

# **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WHITE PEOPLE CHANGE**

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HOOKS (2003)**

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# WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WHITE PEOPLE CHANGE

Piointing that particular historical moment in anti-racist struggle when black people begin to endorse the notion that all white people were racist and were unable to change is difficult. In his autobiography *Walking with the Wind*, civil rights activist John Lewis sees that moment as beginning with electoral politics, when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was denied representation in the seats of governmental power. Lewis remembers: “As far as I’m concerned, this was the turning point of the civil rights movement. I’m absolutely convinced of that. Until then, despite every setback and disappointment and obstacle we faced over the years, the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen, the system would respond. Now, for the first time, we had made our way to the center of the system. We had played by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had played the game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep and found the door slammed in our face.” Racial integration ushered in a world where many black folks played by the rules only to face the reality that white racism was not changing, that the system of white supremacy remained intact even as it allowed black people greater access. To many black people who had dreamed the dream, who had believed that racism could be changed by law and interaction, this was cause for despair. In their eyes, racist white people were betraying democracy, contemptuously making light of the oppression and pain black people had suffered.

Growing up in the world of racial apartheid, I had always known that there were courageous individual white people who sacrificed power, status, and privilege to be anti-racist. I heard their voices as they sat in my grandmother's house on the white side of town and gave voice to their beliefs in justice. I saw them cross the boundaries at a time when they risked life and limb to do so. In my childhood I knew that white people could change. And yet I knew that most white people did not want to change; that hurt, the knowledge that white people embraced racial domination as their privilege and their right. Racist white people were the norm. The white people who fascinated me, the white people I wanted to know, then and now, were the rare white folks who had the courage to choose against racism, to choose and to change. In the world I grew up in, a white person who dared to cross the boundaries and be actively anti-racist was respected by black people.

Militant anti-racist struggle spearheaded by patriarchal black people (mostly men) ushered in the idea of white folks as always and only the enemy. There are fundamental differences in the civil rights Southern-based anti-racist struggle and the Northern- and West Coast-based militant black struggle. Southern-based anti-racist struggle always pushed the notion that we are all one, that the goal of ending racial domination was more than just the gaining of civil rights, the ending of discrimination; it was also a vision of diverse people living together in peace. Militant black power rejected this vision of beloved community and invested in a vision of white folks as always and only racist; they were the enemy. Even if they were doing the work of justice they were still deemed the enemy because of the fact of whiteness. In a reversal of the racist thinking that condemned black folks on the basis skin color, nationalist militant patriarchal black power movement condemned all whites on the basis of skin color, not on the basis of beliefs and behaviors.

Even though the vast majority of African-Americans did not support the ideology of national militant patriarchal black power movement, the notion that white people were the enemy gained validity as black people, particularly our leaders, were assassinated and state terrorism stifled militant black protest. When integration failed to rid the nation of racism, many black people despaired and the notion that white folks were racists, that they were not willing to change, gained greater momentum. Rather than focusing on the individual heroic struggles of white folks who committed themselves to anti-racist justice, many black folks dismissed their effort as though it could have no real transformative meaning given the collective world of white racism. This thinking combined with the cynicism among whites about challenging and

changing racism fundamentally undermines anti-racist struggle in our nation. The black people/people of color who truly believe that white people cannot change can only embrace the logic of victimhood. They are the doomsayers investing in the belief that there is no way out.

No one is born a racist. Everyone makes a choice. Many of us made the choice in childhood. A white child taught that hurting others is wrong, who then witnesses racial assaults on black people, who questions that and then is told by adults that this hurting is acceptable because of their skin color, then makes a moral choice to collude or to oppose. A large majority of the white people I knew in the apartheid South who put their lives on the line to choose being anti-racist made that choice in childhood. Ann, one of the few white females in my high school in the late sixties who offered real friendship, was consistently anti-racist. We are still friends today, more than thirty years after we first met. She says that she made her choice as a child. To Ann, it was a moral choice stemming from all that she had learned about right and wrong. It was a choice for justice.

Ann was able to maintain the integrity of her choice as a teenager in part because her parents did not attempt to impose white-supremacist values on her. Working in the tobacco industry, her father encountered black and white folks, as did her mother in the health industry. They taught her that, as she put it, “there is good and bad among all races.” When I interviewed her for this book Ann remembered that her father never opposed her crossing the boundaries of race to build friendship, to build community. He never warned her about the risk she was taking. But he did tell her that other white folks were watching and were not happy with her behavior. Ann remembers her father conveying the message sent by an aunt that she should not be opposing white supremacy. Her response was to tell her dad that her aunt “should mind her own business.”

