

## **The Dialogue of Denial: Perpetuating Racism Through Thoughtful Inaction**

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### **Abstract**

This conceptual essay explores the idea of negotiating race-related tensions through the lens of critical Whiteness and antiracism theory. Introducing the concept of thoughtful inaction in relation to White privilege and antiracist work, the essay examines what it means not to act and the consequences of such inaction. Current ways of thinking related to diversity, equity, and inclusion and how mindsets are manifest into (in)action will be investigated, along with barriers confronted when attempting to maintain and facilitate antiracist dispositions and actions in sociopolitical contexts. The author emphasizes conceptualizations of antiracism and argues the benefit in framing antiracist development to better contextualize personal understanding and encourage growth in relation to one's own racial identity development.

*Keywords:* Antiracism; Critical Whiteness; Racial Identity Development; Racism; White Privilege

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## Introduction

While serving in the capacity of a fully released mentor for beginning teachers, I was working in the media center of a predominately Black high school in a large urban area when I overheard a White female teacher in her mid-fifties make a racist remark to a White male student regarding another student who was Black. The teacher had been facilitating essay writing with the two students for approximately one hour. After the Black student concluded his work, he exited the media center. Shortly after his departure, the White student said something to the teacher that was inaudible to me. In response, the teacher stated, “You have to remember, he doesn’t speak the same language as us.” Looking confused, the White student said, “Huh?” The teacher replied, “You know, in my house we have a certain way we speak and in your house you have a way you speak. But, African Americans from the south, they don’t speak the same language as us.” The White student continued to look confused. In a patient, yet determined, manner, the teacher persisted and said, “You know, Ms. Johnson (pseudonym) in the front office, she speaks the same as we do, but she’s from Boston. African Americans from the south, they just speak differently.” Even though I was immediately alarmed by what I heard, sickened by this “us and them” philosophy the teacher was asserting, I did nothing. I sat silently as if I were paralyzed.

On my drive home that afternoon, I called a friend to discuss the day’s occurrence. While recalling the scenario, I heard myself clearly making excuses about why I choose not to act. For example, all of the following statements came off of my lips as justifications for my decision not to

respond: (a) “Since I’m not actually assigned to that particular school site, I didn’t think it was my place to say anything.” (b) “How was I supposed to confront the teacher about what she said without making her look bad in front of the student?” and (c) “I’ve never even seen her before. I don’t even know her name. I didn’t know how to handle it.” Since I could not mentally escape the situation for the remainder of the evening, I decided I would inform the administration of the teacher’s comments. The administrator I spoke with was a Black male. He expressed extreme concern regarding the event and thanked me for bringing it to his attention because, as he stated, “I don’t think that was something many White people would do.”

Even though I felt some sense of relief after talking with the administrator, as soon as I left his office, I was immediately reminded of Audrey Thompson’s (2003) seminal article about antiracism. Internalizing Thompson’s (2003) ideas, I remember thinking I did not deserve a “good White person medal” for this, but rather, if anything, should be labeled a hypocrite. There I was, a White female interested in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and antiracism, and when actually tested in a professional setting, I failed to act. In the given situation, I was unable to translate my thoughts into action. Additionally, I, a White woman, took the situation to a Black male, thereby turning over the responsibility to him and I allowed an innocent Black male student to be further disenfranchised without even knowing.

Since the incident occurred, I have spoken about it to several people, both Black and White. Although none of them criticized me or seemed critical of my failure to act

(maybe they were just being kind), I continue to criticize my own silence and inaction. Replaying the scenario over and over in my mind, I continue to imagine how, if given the chance again, I would have responded or what I would have said. Before beginning my study of antiracism, I am confident I would have believed the White teacher who made the comment to be the problem in the given scenario. After much reflection and deliberation of my role in antiracism, I find my silence and lack of action to be more problematic. Scheurich (2002) states, “We can criticize the world out there day after day, but if we don’t also criticize our own subjectivity, we leave one of the main tropes of White racist modernism not only untouched but also active in reproduction” (p. 156).

