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How To Be A Good Ally:  
 A Guide to Dismantling Colorblindness, White Normativity, and Everyday Racism Without  
 Erasing Oppressed Voices

“The subtle and deadly change of heart that might occur in you would be involved with the realization that a civilization is not destroyed by wicked people; it is not necessary that people be wicked, but only that they be spineless.”  
 –James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

With the increasing media coverage of racialized police brutality and the Black Lives Matter Movement garnering the attention of mainstream society, I have encountered many friends, colleagues and peers who feel too paralyzed to talk about racial inequality, or engage in conversations about this subject in problematic ways. The question arises, how does one speak up and speak out against racial (and other forms of) discrimination when one does not belong to groups that experience those oppressions? How does one speak without contributing to the erasure of oppressed voices? I argue that while speaking for others may contribute to erasure, it is far worse not to speak up at all. I have fashioned a theoretical toolkit meant to disclose contexts in which speaking out is or is not appropriate and how one might speak out against oppressions in a conscious and responsible way. Ultimately, this project seeks to facilitate cognizant and respectful interaction when addressing systematic oppression and encourages those in the dominant social groups to venture outside spheres of privilege to engage thoughtfully in conversations with members of oppressed groups.

**Contextualizing Racial Inequality: Defining Structural Racism**

So why talk about race at all? To answer that question, we must first define structural racism and structural racial inequality in order to understand how they disenfranchise minorities.

Structural racism, as opposed to individual and institutional racism, examines how seemingly race-neutral policies interact between different institutions (such as the educational system, residential segregation etc) to disenfranchise minorities, rather than examining racism between individuals or within a single institution. In contrast with the institutionalized focus on *intra*-structural policies, structural critiques are much more salient because they look at *inter*-institutional dynamics between and among different institutions to discover how “racialized outcomes may be the product of cumulative effects of discrimination ‘over time and across domains’” (Powell 796).

Structural racism, according to Berkeley law professor and civil rights scholar John A. Powell, acknowledges that “racism need not be either intentional or individualist. Institutional practices and cultural patterns can perpetuate racial inequity without relying on racist actors” (795). In this way, structural racism transitions from identifying individual motives within a single institution to seeing causation as a cumulative form of discrimination resulting from the interaction of many institutions (796).

According to feminist scholar Iris Marion Young, structural racial inequality refers to racial disparities in life chances and opportunities that *result* from the cooperation of multiple institutions, each of whose policies effectively constrain minorities’ opportunities (94). That is,

the effects of interacting policies between institutions results in people with skin privilege or higher socioeconomic status having the ability to be socially and economically mobile, while poor black and brown citizens have a much harder time changing their socioeconomic status because of the way in which these policies interact to keep them out of mainstream society.

According to Powell, adopting a structural approach is far more beneficial than the traditional critique of institutional racism as, “[t]he institutional racism framework... fails to account for the way in which the joint operations of social institutions produce critical racialized outcomes” (795). In this way, structural approaches to understanding racism and racial inequality are beneficial because it shifts the focus from examining individual intentions to the actual effects of inter-institutional policies. By emphasizing that what matters is that the effects disproportionately hurt black and brown people, structural approaches are beneficial because they do not waste time and effort on pinpointing the culprit, but rather focus on redressing the harms.

To be fair, there are disadvantages to taking a structural approach to examining racism and racial inequality in that that it may overlook individual practices and policies that have created these oppressive structures in the first place. By not examining individual intentions, structural approaches leave those responsible for these perpetuating these racialized policies, either through passive acceptance or active support, uninterrogated and unaccountable for their discrimination. For example, Douglass Massey, sociology professor at Princeton University, and Nancy Denton, professor of sociology at State University of New York at Albany, argue that in terms of the ghetto, “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it” (4). By looking at racism from a structural approach, it may result in a diminished sense of complicity from white Americans who have been integral in creating a system that keeps Black Americans subordinate. While a structural approach is not perfect, ultimately, I believe it is the most comprehensive analysis of racial inequality because it is situated to support systems of addressing present and future injustice, which we will examine more later on.

### **Consequences of Structural Racial Inequality**

The consequences of structural racial inequality are most severe for Black America. UC Berkeley sociology professor Loic Waquant argues that systems designed to perpetuate racial inequality like slavery, Jim Crow, the Ghetto and the carceral apparatus are ‘genealogically linked.’ By this, he means that one cannot understand any of these independently of one another because they stem from each other (41-42). That is, they comprise a lineage of successive institutions that are functionally analogous, yet have been modified according to the time period to seem socially acceptable.