Ann did not have relational contact with black people until high school, but she had made her choice in her younger years. When she made black friends at school, she wanted to bring them home to spend the night. And even though her parents let her know that would not be a good idea they did not demand of her any form of racial allegiance. The antiracist values Ann embraced have stayed with her throughout her life. Being anti-racist feels as simple and as natural to her as breathing. The world we grew up in has changed little when it comes to race. Segregation is still the norm in social relationships. Ann is still crossing the tracks. And when white folks warn of the dangers, she just laughs

knowingly. Confident that there are good and bad in every group, she seeks the good. That seeking has stood her in good stead.

In my memoir *Wounds of Passion*, I wrote about our mutual high school friend Ken a white male who also dared to cross the boundaries of race. Unlike Ann's parents Ken's folks were consciously committed to social justice. His dad was one of the white ministers in our town who openly opposed racism and white supremacy. When I did readings from *Wounds of Passion*, especially the passages about our struggle to be friends in a social context of racial apartheid, audiences would invariably ask about Ken. We had lost touch for a long while and reunited at the first racially integrated high school reunion, the twentieth. When I was called to see if I would come, my first question was "would Ken be there." A former white male classmate who was doing the calling chuckled and replied that he had just spoken to Ken, whose first response had been to ask if I would be there. Ken and I reunited. We have been close ever since. I moved to the Florida city where he and his wife lived, moved around the corner, bringing blackness to their predominantly white neighborhood. Ken is politically anti-racist, but his social life is still mostly white. He cheerfully absorbs my critiques, even my disappointment that he is not as radical as he was when we were teenagers.

Like many white liberals, Ken sees the "whiteness" of his social life as more an accident of circumstance than a choice. He would welcome greater diversity in the neighborhood. However, he does not consciously do enough work either in his own social life or in the larger community to make that diversity possible.

As allies in anti-racist struggle, Ken and Ann made sacrifices. The bonds of communion and community we forged in resisting white supremacy connect us today. Those bonds are much stronger than the ties I have with most of my white academic peers who write about race and racism but who do not allow anti-racist action to govern how they live their lives. Words are inadequate when we try to evoke the experience of little children in a Southern, white-supremacist culture where state-sanctioned racial terrorism kept everyone in their place. The Jim Crow South was our South Africa. Desegregation did not bring social racial integration. Mingling, crossing the boundaries of race was still a question of individual choice. Most white folks continued to believe in white supremacy and lived their lives accordingly.

Ironically, de-segregation and racial integration was viewed by liberals and

conservatives as the action that would bring the races together. In reality even when black and white came together, they were still separated by white-supremacist beliefs. Racism maintained segregation in the minds and hearts of white people even when it ended legally. Given that reality, white people who choose to be actively anti-racist are heroic. And their heroism goes unnoticed in a world where the overall assumption is that all white people are racist and they cannot or will not change. Dangerous and detrimental, this thinking maintains and reinforces white supremacy.

While it is a truism that every citizen of this nation, white or colored, is born into a racist society that attempts to socialize us from the moment of our birth to accept the tenets of white supremacy, it is equally true that we can choose to resist this socialization. Children do this every day. Babies who stare with wonder and bliss at caretakers, not caring whether they are white or colored, are already actively resisting racist socialization. Whether or not any of us become racists is a choice we make. And we are called to choose again and again where we stand on the issue of racism at different moments in our lives. This has been especially the case for white people. Few white people make the choice to be fundamentally anti-racist and consistently live the meaning of this choice. These are the white folks who know intimately by heart the truth that racism is not in their blood, that it is always about consciousness. And where there is consciousness there is choice. In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, Paulo Freire reminds us that racism is not inherent declaring: “We are not racist; we become racist just as we may stop being that way.”

If we fail to acknowledge the value and significance of individual anti-racist white people we not only diminish the work they have done and do to transform their thinking and behavior, but we prevent other white people from learning by their example. All people of color who suffer racial exploitation and oppression know that white supremacy will not end until racist white people change. Anyone who denies that this change can happen, that one can move from being racist to being actively anti-racist is acting in collusion with the existing forces of racial domination.