Furthermore, before exploring antiracism, I believe I probably would have positioned myself as much more enlightened than the teacher who made the comment. However, I have come to believe antiracist development is not about positioning oneself against others or a point of arrival, but rather is best framed to contextualize personal understandings to encourage growth. Subsequently, when I reflect on the scenario, I think the reason I continue to feel so strongly is because the situation is no longer about the White teacher in the media center; it is about me. When I contemplate my failure to act, I must not redirect attention, make excuses, or minimize my role, but rather ponder, not on what the teacher said, but my own subjectivities. Additionally, I need to take ownership of my thoughtful inaction and lack of congruence between thoughts and actions.

In this essay I will introduce the concept of thoughtful inaction. The concept will be explored in relation to the perpetuation of racism and the preservation of White privilege. Since White privilege is

often characterized as a lack of awareness (essentially part of the privilege is to be unaware of the deeply rooted nature and implications of race and racism), it is difficult to challenge because of its invisibility. As such, the notion is frequently denied and uncomfortable to broach. Along with providing theoretical underpinnings of White privilege, the importance of the theoretical frameworks of critical Whiteness and antiracism will be examined as a means for exploring how people can work to both expose and oppose racism, while working to promote advocacy dispositions and further examine what it means to act in the service of antiracism.

### Thoughtful Inaction

Bearing in mind antiracist work and advocacy, it can be helpful to consider the notion of thoughtful inaction. When placed in a situation where speaking up or acting would have been appropriate, albeit necessary, to espouse the ideals of antiracism, what does it mean when one chooses not to act? Although one should not act on impulse or react in a way that may offend others, as that is not useful or productive in interrupting racism, when one elects not to act, there is prospective meaning behind the inaction. Thoughtful inaction results when a person’s actionable thought leads one to decide not to translate thought into action to minimize, prevent, or avoid discomfort or conserve or preserve the current context. The thoughts may not always be explicit, however, they are influential in maintaining the strategic silence of well-pondered and deliberate dispositions.

The ideas of Leonardo da Vinci are often cited, “I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough;

we must do” (Edberg, 2016). In respect to antiracism, are application and the act of doing required components of this framework? How do we facilitate the urgency of doing in this context to promote equity and social justice? In addition, to intensify the complexity, how do we differentiate between complete inaction as opposed to strategically delayed action that may later occur?

In a world where racism is manifest in a myriad of ways, it can be advantageous to contemplate how action, and thoughtful inaction, is applied to multifaceted and diverse contexts. Even though internalized, interpersonal, institutional, structural, and global racism are demonstrated in varied forms, the dialogue of denial and the application of thoughtful inaction are seemingly applied to all of these given contexts. In order to maintain and preserve the strategic and deliberate silence, one may completely deny the existence of the issue or avoid the topic entirely. In addition, as with the scenario in the introduction, like me, one may elect to engage in a dialogue with oneself that somehow serves to justify the continued silence and the inability to act.

Despite the fact that racism frequently transpires in subtle ways, perhaps representative of the opening scenario, it is pervasive and continues to disempower and oppress historically disenfranchised communities and people of Color while simultaneously empowering and advantaging White people. Consequently, it is important to deliberate how people, particularly White people, negotiate with subtle racism and increase consciousness related to self-reflection and action. How can White people work to expose and interrupt racism in ways that are useful and long standing?

**Why did I choose not to act?** This can be a challenging and unsettling question. With every decision and every choice there are consequences, just as there are with each thoughtful silence and every thoughtful failure to act. When choosing not to act, we must ponder the motivation of the choice. For example, how is this inaction perceived by others? Who are we choosing to make feel comfortable through this inaction? Perhaps there are perceived ramifications of action. Consequently, inaction, in a given context, is perceived as a better choice. But, for whom is the choice *better*?

Applying the role of power to the scenario, let us consider who benefits from the inaction and who would benefit from action. In the opening scenario, the dominant discourse on Whiteness and White privilege benefitted from my personal failure to act. The comfort of the White teacher and the comfort of my White female existence benefitted from my silence. As a result, in the given scenario, I continued the perpetuation of White privilege and the status quo. Many may not perceive my silence as exploitation or oppression; however, I exploited in my complicity. My silence allowed for inaccuracies about people of Color and a mindset of “us and them” to be extended and maintained. I consented to continued marginalization and disenfranchisement.