This becomes more apparent by looking at the shared functions of each institution. Waquant argues that slavery, Jim Crow and the ghetto “were all instruments for the conjoint extraction of labor and the social ostracization of an outcast group deemed unassimilable by virtue of the indelible threefold stigma it carries” (Waquant 44). For example, Waquant argues that the ghetto may be likened to an “ethnoracial prison” for Black Americans as it “encages a dishonoured category and severely curtails the life chances of its members in support of the ‘monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities’ by the dominant status group” (51). The ghetto encompasses stigma, constraint, territorial confinement, and institutional encasement, which make it remarkably similar to the carceral system (50). He argues that this social ostracization of Black Americans through the ghetto and carceral system functions similarly to the institutions of

slavery and Jim Crow that they are rooted in. Waquant says, “[l]ike Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (13). All four institutions reinforce a system of racial hierarchy, which effectively keeps Black Americans out of mainstream society through ostracization and by restricting their life chances, even through contemporary institutions are seemingly colorblind.

Waquant describes how post-carceral exclusion from mainstream society enables a new racial caste system through “triple exclusion” (58). Prisoners are firstly restricted from cultural capital, such as being exempt from receiving Pell Grants for college education, even though a bachelor’s degree is a prerequisite for entering the middle class (Waquant 57). Prisoners are also denied benefits of social redistribution such as welfare, food stamps and benefits for veterans (58). Furthermore, convicted criminals are excluded from political participation in that they are no longer allowed to vote, which means that many members of poor communities of color targeted for non-violent drug-related crimes cannot even vote to end the racially biased laws or to remove the police officers that disproportionately targeted them in the first place (58). Waquant shows that once one is a convicted criminal, they are kept in poverty and rotated back and forth to prison. This illustrates the symbiotically related circuit of black migration between the ghetto and prison.

Civil rights lawyer and legal scholar Michelle Alexander points out that because of the legalized discrimination in the form of triple exclusion that prisoners face, the institutions that compromise the carceral apparatus function more like a caste system than class system. This is because their legalized social exclusion is permanent. She says, “it is not just that they [African Americans] lack opportunity, attend poor school, or are plagued by poverty. They are barred by law from doing so. And the major institutions with which they come into contact are designed to prevent their mobility... Although this new system of racialized social control purports to be colorblind, it creates and maintains racial hierarchy” (13). She argues that the ideology of a class system reinforces the idea that anyone can achieve upward social mobility, but black and brown citizens are excluded from these opportunities through seemingly race-neutral institutions. Thus ‘caste system’ is a more apt name because it recognizes the subordinate group excluded from mainstream society by law and social norms, in which black and brown citizens are permanently, and legally, locked into.

### **Pervasive Ideologies To Challenge**

So now that we have a basic understanding of how structural racial inequality hurts People of Color, the questions become: why haven’t we changed these unjust systems until now? What ideologies uphold these racially biased practices?

### **Colorblind Racism**

The first ideology that we must challenge is colorblindness. Duke University’s sociology professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that colorblind racism perpetuates structural racial inequality by using “market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and their alleged cultural deficiencies” to justify the disadvantages minorities face economically, socially and otherwise (191). Bonilla-Silva argues that colorblindness manifests in three different frames—abstract liberalism, cultural racism, and minimization of racism—all of which work within the post-racial dominant political rationality to further the myth of meritocracy and maintain entrenched structural inequality, by ignoring the fact that “whites and people of color remain mostly separate and disturbingly unequal” due to generations of legalized racial discrimination (191).

Colorblindness, a term originally used in the Civil Rights movement to argue for black equality, was co-opted and repurposed to further the dominant rationality of post-racism (López 158). Berkeley law professor Ian Haney López argues that colorblindness is the third of three elements that work to establish colorblind white dominance, the first two being white racial dominance and redefined whiteness.

The first element, white racial dominance, is seen in everyday situations like job preference, access to gated communities, and even “in the moral certainty regarding one’s civic belonging and fundamental goodness” in which whiteness “affords advantages across the range of material and status divisions that mar our society (150). Those who benefit from the status quo of white dominance, resulting from centuries of White supremacy, are unwilling to relinquish their claim to the “mantle of Whiteness” (149) and all the socioeconomic benefits it provides them.

Whiteness redefined is an expansion of Whiteness as an identity and conception to include new members including “white passing” and “honorary white” people (151). Although this expansion of whiteness will seemingly extend racialized benefits like wealth and professional potential to more groups, racial divisions based on physical features will still contribute to a racial hierarchy (154-156).