Maybe I would have despaired about the capacity of white people to become anti-racist if I had not witnessed firsthand individual Southern white folks (older people), born and bred in a culture of white supremacy, resist it, choosing anti-racism and a love of justice. These were folks who made their choices in circumstances of great danger, in the midst of racial warfare. To honor their commitment rightly we have to fully accept their transformation.

To ask folks to change, to surrender their allegiance to white supremacy, then to mock them by saying that they can never be free of racist thinking is an abomination. If white folks can never be free of white-supremacist thought and action, then black folks/colored folks can never be free. It is as simple as that. We must accept that black folks/people of color are as socialized to embrace whitesupremacist thinking and behavior as our white counterparts. If we can resist, if we can refuse to embrace racist thinking and action, so can they.

Leaving the South to attend a predominantly white liberal arts college on the West Coast, I entered a world where it was fashionable to mouth anti-racist sentiments without truly undergoing the radical transformation in thought and action that must also take place. Active in feminist movement on campus I was stunned by the extent to which white female peers were ignorant of race, racism, and white female privilege. When you grow up in a world of racial apartheid where all manner of terrorizing assaults are used to keep white and black in their “proper” place, white and black folks know intimately that race matters and they know the privileges accorded the white race via the institutionalization of white supremacy.

During my undergraduate years at Stanford University I met groups of liberal well-meaning white folks who were in theory anti-racist, but the vast majority of them had little or no actual everyday contact with black people. Many people forget that the apartheid South did not keep white and black folks apart in daily life but rather enforced subordination and domination through a system of manners and “proper” decorum while allowing close contact. As a consequence, many Southern white folks who had been waited upon all their lives, from birth until death, by black caregivers never had the fear of black presence that Northerners or folks on the West Coast had. And even though I entered Stanford in the early part of the seventies, at a time when racial integration had challenged and changed racial discrimination, the South was slow to change.

When I became an academic focusing my work on feminist theory I, along with other individual radical women of color, challenged white women who spoke of sisterhood to unlearn their racism, to take the time to revise the theories that they were creating from a perspective of racial biases. This intervention exposed the racism of most white feminist activists, but it also revealed and highlighted those individual white women who either were already committed to anti-racist being, or who were in the process of allowing

their lives to be changed through understanding the intersections of racism and sexism. While I was one of the keenest critics of the way racism informed much feminist theory and practice, I have also continually celebrated those individual white women who are true comrades and sisters—women who are anti-racist.

Often I am asked to explain why I could, can, and do critique the racism of white women within feminist movement and in our society as a whole and yet maintain deep bonds of solidarity, care, and love with individual white women. My explanation is rooted in the recognition and praise of the individual anti-racist white women I encountered and encounter in feminist movement who are utterly and steadfastly committed to eradicating racism, to racial justice. As comrades in struggle, the presence and actions of these individual white women renew my faith in the power of white people to resist racism. I feel this especially during times when I am discouraged about the more widespread white female passive acceptance of racism.

In the academic world I found those women in colleagues like Zillah Eisenstein. More than twenty years ago I met Zillah while speaking on a panel about feminist theory. Since we are both fond of spirited dialectical exchange we debated, argued, and in our own way fell in comradely love. When I told her that I felt she had used my work without really giving me credit, she did not respond with the defensiveness and fear I often encountered whenever I challenged white women. Confident, she stated she would go back, take a look at the work and if she agreed with me make amends. This encounter was so refreshing. We regarded each other as equals, as peers. I had become so weary of encountering white people, especially white women, who used fear as a practice of dehumanization. The same white female colleagues who would engage in professional debate with white female peers would often engage me as though they were Jane in the jungle threatened by a raging beast. Their irrational, racialized fear separated us.

Of course as Zillah became a lifelong political comrade and personal friend, I learned that she was born into a household of serious Jewish political activists who were fundamentally antiracist. Living among black folks and working with them, her parents embodied the truth that we are created equal. Zillah has done to same for her daughter. The choices Zillah's parents made to be anti-racist caused difficulty in their lives, and yet they never wavered. Zillah has herself become someone who does not waver in her resistance to imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal domination. Early on I learned the phrase "capitalist patriarchy" from reading Zillah's work.

Accepting Zillah and other white women comrades as antiracist in their being does not mean that I or they ignore the reality that we can all be as anti-racist as we want to be and still make mistakes. There are individual women of color who work with Zillah yet who do not see her as I do. I can only say that they do not know her as I know her. Once I came to talk at her college, and with bold zeal she wanted to introduce me, but the women of color who were my hosts felt that “like the typical white woman she was trying to take over.” Talking with them I could see that they brought to this encounter a pent up impatience and rage at white female racism that was not simply about Zillah’s action. I understood their rage even though I did not share their interpretation. Realizing that something was “wrong,” Zillah was both hurt and disturbed. Like any of us who take courageous stands against racism it was hard to accept being lumped, even if just for a moment, with all the unenlightened white folks who have no intention of unlearning their racism.