Taking into account the difference between actions and dispositions, my thoughtful inaction propagated the dialogue of denial. While dispositions inform our actions, they do not always transform into action. Therefore, my dialogue, or lack thereof, continued to discount problems related to racial ideology rather than challenge this stark inaccuracy. While I perceive myself to be an advocate for social equity and inclusion, since my actions did

not exemplify this mindset, there was an extreme lack of congruence. As such, I must take into account how to promote growth and advocacy in both mindsets and actions in order to better foster congruence. Rather than legitimize inaction, we must contemplate how to respond more effectively. For example, how do we break with the traditional and socially normed silence and confront the resulting dissonance? How do we intervene to thoughtfully disrupt the dominant discourse, even when there may be potentially negative consequences from such intervention? How do we navigate issues of perceived power and authority that influence (in)action? My failure to act does not make me a failure on this journey, but my reflection on my failure to act is critical in examining my thinking and consciousness related to antiracist awareness and what it means to act in the service of antiracism.

### **Critical Whiteness**

When considering race and racial identity development, while Whiteness and corresponding cultural capital must be examined, it is also important to develop a critical consciousness of how White privilege influences and connects to oppression of non-Whites. Whiteness studies began to emerge in the late 1980s as a result of the frustration of multiculturalism's failure to challenge Eurocentric ideology and continued reinforcement of the status quo that favors Whiteness (Harris, 1998; Niemonen, 2010). As a result, in an attempt to challenge the existing hegemonic tendencies, it encourages honest discourse about race and racism centered on understanding how Whiteness is constructed, experienced, and reproduced as privileged (Niemonen, 2010). Connecting to the idea of the dialogue of denial, critical Whiteness examines the

invisibility of Whiteness and the social forces that continue to position White identity as the norm (Applebaum, 2003; Bergerson, 2003; Harris, 1998). Stemming from CRT, critical Whiteness is a theory used to further examine the pervasive nature of racism by analyzing the construction, influence, and implications of White identity and how such identity awards dominance (Applebaum, 2003; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hayes & Juarez, 2009). Emphasizing the social construct of Whiteness, the theory examines cultural, historical, and sociological influences within the American context, as well as how Whiteness influences social status, sustains White dominance, and results in oppression of non-Whites (Applebaum, 2003; Bergerson, 2003; Harris, 1998; Niemonen, 2010). It serves to examine issues of perceived power and authority and how that power is either challenged or reinforced.

Taking into account the complexity of the topic, advocates of critical Whiteness assert that White individuals should be encouraged to view oppression with a comprehensive lens. It is essential to look at the big picture, not just individual actions or recent events. Although it is important to heighten both the mindfulness and responsiveness to Whiteness and expose White privilege, it is essential to focus on how Whiteness relates to political, social, and historical constructions (Hayes & Juarez, 2009; Kendall, 2006; Vann Lynch, 2006). "Because [Whites] do not suffer materially from the interlocking effects of such systems, because they do not experience institutional and cultural oppression, it is easy for them to avoid viewing the world macroscopically. In fact, [Whites] can choose to ignore oppression altogether; they have the option to decide whether to struggle against it or not" (Applebaum, 2003, p. 11).

Critical Whiteness involves race cognizance, an awareness characterized by the ability to understand historical influences related to the social construction of race, as well as identify practices and policies that normalize Whiteness and its implicit system of advantages (Niemonen, 2010). It highlights the reality that racism is not simply about individual actions, but rather a system that disadvantages, disempowers, and denies privileges. Since many Whites do not see themselves as individually racist, they often fail to recognize ways their Whiteness maintains current systems of oppression (Harris, 1998; Hayes & Juarez, 2009; Kendall, 2006; Niemonen, 2010). Many White people go so far as to emphasize they are “good Whites” and differ from other White people by highlighting flaws in others in attempts to highlight their own positive White identity (Thompson, 2003). For example, White people will often highlight their good intentions, liberal mindsets, and work and relationships with people of color, but never consider that these attributes do not diminish the reality of their privilege.