Third, colorblindness is built upon the post-racial tenets that the civil rights reforms have fully succeeded in establishing racial equality, that US society is colorblind so Americans are no longer racist, and that laws that redress racial inequality are unnecessary because by acknowledging race, they create racial tension and hurt people of color and whites alike (160-161). In this way, colorblindness “disconnects the racial past from the racial present” creating a society in which colorblindness “conceals the true roots of racial inequality today, as the contemporary product of pre-civil rights policies and programs explicitly designed to aid whites at the symbiotic expense of people of color” enable whites to benefit from the material privileges of whiteness for multiple generations (Hutchison 7).

Specifically, López argues that “colorblindness has erased Whites as a dominant group and instead conjures them as the true victims of racism in the brace new world of civil rights and racial remediation” as it “equates Jim Crow segregation and affirmative action by redefining racism as any mention of race, and race as something utterly empty of social content or history” (160-161). That is, colorblindness furthers the idea that talking about race is inherently problematic because it perpetuates the fiction of race, while actually reinforcing white racial dominance and allowing whites to cling to their “mantle of Whiteness” (or white privilege) and deny that the accompanying privileges are built on generations of black denigration and laws that benefitted whites.

Reinforcing the myth of meritocracy, colorblindness allows whites to “imagine that the socio-economic success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education” (Gallagher n.p.). In this way, colorblindness overlooks the role of institutional racism in creating socioeconomic inequality between races.

### **Defining White Privilege: Material and Psychological Benefits of Whiteness**

To dismantle the colorblind ideology, we must also dismantle white privilege. White privilege is a set of race-based psychological and economic advantages that people who are white (or white passing) benefit from. These “unearned advantages” are “conferred systematically” through generations of racialized laws that benefitted whites economically and socially and still function to reinforce white racial dominance today (McIntosh n.p.).

According to American feminist and anti-racism activist Peggy McIntosh, there are certain psychological benefits to being white. She lists a few, saying, “I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider,” “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race” and “I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race” (McIntosh n.p.). Thus, whites psychologically benefit from being the dominant culture as their opinions are unquestioningly non-racialized, which means they are not called upon to serve as representations of their race, and their success is assumed to be merit based, rather than an unearned result of race-remedial policies. These are just a few of many psychological privileges that are conferred systematically to whites simply because of their race.

As Chair of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at UCLA Law, Cheryl I. Harris also argues that there are many economic advantages to performing whiteness (as a white or white-passing person) (Harris 277). She defines whiteness as a racialized privilege and valued social identity with attached legal rights, rights of property and ownership (of people and land), rights to freedom, and rights to inclusion in racially discriminatory institutions (278-283). Whiteness is an identity trait, but has also functioned historically and contemporarily as a form of property that can be attained. (278). This is based on her assertion that both whiteness and blackness have been “propertized” in different ways. As Harris says, “Race and property were thus conflated by establishing a form of property contingent on race: only blacks were subjugated as slaves and treated as property... Only white possession and occupation of land was validated and privileged as a basis for property rights” (278). Historically, white privilege has also contributed to the propertization of black women’s bodies as laws “legitimat[ed]... the use of black women’s bodies as a means of increasing property” (279). That is, white slave owners legally raped their female slaves to reproduce their own labor force.

Whites treat their whiteness as an object they can control and deploy, as something to use and enjoy for personal benefit, but also should be protected to exclude others from enjoying the material and social benefits of whiteness. Harris argues, “White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits, and it was jealously guarded as a valued possession, allowed only those who met a strict standard of proof. Whiteness—the right to white identity as embraced by law—is property if by “property” one means all of a person’s legal rights” (280). Thus the economic advantages that defined blacks as property and whites as property owners, was predicated on the notion that legal rights and civic freedom were also forms of property. American studies scholar and professor George Lipsitz supports this notion of whiteness as a material advantage, such as access to housing and loans denied to blacks (373). He argues that because of this, whites have strong economic and material interests in claiming whiteness and preserving the notions of racial difference (381).

### **Challenging White Normativity and Privilege by Making Whiteness Strange**

Now, in order to challenge white privilege and white normativity, we must make whiteness strange. English academic Richard Dyer argues to make whiteness strange is to challenge the notion that white power is the norm (10). He says that white normativity is based on the “assumption that white people are just people, which is not far off saying that whites are people whereas other colors are something else” (6). This means that whites have the non-raced “claim to power to speak for... humanity” whereas people of other races are only allowed to speak for their race (6). According to Dyer, “whiteness needs to be made strange” in order to subvert white authority upon which whites’ positions of power are based (2).

