

Chapter Eleven

Doing the Work: Unearthing Our Own White Privilege

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For once we “know” we have to work to “not know.”

Some of us may understand what white privilege and racism cost us as a country and as white people. Some of us may be disturbed that people of color fare differently than whites in our community. Others may be outraged about the obviously inequitable policies that significantly impact people of color’s quality of life. And still others may be frustrated with continued awkwardness in our interactions with people of different races or ethnicities and unsure how to create authentic relationships. How can we be effective white allies in our multi-racial society? How can we work together to address the institutional inequities and structural white privilege?

Being a white ally is an ongoing journey with no graduation certificate and no how-to book that will make me or anyone else the perfectly aware or acting white person. We must start by releasing the myth that with focused attention (education, workshops, reading, dialogue, etc.) we can fully release white privilege from our feelings and behavior and be done with it once and for all. The long historical practice of white privilege and the deep societal constructs alive in our world today make this an unrealistic prospect. “Doing the work” is about understanding the theoretical constructs of structural racism, having a power analysis of systems we work and live in, developing the willingness and skills continually to align our intent and action, and dedicating ourselves to being in authentic relationships¹ with people of different races and ethnicities.

In this chapter, I specifically speak to people who identify as white, based on the premise that whites need to learn and teach each other. There are at least four reasons. First, people of color get tired of being placed in the position to teach white people about racism. Second, white people often have access to and credibility with other white people, based on our shared racial identity and family, social, business, faith and organizational affiliations to which people of color are not privy. Third, white people created white privilege and most of the strategies that maintain it. So we have the lion’s share of responsibility for ending it. Finally, it will take many people stepping up to eliminate racism and race-based privilege. People who step up get marginalized and punished for doing so. We need to work to have white people be among the waves of people who step up and stand strong for racial equity. If enough of us do that, we are unstoppable.

¹ Authentic relationships are grounded in trust, being real, talking through conflicts, and being willing to be there for each other even when the risks may be high.

A Packing List for Our Journey as Whites

There have been many who have said, “To be white in America means not having to think about it.” Part of why it is difficult for whites to get their arms around the concept of white privilege is because it can seem to be invisible. It is set up that way. And for many whites, once exposed to the concept of white privilege, it is easier to see it on the individual level than to see how it manifests on an institutional and structural level. As our knowledge and awareness increases, there is less probability of returning to the status quo or the “privilege bubble” in which we typically operate. Once we finally “know,” then we are forced to face white privilege and we have to work to “not know.” Our journey is about steadily increasing our awareness and taking action. What follows is a list of valuable things I take with me as I continue on that journey, and some thoughts about what they imply.

A willingness to ask questions and face the answers

We must take responsibility to reflect on how we go about our daily activities and interactions, be willing to know and accept that we will make mistakes publicly and will need to continue to take action anyway. We must be open to and ask for feedback even when it is hard to hear it, and remain accountable to our friends and colleagues of color and our white allies.

Recently, I facilitated a community meeting with an African American colleague and walked away feeling pretty good about what I contributed and what we accomplished. But then I had to ask the questions: How well did I co-facilitate? And did I co-facilitate? Did I take over the meeting? Did I support and follow my co-facilitator’s leadership? Did I make assumptions about how participants responded or perceived her leadership? Did I over-compensate based on how I saw whites interact or not interact with her? Yes and no. I must also ask myself if I am willing to discuss these questions with my colleague. Am I ready to hear her answers?

Knowing what white privilege is and understanding how racism works cannot eliminate the ingrained stereotypes and biases, even for the dedicated white anti-racist change agents of the world. They don’t stop the feelings of fear, awkwardness, and uncertainty from showing up in work and in life. I like to believe I am more aware than maybe 10 years ago, can discipline myself to stop the “stereotype tape” in my head, and am more cognizant when my privilege shows up. While I am more thoughtful about these issues, I am not “done.”

A bigger question I have wrestled with is wondering about the role of white privilege in my successes. I need to think about what role white privilege has played in my varied career: Did I have the opportunity to present to the university board of trustees, or get into graduate school, or get a promotion, or receive a national grant, because I was white? Did fear, or someone’s comfort level, or the so-called ease of me fitting in to the “organizational norms,” or institutional practices and policies give me the access and opportunities to have these life experiences? There is a sick feeling in my stomach ... because I know the answer is, a resounding “yes.” It doesn’t mean I don’t get to take credit for

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my accomplishments, but it does mean that I have to understand the unearned advantages and privileges I had (and have).