As Thompson (2003) argues, many White people are determined to define their own Whiteness and tell their story in their own way. Feeling that they did not choose either Whiteness or racism, nor did they participate in the historical events tied to slavery or its oppressive aftermath, many White individuals attempt to distance themselves from these associations by highlighting their “good” characteristics. However, even though many White people insist they had nothing to do with the past nor do they have the ability to change it, feelings of guilt often result, thereby continuing to highlight Whiteness as the focus of the oppression (Frankenberg, 1993; Helms, 1990). Consequently, critical Whiteness emphasizes the importance of

being able to advance past the individual and analyze how the privileges link to and maintain systemic oppression (Bergerson, 2003; Harris, 1998; Wise, 2005); thereby highlighting a connection between White privilege and the resulting oppression that sustains White dominance.

As argued by Thompson (2003), “[T]hose of us who want to confront and challenge racism in ourselves, in institutions, and in others, can never forget race or racism but also cannot be trapped by it; we cannot allow it to be reified as meaningful in the particular ways we have learned to understand it” (p. 24). Critical Whiteness scholars maintain White individuals should attempt to develop an understanding of the social construct of Whiteness and the pervasive nature of racism, as well as examine how the manifested privileges of their Whiteness have worked to create and sustain a system of dominance that oppresses non-Whites. Although the ideologies of antiracism directly connect to and influence critical Whiteness, it is difficult to assume an understanding has been established for what it means to be an antiracist White person as the tools are still under construction (Thompson, 2003) and there is still much work to be done. As Thompson (2003) asserts:

*[W]hen we start congratulating ourselves on how far along we are, it is easy to stop thinking of ourselves as on a journey and start thinking of ourselves as having arrived. Not only have we not arrived but we cannot know, either in a pragmatic or visionary sense, what the end of the journey looks like. What will come to count as antiracist will change as we take on new lived possibilities. (p. 20)*

## White Privilege

Critical theory suggests that society has been cautioned to be aware of the abuse of power and encouraged to question who is advocating for reform and what their potential agendas may be. As such, people must be cognizant of the dangers of hegemony and the privileges of the dominant group. Despite this argument, many people still frequently fail to employ such critical consciousness (Foster, 1986; Freire, 1970, 2010). In relation to education, many White people do not understand issues of racial inequity, do not want to engage in this particular topic, or cannot picture what educational equity would look like. As a result, they avoid related dialogue (Applebaum, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1993). Since many educators are White and middle class, they do not have personal experience with inequity. For that reason they are frequently unaware of the realities of racial inequity, discrimination, and White privilege (Applebaum, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Kendall, 2006). It is not uncommon for White individuals to be completely unaware that schools focus on White curricula, White values, and White culture. Although society has incorporated Black History Month and Hispanic Heritage Month, the remainder of the year tends to focus on topics that align with White values and norms. Subsequently, as asserted by Takaki (2008), “Not to be ‘White’ is to be designated as the ‘Other’— different, inferior, and unassimilable [*sic*]” (p. 4).

The hegemonic discourse of White privilege highlights a system of advantages based on race that rests on the notion that American institutions perpetuate the advantages of the majority culture, thereby perpetuating racism. Since White culture is

dominant and people frequently regard what is dominant to be the norm, it requires a conscious effort for White people to realize the existence and effects of racism (Applebaum, 2003; Harris, 1998; Kendall, 2006; Thompson, 1997, 2003; Wise, 2005). White privilege provides an avenue for such thinking as it is a way of conceptualizing racial inequalities that underscore the benefits White people receive based on skin color, as well as the reality that such benefits and privileges result in an advantaged position (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Kendall, 2006; Niemonen, 2010). As a result, to question or challenge the privileges or implications of the privilege is frequently perceived as offensive. Although White people do not ask for such privileges, due to the socially constructed nature of Whiteness, they are unable to return them or avoid the resulting benefits (Applebaum, 2003; Kendall, 2006; Wise, 2005). Since the reality of Whiteness and the corresponding privileges are often invisible to many White people (Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Niemonen, 2010; Wise, 2005), such privileges often manifest themselves as entitlement (Watt, 2007) or are equated with hard work, skills, and motivation (Applebaum, 2003; Niemonen, 2007). The idea of White privilege is invisible to many and usually only subconsciously reveals itself. As highlighted by Wise (2005), despite common messages that advocate color evasiveness and human equality, actions and experiences inform people from an early age about the reality of White privilege and superiority, as well as the power of systemic racism.