Engaged in critical dialogue about this encounter, Zillah and I were painfully reminded of the damage white supremacy has done to our capacity as women to trust one another. Most black women encounter racism from white women. That remembered assault may leave us feeling guarded, feeling we cannot allow ourselves to trust any white woman. On the flip side, white women who seek to be our comrades may work overtime to show us that they are worthy, but in a manner that is ultimately patronizing. Anytime we strive to prove our worth by exaggerated gestures there is usually an underlying problem of low self-esteem.

Relationships between black and white women are often charged by the dynamics of competition. Whether or not that competition stems from a racialized base, it will ultimately manifest itself in a racialized response. Sexism pits women against one another, and the power struggle that ensues may become even more intense when racial difference is added to the mix. Antiracist white women are not afraid to engage with critiques by black women/women of color because those white women fundamentally understand that as long as we fear facing our differences and avoid conflict we cannot arrive at a true place of solidarity and sisterhood.

When black people/people of color fully embrace the reality that white people who choose to do so can be anti-racist to the core of their being then we draw these folks to us. Their commitment to anti-racism does not mean they never make mistakes, that they never buy into race privilege, or that they never enact in daily life racial domination. This could always happen on an

unconscious level. What it does mean is that when they make a mistake they are able to face it and make needed repair.

Since I believe wholeheartedly that white people can choose to be anti-racist, I look for those individuals in every walk of life who have made this choice. The publishing world has little diversity, and is way behind the small progress made in educational settings. But I have found those rare white folks who understood, who are anti-racist. When I interviewed Lisa Holton, a high-level executive at Disney Hyperion Children's Books who has worked hard to further publishing books by and about people of color, I asked where her commitment to racial justice was made. She shared that she was the child of a divorced couple at a time when it was not common, that she had been an "outsider" in school eating her lunch with three other outsiders, two of whom were black, and all of whom were the children of divorced parents. It was in that setting that she forged her bonds across the boundaries of race and made her choice to be anti-racist. She recalls: "I just really saw what racism does to everybody." Awareness of the pain racial injustice causes in the everyday lives of black folks was the catalyst that led her to reject white supremacy. When I talk with black folks she supervises they just express such joy that they can work with a white person "who never lords it over" them. The "it" she could use to maintain hierarchal domination is racial privilege.

Often the white women I have encountered who are most passionate in their will to be anti-racist, who carry their commitment from theory to practice, are gay women. Interviewing them I heard again and again that discrimination against them on the basis of sexuality helped bridge their understanding of the pain of race-based discrimination. Rather than assuming that this pain was identical to the pain they experienced, they accepted the "bridge" as merely a base to walk across, allowing them to learn from people of color the nature of our experience in the social context of white supremacy.

Many white gay people are unable to bridge the gap. They remain unable to look at the way in which whiteness and white power give them access to privilege to the role of dominator. They refuse to see the ways discrimination can impact on our consciousness differently even though the forms it takes are the same. Often gay white people look down on black people because they perceive us to be more homophobic or less sexually progressive. These stereotyped assumptions are rooted in white-supremacist thinking, which deems white folks to be always more sophisticated and complex than people of color. White gay women and men who are fundamentally anti-racist do

not need to use the notion that they are intellectually superior or to legitimize their fear of us.

Writing openly and honestly about these issues in her collection of “lesbian essays on Southern culture,” Mab Segrest describes the pain she feels when she acknowledges the power of white supremacy. When “as a white person — I realize what white people have done and are doing in the world, the more I am tempted by the tragic voice which tells me . . . It is too late.” Humor is the vehicle Segrest uses to restore her spirit: “My comic sense. . . encourages my white self not to hate itself since I can change. For white women doing anti-racist work, one of our chief challenges is to find ways of overcoming our feelings of self-hatred and despair brought about by an increased knowledge of our white heritage. The sense of humor is also the sense of faith and trust and hope.” Humor is vital to our efforts to bond across race. Laughing together intervenes in our fear of making mistakes.