A willingness to become uncomfortable, yet stay focused

In this monograph and throughout your journey, you may find reasons to move away from some ideas, or consider some things to be untrue, unfair, or invalid. Lean into this discomfort, as part of the process of individual change is being uncomfortable. It is challenging and sometimes overwhelming to take all of these messages in. Take time to reflect, discuss and struggle with the material and work to not avoid it or dismiss it. You may say to yourself, “But I saw a person of color display that same behavior.” And you may have. Try to put the behavior in the context of the organization’s norms and culture and not just look at the individual-level behavior. Since most systems are entrenched with the culture of white privilege, then individuals—regardless of their race or ethnicity—will receive affirmation, bonuses, positive performance reviews, and promotions for assimilating to an organization’s culture.

The key here is to develop the curiosity and seek to further examine the context of our actions and how others may interpret our behavior. It is not unusual for white people to feel defensive. It is part of a mechanism that protects our image and self-esteem. Being defensive is part of the fear of our behavior being labeled as insensitive, or worse, racist. Part of the success of structural racism is that it systematically indoctrinates us about our roles in society. Each of us may have resisted and questioned those roles at different times but we need to be vigilant in developing a lens for seeing our privilege, to be grateful when we receive feedback, and to not rely solely on people of different races to directly teach us.

It is important to clarify this last statement. Our responsibility is to talk to people of different races and ethnicities and hear their experiences, viewpoints, and ideas for actions to be taken. We also need to keep in mind that, just as with whites, one person does not speak for an entire race. With listening comes the responsibility to “evaluate the content of what they are saying by what we know about how racism works and by our own critical thinking and progressive political analysis.”²

An understanding of the importance of aligning our intent with impact

We hear so many messages about being white—not always clearly stated but implied, reinforced, and, in some cases, enforced. As each of us takes this journey of becoming a white person who believes and acts for racial equity, we look for affirmation. Some of us are fortunate to be surrounded with individuals who care deeply about creating more equitable communities. And some of us are even more fortunate to find allies in the various circles of life we enter into daily (e.g., our own families, social circles, faith communities, neighborhoods, etc.). Others

² Paul Kivel, “How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color in the Struggle to End Racism,” from Paula S. Rothenberg, editor, *White Privilege: Essential Readings of the Other Side of Racism*. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2002), p. 128.

may have a network of allies, but we have family members, colleagues, or friends who *do not* understand white privilege, or don't agree with it, or even may marginalize us because they don't want to get into a "political" discussion.

A "disconnect" can then sometimes occur. If there are people around us who do not share our values or who question our work, we may begin to adopt a self-image that "I am a good white person" or "I get it." Doing the work is not about being a "bad" or "good" white person. We may get confused when we are called out by our colleagues (i.e., told that one of our statements is heard as racist or that our actions reflect our white privilege), especially if this comes from a person of a different race. We may want to run away or go into protection mode. Because there are people in our life who marginalize us because of our work, we may be able to name the challenges we have overcome, or the things we have lost because of stands we have taken. It is difficult to deal with feedback at times. It may make us wonder, "Why am I receiving this feedback? I am trying so hard to do the right thing!"

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We may value fairness, equity and justice, but we need to work continuously to ensure that our actions are aligned with those values. And we cannot assume that we "get it." *Our stated intent is not a defense.* Our intent may come from our deepest values, yet it doesn't mean that the impact of our action aligns with our values. Sometimes we are blinded by our own ignorance, sometimes by our righteous indignation, sometimes by our assumed "good white person" label. For these and other reasons we can miss the results of our behavior on others. We need to take responsibility and avoid going into immediate defensive mode and focus on *listening* to another person's reality of the situation. Our job is to be diligent in understanding the impact of our choices, our judgments and our behavior, and not assume just because we *meant* no harm that there was none.