As described by McIntosh (1988) in her seminal essay that established the foundation for discourse on this subject, White privilege is “an invisible package of unearned assets which [White people] can count on cashing in each day, but about

which [they were] ‘meant’ to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (p. 1). White privilege seems to be an incredibly complicated, often uncomfortable topic to address, because one cannot see what one does not understand. Since White privilege is often completely invisible to those who benefit from it, White people are frequently completely unaware it exists altogether (Applebaum, 2003; Hayes & Juarez, 2009; Heinze, 2008; Kendall, 2006).

Consequently, Whiteness dominates and has been established as the norm. In addition, many White people do not identify themselves as racial beings, often regard race as something only non-Whites have (Jay, 1998; Niemonen, 2007), and are blind to the issue of racial inequity, proclaiming society is fair and just (Jost, Jost, & Whitfield, 2005). Deeming themselves as colorblind or racially neutral, many Whites make excuses and offer explanations for inequities or differentiated treatment based on characteristics that do not involve race, such as socioeconomic status, personal dress, family history, or personal credentials or explain failure to comply with or measure up to the norm as a failure on the part of non-Whites. Rather than engaging in conversations about race, which many White Americans realize is a difficult subject to address (Howard & Denning del Rosario, 2000), neutrality has become part of the dominant discourse, and many White people proclaim opportunities and success result from merit alone (Bergerson, 2003; Wise, 2005). As emphasized by Tate (1997), “most oppression does not seem like oppression to the oppressor” (p. 220). White individuals do not have to deal with the tiring micro-aggressions that inconvenience, sometimes torment, the lives of people of Color. In fact, most White people can live in such a way

that they rarely, if ever, have to actually even consider their own race or the reality of racism. “Racism is not an aberration or tragic flaw but a systematic way of organizing social relations that privileges Whites and then naturalizes that privilege” (Thompson, 1997, p. 13). Subsequently, racism cannot be addressed without recognizing the need to deconstruct Whiteness and the corresponding implicit advantages since, “Whiteness is the cultural marker against which ‘otherness’ is defined. Because those who possess Whiteness accrue unearned benefits, Whiteness must be rendered problematic if prevailing inequalities are to be redressed” (Niemonen, 2007, p. 162).

### **Antiracism Theory**

Antiracism theory involves thoughts, beliefs, actions, and policies that oppose racism and challenge the status quo and traditional notions that favor hegemonic discourses regarding Whiteness (Gupta, 2003). Proponents of antiracism argue race is not a neutral concept (Applebaum, 2003, 2007; Closson, 2010), but rather a deeply entrenched and highly influential notion. As asserted by Scheurich (2002), “White racism steals lives of color, destroys people, and convinces many that they are not intelligent, capable, important, valuable. At best, it constantly places barriers in the paths of people of color. At worst, it literally kills. In between, it hurts, damages, stunts, limits, contorts. Even for us Whites, it corrupts our souls and devalues our lives” (p. 18). Subsequently, given the complex, deeply entrenched, and destructive nature of racism, proponents of antiracism highlight the need to challenge the influence of race and racism and examine ways that they influence both thoughts and actions (Bell, 1973; Lopez, 1994; Lynn, Benigno, Williams, Park, &



Mitchell, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994; Yosso, 2005).

Employing the emancipatory ideologies of Paulo Freire (1970, 2010), antiracism theory applies principles of critical theory and cites the need to critically examine race and racism (Niemonen, 2007), particularly focusing on examination of institutionalized and systemic racism (Gupta, 2003). The theory underscores the social construct of race and the influence race plays in the development of personal identities, interpersonal and social dialogues, as well as institutional constructs and organizations (Niemonen, 2007). For example, how does race and racial ideology not only impact an individual and one's thinking, but the social, economic, and political systems that people comprise? How does race influence the dominant discourse and the way people are perceived and represented?