A group of white women, mostly gay, who have worked to create in their collectively owned bookstore an atmosphere of beloved communities that embraces everyone, are the owners and workers of Charis bookstore in Atlanta. To eliminate the racial tension/fear that could arise when people of color enter what is often a predominantly white setting, these women practice a basic civility to all. Years ago we/people of color would often complain that we would enter feminist bookstores and be treated as though we do not belong. Embracing civility in interactions across race can serve as a simple way to break down barriers created by white-supremacist thought and action. In the world I grew up in, black people’s subservience was measured by the degree to which we extended ourselves to be courteous and civil to whites; now, anti-racist white people use the practice of civility as a strategy of resistance.

The principles that govern interaction between black and women folks in a white-supremacist society, that help us resist and form solidarity, need to be identified. One principle is the will to form a conscious, cooperative partnership that is rooted in mutuality. Striving to be mutual is the principle that best mediates situations where there is unequal status. Of course, we cannot forge boundaries across the barriers that racism creates if we want always to be safe or to avoid conflict. In feminist settings, during my first year of college, I was always confused when my peers would encourage us to participate in activist revolution on the one hand, and then on the other hand stress the importance of safety. The emphasis on safety in feminist settings often served as a barrier to cross-racial solidarity because these encounters

did not feel “safe” and were often charged with tension and conflict. Working with white students on unlearning racism, one of the principles we strive to embody is the value of risk, honoring the fact that we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe, that the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict. Trusting our ability to cope in situations where racialized conflict arises is far more fruitful than insisting on safety as always the best or only basis for bonding.

Individual white men working to be, like their white female counterparts, fully anti-racist, rarely get the attention white folks who are actively racists get. When any white male in our government makes a racist statement he receives a hundred times more attention than the lone white male who publicly stands against racist policies. Through the years I have noticed that people of color who are still invested in power struggles judge anti-racist white folks much more harshly than their racist counterparts. Often the anti-racist white person must endure social isolation, rejected by racist white folks and by people of color who may either fear being betrayed or who may simply be enacting dominator power via exclusion.

Art professor Mark Johnson, a white male who knows what it feels like to be the object of scorn or ridicule from both sides of the fence, white folks who think he is “too pro black” and black folks who seem him a being the uppity white male. It is vital that we refuse to allow rejection by any group to change one’s commitment to anti-racism. Love of justice cannot be sustained if it is only a manipulation to be with the in-crowd, whoever they may be. Many white folks worked for civil rights, then passively dropped the struggle when critiqued by people of color or told by them they were not wanted. Anti-racist white folks recognize that their ongoing resistance to white supremacy is genuine when it is not determined in any way by the approval or disapproval of people of color. This does not mean that they do not listen and learn from critique, but rather that they understand fully that their choice to be anti-racist must be constant and sustained to give truth to the reality that racism can end.

Mark believes that service is central to anti-racist commitment. People of color, myself included, trust him because we see the work he does on behalf of ending white supremacy, work for which he receives no visible reward. To him the reward is knowing that he is living a life of integrity, living the truth of his commitment to ending racism, within and without. His work on behalf of racial justice has brought to him a beloved community where diversity is

a given. When I hear white people complain about not being able to make the social contact they would like to have with people of color, my response is always to encourage them to work actively for racial justice, because that work will draw to them the community they desire, if their longing is sincere and not an excuse for living a life cloaked in unchanged whiteness.

There are so many individuals I could name whose lives bear witness to the power of anti-racist white people, folks like longtime activist Grace Lee Boggs, that it would take pages and pages to share their stories. These pages should be written. Everyone should hear their testimony.

Activist, writer, lesbian Barbara Deming transformed her life by refusing to support white supremacy. Working in the South during the civil rights movement she was, by her power as an individual, working for justice. She learned firsthand that “the individual can act” and that actions on behalf of social change “has weight.” Like Deming, I have learned firsthand that individual white people who choose to be anti-racist make a difference. Speaking of her work with black people during dangerous times wherein she risked arrest, Deming writes that she finds joy in struggle, community, and a courage to resist that left her proclaiming “I am no longer the same.” All white people who choose to be anti-racist proclaim this truth. Challenging racism, white supremacy, they are transformed. Free of the will to dominate on the basis of race, they can bond with people of color in beloved community living the truth of our essential humanness.

2003,  
bell hooks

Also available in English:

- *Bouteldja, her «sisters» and us*, by Mélusine (2016)
- *Bouteldja, «a sister» who wishing you well*, by Lala Mliha (2017)
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