quite a challenge. Because our culture is based on "White norms,"<sup>5</sup> Whiteness has been so deeply normalized in U.S. society that it has become invisible to many eyes.<sup>6</sup> As a result, many Whites develop what Adrienne Rich once called a "Snow-blindness," or "White solipsism," which is to "think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness ruled the world."<sup>7</sup> And because of this normalization of Whiteness, Whites can live most of their lives without thinking about their race.<sup>8</sup> Thus, many scholars have spoken about the importance of "naming Whiteness" as this is a prerequisite for recognizing White privilege.

However, recognizing Whiteness can prove to be a significant obstacle for most White people, as Whites are frequently told to be colorblind and ignore their race and the race of others. The idea of ignoring skin color developed in the U.S. during the 1960s<sup>9</sup> under the pretense that ignoring race would perhaps make racism

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<sup>3</sup> Eichstedt, 454

<sup>4</sup> O'Brien, 1999, 310

<sup>5</sup> White Awareness, 13

<sup>6</sup> White Reign, 80;

<sup>7</sup> Quotes in White Reign, 80 (quotes in 1979)

<sup>8</sup> Tatum, 93-94

<sup>9</sup> Racism without racists, 15

go away.<sup>10</sup> Because of the atrocities that have been committed in history as a result of race, many Whites today still feel that the only way to move towards racial equality is to ignore race.<sup>11</sup> While colorblindness may seem to have good intentions at its core—the idea that ignoring race will prevent racial hierarchies—because race still plays a large part in our society and because racism is still very much alive today, to ignore race is to deny that racial inequality still exists. Along with this, because a colorblind White person does not see race, neither their own nor other’s, they will also fail to see White privilege. Thus, if cognizance of White privilege is seen as essential to becoming antiracist, as the authors noted above has shown, then abandoning colorblindness would also be required.

Despite these few notable studies and their important findings on White identity and colorblindness, a direct focus on White antiracist activists’ motivations for doing their work has been largely absent from this literature. While this topic has been explored to some extent, in studies of White antiracists centered on Whiteness<sup>12</sup> and to a somewhat lesser extent, in studies focusing on colorblindness,<sup>13</sup> the White anti-racist’s motivations are typically discussed only in relation to these subjects, and rarely as the topic of exploration. Furthermore, these studies have focused largely on activists who grew up or began their activism during or around the civil rights era, and consequently the young activists of today have been largely overlooked. Although a great deal can be learned from these seasoned activists, the racial climate they fought in is different from today’s. Whereas the activists of the civil rights era

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<sup>10</sup> Racism without Racists, 1

<sup>11</sup> Being White, 21

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Jennifer L. Eichstedt, “Problematic White Identities and a Search for Racial Justice.” Sociological Forum and Ruth Frankenberg

were up against legal segregation and rampant displays of blatant racism, those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are largely fighting against a White population that believes that racism died in the 60s.

With these factors in mind, I designed this study to focus solely on the motivations of young antiracist activists of today in the hopes that in giving a voice to those who are currently at the forefront of the fight against racism, Whites *today* can learn from those who have managed to overcome the obstacles of becoming antiracist activists in contemporary society.

## **Methodology**

The Participants: Who they are and how I found them

My use of the term “activist” is largely for want of a better term to describe someone who *actively* fights against racism. My intention wasn’t to limit my research to activists in the traditional sense, that is, as Becky Thompson describes them as “placard-carrying protesters attending rallies and demonstrations.<sup>14</sup>” While these “true” activists are essential to the antiracist movement, I did not want to overlook those “nontraditional” ones who, although may not belong to an activist group, devote their everyday lives, in perhaps even small commonplace ways, to fighting racism. I hope that by studying these types of “activists”, other Whites will see that although they may not have access to antiracist groups or do not have the time to join one, they can still actively fight racism in each corner of their day to day lives.

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<sup>13</sup> E.g. O’Brien 1999 and 2000

<sup>14</sup> Becky Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

In order to find young (those born between 1980 and 1989) White antiracists I first attempted to track down the “White Women Against Racism” student group that was founded at Mt. Holyoke College in 1992 after the Rodney King trial.<sup>15</sup> Not having known that White antiracist student groups like this existed, I did a simple Google search on this group and other ones like it. Although the Mt. Holyoke group was unfortunately defunct, I was able to find a handful of White antiracist student groups on college campuses across the country. While small, the circle of college-aged White antiracist activists proved to be well-connected, as making a handful of initial contacts soon led me to nearly 20 potential participants. In fact, one contact I made at Oberlin College led me to a number of potential participants who were current students or recent graduates of my *own* University and whom I had not been aware of. In addition to the contacts I made via the internet, I also sought out other students at my University who were involved in anti-racist work.

Once I obtained the names of potential participants, I sent them each a recruitment e-mail stating the intention of my project and my definition of an “activist” as “anyone who considers themselves to be actively fighting against racism in some way or another, whether it be with an organization, group, or on their own.” Thus, the term was largely self-defining and covered a broad range of people, from those who are deeply involved in anti-racist organizations to those who take race-related classes and who were very much at the beginning stages of anti-racist work.

While I tried to obtain as diverse a sample as possible with participants from a wide variety of colleges and universities (both public and private), socioeconomic

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<sup>15</sup> Beverly D. Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations About Race* (Basic Books, 1999), 110

backgrounds, political ideologies, genders, and sexual identities, my position as a student at a private liberal university in New England limited my accessibility to some populations. Finding activists from public universities proved itself to be especially difficult as all of the White antiracist student groups were at private colleges and universities. I contacted a number of friends and acquaintances who attend public universities in New York and Connecticut, but they were unaware of any such student groups or individual antiracists on their campuses. Although the majority of my contacts at public universities are not antiracists and thus would perhaps be unaware of such groups or individuals even if they were present on their campuses, my research of antiracist student groups on a number of these campuses turned up empty. I was able to find one White antiracist activist who had attended a public school in Michigan, but unfortunately, she was beyond the age range of my study. Even she was unaware of any other antiracists either at her alma matter or at the public university where she currently works. While my inability to find White antiracist activists at public universities could be representative of an overall lack of presence at these types of educational institutions and thus, it may also be purely a product of my lack of accessibility to these types of institutions.

One of the primary reasons I had attempted to find White antiracist activists from both public and private schools was in order to achieve a socio-economically diverse pool of participants. Indeed, all of my participants indicated in a pre-interview questionnaire that their families made at least \$50,000 annually and the majority made \$100,000 or above annually. All described themselves to be either lower-middle, middle, or upper-middle class. Thus, while none of my participants represented the working class, this presents an interesting contradiction to previous



findings on White antiracists' economic backgrounds. As O'Brien first pointed out, her diverse pool of participants, ranging from "homeless transients to affluent lawyers" challenges Herbert Aptheker's<sup>16</sup> finding that most White antiracists of the past 200 years have come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> My sample also serves to challenge the notion that contemporary White antiracist activists are predominantly lower class today.<sup>18</sup>

The 12 participants I interviewed were between the ages of 18 and 25, and with the exception of one, were either current undergraduate or graduate students, at one of three private schools in New England. The one participant who was not a student at the time was a 2004 graduate of another New England private school and a current employee at one as well. Although I found a number of willing participants in Louisiana and California, two of whom currently worked for antiracist organizations; and a number from a Christian White antiracist group at Messiah College, due to the distance and constraints of this project I was unable to meet with these activists. However, while my pool of participants is currently situated in the same geographic region, they come from all corners of the country, including California, Minnesota, Georgia, Florida, Washington D.C., New York, Michigan, Massachusetts and Vermont.

### The Interviews

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert Aptheker, Antiracism in U.S. History: The First Two Hundred Years (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992)

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, 1999, 307

<sup>18</sup> In his study of White racial *progressives* (although not necessarily activists), Bonilla Silva found that six of the 8 participants were from working class or lower-middle-class backgrounds. See Eduardo Bonilla Silva, Racism Without Racists (Oxford: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 138.

The interviews were conducted during the months of November and December 2007. All interviews were tape recorded and with the exception of one interview which took place in two parts, all took place during one session, lasting anywhere between one hour to two and one half hours. I allowed the participants to choose where to conduct the interviews so they could be in as familiar and comfortable environment as possible.

I approached this project not wanting it to be a sterile academic construction in which I, the researcher, remove myself and my emotion entirely in order to present myself as an expert scholarly observer. I cannot do this, nor did I ever want to because, as a White person attempting to become actively antiracist, this topic is tied to me intellectually, emotionally, and personally. The thought of being the “blank-faced or neutral interviewer<sup>19</sup>,” as Frankenberg calls it, seemed unnatural to me. With this in mind, I modeled my interview style off that of Frankenberg’s and approached the interviews as conversations among peers rather than a data collection process as interviews sometimes are.

At the beginning of each interview, I briefly told the participant about my own experience with becoming antiracist and encouraged him or her to treat the “session” as an informal conversation. In the footsteps of Frankenberg, I welcomed them to ask me questions at any time either about the project itself or about my own experiences, and even to ask me any of the questions I asked them. I hoped that by approaching the interviews in this manner, I would create a more relaxed and open environment in which the participants would feel comfortable to speak freely without fear of

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<sup>19</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 30.

judgment. While for most of the interviews I asked the questions and they answered, there would be random outbreaks of conversation from time to time usually regarding similarities in our experiences. Beyond this, I generally tried to limit the sharing of my own thoughts and opinions unless they were asked for, but at times I did so without prompting. Beyond sharing my background at the beginning of this interview, this typically occurred when I felt that it would facilitate a more honest answer from the participant on a more difficult question, as I did in this exchange:

AP: How would you say your friend group, your core group of friends, how's the racial make-up now? Because I know that for me, I wish that mine was a lot more racially diverse and I feel bad that it's not. How is yours [now]?  
Adam: Um...it is...I think it's more homogenous than I like. Just like you.

Having a racially diverse group of friends is sometimes seen as validation of a White person's antiracist attitudes and so, for those who had mostly White friends, this question was a sensitive matter. By talking about the lack of racial diversity in my own group of friends, I hoped that the participant would feel comfortable to give a truthful answer without feeling that their validity as an antiracist activist was being questioned. As we see above, Adam was hesitant to answer immediately, but by posing my question as I did above, Adam could identify with me and answer without feeling alienated for the homogeneity of his friend group. Thus, he could say freely that his friend group is "more homogenous" than he likes, but take comfort in the fact that in this manner, he is "Just like" me.

In some interviews, the feeling was more formal, and generally I did not share much or anything about myself. However, with some of the participants, a rapport was developed initially that facilitated a more informal and relaxed tone for the interview. It was these interviews that felt more like conversations between friends

and flowed as such. We joked and laughed, and sometimes a conversation would continue after the tape recorder turned off. In retrospect, I recognize that these more conversational interviews generally happened in a space that the participant had chosen and was familiar with: a coffee shop or office in which they worked, a campus lounge, and even sitting on a bed in a dorm room. The other interviews that had a more “formal” feel generally took place in a classroom that I had chosen. While I am sure the personality of the participant and the chemistry between us played into the tone that was set, perhaps the participants’ level of familiarity with the location also contributed to their level of comfort and thus, the openness and the level of formality of the interview.

The interviews were largely unscripted and the questions asked changed in accordance with the participants’ life experiences. However, there were a number of key questions I asked in almost every interview. These included questions about where they grew up, their parents’ racial attitudes, their education (or lack thereof) on racism and other race issues both within school and at home, when they first became aware of racism, when they began antiracist work, and why they continue their work today.

## **Results**

After many hours of interviewing and listening to the stories of these White antiracist activists, I have found that there is no one formula to become actively antiracist. Each participant finds their motivation to fight racism in a unique and powerful way. However, what unites them all is that in order to walk against the moving pathway of racism, they have had to recognize racism not as a problem that

only affects people of color, but as one that is personally connected to themselves and their own lives.

In the first chapter, I explore how this connection is made through an awareness of White privilege and one's place in the racist system. In chapter two I investigate how interracial friendships and relationships can bring the pain of racism to the forefront of a White person's life in a way that highlights the urgency of fighting racism. Finally, I conclude with a look at how a White person can use their own experiences with gender oppression and anti-Semitism to connect their own experiences to the harmful forces of racism and understand the importance of actively fighting against it.