Given that many White people displace the responsibility and claim racism is not about them, but rather a problem that involves other people (Applebaum, 2003; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Thompson, 2003; Wise, 2005), application of this theory can be advantageous since it emphasizes "the ability to move beyond prejudice and discrimination as a problem to be corrected in individuals in order to critically examine how institutional structures support racist practices economically, politically, and culturally" (Niemonen, 2007, p. 160). Proponents of antiracism assert that attempts to promote racial equity and eliminate racism should include exposing White privilege and deconstructing the meaning of Whiteness (Niemonen, 2007) as they identify the implicit privileges from which they benefit and recognize themselves as oppressors (Applebaum, 2007). As Scheurich (2002) argues, "Since I cannot

individually escape my racial group and its position with the inequitable social hierarchy, no matter how much I individually detest racism, I am compelled to work inclusively with other members of my racial group to address White racism" (p. 33). Consequently, in order to encourage progress in relation to modern racism, it is critical for White people to recognize, despite their personal dispositions regarding people of Color, they are subject to racist tendencies and influenced by the social construction of race and deeply rooted nature of racism (Niemonen, 2007).

Antiracism is not nonracism as it does not assume racial innocence is possible, but rather asserts that all people are racialized (Closson, 2010; Thompson, 1997). Therefore, in recognizing the highly influential nature of race and impact of racism, deliberately creating spaces to discuss such matters (Johnson Lachuk & Mosley, 2011), and engaging in critical discourse can encourage democratic change. Antiracism theory supports the need to "create performative spaces in which the commonplaces of racism can be unsettled — in which racism can be addressed as a framing of meaning rather than as natural, while alternative possibilities are played out within the performative constraints of the classroom" (Thompson, 1997, p. 35). Additionally, in order to best examine race and racism, antiracist theory emphasizes collaboration with insiders who have a wealth of experience with race and racism and allowing for the knowledge of those who are "relegated to the 'margins' of society" (Gupta, 2003, p. 459). To "extend what it means to be racially literate" (Johnson Lachuk & Mosley, 2011, p. 328), conversations should be encouraged to examine inequitable ideologies, practices, and policies, emphasizing the clear contrast in highlighted and silenced voices, as well as

action and thoughtful inaction. In addition, it can be beneficial to consider contextual issues that make action complicated in an effort to better examine how to move people to action and advocacy.

### Conceptualizations of Antiracism

Even though there are stages in racial identity development models such as Helm's Model of Racial Identity Development (1990) and Frankenberg's Model of the Five Phases of White Racial Consciousness (1993) that align with antiracism, there are no established models distinctively created for antiracist identity development. Given that antiracism is defined as thoughts, beliefs, actions, and policies that oppose racism and challenge the status quo regarding White privilege (Gupta, 2003), it seems there are different gradations of antiracism. In addition, it might be advantageous to investigate what it might look like to act, given one's positioning, skill set, and available information. Regarding the frequently referenced academic models, it could be argued that antiracism would align with the final stage in Helms's (1990) model and the final two phases in Frankenberg's (1993) model. Helms's final stage, Internalization, is characterized by individuals who have advanced beyond reflections of conceptions of Whiteness as a social construct, acknowledge White privilege while still being proud of their own identity, and dedicate themselves to further understanding and fighting the injustice of racism and discrimination (Helms, 1990).

In regard to Frankenberg's model, in the fourth stage titled Race Cognizance: Rethinking Race and Power, people begin to recognize the influence of race on daily life. Individuals in this stage identify institutional racism, are willing to think about difficult

questions, and focus on reflection rather than action. Frankenberg's final stage is Race Cognizance: Transforming Silence into Language and Action. People in this stage understand individual racism and view political activism as beneficial in taking action. In this stage the focus shifts to collective action rather than individual thinking. Let us consider: Do you have to act to promote antiracism and interrupt racism?