Matthew Frye Jacobson, Chair of Yale University's African American Studies department "makes whiteness strange" by arguing that "Caucasians are made, not born" and that race is an "invention" that is fluid (4-6). Jacobson writes that in the 1920s "whiteness was reconsolidated...probationary white groups were now remade and granted the specific stamp of authenticity as the unitary Caucasian race" in "response to...African American migrations to the North" (8). As whiteness and blackness created a more obvious binary, white ethnics were assimilated into the monolith of whiteness. Caucasians were "made, not born" (4). This illustrates how race is socially constructed, as the boundaries of white racial identity are fluid and malleable. If someone is white enough, they may be protected under the monolith of whiteness, which is constantly changing. This notion supports Jacobson's argument that "race resides not in nature, but in politics and culture" (9). That is, race is used as a criterion for political belonging. Similarly, the construction of whiteness is a political act that whites have a stake in maintaining, as these political power hierarchies keep certain people in power and others out of power (9).

Jacobson also makes whiteness strange by challenging the melting pot narrative. He writes, "this pretty story...fades once one recognizes how crucial European's racial status as 'free white[s]'...was to their gaining entrance in the first place; how profoundly dependent their racial inclusion was upon racial exclusion of others...and how completely intertwined were the prospects of becoming American and becoming Caucasian" (12). The melting pot narrative is disingenuous because the racial makeup of the country is regulated using immigration laws that exclude people of color. The assimilation of ethnic whites happened through the exclusion of others, particularly Native and African Americans. Furthermore, the supposed celebration of multiculturalism from the melting pot narrative actually is synonymous with assimilation to American whiteness. This is because for the melting pot narrative, the unifying aspect of all people's is their American-ness, which implicitly shames other forms of cultural pride and identity outside American whiteness.

Similarly, López "makes whiteness strange" by pointing out the fact that whiteness is a legal construction that only exists because the content of whiteness is defined racially against non-whites. Whiteness is associated with civilization and morality, which is defined against black savagery and barbarism (122). This dichotomy also spurs López to reject the notion of a positive white racial identity to combat "white transparency" (122). He argues that even if whites try to construct an identity that is not built on the demonization of blackness, "Celebrating Whiteness, even with the best of antiracist intentions, seems likely only to entrench the status quo of racial beliefs" (121).

### **Why Don't Whites Speak Up? Stakes for White America**

So why doesn't white America actively engage in conversations about their privilege or take steps to engage in dismantling structural racial inequality? American novelist and civil rights activist James Baldwin argues that it is because:

[W]hat they [whites] see is an appallingly oppressive and bloody history, known all over the world. What they see is a disastrous, continuing, present, condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility. But since, in the main, they seem to lack the energy to change this condition, they would rather not be reminded of it...White people carry in them a carefully muffled fear that black people long to do to others what has been done to them. Moreover, the history of white people has lead them to a fearful, baffling place where they have begun to lose touch with reality—to lose touch, that is, with themselves—and where they certainly are not truly happy, for they know they are

not truly safe. They do not know how this came about; they do not dare examine how this came about. One the one hand, they can scarcely are to open a dialogue, which must, if it is honest, become a personal confession—a cry for help and healing... (47-48).

In this passage, Baldwin skillfully identifies the stakes/incentives for white Americans to distance themselves from even engaging, let alone thinking critically, about racial inequalities. The main obstacle is a deeply paralyzing fear. It is a fear of being held responsible for both for their ancestor's crimes and being held accountable for dismantling their own whiteness, against which, all other races are measured and denigrated. It is a fear of losing the psychological and material safety and benefits their white privilege affords them. This encompasses the fear of actually feeling uncomfortable and unsafe. Essentially, it is a fear associated with leaving secure spheres of privilege to engage with those who have not been arbitrarily awarded such "conferred dominance" and "unearned advantages" (McIntosh n.p.).

Furthermore, while whites have incentives *not* to engage, they have no incentives *to* engage. Why would one upset a hierarchy of power and privilege in which they reside on top? The answer is simply, they wouldn't, and don't. White people who are epistemically privileged in the ways that they may "see [their] appallingly oppressive and bloody history... But since, in the main, they seem to lack the energy to change this condition, they would rather not be reminded of it" (47). In other words, it takes energy to acknowledge privilege built on the backs of oppressed people, and whites have the ability to decide that they "would rather not" engage simply because they don't have to. Their own social and material wellbeing is not threatened, but rather is upheld through their complicit silence (DiAngelo 4). It is far easier to disengage, to see racial hierarchies as a problem of black and brown people (because if they worked harder, they could be just as successful as whites!) than to understand white normativity as a problem that all people have a stake in dismantling.