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The lives of real people cannot be put into small boxes. Their stories cannot be looked at solely as data, nor can they be broken up into neat thematic sections. By presenting the stories of seven of the participants who best illustrate the points of connection made among the sample and telling their lives in full, or nearly in full, I wish to show that while the point of connection that I focus on is important, no antiracists' story can be boiled down to any one point and that there are a myriad of factors that have helped them become antiracist. Through sharing the stories and motivations of White people who have taken the extra step to turn around on the walkway of racism I hope that other Whites will come to see the urgency and importance of fighting racism and will find the guidance and inspiration to do so themselves.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Within the System**

To speak of Whiteness is, I think to assign everyone a place in the relations of racism. It is to emphasize that dealing with racism is not merely an option for White people—that, rather, racism shapes white people’s lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life.

--Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*

For Jessica and Louis, the two subjects of this chapter, an awareness of White privilege has been a primary motivation for doing antiracist work. Once they understood White privilege and recognized that they are part of a system that unfairly advantages them based on their skin color and unfairly disadvantages and oppresses others based on *their* skin color, the issue of racism suddenly became much more personal. Through this personal connection, these participants developed race cognizance, meaning an understanding that because Whites are implicated in a system of racism, a failure to actively combat racism would signify complacency in perpetuating it.

#### **Jessica**

*"Learning about white privilege was like the most important aspect I think for me to learn about racism...Because until it became personal there wasn't really any way that I was going to be involved or make any kind of changes."*

When I met Jessica, she was in the midst of writing her undergraduate thesis on colorblindness and had recently founded “Debunking Whiteness,” a student group

that focuses on raising awareness of racism and White privilege. These two projects are telling of her journey to antiracist activism, as it was only when she ceased being colorblind and came to recognize her own White privilege in college that she was able to begin actively fighting racism. As an individual who grew up completely blind to racism, coming to see herself as part of the racist system helped Jessica to understand that if she was not fighting against racism, she was implicit in its oppression upon others.

Jessica was taught early in her life to embrace colorblindness. At her elementary school in her hometown of Ann Harbor, Michigan she was taught that it was a “positive thing,” that “well-intentioned goodness [was] not see[ing] race.” She describes her school as “big on diversity and cultural awareness,” yet any diversity of race was ignored. Jessica was taught about prominent Black figures like Martin Luther King and even learned the Black national anthem, but any lessons on racism that she received were “completely disconnected” and conveyed a message of equality that “made everyone feel good about themselves.” Racism was as far removed from Jessica as it could possibly be. While most Whites are able to recognize present-day racism on an individual level at the very least, Jessica thought that racism was something that “belonged in the 1800s and didn’t exist anymore.” Thus, for 16 years Jessica looked at the world with the thought that “everything was so perfect.”

Jessica’s failure to recognize that racism exists in the contemporary world presented a significant barrier to her becoming antiracist, as the first step to fighting racism is, of course, recognizing that it exists. Furthermore, because White privilege is what eventually made racism “personal” to Jessica, Jessica’s colorblind mentality

further removed her connection to racism by preventing her from seeing her own race and thus, her own racial privilege.

Jessica was able to continue living her life completely oblivious to racism until she heard a racist joke for the first time when she was a sophomore in high school. This incident was her gateway to antiracism because by exposing her to evidence of *present*-day racial inequality, thus she could no longer believe that racism only existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She describes her reaction to this incident:

It was just this shaking the world. The world cracked open in a lot of ways and I began to really question everything around me. And it was this whole, “Oh my God, the world’s not perfect like everyone has been telling me for the past sixteen years of my life. I was just so sheltered, I had no idea. So I think that is when I started to really understand.

This incident tore her conception of a perfect, racism-free world apart and led her to reevaluate everything she had previously learned about race and racism. With her eyes now opened to racism, she was able to see racial disparities in her own immediate world, such as how her Black and Latino classmates were tracked into lower level courses while those who were White were placed into advanced classes.

Despite these realizations, because she had been taught for so long that ignoring race was the “good” thing to do, she struggled for the next few years to maintain the colorblind view she had been so accustomed to having. Although Jessica did not resolve this struggle immediately, the confusion it created motivated her seek answers to her questions about race. She says:

It [was] really hard because I could tell there was a difference, there was some difference in race, but everyone was telling me, just look at people and be colorblind basically. But it was like, how can I be colorblind if I can see that all the Black students are sitting at this table and all the White students are sitting at this table? How could you ignore that?! And does that mean that Black people are different than White people? I had no idea what it meant. I wanted to understand it because it was so contradictory to what everyone was



telling me, basically. And so, I think that was where it all started [laughs]. I dunno, there was internal...dissonance, I guess

While the realization that contemporary racial inequality exists was an important step in Jessica's path to antiracism, because she was surrounded by her parents and her friends who encouraged her to remain colorblind, she was unable to become antiracist until she learned about her own White identity in her junior year of college.

Prior to entering a Psychology of Racism course in her junior year, Jessica knew nothing about White privilege. While much of the readings for the class revolved around White privilege, learning about this topic through the stories her classmates of color told is what impacted her most. Before this class, Jessica said there had been a gap between her and her White identity. Listening to her classmates speak, however, she came to understand how she, as a White woman, benefits from racial privilege and helps perpetuate the negative experiences that her classmates spoke about. She describes her experience in this exchange:

J: So that's what that class offered me is to really hear from students of color on campus, you know, their own experiences. And how I was helping perpetuate those...

A: What ways did you discover you were perpetuating these forms of oppression or however you would describe that?

J: I think there's such a disconnect for me with racism and myself and being White. And I wanted to understand it, but I felt illegitimate because I was White. I was like, what am I supposed to do about racism. And then I realized, you know, I love Beverly Tatum's analogy about the walkway in the airport...I mean, those types of things really hit home for me, 'cause it's not, you know, being a part of the solution is really taking the active role and going on the walkway and running the opposite direction. And that's so hard for some people to [do] and realizing that as well intentioned as I was, I was still a part of the system...

While her experience hearing the racist joke brought racism closer to her by waking her up to the fact that racism still exists, the experience of understanding her

own race and role in the racist system moved racism even closer to her own life. Upon recognizing her implication in a system that benefits her while at the same time disadvantages her classmates and other people of color, she desired to distance herself from it. She says, “it’s just something that I did not want to be a part of, something I did not want to perpetuate myself.”

It is particularly important that she cites Tatum’s walkway analogy. Through this, she was able to understand that, regardless of her intentions, unless she is actively fighting against racism, she is contributing to its survival. Thus she became responsible to act against racism lest she remain a part of a system she wished to distance herself from. She says, “I think when I really realized when I had a personal stake in fighting racism, when I realized that I was contributing to it by not acknowledging it, that’s when I really started to be antiracist.”

Although Jessica says that recognizing White privilege was the most important aspect of her education on race and racism, she says it was also the hardest because she did not want to hear that she had “unearned privilege or that [she] benefited from racism.” Coming to terms with their role as benefactors of an oppressive system causes a great deal of anger and guilt for many White people, which is why so many choose to ignore it or deny that its existence. Jessica however has found a way to help alleviate this guilt and “empty” white identity through her activism. She says “to fill that void [of empty White identity] is knowing who you are and taking an active role in figuring it out.” Her activism then is a way to take responsibility for who she is and to find pride, rather than shame, in her White identity by actively fighting the system of racial oppression.

Thus, in Jessica's narrative, it is clear that in order for her to become actively antiracist, she had to make the transition from a race-ignorance to race cognizance, and then recognize that as well intentioned as she may be, if she is not fighting against the system then she is implicit in it. Once she was able to understand this, racism became directly related to her own life and her own identity, because in order to maintain a healthy self-perception and an identity which she could find pride in, it was essential for her to take action.

### **Louis**

*"I don't think I can ever stop thinking about issues of inequality and privilege... it's almost not a choice now, I just always come back to that..."*

Louis was a sophomore in college at the time of the interview and very much at the beginning stages of antiracist work. Louis's work is mostly done on a smaller, interpersonal level, such as by speaking to friends and family about racism and White privilege, and pointing out racist material he encounters in class (such as stereotypes in films) to his professors. Like Jessica, one of Louis' primary motivations to do antiracist work has come through his understanding of his implication in the racist system. The effect of learning about this was much the same with Louis as it was with Jessica's experience, however in his case, coming to an awareness of his racial privilege did not immediately inspire him to act. For Louis, coming to terms with his White privilege proved to be difficult, and for many years, he chose to ignore it rather than act against it. It wasn't until college, when the *choice* to acknowledge racism and White privilege no longer became an option, that he finally began to become actively antiracist.

Louis grew up in a small, predominantly White town in the mountains of northern California and like Jessica, his early life was characterized by a deep colorblindness. While Louis noticed race enough to remember that some of classmates were of color, he says that their race “really wasn’t an issue.” In fact, Louis was so secure in his colorblind stance that he experienced a great deal of uncertainty and discomfort when his colorblindness was challenged when he began attending a multi-racial high school. With racial differences now salient in this mixed-race setting, he began to notice his classmate Tom’s race, but wanted nothing more than to just see him as he had in grade school—as being no different from all his other (White) classmates. He describes this change in his thoughts on Tom and the struggle he felt because of it:

[Before high school] I think I noticed he had a different skin color. It really wasn’t an issue. Then as I started thinking about it more, when I thought about him, I thought about his race rather than who I had known growing up with him and it was just frustrating knowing that I could be colorblind...but also race conscious. [...] I was just afraid it would get in the way of me seeing him as a human being where everyone’s individual.

The ambivalence that Louis experienced is not surprising considering that many Whites espouse the idea that in order for our society to overcome racism, we must completely ignore race. By this logic, anyone who recognizes race is then a racist.<sup>20</sup> However, this view is put in tension with the idea that if a person remains colorblind, he will never recognize his race and the privilege that comes with it, thus keeping him further from recognizing his role in the racist system. Because it was only through coming to understand himself within this system that Louis began to actively fight

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<sup>20</sup> Karyn D. McKinney. Being White: Stories of Race and Racism. (New York: Routledge, 2005) 21-22

racism, colorblindness presented a strong barrier to his development of an antiracist conscious, as it did for Jessica as well.

In Louis's junior and senior years of (public) high school, he participated in an integrated social studies and English program, in which the students spent most of the semester learning African American history. The course culminated with the students making documentaries on the legacy of *Brown v. Board of Education*. While the documentary focused on present-day issues, the in-class portion of the course was limited to the past. Louis says that the history he learned was important in developing an "intellectual basis" of race-issues and that this sparked his interest in studying and discussing race issues further. However, despite this education, he remained personally disconnected from the issues. He says, "I still feel like as a student it was all there but I—I still [didn't] really know what to do or really how to think about it."

What was missing, he now realizes, was a discussion of Whiteness. He says,

...understanding that...[the] privilege of some oppresses others...I think that gives me a better framework for understanding than like, "oh, it's unequal." I think White privilege in the fundamental part of understanding that. So I think if I had been in high school and realized that Whiteness was treated as normal, it might have been an easier entry point to changing things.

While Louis was unable to learn about White privilege in school, he had the opportunity to do so through two workshops he attended while in high school. Although the first workshop wasn't entirely focused on race, he was at least briefly introduced to the concept of White privilege through various activities such as the "walk of privilege." In this exercise, the participants line up together and then statements pertaining to societal privileges are read. If a person shares this privilege, then they move forward, if they do not, they move back. This activity makes privilege visible—the role of skin color in determining privilege cannot be overlooked.

Louis was able to build on this introduction to White privilege later through a weekend-long community workshop he attended towards the end of high school in which he read a number of pieces about White privilege by prominent White antiracists such as Robert Jensen and Tim Wise. Through reading about White privilege, he was able to look at race issues in a new light, this time focusing on the oppressor (Whites) rather than solely the oppressed (people of color). He describes this experience:

Um, I think it was the first time like I critically looked at Whiteness before, 'cause before I would say in high school we learned about race and how stuff's fucked up... And it's unequal, but I didn't feel I really, I don't know,—it's something about naming privilege rather than only naming, oppression, only naming inequality. And it goes back to the complacency thing, like, in some ways we're complicit in all this if we're not doing anything against it. [...] And it's something you always know in the back of your mind, but like, naming it straight up like that, makes you realize, like, how much more of an issue it is.

In his education on racism up until this point, Louis had only been shown half the picture of racism by solely focusing on those who are targeted by it. To look at racism in this manner is dangerous because it conveys the idea that racism is a crime without a perpetrator. Through this lens, one can examine and pity the “victim” and note the injustices present in the world without acknowledging the cause of this crime. That White people benefit from racist institutions raises the question: if someone recognizes that a group of people are benefiting from a system that oppresses others and then does nothing about it, are they not then complicit in furthering the system? In order to become an antiracist, Louis needed to find an answer to this question.