An awareness of the possible consequences and risks of the journey

The reality of doing this work is that there will be few other whites who are our allies. Many more will dismiss us; some will ignore us; others will distrust our actions and the same will be true for people of color. And that is the paradox of this journey for white people. We may feel damned if we do and damned if we don't. That is not meant to be a whiney statement. That is, we have to acknowledge that we work in a system that is structured for whites, at the same time that we are working with others to transform it into an equitable institution or community.

At times we will feel pulled, our allegiances will be questioned, and we may wonder if the consequences are worth it. Is this the battle that needs to be fought at this time? Only you can answer that question. I say this not to dissuade or create fear, but to give a reality check of our journey and to encourage us to work *together*, support each other, believe in each other, and affirm each other. This is not about doing something for someone to make his or her world better. When we act as martyrs we are not helping anyone. It is about reclaiming and working toward our vision of inclusive, just and equitable institutions and communities.

People have different beliefs about how change happens. My own is that without working on individual attitudinal and behavioral change, then institutional and policy changes will not typically be sustained. And only working on institutional and policy change, and not also individual-level change, can lead to processes that are privileged and racist, which can result in relationships not being able to be sustained. Working on both levels can lead to communities becoming equitable and inclusive.

A commitment to remain on the journey

Showing up as a white ally is a decision we make every day. The keyword in that sentence is “decision.” Even here, my white privilege shows up because I get to “decide” how I will show up, weigh the risks, and determine if I will act. The very fact that I have this choice speaks of the depth of my privilege. I would like to think that knowing this, I would have no choice but to take effective white anti-racist action. But I cannot escape, no matter how much I would like to, the fact that I do have a choice in every moment. I need to remember, and remind myself when I forget, that the consequences I suffer for challenging racism anywhere in my world will always be less than those to which my colleagues of color will be subjected.³

With my commitment to check what I am doing and the decisions I make to challenge racism and white privilege—my own and others’—I sometimes feel exhausted and feel like there is no light in sight. In these times, I just want to go and be a hermit somewhere. And then I remember the daily nature of racism and the impact of white privilege on the lives of people of color. I think about the stories, the statistics, and I think about the type of world I want to live in ... and then I feel the energy and passion to be a better advocate and ally. I find myself teetering back and forth on a daily basis between pure outrage and the intense belief that the system can be transformed. And yes, I can feel myself get fatigued and take less action at times. These intervals don’t last long but they exist, and while I have not yet eliminated them I have made them days rather than weeks and months. One of the key sources of strength must come from us: white people working together, sharing our truths, our vulnerabilities, our lessons and our accomplishments.

Lessons Learned

The following are some lessons I have learned along the way. Some were shared with me over the years by white people on their own anti-racism journeys. Some are my personal learnings. And some are lessons or observations shared by people about how white people show up in community building work. Some of these lessons I learn and re-learn on a regular basis—not because I am forgetful, but because old patterns and racist training are deep and ingrained in me from my education as a white person in the U.S. Though I hope this is a helpful guide to consider as you “do the work,” it is by no means “the guide.” Each of us must

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³ A special thank-you to Cyndi Harris for supporting my journey, sharing her insights, and for contributing her editing skills on this chapter and the case study in the chapter, “What Is White Privilege?”

find the courage through allies to continuously resist the system's oppressive framework and to work toward its transformation.

1. We will experience different emotions: guilt, shame, humiliation, confusion.

All are relevant and normal feelings as white privilege is unveiled, and behaviors and attitudes are named. Our white culture does not always honor emotions, nor does everyone have the resources or the support network to discuss his or her feelings. Many times the common phrase for dealing with emotions is “just get over it.” Thinking about past incidents may cause that reaction, as we remember things we said and did. It may be overwhelming at times, but it is important to effectively deal with any feelings we may have.

There will be times when we want affirmation or we are frustrated and would like to hear an empathetic voice of support. Keep in mind that it is not the job of people of color to be caretakers of white people as we work on self-awareness with other white folks. As Donna Bivens discusses in her chapter on internalized racism, one of the traps for people of color in this entrenched system is to “take care of” whites. We need to seek out other whites for support. There may be people of color in our lives with whom we have genuine relationships and who may choose to offer us feedback, but it needs to be done by choice, and not by request or assumption.