Yet Baldwin argues that because by upholding colorblind ideologies of the post-racial rationality in order to not recognize their "oppressive and bloody history" white Americans are actually harming themselves. Baldwin explains that by not engaging in actively dismantling this racially stratified hierarchy of privilege dominated by whites, whites not only perpetuate inequality, but they also condemn themselves to a constant misperception of and "loss of touch with reality" and ultimate inability to perceive the world from any perspective other than a white one. If this is allowed to continue, it may result in eventual unchallenged spheres of white privilege and domination in which whites needn't be accountable for their actions—historical or current—that denigrate other races.

Baldwin ultimately argues that whites must reckon with their history and complicity in maintaining systems of dominance over people of color in order to be released from their paralyzing fear.

### **Speaking for Others Is Problematic, But Staying Silent is Worse**

So how does a white person begin to speak out against past and contemporary forms of oppression they have not lived? Before you start, it is important to recognize that when a privileged person speaks for an oppressed group, it has the potential to increase their oppression and may be more problematic than helpful. According to feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff, this is because "a speaker's [social] location [or identity] has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or de-authorize her speech" (79). For example, a white woman would have less authority to claim that black women feel a certain way about feminism, because the white woman does not experience the same oppressions of being

black due to her different social location. Alcoff further argues that “certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous...” because “Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle” (83).

This is true for many reasons, three of which, I will address below. First, speaking for others less privileged than you can draw the attention and ability to speak away from the oppressed groups towards the privileged groups. It censors the oppressed while centering the privileged. Second, it becomes an issue of credibility, as “the rituals of speaking, which involve the locations of the speaker and listeners, affect whether a claim is taken as a true, well-reasoned, compelling argument or significant idea. Thus, how what is said gets heard depends on who says it and who says it” (82). Credibility is often only conferred to people in privileged groups thereby reinforcing the problematic notion that whites are more qualified to speak about oppression than the oppressed. Third, speaking about groups that you are not part of leads to essentializing and stereotyping. For example, if the white woman from the earlier example said, “black women are grateful for feminism,” she is stereotyping black women by claiming that they are a homogenous group of people who think the same way and have no individuality. In this way, she also essentializes black women (that is, she assumes there is a defined “essence” to being a black woman) by implicitly claiming that there is a “right” way to be a black woman, or that black women should think a certain way about feminism. However, these reasons do not mean that the white woman cannot speak up against black oppression because she is not black.

In fact, Alcoff says, “It is a false dilemma to pose the choice as one between no accountability or complete causal power” (83). While speaking for others may contribute to oppression, it is far more problematic if you don’t speak up at all. Thus the question becomes, “If I don’t speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege?” (80). And the answer is simply, yes. Yes, because by staying silent, you are complicitly endorsing the status quo, the racialized hierarchy of privilege and exclusion (McKenzie n.p.). Yes because by staying silent, you reinforce the silence of others and show them it’s okay not to speak up. Yes, because by staying silent, you shift the responsibility to speak onto the oppressed, and the oppressed do not have the responsibility to explain their oppression to their oppressors. I will say this again. The oppressed do not have the responsibility to explain their oppression to their oppressors. IF a member of an oppressed group wishes to invest in the education of a potential ally and is in a place (mentally and physically) in which they feel okay with taking on the emotional and mental challenges of such discussions, they may do so. But it is the choice of the oppressed person to do so. It is not their obligation or their responsibility to educate you. It is your responsibility to educate yourself.

### **Common Problems and How to Address Them—Rejecting Discursive Imperialism**

That being said, how can you educate yourself and speak eloquently against oppression without oppressing minorities further? The best thing you can do is find readings to guide conversations with friends, family, peers, strangers, etc. about white privilege, structural racial inequality, and actions for future activism, starting with this reading. Below, you will find common forms of discursive imperialism—problems that even the most well-meaning allies engage in—and some suggestions for how to deconstruct those arguments.

#### **Problem #1: The Retreat Response**

- **Example:** “I don’t feel like it’s my place to march in Black Lives Matter protests or talk about racial discrimination because I’m not a black man.”