While Louis had previously been introduced to the concept of White privilege in a general sense through reading James Baldwin (a prominent Black author) in a

literature course he took in high school, the pieces that he read in the workshop were especially helpful to Louis because they were written by *White* antiracists. By reading about how White privilege was present in their lives, he was able to draw parallels to his own and recognize how he personally benefits from White privilege. In regards to Jensen's autobiographical work in which he writes about how White privilege affects each part of his life, Louis realized that he could "tell [his] own story the same way." Recognizing these similarities made it hard for him to ignore his own racial privilege. As he says, "if you hear a White person who's had similar experiences, by reading that you can't deny that your own experience isn't the same." Upon realizing his own White privilege and role in the racist system Louis began to look to the White authors as antiracist role models. He says, "people like Time Wise are really powerful, because I can almost see myself in his shoes and I can use him as a role model for realizing how issues of race *do* affect me (5)." Therefore, these authors provided Louis with what he calls an "entry point" into engaging in issues of racial inequality by helping him realize his own White privilege and by helping him to think that if other Whites can do anti-racist work, so can he. Thus, Louis first became aware and began engaging with issues of White privilege in high school, however, he characterizes college as the period during which he first grasped racism and White privilege. The question then is: why is this the case?

One reason he suggests is that the content of his college classes differed from most of those in his high school by providing him with a more comprehensive and White-conscious education of race by learning history from a *Black* perspective, rather than through the dominant White narrative which he had been taught previously. While he had previously learned of the need to understand both the

oppressor and oppressed in order to understand racism, seeing the contrasting perspectives of each side helped him to understand the ways in which the dominant narrative had distorted history, such as through the recreation of Martin Luther King Jr into an “ideal” proponent of “colorblind equality.” Furthermore, he was able to learn about post-1960s African American history, whereas there had been a “big void between the 60s and the present” in his history classes in secondary school. The classes he took in college helped him to see the hidden racial agenda of contemporary policies and movements and how “since the 70s, so many of the social platforms have been...racist with coded words.” Understanding this “backlash to the civil rights movement” he says has been “really helpful in contextualizing present-day issues.” He explains the importance of closing the gap between the civil rights era and today: “I didn’t have an overall concept of how all of society went from like the 60s to the present. I really didn’t get it. [...] But I feel like in college, I’ve come to a lot better understanding [of] that. It makes all the difference in understanding the larger present-day situations.” Finally, having this “intellectual” basis for understanding present-day situations has led him to see that Whites have a responsibility to fight the racist system: “in some ways that’s also made me realize that...when thinking about White privilege, all White people are implicated in the system and have...a responsibility to change it (20).” Here, Louis shows an awareness of systemic racism, White privilege, and White responsibility—three crucial steps in his process of becoming actively anti-racist.

Beyond providing him with an intellectual basis for understanding racism, there is a more pragmatic aspect of the classes that made learning about White privilege this time around finally lead him to take the step and actively begin working



against racism: the duration of his courses. While learning about White privilege in the workshops he attended in high school had a significant impact on him, they took place over very short periods of a few days at a time, and he only went to two such workshops. Therefore, despite the fact that he learned enough about how racism and White privilege affect society to give him a desire to work against inequality, once he returned to his every day life where race was rarely spoken about, it became easy to forget about his racial privilege and to slip back into complacency and inaction. Even though the lessons Louis learned in college about race and Whiteness were similar to those he learned in high school, because he was frequently put into contact with ideas about race while he was in college, he was unable to ‘turn off’ his awareness of his role in systemic racism.

The ability that Louis’ high school environment had to pull him back into complacency about race is a testament to the power of what Shannon Sullivan calls the “seductive habits of White privilege.”<sup>21</sup> What Sullivan speaks of is the notion of “unconscious habit,” which W.E.B. DuBois first explored.<sup>22</sup> This habit, she says, is created through “socially inherited customs and attitudes that resists its transformation,” and uses “active mechanisms and strategies for blocking access to them by conscious inquiry.”<sup>23</sup> When a person has been taught all of his life to ignore his race and racial privilege, doing so becomes an unconscious habit. And indeed, it

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<sup>21</sup> Shannon Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indian University Press, 2006), 63

<sup>22</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 296 as cited in Shannon Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indian University Press, 2006), 21

is truly seductive, because by giving into this habit of complacency, a White person does not have to think about race or question whether the privileges he has have been given to him unjustly. An habitual ignorance about racism means that one does not have to analyze one's role as oppressor. The race problems can be ignored or can simply be blamed on someone else, and the White person can go on with their life, guilt-free.

Once a person has become accustomed to this comfortable way of life and has developed these unconscious habits, choosing to abandon ignorance in favor of a life where he must critically examine himself and recognize that he is at the top of a system that crushes others without warrant is a truly difficult thing to do. Louis recognizes this in himself, saying, "Subconsciously it's easier for me to identify with Whiteness at some level," and thus remaining aware and critical of his White privilege is still difficult for Louis as he spent most of his life habitually cultivating a *lack* of awareness of his race and privilege. And, as Sullivan notes, because the habit can "actively" resist and "undermine" its own change, giving up this habit is a long and slow process.<sup>24</sup>

Because these habits of White privilege were able to grow unchallenged for most of his life, Louis was actually unable to break the habit of race-ignorance with his own willpower alone. He had spent so many years ignoring race, that it was difficult for him to think about his own race affects his place in society. Sullivan says, "While unconscious habits of white privilege will continue to thwart attempts to

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<sup>23</sup> Shannon Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indian University Press, 2006), 22

<sup>24</sup> Shannon Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege. (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indian University Press, 2006), 22

expose and change them, change can occur and habits of resistance can be developed, but only if a person takes responsibility for her unconscious life.<sup>25</sup>” This is why Louis’ classes in college were so important, because they countered the desire to give into habitual race-ignorance by consistently placing him in situations that *forced* him to think about racism and White privilege. He says that one course in which he is doing a 25 page research paper on White privilege on his campus has become “very central in [his] life” and has made him think about race so much that sometimes it’s the only thing he says he can think about. Thus, the importance of Louis’ classes is that they made White privilege so central to his life that the choice to ignore it was no longer a choice. And with this, he could no longer ignore his responsibility to fight against racism.

Despite his current involvement with antiracist work, the temptation to slip into the complacency is still strong due to the White environments in which he grew up and currently lives. Because he was ignorant of race for so much of his life, Louis still sometimes espouses a colorblind mentality and treats racial awareness as an annoyance that gets in the way of him seeing others as individuals. He says:

...after working on this research paper sometimes I just, I don’t wanna think about race ever again. Sometimes [...] I feel like it’s the only thing I can think about and so I don’t wanna think about it at all, ‘cause I feel like it does get in the way sometimes. [...] I feel like in some ways it’s compromised my ability to [laughs] see people as people.

Despite Louis’ desire to forget about race, he does not think that at this point in his life he ever will. He says: “I don’t think I can ever...stop thinking about issues of inequality and privilege. It’s almost not a choice now, I just always come back to

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<sup>25</sup> Revealing Whiteness, 197

that.” When I asked him how he would feel about himself if tomorrow he decided that he was going to stop thinking about race forever he answered:

I definitely have those inclinations. But, I just don’t think...I mean, I would feel horrible, ‘cause that’s the fundamental problem of privilege is the ability to just give up or not address it, um...though, I mean the way I’ve been thinking about it is the number one privilege is to not be aware of privilege. But the number two privilege is to be aware of it, but not do anything about it. But then the number three one is to do something about it, but decide to stop whenever you want. So...I mean, I think for me, it will always be a part of my life out of necessity, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to stop thinking about it.

It seems then that his awareness of White privilege has been ingrained into him so much, most likely through his classes, that it has solidified itself in his long-term consciousness and motivates him to continue his work. Thus, while Louis continues to struggle with maintaining his awareness of race and White privilege, as long as he can remain engaged in classes and antiracist work which force him to remain aware, then perhaps he can continue pressing in the fight against racism.

### Conclusion

It was crucial for the participants to learn about White privilege because doing so allowed them to make the transition from seeing racism as an issue of the past that was both temporally and emotionally distant from them to seeing it as a present-day system of oppression that they are implicitly a part of. An essential prerequisite to this understanding was a collapse of colorblindness, as the participants were only able to recognize racism and identify with their own White privilege once race (both their own and others’) was made salient in their lives.

As we saw with Jessica, however, one does not automatically recognize White privilege as soon as one sheds a colorblind ideology. Both she and Louis only became aware of how they are advantaged by the racist system through formal education experiences. While classes provided both with the necessary intellectual background on White privilege and racism, they also provided other ways for the participants to engage with issues related to race. For Jessica, her classes provided her with a way to gain a more emotional understanding of racism through hearing the personal stories about how racism has directly affected her classmates of color. In addition, classes can also serve as a way to force engagement in race issues, which, as Louis shows is sometimes necessary when the (unconscious *and* conscious) habit of White privilege is strong.

In whatever way they came to understand racism as a system that benefits them while oppressing others, once they did, racism personally connected to them. With the understanding that they were complicit in the system unless they were fighting against it, they could only remain complacent as long as they were willing to contribute to the oppression of others.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Interracial Friendships and Relationships**

The contact hypothesis suggests that interracial contact can help to improve racial attitudes and reduce prejudice.<sup>26</sup> While the verity of this hypothesis has long been debated, this study shows that interracial contact can serve not only to reduce prejudice, but can go far beyond that and motivate a White person to become antiracist. However, sheer contact alone will not do.

While the participants included in this chapter both had contact with people of color while growing up, it was not until college, when their contact changed from casual relationships to very meaningful ones that this “contact” finally became a motivation for them to fight against racism. It seems that because Whites are not the targets of racism, it can be easy for them to fail to notice its existence in their lives. But, when those who are closest to a person are hurt by racism, the problem quickly moves closer to home, and the need to fight racism then becomes personal.

#### **James**

James is one of the participants who has maintained the highest level of involvement in social justice related work. As a 2004 graduate of a prestigious liberal arts college, he has since become the director of a chapter of a national Christian collegiate organization at a small northeastern university. He has held this

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<sup>26</sup> Lee Sigelman and Susan Welch. "The Contact Hypothesis Revisited: Black-White Interaction and Positive Racial Attitudes." *Social Forces* 71 (1993): 78. [Jstor](#). Olin Library, Middletown, CT. 13 Apr. 2008. Path: Interracial Contact Hypothesis.

position for four years, and currently lives in a low-income and predominantly Black neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut. James' apartment has become a community center of sorts where neighborhood meetings often take place and where a handful of community members have taken up temporary residence when they have had to move from their own home. Although he also does anti-racist work as the leader of the Christian student group, most of his activism takes place within his neighborhood and is focused primarily on socioeconomic inequality. However, while James says that none of his work is officially focused on fighting racism, he recognizes that any community work he does is "racialized" because he sees socioeconomic inequality and racial inequality as closely tied together. As he says, "... they're just so tied together historically, I don't feel like you could deal with racism without dealing with economics."

While today James works and lives with people of color in a low-income neighborhood, his roots are grounded in an entirely different environment. Before starting college, James spent his life in an affluent and predominantly White neighborhood in the outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia. James remembers having numerous interactions with people of color, but they were predominantly "non-relational," meaning they were usually brief and with people he did not know, such as workers in the city or students who attended his school. But despite the racial diversity in the city as a whole and the fact that he did manage to form a handful of somewhat meaningful relationships with people of color, his immediate environment, including his neighborhood, school, and friend groups remained almost entirely White. He says, "There was no sense that the world was White, there was just the sense that your social world was White."

The frequency and type of contact he had with people of color was important because it seems that it was largely due to the lack of interracial contact and the people with which it occurred that he developed prejudices against his Black housekeeper early in his life. Although he describes her as a “really good friend to the family” and said that she was “very close” to them, he recalls feeling embarrassed as a seven year old when a friend’s mother referred to her as his “nurse” rather than housekeeper:

J: I felt this sense of...since she said “nurse” and not “housekeeper”, and nurse has a much more relational feel to it...that I should feel some kind of shame about that, that she was Black and she was my nurse...

AP: How come you felt that way—the shame?

J: I have no idea!...Well, I have theories now [laughs]...so somewhere latently I had absorbed [laughs] the idea that white people were not supposed to be...maybe it was the sense of being young and being dependent.

Later he continues:

There was this kind of a sense of shame that I was that close or that *dependent*, maybe...as a little child or something, on a woman who was Black.