2. We need to avoid being paralyzed by people's mistrust or assumptions about our actions.

Trust takes time to be developed, and our actions may be suspected even if we are “doing the work.” Some of us, who are driven to “get everything right,” or even those who are not, may respond to this by giving up or retreating to do some personal awareness-building work. Being a white change agent is not something we can turn on and turn off when it is convenient. People of color face racism every day. There is not a back door through which they can run and hide. We need to know that we will make mistakes in our work; it is part of the journey. However, it is important to occasionally step back and regroup and recharge. We need to each take care of ourselves and balance our work so we can stay in it for the long haul.

3. We may want to connect to people of color rather than to people who are white.

When I first started facilitating anti-racism workshops, I always felt great if people of color came up to me afterwards and said “Thanks for telling it like it is.” It was good to get the unsolicited affirmation and it helped me to deal with some of the criticism from whites (for some, expressing their underlying resistance). But I soon learned that what was most important was for whites to have an “aha” moment, realize how the system works, and be willing to step forward and be change agents. And though it is very nice to receive affirmation from people of color, my job is to work with other whites—not prove to people of color that I “get it.”

I sometimes have low tolerance and become frustrated easily when I hear whites believe in colorblindness or choose not to act (despite intellectual awareness). Our challenge is to not dismiss other white people's worldviews or their experiences to date, but rather provide feedback, be willing to support each other's learning, and avoid marginalizing other whites just so we can keep our "good white person" label. This is sometimes very difficult to do. It is one of the areas I continue to work on.

4. We need to create genuine and authentic relationships with people of color.

Becky Thompson, author of *A Promise and a Way of Life*, talked with 39 white anti-racist activists about their individual experiences. Thompson writes about her conversation with activist Sarah Stearns on what Ms. Stearns has learned about interacting with people of color: "Through the years, Sarah has seen many interactions around race in which a white person insists the conversation focus on the personal level of the individual relationship...Sarah believes this reduction stymies many conversations across race." She told Thompson that "Unless I am willing, as the white person, to feel and hold the rage of the cultural and institutional racism, then I am basically exercising my privilege to bring the conversation back to 'What does this have to with me?'"⁴

We need to enter into relationships gently and not assume that our work or our values or the number of marches we participated in gives us a free ticket or access to build a relationship with persons of different races or ethnicities. We must keep in mind our historical record as a group of whites, who time and time again have betrayed people of color. We must be willing to work through the spectrum of emotions and the conflicts, and to be there consistently not just when it is convenient.

5. We need to NOT expect certain conditions to be met before we will do our personal work or act.

In many diversity workshops or dialogue groups, at the beginning the facilitator announces that "we are going to create a safe place." I was one of those facilitators who made this promise. Though there should be an expectation that this is an environment that is based on respect, mutual learning, trust and confidentiality, let's keep in mind that the world *is not a safe place for people of color on a daily basis*. They have to constantly think about what will happen if police conduct a traffic stop; what if today is the day a bigot turns his hate into violence; or how co-workers will respond if they think a promotion was based on race.

We should work to create an agreement to support each other's learning through building relationships, providing feedback, and sharing information and stories. We also have to understand that emotions are part of the learning process: discomfort, confusion, anger and fear. We need to be open to people

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⁴ Becky Thompson, *A Promise and A Way of Life: White Antiracist Activism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 315.

expressing different emotions. It is important not to marginalize those who are white who may be confused or resisting the process, and to support their journey. For those people of color who are expressing their anger and venting their frustration, whites need to not run away but to understand and support the expression of emotions and understand their context. We need to keep in mind that if we are saying this workshop or dialogue group HAS to meet certain conditions in order for me to participate (e.g., participants have to follow my expectations for how they express emotions), then this is a manifestation of white privilege.

Can we suspend our white privilege that says we get to decide who the best leader might be, and simply accept that we might be wrong about what constitutes the best leadership?

6. We need to check our assumptions and expectations of what can be accomplished when people of color lead.

It is important to do a self-check on our perceptions, stereotypes, and biases about people of different races and ethnicities. Dealing with our stereotypes is knowing about the tapes (life experiences) playing in our heads. Think about what we were taught in school about the leadership of people of different races and ethnicities. What were some of the messages from the American history lessons about Native Americans? Were their cultures described as less fully developed or less ‘civilized’ than the cultures of the Europeans who displaced them? Were the Europeans described as settlers and the Native Americans as primitive peoples? What did we hear from family and friends about people of different races? Did we hear stereotypes such as: “they are lazy,” “they want handouts” and “they look exotic?”