**Why it is problematic:** The retreat response furthers the belief that an individual may only speak based on their own narrow experiences, and often results in speakers choosing not to speak about things past their own experiences in the groups they belong to. Yet, because people think they can only speak for their epistemic location, many choose not to speak at all. The retreat response often stems from good intentions. That is, the desire to not practice “discursive imperialism” (Alcoff 84) and overpower spaces in which the oppressed should be allowed to speak of their own oppression if they desire without someone from another group commandeering the conversation to frame it from an outsider’s lens, effectively silencing the oppressed further. While discursive imperialism may be harmful, it is far more harmful not to speak up. While contributing may or may not enhance the conversation, retreating certainly will not. Alcoff says, “It may result merely in a retreat into a narcissistic yuppie lifestyle in which a privileged person takes no responsibility whatsoever for her society” (84). If a person with privilege stays silent about oppression, then they simply reinforce others’ silence through their complicity. This effectively functions to shift the responsibility to speak up onto the oppressed when they should not have to explain their oppression to their oppressors. Worse still, the retreat response is sometimes used by a privileged person to justify their enjoyment of their privilege for personal gain, even if that privilege is built on the disenfranchisement of the underprivileged, from the standpoint that they have no ability or right to speak up for others.

- **Potential Response:** “Just because you are not a black man (or insert other oppressed group here), does that mean that you are not allowed to care about racial discrimination? The fact that you are white does not exclude from fighting for racial equality alongside blacks. In fact, your whiteness is a powerful tool you can use to show that racial discrimination is not a problem for black and brown people to face alone, it is a problem that everyone has a stake in addressing.”

**Why the response works:** This response is effective because it dismantles the idea that identity must dictate activism. It also serves as a call to action for whites to use their unearned privilege to help groups who were arbitrarily denied those privileges.

#### **Problem #2: Hiding Behind Good Intentions/Shifting Blame**

- **Example:** “Well I didn’t mean for it to sound that way. You misinterpreted what I said.”

**Why it is problematic:** This response overvalues intentionality while disregarding material consequences of their words (Utt n.p.). It is often used to excuse subtle or overtly racist actions by placing the action in over-simplified categories of good or bad intentions (as if intentionality absolves one of racism). It reinforces colorblindness by displacing blame for both structural violence and microaggressions onto the person who called out the racist action, as if mentioning race at all is a form of racism. Furthermore, it shifts blame onto the person calling out the racist action to make it seem as if it is the duty of the listener to evaluate intentionality. In doing so, the speaker absolves themselves of responsibility for what they say, how they say it, and consequences of their words.

- **Potential Response:** “Just because you didn’t mean for it to sound disrespectful doesn’t mean it wasn’t oppressive. Consider this, if you accidentally stepped on my toe and broke it, it doesn’t matter if you meant to break my toe or not. The damage has been done, and my toe is still broken. It’s your responsibility to apologize and make an effort to alleviate the pain you caused and right your wrong. Also, it is not my job to evaluate your intentions. You need to think about what and how you say something before you say it to make sure it sounds the way you intend it to.”

**Why the response works:** This response is effective because it deconstructs the idea that intent is more important than the act, by showing the real consequences of the act regardless of intent. It also shows them why they need to do next: apologize and make an effort to make amends.

**Problem #3: Individualism as Exculpation:**

- **Example:** American novelist James Baldwin explores this problem particularly well in his essay *White Man's Guilt*. He says, “This incoherence is heard nowhere more plainly than in those stammering, terrified dialogues which white Americans sometime entertain with that black conscience, the black man in America. The nature of this stammering can be reduced to a plea: Do not blame *me*. I was not there. I did not do it. My history has nothing to do with Europe or the slave trade...I was not present on the middle passage...I *also* want your child to have a decent education and rise as high as his capabilities will permit. I have nothing against you, nothing!” (Baldwin 47).

**Why it is problematic:** This response removes oneself from their role as a beneficiary of systematic oppression by claiming that their individual actions did not contribute to systems of injustice.

- **Potential Response:** “Just because you as an individual did not create systems of oppression for people of color, does not mean that you do not benefit from material and psychological privileges afforded to you by your whiteness. By unquestioningly claiming your white privilege you reinforce a racial hierarchy dominated by white normativity—against which all other races are measured against and stereotyped as lesser. By not thinking critically about your white privilege, not questioning what has been given to you because of your skin color, and not trying to actively reject that privilege and fight racialized oppression, you are complicit in maintaining these structures that denigrate black and brown people.”

**Why the response works:** This response is effective because it highlights the difference between directly oppressing others and indirectly oppressing them. It makes an important point that by not actively questioning privilege and structures that maintain privilege—even if one is not actively being racist—staying silent about the status quo only makes one complicit in upholding society’s racialized power hierarchy.