He explains why he felt this prejudice:

I’m pretty confident nothing like that was ever concretely and consciously said, like, “You should not associate with whatever.” In fact, the opposite was said. [Pause] So, there’s just a lot of separation, I mean Atlanta, like most other cities, is residentially segregated. So there’s a lot of separation. I think it’s just probably something that I just probably absorbed from who I knew, from who my parents were friends with, the kind of people that I went to church with...my relatives. Just kind of the people I knew, you just kind of absorbed it.

While he does not remember any explicit expressions of prejudice by these people, this seems to have mattered little because although he was not being told



directly that he should not be close to Blacks, his environment—the fact that he was *physically* separated from blacks—seemed to teach him that he should remain *relationally* distant from blacks as well.

Considering the racial homogeneity of James’ social world, it is hardly surprising that he described himself as “clueless” to race issues until college. Given this, it is also reasonable to believe that he probably would have remained clueless had it not been for his involvement in a Christian student group on campus. James’ involvement with the Christian Fellowship, as it is officially called, was helpful in his becoming antiracist for three primary reasons. First it provided him with opportunities to develop not only an intellectual understanding of racism, but an emotional and spiritual connection as well.

The basis of James’ intellectual understanding of racism was built during his first two years of college when he attended a week-long seminar with the Christian Fellowship. The seminar offered workshops on a variety of topics related to Christianity, one of which was history of racism and the Bible. Through this workshop, James gained a general knowledge of racism, such as the differences between personal and societal racism, and intentional and unintentional racism. Beyond this, he also learned how to understand racism in a Biblical context, which would later influence his spiritual connection to racism. The concept of racism was not entirely foreign to James at this point, as he had at times heard people describe their personal experiences with racism, but James calls this workshop a “moment of realization of what racism really looks like” and a “turning point” because it provided him with a “framework to pull [the experiences] together” and understand them better, as well as with the language he needed to discuss these topics.

The Christian Fellowship also provided James with experiential opportunities to learn about race issues through his leadership roles within the group. When James became a student leader in his sophomore year, he and his co-leaders were faced with the challenge of resolving racially motivated conflicts among the students in the group. Thus, as a leader, he was required to deal with race issues before he had ever made a conscious decision to do so. These experiences gave him a glimpse of large-scale racial and ethnic tensions and the difficulties of solving them. By his senior year in college, after attempting to resolve local racial tensions for more than two years, he became disillusioned and realized that “Racial issues are a mess. And trying to build a community where everyone’s valued is a mess [...] A multi-ethnic community just doesn’t work. People are always getting trounced in some way and we’re always biting.” However, instead of making him give up, this realization instead gave him valuable knowledge that he now can use in his current antiracist work.

While the group conflict was important in giving James a deeper understanding of race issues, resolving the problem required him to work closely with a number of American and international women of color who were student leaders as well. This setting was a crucial step in his becoming antiracist because it provided him with the opportunity to build substantial relationships with people of color for one of the first times in his life. What is important to note here is the difference between the contact he had with people of other races before college and that which he had with his co-leaders in the Christian fellowship. While the fact that his contact in college was coupled with his developing an intellectual understanding is part of the difference, the type of contact was also significant.

Unlike some White people who live in such racially isolated areas that they do not even come in contact with people of color, James, as mentioned previously, was rather accustomed to interacting with people of color while growing up. However, his contact with people of color was limited either to those in lower status positions relative to himself and his family (such as his family's housekeeper or workers in the city) or when it was with people of the same status as him (classmates), the contact was casual and non-relational. The conditions under which James' cross-racial contact took place are important because, as the famous scholar on prejudice Gordon Allport says in *The Nature of Prejudice*, mere interracial contact isn't enough to reduce prejudice in a person-- this contact needs to be of some depth and must occur between individuals of equal social status who are working together.<sup>27</sup> Thus, what made James' contact with his co-leaders of color different from past experiences with people of color is that it fits into Allport's formula for beneficial interracial contact: as student leaders, they were all of the same status, because of the need to resolve the problem, they all worked together to try to end the conflict within the group, and the nature of the work allowed them the opportunity to develop meaningful friendships with people of color.

Through these friendships and others he has made since, he has seen how racism personally affects those he cares about. His desire to ally himself with his friends and reduce the source of their pain has been a strong motivation for doing antiracist work, as he illustrates in this exchange:

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<sup>27</sup> Gordon Allport. *The Nature of Prejudice (25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition)* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Inc., 1979), 281

AP: Why do you think you fight against racism now? What has led you to do this?

J: ...One is probably other people. The people I know and who I've watched get hurt by whatever particular form racism takes. And so, wanting to care for them and be a partner for them, and kinda care for them as they care for me

While friendships with people of color are one of James' primary motivations, to end here and say that they are the sole reason James does anti-racist work would be to paint a picture of James' life that is only half complete. Racism has become a part of James' life not only because people he cares about are directly affected it, but also because he sees fighting racism as intrinsically tied to his religious faith.

Although James has been an evangelical Christian since he was a teenager and has been deeply involved in the Christian community for many years, because race was rarely, if ever, discussed in his all-White church at home, the opportunity to connect it to his faith never arose. Now, thanks in part to the workshops and conferences he attended through his Christian fellowship as a student, he has found Biblical evidence that calls for racial equality. James elaborates on how his faith motivates him in this exchange:

J: Another [reason] was seeing it so clearly evidenced, sometimes really blatantly and sometimes less blatantly in scripture and just kind of the blatant commandments to love your neighbor as yourself. It doesn't say love your white neighbor as yourself, it says love your neighbor as yourself. You got to figure it out.

AP: What if all your neighbors are White?

J: Well, then you need to move [laughs]! Then you need to read Jesus' comments on what it means to be a neighbor.

Although James' last line was said partly in jest, there is a great deal of truth in it. While his neighbors were all White while growing up, after he graduated from

college, he specifically sought out a neighborhood to live in that was both racially and socio-economically diverse with the intent to “serve” his community. Now, antiracist work inscribes his whole reality, as he is not only involved with it through his job, but at home as well. Whereas in the beginning of his antiracist work, he did it because he knew that as a White person, it was a privilege to quit working against and thinking about racism, he now continues because it is such a large part of his life that not doing it is no longer really an option, nor is it an option he would want to take. He explains in this passage:

AP: What motivates you to continue [doing antiracist work] now, six years later, when as a White person, you could say no and [stop]?

J: Originally I would say I stuck with it because I knew I could quit and I knew other people didn't have that choice. And I felt like if they didn't have that choice I wouldn't take it either. Now, I would say I've kind of erased that choice. Like, I just don't think—I think it would be bizarre to me to quit. I just don't know how I could do that [laughs]. It doesn't seem like a real choice. It's very much a part of the things that I do and that I think about and that are around my life. And I feel like my life would be much narrower without it.

A: Narrower in what sense?

J: Narrower in missing the things that I learned from other people. Narrower in missing the perspective on life or on specific events that I gained from other people. [...] to quit would be really to forfeit some things I could really learn.

A: So it's something in it for you to keep going?

J: Yeah. Yeah. I mean definitely. It's always something for me and something for others.

Thus, through following the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself,” James has found that living an anti-racist life is personally more beneficial and even more enjoyable for him than not. Now, James is at a point where he can

hardly conceive of ever discontinuing his anti-racist work. However, he does not think he would have been able to last for this long had it not been for his faith or more specifically, his God. James explains his experience of being introduced to race through the context of Christianity and how understanding racism as connected to his faith has sustained his anti-racist work:

AP: What was that like being introduced to race through faith, through religion, through the lens of Christianity?

J: It was compelling in the sense of the way that it was introduced was like, how could you ignore this? And there's such a strong value system there. When something like that becomes attached to the value system it was compelling and it was—it was life giving...I mean, it was definitely painful at times, but also it felt like this is where the Spirit of God is bring life...

AP: Where?

J: Which is through...kind of dealing with cross-cultural and racial issues, and so dig[ging] into these things, which is what God is doing. And it was *sustainable* because God was in it. I don't think I would have been able to sustain...the last six years, right [laughs]? But there's a definite way that it's, um, that I feel like God has provided...you know...resources, but kind of more community and just kind of internal resources to be able to work through difficult things and *stay engaged* in them [emphasis mine].

AP: So you think you've been able to keep struggling and working against racism because of the resources that God has provided you?

J: Yeah, so because of both the community and I—I mean, I don't necessarily even know how to describe it in ways that translates....um, but just the sense of God's spirit being in it and drawing me into it and providing the encouragement and rest or...energy or something. (6)

While James' friendships continue to motivate him to do antiracist work, his religious faith gives him a sense of power and encouragement that he talks about as though it were supernatural; that is beyond him and beyond what any human can offer him. Thus, while James' friendships with people of color have moved racism

closer to his own life in that he now has people whom he deeply cares for who are directly targeted by racism, his religious faith ties the importance of fighting racism even closer to his him because he now sees doing so as a commandment from the God. As a result, the combination of his friendships and his faith has made fighting racism so central to his life that it is almost impossible for him to ignore the importance of doing anti-racist work. He explains in this exchange:

AP: When you started doing anti-racist work, how did you get to that point? What propelled you to actually *do* something about [racism]?

J: One thing that did was relationships with people that made it clear to me [that] this is the cost. How could you *not* do something about it? And another was seeing it so clearly evidenced, sometimes really blatantly and sometimes less blatantly in scripture and just kind of the blatant commandments to love your neighbor as yourself. It doesn't say love your *White* neighbor as yourself, it says love your neighbor as yourself. [...] In some ways I felt like I didn't have a choice. Not in a negative way, like you have to do this, but just like, why would you *not* do this? Your friends are hurting because of this...and the God who you claim to be following tells you you should do it. What more do you want? (11).

Thus, considering this, to fail to work against racism is not a valid option for James because discontinuing his work would mean passively sitting by as his friends are hurt by racism and going against what he sees as a fundamental part of his religion. And so, if he decided to give up his life as an anti-racist activist, not only would he be betraying his friends, but his God as well.

### **Patrick**

After becoming deeply involved in his campus' student antiracist education group during his sophomore year and taking over as one of the leaders as a senior, at

the time of the interview, Patrick was a graduate student preparing to become a student teacher in the Boston Public school system. His commitment to anti-racist work was quite remarkable and was immediately evident through the eagerness with which he spoke about his work and the interest he showed in hearing about my own.

Patrick was one of the last people I interviewed and by the time I met with him, I had become so accustomed to hearing stories of childhoods almost completely devoid of racial discussion, let alone any exposure to overt racism, that when he told me, “Growing up, race was always talked about,” I was taken aback. I had assumed that his parents must be anti-racists themselves and that they must have taught him from a young age about the evils of racism, so I was even more surprised when he continued, “[A]t the dinner table race was always talked about, you know, whether it’s a racial joke...whether it’s telling me not to go in certain neighborhoods.” While the majority of the participants acknowledged that they have had prejudiced thoughts about people of color at some time or another, Patrick’s references to his overtly racist past comprised a large part of his narrative. In fact, Patrick was the only participant who used the word “racist” to describe himself prior to his becoming antiracist.

Patrick grew up in a middle-class Irish Catholic family in Braintree, Massachusetts. Born to a father who made his living as a plumber and who came from a modest background and a mother who works as a nurse and comes from a family of Irish immigrants who came to America with nothing and over the years accumulated a great deal of wealth, the traditional economic mobility model was espoused in his home. Patrick was taught by his family that with enough hard work, *anybody* can make it, just like their family did. As a result of this belief, his family



looks down upon Blacks, Asians and Latinos because they feel that they're "not like us," meaning that they just haven't tried hard enough. These attitudes were not limited to his family alone, but were prevalent among his peers as well. Patrick says of his environment, "[Race] was always talked about. It inscribed our whole reality, where we felt safe, where we felt comfortable, what we thought about people." Considering this, it is hardly surprising that Patrick internalized the racist attitudes that were all around him.

Despite Patrick's description of himself as harboring deeply racist attitudes, his expressions of racism throughout his narrative are almost entirely limited to moments when he was among his friends and family-- in short, when he was around other White people. This is not to say that he did not ever enact racism around friends of color, though: when I asked him if he had ever said or did anything racist *directly* to a person of color, he said that he had commented on Black people's hair and said, out of curiosity, "Oh, can I touch it? Why isn't it straight?" He would also tell his friends of color that they were exceptions to their race; they weren't like "those other ones." Although these actions are undoubtedly offensive, they are ones that commonly occur out of a White person's ignorance of race and racism rather than with the intent to hurt, as one might expect from a person who describes themselves as very racist, as Patrick does. His tendency to enact blatant racism mostly when he was only around other White people seems to stem from his desire to not hurt other individuals.