What messages did we hear from the media? Though we may intellectually not believe the stereotypes, it does not mean they automatically disappear from our unconscious and conscious mind. The question is how we respond when we hear these stereotypes internally or from others. Can we suspend our white privilege that says we get to decide who the best leader might be, and simply accept that we might be wrong about what constitutes the best leadership?

7. We need to figure out how to use our privilege for good.

One story our team heard several times was about white people going to someone in an authority position to “fix” a problem in the community or an organization. It may seem like a perfect solution at face value. But putting an issue in the hands of an authority figure leaves more questions: How will the person get involved? If he or she “fixes it,” who will it benefit? This is an example of using privilege: since the white person has the access, he or she is in a position to frame the issue based on his/her viewpoint, and make decisions on how to proceed—instead of supporting residents on how they want to address the issue.

It is a dilemma. Should we use our privilege to get something done? Or, as in the example above, can we admit that our way of getting things done might be wrong or not helpful? And that pursuing our way might be maintaining white privilege in ways we cannot see as white people? One way to check ourselves is to consider the potential consequences to the process and relationships. We can question our intent. Are we helping or pushing an agenda to meet deliverables? Why are

Detour-Spotting for White Anti-Racists, by joan olsson

These lessons are from an article by joan olsson of Cultural Bridges, Detour-Spotting for White Anti-Racists. She has created a list of 18 “detours” of an anti-racist journey, where she also includes clarification of the underlying meaning and consequences of the particular behavior pattern:

“Blame the Victim”

Description: “We have advertised everywhere; there just aren’t any qualified people of color for this job.” Or “If only he had a stronger work ethic;” “If she just felt better about herself ...” Or “Internalized racism is the real problem here;” “She uses racism as an excuse to divert us from her incompetence.” And “He goes looking for racism everywhere.” As if racism is so hidden or hard to uncover that people of color would have to search for it.

Reality Check and Consequence: All “blame the victim” behaviors have two things in common. First, they evade the real problem: racism. Second, they delete from the picture the agents of racism—white people and institutions—which either intentionally perpetuate or unintentionally collude with racism. As long as the focus remains on people of color we can minimize or dismiss their reactions, and never have to look directly at racism and our own responsibility or collusions.

“Bending Over Blackwards”

Description: “Of course, I agree with you” (said to a person of color even when I disagree) or “I have to side with Betty on this” (Betty being a woman of color).

Reality Check and Consequence: Our white guilt shows up as we defer to people of color. We don’t criticize, disagree, challenge or question people of color the way we would white people. And if we do disagree, we don’t do it with the same conviction or passion that we would display with a white person. If this is our pattern, we can never have a genuine relationship with a person of color. Our sincerity, commitment and courage will be rightly questioned. We cannot grow to a deeper level of trust and intimacy with people of color we treat this way.”⁵

“BWAME”

Description: “But What About Me... look how I’ve been hurt, oppressed, exploited ...?”

Reality Check and Consequence: This diminishes the experiences of people of color by telling our own stories of hardship. We lose an opportunity to learn more about the experiences of racism from people of color, while we minimize their experiences by trying to make them comparable or less painful than ours.”⁶

⁵ *Note from author:* The balance is between supporting people of color in leadership and feeling confident about challenging a decision or asking questions about their opinions. It is helpful to ask questions about our interactions and responses: Was the interaction based on stereotypes? Was the response or lack of response due to our uncertainty about what to do? Was our response because we were afraid to make a mistake? Was our response because we think we know what is best? By unearthing barriers, we can create more authentic relationships with people of color.

⁶ olsson, joan. “Detour-Spotting for White Anti-racists.” (www.eraseracismny.org, accessed May, 2004), p. 3, 5, and 6.

we not introducing the residents of color to this person in authority? Keep in mind the historical context for the residents going to authority figures and the number of times they have been betrayed, ignored or deceived. A different option would be to ask the group of residents about the process they want to use to solve the problem. The group can choose whether to involve those in authority in the problem-solving process. The focus needs to be on building capacity, creating mutually respectful and beneficial relationships, and supporting the leadership of people of different races in the community to begin to shift power.