**Problem #4: Equating Oppressions**

- **Example A:**
  - POC: “I feel like I have to dress in a certain way for people not to profile me as a thug.”
  - White Person: “I totally understand. I feel like I have to wear a suit to work to be respected. Its so annoying.”
- **Example B:** From Baldwin again, “I am not responsible for the textile mills of Manchester, or the cotton fields of Mississippi. Besides, consider how the English, too, suffered in those mills and in those awful cities!”

**Why it is problematic:** Both examples flatten the differences between each oppression by equating them. In example A, empathy is used as a vehicle for overlooking racial discrimination entirely, as the distinctly POC problem is subsumed into a larger category of social dress codes. It equates an unalterable restriction on how someone lives, with a time-specific and changeable work situation. Example B, overlooks the fact that oppressed people are still capable of oppressing others (Anzaldúa 425). It also disregards the racialized hierarchy of power in society.

- **Potential Responses:**

- **Response A:** “Actually, these situations are not similar because my situation is caused by society’s racialized equation of darker skin with crime. Because I have dark skin, I am forced to prove that I do not fit into this problematic stereotype by changing my appearance all the time. Your situation only applies to a portion of your day, and outside work, your white privilege allows you to dress as casually as you like without society portraying you as a thug. Further if you dress in a way that doesn’t meet societal expectations, people will consider you an eccentric *individual*, whereas society sees me as a representative for my race, so if I dress in an unconventional way, people will use negative stereotypes about my race to rationalize my individual style choices. Because of this, I have to work much harder than you to convince people of my trustworthiness and capability.”
- **Response B:** “Just because you have experienced oppression, doesn’t exonerate you from being a member of an oppressive group. Plus, by equating these oppressions you are erasing the society’s different treatments of each race, including the many privileges afforded to whites and injustices against blacks on the basis of skin color.”

**Why the response works:** These responses are effective because they highlight important differences between problematic claims of sameness and the very real material consequences of these differences for People of Color.

#### **Problem #5: Evaluating Seriousness/Delegitimizing Emotion/Tone Policing**

- **Example 1:** “Wow, you took that way too seriously and are completely overreacting. It was just a joke. You need to calm down.”
- **Example 2:** It’s like if you’re standing on my head and I say, “Get off my head,” and you respond, “Well, you need to tell me nicely.” I’d be like, “No. Fuck you. Get off my fucking head” (Alder-Bell).

**Why it is problematic:** This example delegitimizes valid emotional reactions by assuming that rationality is more important than emotion, and that emotions are irrational. It not only monitors emotion and tone, but also assumes that everyone should interpret speech and actions from a position of privilege (Utt n.p.). The speaker did not consider the fact that they have the privilege of not taking such jokes seriously because for them it not a microaggression, stereotype or form of oppression that negatively affects their life.

- **Potential Response:** “First of all, don’t tone police me. My emotions are a legitimate response to your rudeness/racism and you need to listen to *what* I’m saying, rather than tell me *how* to say it. Second, what is ‘just a joke’ to you is just one of the many ways microaggressions are used to subtly denigrate people of color and reinforce racialized power hierarchies. Third, you have the privilege of understanding what you just said as ‘just a joke,’ because it does not reinforce problematic stereotypes about who *you* are based on your skin color, and does not affect how people treat *you* on a daily basis (Wang 8-9). I don’t have that privilege, so I am forced to educate ignorant people like you about just how serious these ‘jokes’ are.”

**Why the response works:** This response to Example 1 is effective by highlighting and deconstructing various ways in which privilege operates to oppress people outside spheres of privilege. The second example, which includes a response, works well to counter the absurdity of tone policing, white fragility, and the problematic assumption that targets of racial microaggressions must shoulder the burden of not overreacting to unintentional offensive speech by evaluating perpetrator intent (Wang 3-4).

### **Problem #6: Allyship as Performance Rather Than Practice**

- **Example:** Changing one's Facebook profile picture to the "Black Lives Matter" banner and identifying as an ally, while participating in no other forms of activism.

**Why it is problematic:** Claiming alliance is not a problem in and of itself, but it becomes problematic when activism is reducible to this. Many claim alliance to increase their social capital. Whatever social justice movement is trending on Twitter will make these "allies" passionate for a moment, perhaps long enough to craft a status claiming allyship that will garner many "likes" and a virtual pat on the back for caring, before they move on to the next trendy injustice to be angry about. Yet, these "allies" are not passionate long enough, nor do they truly care enough, to engage with injustice when it is inconvenient for them. Thus, allyship becomes a performance, rather than a practice.