At numerous points throughout the interview, Patrick stated that despite his racist attitudes he always knew, deep down, that racism was wrong. He commented that he, "knew it was wrong in the sense that I knew on an *individual* basis that

people were people [emphasis mine].” As a result of this internal conflict between espousing and enacting racist ideas while at the same time knowing they were wrong, he would try to make up for his guilt by “seek[ing] out people of color to be nice to.” He elaborates on his guilt in the following passage:

I felt really guilty about it, even though I was definitely into it. When I was at home I'd be telling jokes or whatever, but I kind of got the mentality that if I don't do it to their face, it's just funny. It's just funny. It's just a joke. You know? It kind of became more sterile. It wasn't so much as, you know, physical. It was never like I'd liked beat them up or anything like that.

Here he shows that he draws a clear line between verbally enacting racism among White friends and physically enacting it *upon* a person of color. The significance of Patrick's restrictions upon the places and the company in which he could “acceptably” enact racism are significant: as long as racism remained in a White circle and didn't directly hurt anyone else, it was “just funny;” nothing more than a joke. But, Patrick's insistence that he never beat up a person of color or “anything like that” shows that when racism transgressed from a “harmless” banter among friends to a *physical* act that directly affected a person of color, it no longer became acceptable to him.

The effect that physical proximity to people of color had on whether or not Patrick would intentionally enact racism is strongly reminiscent of a finding in Stanley Milgram's famous obedience study.<sup>28</sup> The importance of this study in relation

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<sup>28</sup> In this study, a participant called the “teacher” was asked to administer a memory test to another participant called the “learner” and was instructed to administer progressively stronger electric shocks each time the learner answer a question incorrectly. Although the learner was actually a confederate in the study and never actually received the shocks, the teacher had no way of knowing this because he was in a separate room from the learner. However, whether or not the learner was there made no difference since the goal of the study was to find out to what extent the teacher would obey his instructions to deliver the shocks even when the learner (actually a recorded voice) protested in pain.

to Patrick's narrative is that like the "teachers" in the experiment, Patrick was much less likely to cause pain to people of color (the "learners" in this case) when he was in their presence. When he was with his White friends, he was like the teacher who was alone in a room and could neither see nor hear the learner. In this case, he was willing to be overtly racist because he was removed from people of color and thus, couldn't see (or hear) how his actions would cause them any pain. But, when they were near him, he was like the teacher who was told to put the learner's hand on the electric plate when he answered incorrectly. Here, face to face with people of color, they became individuals to him and if he acted towards them in a racist way, he would have to see first-hand the effect his actions would have on them. Again, as he said, "I knew it [racism] was wrong in the sense that I knew on an *individual* basis that people were people [emphasis mine]."

However, despite his racist attitudes, Patrick did manage to develop a close relationship with many people of color, including his college girlfriend Nina. Patrick's experiences with Nina and the friends of color friends he made later in college support the theory that it was his lack of substantial relationships with people of color (thus, personal contact) that allowed his racism to flourish and inhibited his development of an antiracist consciousness. When he began dating Nina during his

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In a variation on this study, the learner was placed in the same room as the teacher and pretended to squeal in pain when the shocks were delivered. What Milgram found was that when the learner was in the same room as the teacher and the teacher could see him, he was less likely to deliver the shocks than when the learner was isolated in another room where the teacher could only hear his voice. To go further, when the teacher was asked to physically hold the learner's hand down onto the plate that supposedly delivered the electric shock, the teacher's obedience rate was lowest of all. However, on the other side, when the teacher was isolated in a room and could neither see nor hear the learner, the level of shocks the teacher delivered was the greatest of all. In short, the greater the physical contact and the closer the proximity between the teacher and learner, the less willing the former was to continue causing the latter pain. This is because the closer the learner was to the teacher, the more individual and real he became to the teacher.

freshman year in college, Patrick became the target of racist attitudes for the first time. Instead of looking at people of color and judging them, *he* became the subject of scrutiny as people watched his girlfriend and him with what he described as looks of “disdain” and even “disgust” as they walked across campus or dined at a restaurant.

What Patrick was experiencing here is what Karyn D. McKinney calls “vicarious victimization.” This occurs when a White person is exposed to racial discrimination while in the presence a person of color, and is a frequent experience for people who date across racial lines<sup>29</sup>. As is often the case with experiences of vicarious victimization, Paul was put “on a stage,<sup>30</sup>” where the critical looks of other Whites were focused intently upon him. It was through this role reversal of the racist becoming the target of racism that Patrick first became aware of his own racist actions and thought to himself, “I wonder if I do that?” He soon realized that he shared much in common with these same people that he was so angry with. He says of them, “I know what they’re thinkin’, ‘cause I thought that before.”

McKinney notes that dating interracially is often a turning point for many Whites, because it draws their attention to the prejudices expressed by other White people.<sup>31</sup> Paul’s experience was a turning point as well precisely because simultaneously seeing and identifying with these prejudiced White people *and* standing next to a woman of color who he deeply cared about made him realize the contradictory nature of harboring racist attitudes while caring deeply about someone of a different race. This was, he says, “the first time where things just got so mixed up

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<sup>29</sup> Karyn D. McKinney, Being White: Stories of Race and Racism (New York: Routledge, 2005), 55-56

<sup>30</sup> J. Feagin and Karyn McKinney, The Many Costs of Racism (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 150-153, as cited in Karyn D. McKinney, Being White: Stories of Race and Racism (New York: Routledge, 2005), 56

inside of me.” In short, in these moments he realized that he had acted similar, in the past, to the people who he saw giving him looks of disdain when he was with Nina.

While the cognitive dissonance cause by continually harboring racist attitudes while deeply caring for a person of color troubled Patrick, it wasn’t until he hurt Nina *himself* that he was able to begin to change his attitudes. For reasons he couldn’t fully understand, he never made a commitment to Nina during the five or six months they dated, but when his mother expressed disapproval of their relationship based on Nina’s race, Patrick soon ended the relationship. What made the breakup especially painful in his eyes is that on top of telling her that he could no longer go out with her because his mother wouldn’t want him to have children with a Hindu Indian woman, he lied to her and told her he was seeing someone else. A wave of shame flooded over him as he realized the pain that his own racist attitudes had caused this woman he cared so much about. He had said he never wanted to hurt someone, but now that he actually had, he finally reached a turning point. “...that was like, the last straw for me,” he said. “I would have never done that to a White woman.”

With the realization that he had broken up with Nina solely because she was a woman of color and, in doing so, caused her so much pain, Patrick became ready to change. And so, when he started to become friends with two women of color, Noelle and Mihan, he was ready and willing to listen to *their* perspective on race issues. This was crucial because it allowed him to him look critically at White people as a group, recognize the negative aspects of the group, and recognize how he shared many of these negative aspects. And through these relationships with people of color, he was

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<sup>31</sup> Karyn D. McKinney, Being White: Stories of Race and Racism (New York: Routeledge, 2005), 38

able to see himself as both a perpetrator of racism and a benefactor of it, which ultimately gave him reason to distance himself from his racist ways:

For the first time I removed myself from who I was and started talking about White people. Instead of talking about who I was, I started to think, 'Yeah, White people are like this.' When I was really, "I've been like this.' But in my head I was like, I don't want to be like this anymore, but this is how I've been.

Recognizing these similarities made it nearly impossible for him to deny what his new friends were saying about racism:

Since I knew how racist and sexist people were and I knew how I could be, I wasn't about to deny what they were saying was true. At that point I was like, "You know what, I know how racist things are because I've been that way, I've experienced it, I've seen it. I know how sick things are 'cause I've felt that I've been that way, I've seen it, I've experienced it [...] I knew how deeply entrenched it was in this society from my upbringing. And so when they explained it from their perspective, I was so willing to hear what they had to say.

Patrick's friendships with these two women were extremely important to his becoming antiracist. By teaching him about its institutional manifestations of White privilege, he was able to see he is a benefactor of racism. Patrick explains how Noelle was especially important in helping him come to a realization of his racial privilege and the responsibility to fight racism that that puts upon him:

She'd always be like, "Well, you're able to do that because you're White. There's certain things you can do that I can't do, or that I can do, but I'm looked as an ass-hole or selfish. You have an even higher responsibility than I do." And I was like, "Okay." And I kind of started getting that feeling like, "You're right. I do."

Recognizing himself as a perpetrator and benefactor of racism was essential for Paul to begin to move away from his racist attitudes and closer to developing an anti-racist consciousness, but Noelle and Mihan also provided him with a way to emotionally connect to the targets of racism, people of color, by sharing their own

personal stories of discrimination with him and helping him connect their stories to his own experiences with being picked on as a child for not meeting the masculine norms of his friends and the people in his community. He explains:

Because I'd been treated so poorly as a kid, their stories and how poorly they were treated, I felt like I could really identify with that. And I told them those stories [of being picked on] as a kid. And they were very sympathetic towards it. And they helped me make those connections [...] and they helped me make it relatable to my life. 'Cause I was willing to relate it to my life and their life and to really go back and forth to from a real friendship with them.

Making this personal and emotional connection was especially important because without it, he says he probably would not have been able to “switch over” and become antiracist.

Another important aspect of these friendships is that they provided Patrick with the support and validation that he needed to become anti-racist. As mentioned previously, Patrick states that he always knew that the racist attitudes he held were wrong, but alludes to the fact that it was the absence of support to turn *away* from these attitudes that kept him from becoming anti-racist sooner. He says,

I could feel what was right and wrong and I always knew that. I always knew deep down that racism, being sexist, and homophobia was wrong. I always knew that somewhere. And that made it easier when I did switch over [to being anti-racist]. But it was hard because I didn't have the opportunities to change a lot of times, I felt. [...] I didn't have access to people of color who like, had a good conceptualization of self.

Later, he reiterates this: “I still knew it was wrong. And I still didn't feel like it was right to isolate or treat badly a person of color or a woman or whoever they were. I just didn't have the—I just needed a rationale, kind of, in a lot of ways. And I needed an outlet, I needed support.”

Today, Patrick's past continues to remain a motivation to do antiracist work. Remembering the blatant racism he used to espouse and the pain that this caused others, Patrick feels a particularly strong sense of responsibility to fight racism.

I think knowing how I was before also provides a huge incentive for me to be who I am. I think I have a much higher obligation, given what I was and what I did, my experiences. I know how things work, I know who I was, I never want to be that way again. I know how bad that was, I feel like I have such a huge responsibility. I also realized that, given who I am, the things I could have done given the access that I have, would've been so...I could have really messed up a lot of people. And I realize that. I could've messed up a lot of people. And so, I feel a really huge responsibility to others and to myself to be that person that I need to be and should be. And so now, it's just more, this is who I am [...] It's a way of life.

It seems that doing antiracist work is almost a way to distance himself from his racist self and the shame that he feels for his past. Through his work, he can, in a way, give back for the years he lost while being racist and move closer to becoming that person he "needs" to be.

Yet despite Patrick's deep devotion to fighting racism, he admits that it is still difficult to do so because as a White person, "there's always that choice to shut-off." He says, "it's constantly a struggle to fight against these things in general 'cause it's against the grain." But, Patrick is able to get through the struggles because he is surrounded by many friends, both of color *and* White, who care about fighting racism and hold him accountable to do the same. In addition, Patrick is currently in a relationship with a woman of color. Not only does she hold him accountable to be anti-racist, but because he plans to some day marry and have children with her, racism will be something that directly affects those closest to him for the rest of his life.



## Conclusion

It is easy for any individual to be apathetic to a problem when it does not directly affect him or his loved ones. However, when the problem begins to hurt him or those he loves, fixing the problem becomes a priority. For instance, it is not uncommon to find that individuals who are active in the fight against AIDS, or any disease for that matter, have been personally inflicted by the disease or have a loved one who has been. Similarly, as James and Patrick show this is often also the case with antiracist work. However, because Whites are not directly targeted by racism, they cannot have the same connection to the issue as someone who has been personally afflicted by it. Thus, in order to make a connection to racism and maintain it, it is sometimes necessary for a White person to have a loved one who has been personally harmed by racism in order for them to be motivated to fight against it. And while this is a strong link in itself, James shows that if a person can make a further personal connection to racism, as he did through his religious faith, then the responsibility and sense of urgency to fight against it becomes even greater.