As with racial identity development, models can provide a framework for what antiracism could look like, keeping in mind the challenges of rigidly applying any model. As highlighted earlier, Thompson (2003) argues that the tools are still under construction as to what it means to be an antiracist White person. For example, if there are different degrees of antiracism, is it enough to have thoughts and beliefs that oppose racism and challenge the status quo or must individuals purposefully take action and support such policies in order to align with antiracist advocacy? Frankenberg's (1993) *Transforming* seems to clearly align with antiracism, but does *rethinking* align, as well? To be considered antiracist, are antiracist thoughts adequate or must the thoughts be manifest into voice and action? Given some people may have more tensions to negotiate in their given circumstances and environments than others, especially in relation to perceived power and authority, is it meaningful and appropriate to compare peoples' thoughts and actions? There is merit in taking into account time, place, and professional role when analyzing whether a person's antiracist dispositions are translated into action. In respect to the deeply rooted nature of racism, there are many factors and systems to bear in mind and navigate. There are certain environments where it is more appropriate to express such thoughts, while there are other places where these thoughts

are encouraged to be concealed. Let us consider the general climate and culture in historically liberal geographic regions as opposed to historically conservative regions. Additionally, some people are in professional roles where advocacy is required, or at least expected, while others are in roles where even speaking about race-related issues is discouraged. As such, context seems to be highly influential in the transition from thought to advocacy.

The fear of being labeled, socially or professionally, can result in thoughtful inaction, as well, thereby encouraging reflective prompts such as: (a) What can I live with? (b) What am I comfortable with? (c) Do the benefits outweigh the risks? (d) Is standing up for what I believe in worth risking the respect of my family or colleagues? (e) Am I willing to risk peer acceptance by voicing and acting upon my concerns? (f) How do I interrupt racism in a way that allows me to maintain what is necessary for me? Therefore, if this process is a journey, does it look different for everyone? Furthermore, what elements are required for the journey to be characterized as antiracist?

It is interesting that Frankenberg's (1993) model was created based on a study she conducted with women living in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, a geographic region that tends to be associated with more "liberal" and "progressive" mindsets than many other areas of the country. Subsequently, taking into account conceptualizations of both racial identity development and antiracism, it could be argued that ecological and contextual influences should be considered. Therefore, it becomes necessary to simultaneously navigate multiple identities within oneself and understand that the identity that takes precedence in a given situation is influenced

by both ecological and contextual components.

In attempt to encourage democratic change, White people must recognize that, despite their personal dispositions regarding people of color, they are subject to racist tendencies and influenced by the social construction of race (Niemonen, 2007). Racism is an endemic phenomenon by which everyone is infected to varying degrees (Closson, 2010). As a result, transformation should include analyzing personal biases and oppressive actions. "Our actions and efforts, our directions, our anti-racist practices must be constructed both within and against the constructions of White racism in which we are embedded and which are embedded throughout our very being" (Scheurich, 2002, p. 8).

Considering the multifaceted dynamics of antiracist identity development, there is also merit in reflecting on whether antiracist identity development has a predetermined destination or if such development is more about the process along the way. Since there are different degrees of antiracism, when examining antiracist identity development as a process, rather than focusing on the destination, growth can be fostered in the process itself. Given the deeply rooted nature of racism, the pervasive implications of race, and the systemic reality of White privilege, antiracist identity development is seemingly something with which White people will always be working, navigating, and negotiating. As such, when White people begin to employ the mindset of arrival, or that they are better positioned than others on a continuum, such thinking becomes counterproductive in the antiracist development process, because it redirects focus and minimizes the role of the individual in the process. Placing emphasis

on problems and existing inequities, rather than the systemic reality of racism, authorizes overlooking or minimizing personal subjectivity and serves to justify thoughtful inaction.