8. We need to work consistently to be strong, effective, forthright and consistent allies.

The responsibilities of being an ally include being willing to take risks, to speak up, and to increase our own and others' awareness. If we are in a meeting and we hear a racist comment, part of being an ally is to be willing to name the issue, even if there are people of color in the room. Be prepared to be criticized or marginalized by other whites when you resist maintaining the status quo. It may be viewed as more powerful when a white person is the messenger. It will usually be more risky for people of color to be the messenger. That is why it is important for whites to be allies and *offer* to "watch the person of color's back." It is important to know when to suspend our privilege of always "thinking we know what's best" or how to handle a situation. Continuing to take risks, ask questions, and request feedback from white allies will help maintain our clarity in knowing if our judgment is operating from our ego and imposed superiority or if we are making transparent decisions based on integrity.

What I Heard from Leaders of Color at this Conference that They Need from White Anti-racist Allies

At the White Privilege Conference⁷ in Pella, Iowa in 2004, white anti-racists were asked what they had heard leaders of color need from white anti-racist allies. The following is an excerpt from the list:

- Understand the anger of people of color.
- Know that you are not the “Great White Hope” for Blacks.
- Our reality is valid; don’t question it.
- Don’t center your thoughts first to make decisions; check in first with leaders of color.
- Don’t come looking for approval or praise.
- Don’t be expected to be trusted; be o.k. with this.
- Commit and stay in; don’t drop in.
- Don’t assume you know what freedom looks like for me, where I want to be heading, or who I am.
- Stop reinforcing the black and white dichotomy; stop silencing Natives, Asians, Latino/a, and Multi-identified people.
- Step up and take risks.
- Educate other white people.
- Be accountable to people of color.
- I don’t want to have to “thank” white folks.
- Feel good about yourself and don’t act from guilt.

The responsibility of being an ally is not just based on interactions with others, but also with the institutions with which we interact every day. For example:

- *Do I consider racism and white privilege where I shop? Is the staff diverse? Are the shoppers diverse? Does the shopping mall work to make sure transportation is user-friendly or have they negotiated for bus lines from neighborhoods predominantly comprised of people of color to not stop nearby?*

⁷ “What I Heard from Leaders of Color at this Conference that They Need from White Anti-racist Allies.” A list compiled at the first meeting of white Anti-Racist Caucus, White Privilege Conference 5, Pella, Iowa, April 29, 2004, courtesy of Dianne Finnerty. (from the Web site, www.wacan.org, accessed, June 2005). For more information about the White Privilege conference, go to www.whiteprivilegeconference.com.

- *Do I consider racism and white privilege where I live? Do I see if there are any policies in the homeowner association that would hinder people of different races from living in the neighborhood? Do I review the policies to see if they are inclusive of different cultural practices?*
- *Do I look at my bank's record of making loans to see if they use equitable practices?*

Final Thoughts

As we think about how we “do our work” as white people who are committed to transforming our communities and organizations to be inclusive, just and equitable, we need to always remember that *this is not a solo journey, but rather it needs to be a collective effort*. We need to work tenaciously together with courage and resilience. It is important to be patient and not disregard those who do not share our values, but to continuously offer a different worldview and show the impact of racism and white privilege on structural, interpersonal and individual levels. Tim Wise, a white anti-racist activist, author and speaker, succinctly frames the road in front of each one of us:

“For it is true, at least in my experience, that whites, having been largely convinced of our ability, indeed entitlement, to affect the world around us and mold it to our liking, are very much like children when we discover that at least for some things—like fundamentally altering the system of privilege and domination that first invested us with such optimism—it will take more than good intentions, determined will, and that old stand-by we euphemistically call “elbow grease.” But regardless, there is something to be said for confronting the inevitable choice one must make in this life between collaborating with or resisting injustice, and choosing the latter. Indeed, it is among the most important choices we will ever be asked to make as humans, and it is a burden uniquely ours.”⁸

⁸ Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2005), p. 154.