### **Chapter 3**

## **Approximated Experiences of Oppression**

As exemplified in Patrick’s narrative in the previous chapter, naming oneself the “oppressor” can be an extremely important step in becoming anti racist. However, as his story also shows, recognizing oneself as “oppressed” is, in some ways, also useful to connect with and understand racism. In Patrick’s case, recollecting his experiences being verbally and physically harassed for not meeting masculine norms of his community helped him to relate to his friends of color when they told him their own stories about being discriminated against based on their race. Even though Patrick recognizes that the teasing he endured is different from the racism his friends experienced, by connecting the similarities of his experience and theirs, it allowed him to understand, at some level, the pain that racism causes.

Eichstedt found, in her study of White anti racist activists, that all of the activists she interviewed described their own experiences with various forms of oppression as “important in enabling them to make intellectual and emotional connections about other systems of oppression.<sup>32</sup>” These “approximat[ed] experiences

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<sup>32</sup> Eichstedt, 463

of oppression<sup>33</sup>” relate to a number of these White activists’ identities, as queer, working class, or Jewish people, as well as Communists and individuals who have survived incest and sexual assault. These identities have been explored in relation to White identity and anti racist activism by a number of other authors besides Eichstedt,<sup>34</sup> but they are often only discussed through a female (and often feminist) lens. In the present study, Jewish and male identities were two of the primary sources of a participant’s connection to racism, and the participants who used these identities to create a connection to racism were more often male than female. In addition, while Eichstedt’s participants used their *own* experiences with oppression as points of connection to the issue of racism, it appears that in the present study, channeling one’s identity as a member of a historically oppressed group (thus, a *vicarious* approximation of oppression) was also an invaluable emotional link to oppression from racism.

This chapter builds on the studies mentioned before--Jack’s ability to connect to racism via his negative experiences with patriarchy shows that non-traditional male identity lends itself to approximating experiences of oppression. Furthermore, Adam and Laura’s experience add to the many Whites who connected to racism via their Jewish identity. Yet while most of the activists in Eichstedt and Frankenberg’s studies were born during or soon after the Holocaust, the participants in my study

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<sup>33</sup> Tiffany Hogan and Julie Netzer, “Knowing the other: White women, gender and racism.” Unpublished Seminar Paper, University of Florida, Dept. of Sociology, as cited in Jennifer L. Eichstedt, “Problematic White Identities and a Search for Racial Justice,” *Sociological Forum* 16.3 (2001): 463

<sup>34</sup> See Becky, Thompson, *A Promise and a Way of Life: white antiracist activism.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

were born decades after this historical atrocity, when many see persecuted against Jews as largely ended, at least in the U.S. They show that despite this historical separation, anti-Semitism and the memory of Jewish persecution live strong in these activists and continues to drive them to fight against other forms of oppression.

As this link was made through two different identities (male and Jewish), it was experienced in two different ways. I begin by showing how a male who fails to meet traditional masculine norms forges a personal link to racism by his understanding of how he is negatively affected by patriarchy. I then investigate Jewish identity; how both personal experiences as the target of anti-Semitism, and more universal experience, as a member of an historically oppressed group, allows a personal connection to other persecuted groups. Though these connections are all made in different ways, they are united, as through them, racism has been linked to their own identity and thus, has made racism and the fight against it personal to their lives.

## **Male Identity**

### **Jack**

Like Patrick, Jack also found a way to understand and connect systematic racism to his own life through his difficulties in meeting the male norms and standards he felt pressured to maintain. However, in Jack's case, understanding how he was negatively affected by patriarchy did not necessarily enable him to sympathize with people of color as fellow victims of oppressive systems as it did for Paul. Rather, his experience enabled him to recognize that he was also limited by White supremacy.

Jack grew up in a largely middle class, mostly White neighborhood outside of Providence, Rhode Island. He does not recall his parents ever talking to him about

race or racism, but remembers that when he played with his friends who lived in the projects or low-income neighborhoods, he did so in his own home and never went to theirs. Although he was not certain of the reason behind this at the time, he began to wonder if perhaps their neighborhoods were not safe. Not only making Jack aware of his class privilege, this experience also connected with race and he listed it as the first time he had heard of racism.

In general, Jack was fortunate enough to receive a more comprehensive race education than most of the other participants had before college. This started as early as 5th or 6th grade in discussions at his Catholic school about why most representations of Jesus and Mary are White. He also had what he calls a “pretty radical” English teacher in 10th grade that assigned the class books by authors like Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, and novel’s like J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*. With books that focused on racial experience and racial conflict on their reading list, Jack said that there was no way to avoid talking about race. Although the focus of his English class was not solely on race, Jack’s experience is a testament to the importance of teachers in beginning or building on the racial awareness of their students. As he says,

I think it laid a foundation or built on a foundation that was already there. Whenever I’ve talked about, anti-racism and like, radical Whites, It’s always been...either connected to like, class background or teachers, having radical teachers who like, shaped their students in some way.

Although Jack can now look back on his English class and recognize it as an important step in his becoming an anti racist activist, during high school, this progressive education seems to have been negated by the racist environment by which he was surrounded. Despite having a number of close friends of color in

elementary and middle school, his friend group became entirely White when he entered his new high school. In an effort to be accepted at his “very class-privileged, mostly White” school, Jack began to buy into the racism, homophobia, and sexism that he saw many of the other White men on his sports teams enact. He likens his experience of adopting the ways of the dominant culture to Noel Ignatiev’s book, *How the Irish Became White* in that,

...you buy into certain identities to gain certain privileges, and I think my experience can be dissected by saying like, because I wanted to fit in the new high school, I bought into a very like, a very classist, [laughs] sexist, racist, homophobic culture that was bred by, invariably a very affluent group of kids.

He goes on to describe the affects this had on him personally and the way people felt about him:

I found the more I allowed myself to fit into a certain image...that produced like a real, a lot of internalized homophobia in me. I think a lot of like, internalized racism and sexism to a certain extent, too. Um, the more I bought into that, the more I was accepted by kids who I was associating with. But if I didn’t, I would be made victim of, you know, whatever, for whatever reason.

Conforming to the dominant sports team culture took a significant emotional toll on him, especially in relation to his gender and sexual identities:

So I think it really affected, like...body image, How I interacted with other guys, um, being afraid to ...share emotionally with other guys or have a lot of anxiety...around interactions with other guys because I would be labeled as like, homosexual.

Buying into this way of life was good in one way, he says, because it allowed him to be accepted, but bad in another because “part of that acceptance was denying part of myself.”

Jack continued to take part in this culture until 12<sup>th</sup> grade when his half-sister was born to his father and Kenyan step-mother. Hearing racist comments from his friends or saying them himself then hit too close to home. He describes the “wake-up call” he then experienced: “recognizing my sister as *family* and the implications of those comments for my *family*, like, that was kind of like, wait a minute, like, this is kind of fucked up.” And with this realization, he began to move away from the racism, sexism, and homophobia he had accepted.

Jack says that his need for acceptance was “at the heart of [his] experience” before he developed a political consciousness and attributes this need, which caused him to embrace the sports culture in the first place, and his feelings of inferiority, largely to his father. Jack says, “[If] the father doesn’t love himself, that gets translated to the son, who in turn doesn’t love himself and then needs to buy into this same patriarchal image in some way.” Although his attempts to fit certain masculine images have been painful for Jack to remember, it has also become one of his primary motivations for continuing his anti racist work. By finding a way to understand and connect systemic racism to his own life, through his difficulties with meeting the male norms and standards he felt pressured to live up to.

Jack’s entrance into anti racist activism was more a result of chance than any concerted effort to fight racism. When I asked him why he decided on anti racist work as one of his primary forms of activism he answered: “I think it was just what was there at the time,” after experiencing a “radicalizing moment,” seeing the many protests and strikes that occurred while he studied abroad in France during the fall of 2005 and spring of 2006. Part of becoming radical, he says, is understanding the need to be active in one’s community. As a result of his new found distaste for apathy,

Jack returned to his campus knowing he wanted to become more involved in his community, but not knowing in what way. When a hate crime occurred at his campus upon his return, he found an “outlet” for activism through anti racist work. He says: “for me, it’s about doing work in my own community and trying to figure out what my own community is....but with antiracism work it was what was going on and where it was at.” Thus, while for many of the participants I interviewed, activism was very much an end product of a desire to work against racism, for Jack, his anti racist work was a by-product of wanting to immerse himself in activism. Jack’s activism is not limited to anti-racism, but extends to work with Women’s organizations and criminal justice groups as well. Jack articulated multiple times throughout the interview that for him to be truly invested in activism and to continue doing it over an extended period of time, it is necessary for him to make his work connect to his own life somehow. He explains the importance of this personal connection for an activist, “for a movement to really succeed, I feel like you need to find yourself—people need to find themselves in the movement.” He says that this is especially important for doing anti racist work as a White person:

I think as a White person, really trying to make those connections is something very useful because it’s not something very many White people do. Like in discussions of race, it’s always discussions about the racialized Other and not about yourself. So part of the organizing is critical self-reflection on where I fit into this, my personal history...

However, making this connection and finding himself within the movement has been difficult, because, as his entrance into anti racist activism shows, he began his antiracist work with almost no connection to it. Thus, in order to continue his anti racist activism, Jack had to overcome an initial disconnect, forging more indirect



connections to anti racist work through something which more directly affected him: patriarchy.

One of the ways Jack finds himself in any movement in which he is involved is by determining how he has been and continues to be negatively affected by the system he is fighting against--whether it be patriarchy or White supremacy. Jack stated outright that he has a much easier time seeing this in relation to the former than he does the latter. Whereas he shared a number of examples of how he has been negatively affected by patriarchal values, whether it be through his dad or his male sports team mates in high school, specific negative experiences in relation to White supremacy are absent from his narrative. Patriarchy is something that Jack has an easy time understanding negatively affecting him, while he has more difficulty relating to issues of Whiteness. However, because he has a very advanced understanding of the interconnectivity of systems of oppression and believes that fighting sexism cannot be separated from fighting racism, he is able to use his experiences, being limited by patriarchy, to understand how he is limited by White supremacy. He explains,

...my very personal connection with patriarchy and my experiences with my family, um, recognizing how it's limited me, as a man, really informs my own personal, more organic conceptions of race and White supremacy. Maybe not be the same thing, but like, by making those connections personal, they become more real. You can much more easily internalize personal experience as a means to educate yourself than some abstract concept.

While exactly how he understands racism and patriarchy as interconnected is not entirely clear, his opinion on pornography sheds some light on this. He says:

Whiteness [is] at the heart...of a culture of capitalist consumption and even how that connects with patriarchy. I see one real way that connects with patriarchy through the pornography industry. And marketing women's bodies for consumption, and really letting men who are in pain in very real ways use pornography as an escape, that at the same time can be a way to sort of project

and idealized, fantasized sometimes racially fetishized image onto women. It's all connected in different ways. The structures of oppression are codependent on each other in those ways, feed off each other.

Thus discovering ways that patriarchy and racism are intimately connected motivates him to fight racism because these two systems of oppression are codependent, as he says they are, then if one falls, the other will as well. And so, the sooner that racism is ended, the sooner the pressures of patriarchy will cease to exert themselves on him. Thus, Jack's freedom as a White man is bound up in the destruction of the racist system.

### **Jewish Identity**

#### **Adam**

Adam came from arguably the most progressive household of all the activists that participated in the present study. He is the son of a mother who has a master's degree in Black Washington D.C. History and who works for a nonprofit organization that conducts walking tours of Black neighborhoods in the District, and of a father who helped raise money to send youth from low-income homes to summer camp through his column in the *Washington Post*. Adam's parents made an effort to introduce him to issues related to racism early on through the music of a "radical" Black folk singer who they let him listen to as he fell asleep at night. The detail with which he recalls a ballad that tells the story of a Black truck driver who is refused service at numerous rest-stops shows the impact that these ideas presented through the lyrics had on his young mind. He may not have fully understood the content and meaning of the song and others like it, but through music, racism was on his radar at a

very important developmental stage in his life. As he says, “I was really thinking about race before I really knew what it was about.”

As Adam grew older, he learned more about racism by listening to his parents talk about world events. He says they were “very used to talking about...things of very serious content in front of us” and were readily willing to explain things to him in an age-appropriate way. He can even remember them talking about how the “core of our government was targeting another group of people they wanted to control,” when he was five or six years old during the Persian Gulf War, and that they related that to race. As Adam matured and eventually started saying racially inappropriate things that he had heard on TV or from his friends, they also made a point to not only tell him that what he said was offensive, but also to explain why. Thus, while many participants never spoke of race issues at home, by being open about racism with Adam, his parents were providing him with a foundation for his later antiracist work.