### **Translating Antiracist Thoughts into Action**

Reflection and antiracist thoughts are critical for democratic change. As Kumashiro (2000) suggests, harm frequently results from inaction, therefore, thoughtful actions should be taken to understand the dynamic of oppression and deliberate strategies to work against it. Additionally, Kumashiro (2000) argues, “we are not trying to *move to a better place*; rather, we are just trying to *move*. The aspect of oppression that we need to work against is the repetition of sameness, the ongoing citation of the same harmful histories that have traditionally been cited” (p. 46). As such, it is worthy to consider how to translate thoughts into action in order to encourage equitable progress. How can people move from reflection to action and how can action be framed as advocacy? As stated by Scheurich (2002), “emancipation, revolution, struggle, transformation is not just an issue of the critique of the socially constructed inequitable world; it is an issue that comes down to our own subjectivities...” (p. 156). Subsequently, while it is important to think about implications of race and racism, as well as recognize how racism is manifest in both education, and society at large, if no action is ever taken beyond personal reflection or critique of what is wrong in the world, it will not be possible to *move* (Kumashiro, 2000).

Taking into account how confronting relates to one’s own personal roles and subjectivities, it can be helpful for people to question how their personal actions, or lack

thereof, influence perpetuation of existing privilege, oppression, and disenfranchisement. When people only think, reflect, or highlight existing problems, their own unwillingness or lack of capacity to translate thoughts into action obstructs change and minimizes movement. In addition, when people deny their role in the process or fail to engage in the dialogue altogether, they also perpetuate the existing inequity. Therefore, when individuals deliberately choose, or are being influenced not to act upon antiracist dispositions, the causes or motivations of the inaction are worthy of exploration.

There are no exemplars for what antiracism should look like, as there are varying degrees of antiracism, and the shades certainly fluctuate depending on the environmental context, place, and time. However, it is valuable to imagine what it could look like. Given the pervasive sociopolitical implications of race and racism, when people are on this antiracist “journey” (Thompson, 2003), they should continuously evaluate their thoughts, actions, and inactions and the corresponding motivations. What are their interpretations of themselves and their own positioning? What encourages them to move? What dissuades them from moving? To deepen and extend racial consciousness, it is essential to recognize race-related inequities and the systemic nature of racism, but it seems people must be willing to extend this reflection and rethink their own dispositions, actions, and inactions. Furthermore, to encourage progress they must be willing to take risks and consider how they can purposefully confront existing oppressions in a way that is useful and productive. Though this transformation will seemingly always be a work in progress, without it, people will remain stationary and fail to encourage equity and social justice. People

must be willing to challenge their socially normed truths and explore their subconscious influences in order to grow, both individually and collectively. When they feel they have arrived, they limit themselves from both imagining and achieving heightened awareness and greater possibilities.

### **Conclusion**

As I reflect back on my silence and personal inability to translate antiracist dispositions into action, I am reminded of the fierce nature of the antiracist struggle. Regardless of the frequency, depth, or intensity of antiracist thought, thoughtfully ignoring or choosing to remain silent in such a situation continues to disseminate inaccurate thoughts, unfairness, and mistreatment, thereby further perpetuating White privilege and systemic racism. Engaging in thoughtful inaction is a strategic effort to silence actionable thought in the decision not to transform thought into action in an effort to minimize, prevent, or avoid discomfort or conserve or preserve the current context. While such thoughts may not always be explicit, they are influential in maintaining the strategic silence of well-pondered and deliberate dispositions. As a result, in an effort to contest thoughtful inaction and challenge the pervasive nature of racism, it is critical for White people to

negotiate race-related tensions and navigate the established sociopolitical systems and perceived power structures while constantly assessing their own biases and subjectivities. At this time I do not know where my own antiracist journey will lead me. However, I am aware I must not look on and do nothing, but rather confront discomfort and challenge racism in myself and society. I must engage in the struggle and resulting dissonance to challenge the current system of oppression particularly related to the invisibility of Whiteness. I must challenge the dialogue of denial and openly engage in discourse, with myself and others, to uncover and unmask racism.

To fight injustice and better foster congruence, I must work to negotiate existing tensions and translate my own silence into advocacy. Many would argue that serving as a bystander is not as harmful as the person initiating the harm. After much reflection, I am committed to the notion that antiracist identity development is not about others, but rather about personal growth. Therefore we must look inside ourselves to assess our movement, progress, and regression. Individual thinking, antiracist notions, and increased consciousness are essential for change; yet, there must be an urgency of doing that includes application of antiracism through collective action, thoughtful advocacy, and engagement.

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