- **Potential Responses:** "This is really cool! What else have you been doing?"

**Why the response works:** This is a tricky one to navigate, because you don't always know who is claiming alliance for social capital and who is a true ally. It is also tricky because it has the potential to quickly become the Allyship Olympics or the "I'm a better activist than you" competition. However, I think by saluting the person's attempt at activism before you question their actions, you set yourself up to be on the same side. From that position, you can push them to reckon with their inaction while creating an opportunity for yourself to suggest better ways for them to engage. If the person is a true ally, it becomes an opportunity for you both to learn from one another and collaborate on future activism.

### **Steps for the Future**

In addition to avoiding these problematic pitfalls, here are some things potential allies *can* do. Before speaking, do consider how your gender, socioeconomic, and racial positions afford you privilege, and shape your beliefs and biases (how will your voice affect others when you speak?) (Jones n.p.). Do pay attention to how credibility is conferred to speakers with privilege and co-opted from oppressed groups (Alcoff 87-88). Do consider how much speaking time is appropriate for you to take up in the conversation, so as not to co-opt it away from minority speakers. Be willing to venture outside your physical and social comfort zones.

While you are speaking, be sure not to speak or presume to know what is best for other individuals or demographic groups (Boom n.p.). Constantly check to see if others who are more qualified than you wish to speak. Be open to the opinions of others. Be accountable and responsible for what you say. Legitimately listen to criticism. Modify your actions based on feedback from members of oppressed groups (Jones n.p.).

So beyond interpersonal interactions, what are the next steps? From a structural perspective, Young argues that we need to shift from a liability model to the social connection model of responsibility.

The liability model entails blaming individuals for "criminal wrong doing, or finding a person at fault in the occurrence of a harm" (174). Yet there are two problems with this. First, many of the individuals who created racially oppressive structures are dead and cannot be held accountable. Second, "blaming some agents implies absolving others" (180). This is where the social connection model becomes useful for Young as it "finds responsibility shared by those connected to one another through structural processes" (180). That is, responsibility is distributed to all members of society, regardless of race because everyone has a responsibility and stake in dismantling structural inequality. Because narratives shape how we understand our histories and identities, one of the first ways we can do this is by constructing new narratives. These narratives

need to acknowledge past injustice in order to create an equitable future (182). Everyone has the ability and responsibility to reconstruct these narratives.

For academics in particular (including students!), your credibility, privilege and power to shape how others understand racial inequality gives you a responsibility to construct new narratives from scholars outside the dominant hegemonic discourse (a.k.a. old white male scholarship) through scholarship, research, publications, class and public discussions, to name a few. According to American author, feminist, and social activist Bell Hooks, One cannot simply write theory. One must live it. She says,

“It’s not like I’m going to talk about writing and thinking about postmodernism with other academics and/or intellectuals and not discuss these ideas with underclass non-academic black folks who are family, friends and comrades. Since I have not broken the ties that bind me to underclass poor black community, I have seen that knowledge, especially that which enhances daily life and strengthens our capacity to survive, can be shared. It means that critics, writers, and academics have to give the same critical attention to nurturing and cultivating our ties to black community that we give to writing articles, teaching and lecturing.” (367-368).

Academics must understand that theory transcends academic background, so it is essential to extend conversations about oppression outside the academic sphere. Academics have a responsibility to challenge the “levels of elitism” within the university system that reinforces the idea that only “privileged people belong here” and are allowed to think critically (Kadi 41). To do this, academics must share their knowledge and make it easily accessible to the public. Discourses must be inclusive and intersectional because “[w]ithout...knowledge of and contact with the non-white ‘Other,’ white theorists may move in discursive theoretical directions that are threatening...[to the] radical liberation struggle” (365). Academics are just as capable of erasing oppressed voices by speaking for them, so an active incorporation of non-white voices is imperative.

Finally, I must make it clear that I am making no claims towards comprehensiveness in this essay. There are so many other subjects I wanted to include, like exclusive forms of activism and the incredible need for anti-essentialism and intersectionality, but those subjects must be addressed in another essay. This essay only touches the tip of the iceberg of entrenched, normalized, and hidden forms of racial oppression. To be a true ally, you must accept your responsibility to redress racial inequality by educating yourself to help reveal the hidden mass of normalized oppression to others, all the while, making a conscious decision not to “speak *for*” others, but to “speak *with*” them (Alcoff 86).

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