While most participants were largely isolated from people of color while growing up, Adam's parents tried to ensure that in spite of living in what he calls a “really homogenous, White, conservative, *Catholic* neighborhood” outside of Washington D.C., that he was surrounded by a diverse group of people of different races, ethnicities, religions, and sexualities. When I asked him if he could remember his first interactions with a person of color, he was unable to do so because interactions had happened frequently and from a very young age. Adam credits his parents' having a “diverse” group of friends for his desire to be around people of different race and ethnicities. For instance, he recalls fondly the memory of spending time with Joyce and Margot, two Black women that worked in the same office as his father:

Adam: I would just sit and play. And Joyce and Margot would take care of me all day and I never stopped and [thought] about what that was or what they meant...I really, I really remember liking that. And I *could* tell that there was something different about...us. But I could also tell that there was another level of love coming out of them that I didn't see from a lot of my parents' White friends. [...] Like a different kind of mothering.

Annalee: To their own children you mean?

Adam: And to *me* [...] I was just sitting there and they were so...*giving*.

Even as a pre-school student, Adam was already noticing and *liking* the ways he perceived Black people in his life to be different from the White people he knew. One of the other differences he first noticed was the way they spoke. He says of the vernacular his parents' Black friends used, "I dug that. I picked up on that immediately and I was like, 'Man, that is so cool, I want to be around that more. I want to know why they're doing that, what's that about...this is different from me...this is not the way my mom and dad talk.'" As he got older, Adam's affinity for Black people grew so strong that in sixth grade he wanted to *be* Black, so he began adopting aspects of Black culture that he was familiar with. He says, "I wore Hilfiger, I listened to all Gangster Rap, I was like, 'Man, that is, like, what is cool.'" On top of these superficial cultural imitations, he had Black friends who were "into it" and "legitimizing" his attempt to be Black.

It seems that part of what enabled him to push his own race to the side and "become Black" so easily was the fact that he thought that because he was Jewish, he was not White. He describes his family as not religiously Jewish, but "very cognizant of our...relationship to Jews and Jewish persecution," the latter of which he says he and his parents personally experienced a number of times. His first experience with anti-Semitism came when he was seven years old and one of his teammates heard his last name and said to another, "Have you ever heard of a person named Cohen?" The other boy replied, "Levy, Goldstein, Cohen, it's all the same." Adam was unsure of

what this meant at the time, but when he told his dad what happened, his father became very upset and said to him, “Welcome to a world where [...] everybody is subject to some sort of disparagement from somewhere else.”

Frankenberg found that some Ashkenazi Jews do not consider themselves White because they are seen and treated by some non-Jewish Whites as the “racial Other.”<sup>35</sup> Adam’s experience supports this othering as he shows that he made a clear distinction between himself and non-Jewish Whites, and says, “I knew I was definitely different than, you know, Ben Smith over there whose parents are White Anglo Saxon Protestant. Like, I know I’m not like *him*.” In the incident of anti-Semitism that he experienced, Adam was “placed on the borders of Whiteness,” because his last name distanced him from mainstream (in this case, White Anglo Saxon Protestant) White culture and he was viewed by his peers as a “cultural outsider,” just as many Jews before him have experienced in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps his placement on the “borders of Whiteness,” and in a realm of racial ambiguity led him to seek a new identity to grasp on to. And because he had grown up with a fondness for the Black people in his life, it seems logical to him that this would be the identity that he would decide to take on.

Adam stopped trying to be Black very suddenly, though, when he realized that there are some immutable differences that, as a White person, he could never shake off. This realization came as a result of an incident that took place in 6<sup>th</sup> grade: he was sitting outside with a few Black friends and decided to imitate Jacki Chan in a scene in a movie where he says to his Black friend, “What’s up my ‘n-word?’” His friends

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<sup>35</sup> Frankenberg, 216

<sup>36</sup> Frankenberg, 224

responded in loud laughter, but another student who was walking by at the same time and heard this reported him, which resulted in him being suspended for three days. When this happened, he became very worried that people would think he was racist, which bothered him a great deal. As a result, he says, “I was really, really conscious of what happened” and thought to himself constantly, “people are still judging you.” He immediately ceased trying to be Black, recognized his White identity, and assessed how his actions and words as a White person might be perceived. He told himself, “be comfortable in a White framework and know a little bit more about who you are and how just even your dressing and your vernacular can affect people.” In order to distance himself from this incident and to avoid being labeled as a racist he says, “I put myself out there for the rest of my time in that school as someone who was ultra-sensitive,” and started attending the Black Student Union meetings as soon as he got to middle school.

Adam listed this incident as the most important race experience in his life and indeed, it was probably one of the most significant factors that led him to become an anti racist activist. Adam’s Jewish identity and the discrimination he has experienced because of it remain an important way in which he connects with people of color in general and more specifically, Black people. He says of his experiences with anti-Semitism:

[S]o things like that made me both know that I could...blend into a White world and stay away form a White world, and the Jewish thing has a lot to do with my sensitivity to any race or any difference that is not involved in our contemplation of our George Bush, White bread White. I don’t know, I mean...I have not experienced any—the [indecipherable] racism or prejudice

to the extent of many other people and I know that I'm very fortunate, but, I do have certain experiences with it that allow me to...navigate a lot of the feeling of shame and embarrassment, and anger.

This last sentence demonstrates that Adam is now able to see the distinction between the discrimination he has faced and that which others have experienced. While before he recognized his Whiteness, he just thought of himself as a fellow oppressed person in the “beautiful struggle,” he is now able to simultaneously maintain this connection and also realize that he has many advantages that people of color do not. Adam knows that some people will still think differently of him because of his Jewish identity, but he also recognizes his racial privilege: “I can skate through ‘cause I'm still White and as long as I'm not Black, I can function in a White man's world as long as certain things are hidden about me.”

Because Adam can now identify as both a White person and a Jewish person, he is more conscious of how his race affects the things he says and does, and how his privilege has the potential to cause others pain. Although he was once unaware of his identity and considered himself to suffer to the same extent as people of color, he has now become “hypersensitive” to other Jewish people who try to compare persecution and say that they have suffered more than Blacks. He describes how, while he agreed with this mindset at one point, he now cannot understand how the discourse of 'who suffered more' will ever be productive:

[Laughs] [I]t was so stupid, but I totally bought into that! Then that makes me—that has evolved into this whole thing where I'm so hypersensitive to when people in the Jewish community are saying like, ‘Oh, Blacks never had it as bad as we did! We've been persecuted for thousands of years! We went through slavery in Egypt! We went through, you know, blah-blah-blah! We

had the Holocaust!' [...] And I'm like, listen, where are we getting with this? What is it gonna do?

Now, he can connect to people of color on as being members of oppressed groups (albeit in different ways) and be "part of the beautiful struggle," but also see how what he does can only make the struggle for others worse if he is not careful.

Adam's experiences with anti-Semitism were an important part of developing his sense of solidarity with people of color. From his limited experiences with prejudice, he is able to recognize now that he has not experienced racism or prejudice to the extent of any people of color, yet he does have "certain experiences with it that allow [him] to...navigate a lot of the...feeling[s] of shame and embarrassment...and anger." As a result of these experiences of discrimination, he felt he could say, "Well, I'm not White, I'm Jewish. We're all part of the beautiful struggle."

## **Laura**

Before Laura was ever able to understand her Jewish identity and its implications for anti-racism activism, she was introduced to race and racial inequality by way of her Black nanny. Laura grew up with her nanny, Gloria, in a wealthy neighborhood in Manhattan. She cared greatly for Gloria and thought of her as a member of the family, as a "second mother." She realized through watching her parents interact with Gloria that though she saw Gloria as a part of the family, her parents did not. The relationship between Gloria and Laura's parents was strictly that of a boss and employee, and as such, Laura recognized that her parents were the "real authorities and Gloria wasn't." Laura gradually picked up on this power dynamic and began to relate it to race--she recognized that between her three "parents," the ones



who had control were White and the one who did not was Black. She says, “[Gloria and her parents] both had authority for me, but my parents really would, you know, treat her like an employee, which was weird for me to see [...] And that’s a very like, racial relation. And it had a lot to do with the race dynamic that I was like, ‘This is weird.’”

This racial hierarchy was only reinforced through language. Laura had certain “racial[ized] assumptions” about Gloria, mainly that she was not very smart, but says that these did not come from her parents, but from the “TV or media.” Interestingly, part of why she thought Gloria was not smart is because of the way she spoke, and the reason why Laura thought Gloria did not speak properly was because her parents told her so. Because Laura was with Gloria so much when she was young, she began to pick up some of Gloria’s vernacular and would say “mine’s” instead of “mine.” This made her father very angry and he and her mother would tell her that she should speak “properly” and not say things like that. Although Laura was young at the time, she quickly picked up on the connection between “improper” speech and the way that Gloria spoke. She says, “[My dad] was like, ‘That’s wrong, that’s not how you’re supposed to speak.’ And like, Gloria spoke that way, so what are you supposed to think?” By teaching their daughter that Gloria’s way of speaking was incorrect, Laura’s parents were implicitly suggesting that she was not as smart as they. In addition to the fact that Gloria was in a position of (paid) servitude and answered to Laura’s parents, these early impressions of Gloria and her race only served to suggest that she, as the only Black “family member” (as Laura saw her) was in some way inferior. Indeed, Laura asked herself “What is this? Slavery?” As a result of Gloria’s

subordinate position in Laura's house, Laura began to experience a great deal of confusion and guilt about her relationship with Gloria.

Laura was able to take her first steps towards understanding the racial dynamics in her own home when she began learning about racism through an anti-oppression education program that was taught in her middle and Hebrew schools. Up until 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Laura said that her private school provided the typical variety of multicultural education in which the students are taught about different cultures, but conflict among cultures and other less "pleasant" information is glossed over. However, Laura was fortunate in middle school (both in her private school and Hebrew school), to be introduced to Facing History and Ourselves, a program that provides teachers with materials and curricula to teach students about "racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism" and the "essential connection between history and the choices they confront in their own lives," primarily through the study of the Holocaust and other genocides.<sup>37</sup> Although a large part of Facing History and Ourselves education seems to have been focused on the Holocaust, her teachers were able to connect this to racism effectively enough that it spurred Laura to have conversations about the race dynamics in her school for the first time. Through this program, Laura was able to begin to notice inequalities in society and, although she did not fully understand the nature of these, she was able to see that they were connected to money and race.

It seems though that Laura was unable to apply her abstract intellectual education on racism to her real life, as she failed to recognize how societal inequalities affected her interactions with others. For instance, she says of one of her

good friends who was Filipino: “I think I sort of assumed that he was of a lower income than he *is*. [...] I think I thought that he lived in a different neighborhood than he does [...] I assumed he lived in a really poor neighborhood in the Bronx, but he doesn’t. And I think his race was definitely a part of that assumption (emphasis mine).” Although Laura is still not sure exactly why she associated his race with being of a lower socioeconomic status, there are a myriad of possibilities. After all, when one grows up with a Black nanny who is treated by her parents as an inferior and then attends a predominantly White school in which most of the students of color attend on scholarship, making such a connection seems almost inevitable.

Laura was only able to begin actively questioning the race dynamics in her own interactions once she began working as a teacher for an urban education program during the summer before her senior year of high school. During one of the class exercises she led that summer, she and the students were discussing a poem and whether the author was using informal or formal language. Although Laura thought the language was informal, one of her students, a Black teenager named Jamal, thought it was formal and said to her, “that’s...how White people talk.” All of a sudden, it was as if a light went off in her head, illuminating her Whiteness. As a child, language was one of the first ways that Laura was implicitly taught that the racial Other, in this case, Gloria, was somehow inferior. Now, language was highlighting racial differences again, except this time, the effect was that this distinction marked her aware of her own race, rather than the race of the Other. This move from recognizing the race of the Other to recognizing her *own* race (and the associations that come along with it) was a crucial step towards her becoming anti

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<sup>37</sup> <http://facinghistory.org/campus/reslib.nsf/pages/aboutus>, 11 March 2008

racist: as she says, the whole summer, she could not stop thinking to herself, “Oh my God, I’m White!” Once she became aware of her own race, she could then become aware of her own racial privilege, as well. While understanding White privilege was not Laura’s primary point of connection to racism, as it was for the participants mentioned in the first chapter, it was nonetheless important to her becoming antiracist as it helped make the racial inequality in her own immediate world salient.

Another incident that she describes that made her aware of her White privilege occurred, once again, with Jamal. One day he came to her expressing concern over an email his mom had received that talked about how Black people don’t read. She describes her reaction to this: “[H]e had specifically come to *me* to talk about it [...] I really didn’t know what to do and I just listened to him [...] but he was sort of coming to me like I was this White authority figure. Like, I was a gatekeeper.” Later she continues, “It was just like he wanted to talk to a teacher, he wanted to talk to *me*. Why did he choose to talk to me?” Although it is possible that the reason Jamal approached Laura about the email instead of the other teachers had nothing to do with her race, what is important is that *she* interpreted it as having to do with race. Laura says that it was he that made her question her position in the program and the significance of being a wealthy White person acting as an authority over a group of students of color only a few years younger than she.

Laura, like many teachers, wanted to be liked by her students, but more specifically, she explained that she did not want them to think she was a “bad person.” However, being in an authority position made her fear that she would be perceived as such. She went on, “being a White authority figure for people of color, it’s already messed up. It’s already like, what right do I have to be up there? What

right do I have to be telling you *anything*?” Although she left without answers to these questions, she also left with a budding “consciousness of race and Whiteness.” As she says, it was the “beginning.” As a result of her experiences that summer, she began to think of race as something that was “very present” in her life. When she returned to school that fall, she began to have conversations about the racial dynamics in her school with people she had never spoken to before. And finally, when she began college the following year, she was able to build race consciousness through classes discussions focused on race, and become a part of a labor activism group. Although the labor group is not specifically focused on race, she says that she sees race and labor issues as “very much tied together,” which is not a great surprise, considering her history with Gloria. Indeed, Gloria is one of Laura’s main motivations for doing anti racist work because it is a way of “resolving that conflict” between seeing Gloria as a parent, but watching her be put in a subordinate position by her biological parents, and the resulting guilt she feels.

The Jewish environment that Laura grew up in and the context in which she came to understand anti-Semitism are essential to understanding how she connects her Jewish identity to her anti racist work. To begin, Laura, as stated before, grew up in New York, the city which she says has the largest Jewish population in the world, and attended a private school made up predominantly of other wealthy, White Jews. Laura has never personally experienced anti-Semitism, nor does she think many other Jewish people who she grew up around have. Her experience with anti-Semitism is limited to the past and what she has learned from her family and in school about the Holocaust and the severe discrimination early Jewish immigrants faced in the U.S. Laura’s temporal separation from anti-Semitism is significant to her narrative because

it is mostly likely because of this that she does not feel personally victimized as a result of her Jewish identity nor does she feel that most Jews are oppressed today, at least not where she lives. Whereas Adam felt the sting of anti-Semitism directly and eschewed his White identity because of it, Laura became angry at Jewish people who claimed oppression but denied that they were White. As a result of people who did this, she disassociated herself from her Jewish identity for many years. She says, “I didn’t want to be Jewish, either. I was like, I’m not Jewish, because I associated Judaism and being Jewish with the culture that I didn’t want to be a part of...those values I didn’t want to be a part of.” Recently, though, she has come to realize that the urge to deny of one’s Whiteness is not inherently tied to Judaism, but rather to larger structures that enforce the 'White' role in society. She elaborates:

I think more recently, definitely, I realized that that’s not Judaism’s problem, that’s the U.S.’s problem. And I think I definitely still—I think that’s a problem with the Jewish community, that they don’t do social justice work...a lot of Jews don’t do social justice work because they *are* White and they are like everybody else, but then, they also think they have a free pass because they’re not part of racist society, they’re not White, they’re not part of that society because they’re Jewish and that’s their race.

Laura says that “growing up learning about the Holocaust as a Jewish person is a huge part of [her consciousness].” Because of it, she says that “a system where everyone is being tricked into thinking that the mistreatment of a certain people is okay is a concept [she has] grown up with.” In this way, her understanding of her Jewish identity has enabled her to recognize similarities between the systematic discrimination of the Jews in Germany and that of people of color *today*. Making this connection has highlighted the gravity of racism in the U.S. to such an extent that she

has come to see the present racial inequality in this country as a modern-day Holocaust. She explains in this passage:

There were these photos that came out [in the newspaper] of Nazis on leisure time, and I thought those photos were really interesting and really powerful because they just—I felt like that was me. I felt like that was—that could—like that...that’s where I am, that’s you know, we’re in a society where so much violence is happening to certain people and not happening to other people. Not happening to White people. Like...when I looked at those photos, I was like, ‘Oh, that’s how it is now. It’s the same thing. We talk about the Holocaust like it’s over and it’s not gonna happen again, but like, it’s happening now. The same violence is happening now [just to a different subset of people]. So I think that’s something that—so when like, I’ve sort of started making those connections, like, they really fit.

Laura's self-identification with the Nazis shows that she recognizes her “oppressor” status. And because she has now reclaimed her Jewish identity and recognizes her membership in a historically oppressed group, she sees the responsibility she has to join in struggle with other groups who are currently oppressed. She explains:

I see...struggles of Jewish people as the same—it’s similar struggles as people now who are in the same position as Jewish immigrants were...and Jews during the Holocaust [were] a persecuted people. So now that Jews are in a position of privilege, a lot of Jews...or at least *I* am, as a Jewish person...I think that since it’s part of our history to know what that’s like to be an oppressed group, that we should be responsible and collectively align with oppressed groups rather than the groups that now accept Jews, but a hundred years ago, they wouldn’t. Why are we trying to act like WASPS when a hundred years ago WASPs were not friends with us...”

By contrasting her life as a Jewish person to those of early immigrants and Holocaust survivors, Jewish persecution in the *past* becomes a motivation for Laura to stop the persecution of others *today*. The importance of the absence of personal experiences with anti-Semitism is clear here as it has given her a sense of obligation to work with other subjugated groups because she views herself as being in a “position of privilege.”

## **Conclusion**

Approximating experiences of oppression can potentially create the most powerful and sustainable connections that a White person can have with their antiracist work for it links them to it through their own identity; the core of who they are. In this chapter, we saw how this was done by a male who does not meet traditional masculine norms connects through his understanding of the oppressive forces of patriarchy, and then by White Jews who find this connection through both their personal experiences with anti-Semitism and their identity with an historically oppressed group.

However, despite the power of this form of connection, White antiracist activists who approximate experiences of oppression “walk a tight rope of not using this complexity to ‘get off the hook’ of complicity in a system of racism.<sup>38</sup>” If the White individual focuses too much on his own experiences with oppression and forgets, or never recognizes, their own racial privilege and their own identity as an “oppressor” then the individual can quite easily feel victimized and forget his White privilege. What a White person is then at risk of is thinking she has, as Laura calls it,



a “free pass” with which she can absolve herself the White racist system and thus, from any responsibility to fight against it.

Thus, Whites must not let their own experiences of oppression absolve themselves from associating with their White identity and privilege. Instead, it should instill in them a sense of responsibility to build alliances and work together with other oppressed groups.

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<sup>38</sup> Eichstedt, 462

## Conclusion

I had originally anticipated that from these interviews I would find a formula of how a White person can become an antiracist activist. I knew that the stories would be different, but I had thought that there would be key similarities that would tie all or most of the participants together; perhaps they were raised by antiracist parents, or grew up in a mixed race setting, or had many friends of color who made them realize the gravity of the racial situation in the US. What I found, though, is that there is no one factor that connects their backgrounds. Despite what I had anticipated, most of the participants grew up in homes where race and racism were rarely mentioned, and went to school where racism was, as one participant says, “a side bar in the text book.” Many grew up in almost entirely White social circles with very little interracial contact, and some still continue to live and move in predominantly White spaces.

In congruence with the participants’ varying backgrounds, their racial attitudes while growing up spanned a rather large spectrum--from those who embraced racial difference and eagerly sought out people of color to be friends with to those who were blatantly and admittedly racist. However, they have all made the choice to turn around and walk, admittedly at very different speeds, against the moving walkway of racism, while most Whites actively or passively head towards White supremacy. What then has made these antiracists of varying backgrounds and beliefs all turn to walk together in the same direction?

While the participants’ initial motivations for making the turn were important, they were not always enough to *keep* them walking. Sometimes, the participants turned around either by accident or without knowing how difficult it would be to go

against the force; as a result, at times some turned around and perhaps took a step, but soon turned around once again, others made the turn, but walked without knowing exactly why. Thus, the initial motivation is important, but not always enough. After all, if one begins walking only to turn back around, they are headed again for the original destination.

In order for these White individuals to not only turn around and begin walking, but to *continue* walking, something or someone needed to call for them to do so and call strongly enough to overpower the allure of resting upon the pathway and just “going along for the ride.” Their motivation for continuing against the force of racism must somehow become personal to their own lives and they must implicate themselves in the struggle. Racism can no longer be a problem for just people of color, but it must become a problem for the White person as well. In short, the benefits of turning and walking against the force must outweigh the temptation to stay on the path towards White supremacy.

Like the participants’ backgrounds, their motivations for becoming actively anti racist varied greatly as well. While their motivations are diverse, what they all share in common is that in order for them to act, racism had to become intimately connected to their own lives somehow. For some, an intellectual understanding of White privilege and their role in a system of oppression was enough to push them to act. For others, they required seeing racism directly affect those they love in order to understand the urgency of fighting it. Still for others, it required them to understand how racism connected to their own identity and their own experiences with oppression. However, once they each made these connections to their own lives, the choice to fight was their only option.

While the path to active antiracism varies widely, this does not mean that the findings of this research have no significance to those hoping to teach their child to become actively anti racist. A discussion of what one can take from these findings is still beneficial as long as one takes into consideration the fluidity of the paths to antiracism and remembers that what has worked for these activists is not the final word.

This is a finding that is perhaps most useful because it can be learned anywhere and does not require any special external circumstances, such as interracial contact or a subjugated identity; it only requires an understanding of racism as a system that advantages Whites and disadvantages people of color. While this may prove to be difficult for adults or older teens who have become accustomed to thinking of racism as an issue of the past and seeing it in the present incarnation only on an individual level, taking a class that focuses on systemic racism may provide a remedy for coming to terms with White privilege, as it did for Jessica and Louis. For children who have not yet been heavily influenced by colorblind ideology, this may be a simple idea for them to pick up from a parent or teacher. If they never taught to ignore race and are conditioned to see racism in the world today, then understanding White privilege and their implication in the racist system may come easier to them (when they are cognitively ready to be introduced to these topics) than those adults who have been taught to believe that racism is no longer a problem in U.S. society. Considering this, it may serve the future of antiracism well if schools abandon colorblind and “feel good” multicultural curricula and looked instead into race cognizant and systemically focused anti-oppression education programs.

While understanding White privilege was an essential part of becoming actively antiracist for many of the participants, it was not always enough to bring racism close enough to their own lives that they were able to recognize a need to fight it. Thus, for those Whites who are also unable to find sufficient motivation through understanding their implication in racism, interracial relationships may then help make racism more personal to their own lives, as it did for James and Patrick. For an adult White person, this may mean stepping out of their social circles and actively seeking out an interracial community setting. As James' experience shows, religious groups can sometimes serve as a venue for relationship-building interracial contact. While interracial contact does not have to take place in a religious setting in order for it to be beneficial, if it does, it may present the White person with an opportunity to further connect to racism to his life through spirituality. This, however, does not happen automatically, but requires the religious group to address issues of race and racism and their relation to the foundations of the faith, as James' group did.

And finally, this study suggests that a further connection can be made through a White person's own experiences with oppression. While in this study the oppression was experienced through male and Jewish identity, as mentioned previously, Eichstedt's study found that similar connections could be made by female and sexuality identities. While this connection can only be made if one has had personal experiences of oppression or identifies with a subjugated group, and is thus not accessible to all White people, for those who have had such experiences, it may serve them well to reflect on their oppression in order to better understand the struggles that people of color face under racism. However, if this connection is made, it is essential for the White person to remember that although they may be oppressed

by one system, they are nevertheless still privileged by racism, and thus have a responsibility to fight against it.

While the findings highlight possible ways that other White people can become actively antiracist, it is important to note that they are not definitive. What worked for these activists may not work for other Whites. However, while this study is not a step-by-step guidebook that easily lays out a plan of action, the findings are encouraging. What each of the participants of this study shared in common was that racism became personal to their lives, yet there was a wide variety of ways in which this happened. Thus, this shows that regardless of background or experience, if a White person can somehow find a way to connect racism to their own lives, then they have a much greater chance of turning around on Tatum's moving walkway and actively fighting racism.

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