

SUMMARY
BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

ME AND WHITE
SUPREMACY
BY LAYLA F. SAAD



Summary of “Me and White Supremacy” by Layla Saad

Written by Alyssa Burnette

How to be actively anti-racist.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
The White Privilege You Don't Think About	6
The Danger of White Exceptionalism	8
"I Don't See Color" is Not a Helpful Statement.....	10
Racism Results in Damaging Stereotypes	12
Final Summary	15



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Introduction

How would you define “a racist?” Would you say a racist is someone who openly discriminates against people of color? Who refuses to hire someone because of the color of their skin? Who uses racial slurs? All of these definitions would be correct, but when we construct a mental image of a racist person, we often leave a few characteristics out. What about people who make racist jokes-- or laugh along when others do so? What about the people who clutch their purses a little tighter when a person of color walks by? What about the people who say things like, “That person was a diversity hire,” or who get upset when they see people of color represented in television commercials? Whether they admit it to themselves or not, all of these people are racist too. They might not mean to be. They might be horrified if you told them that their actions are examples of racial prejudice. And that’s because white supremacy is as much a part of our society as water is a part of the ocean. So, over the course of this summary, we’ll examine why it’s important to be actively anti-racist, why we should call out all instances of racism, and why white privilege is problematic.



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The White Privilege You Don't Think About

When I was in college, my sociology teacher asked us to play a bingo-style game that would help us identify examples of white privilege in our lives. For example, we were invited to check off a square on the sheet of paper he handed us if no one had ever belittled or made fun of you because of the color of your skin. If a security guard never followed you around a department store as though expecting you to steal something. If the history you learned about in school was the history of your race. If your skin color and hair type were considered the “defaults” for the beauty products you consumed. If you never had to worry about race impacting your access to health care. If you didn't grow up believing that the police were likely to shoot you on sight. If you never experienced discrimination because of your race or your cultural identity.

As we ticked off example after example, I and the other white students in the class sat in shocked silence. We had never even noticed these aspects of our lives, much less realized that they were benefits we reaped by virtue of our own white privilege. As white people, my classmates and I had never thought about the impact of our race on our identities or our ability to access resources. But this is a perfect example of a luxury that people of color don't have. And this is exactly why it's important to talk about white privilege in our society. But it's also important to make a couple of key distinctions at this point. Benefiting from white privilege does not mean that you are racist. Saying that someone benefits from white privilege is not necessarily an accusation. Instead, it's a way of acknowledging that all people who are white-- or who pass as white-- are able to enjoy the benefits of a society that inherently privileges white people over people of color.

It's also important to acknowledge that white privilege is not a good thing. It's a value system that needs to be deconstructed because all people should have the same amount of privileges! It's not okay to reward some people because of the color of their skin and discriminate against others for the same reason. Although many people object to being told that they have benefited

from white privilege, the author observes that this should not be an offensive or controversial statement. Saying that you have benefited from white privilege doesn't mean that your life has never been hard. It's not saying that all white people are wealthy or that all white people get everything they want. It simply means that the color of your skin is not a factor that has made your life hard. Therefore, being made aware of your white privilege is an invitation to acknowledge-- and check-- your own privilege so that you can use your awareness to make the world a better and more equal place.



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The Danger of White Exceptionalism

As you know, “white supremacy” means thinking that white people are superior to people of color. We also know that this ideology is both wrong and racist. But as we discussed in the previous chapter, racism can exist in a wide variety of thoughts and forms; it doesn’t have to be as overt or aggressive as traditional white supremacy. A good example of this covert racism is something called “white exceptionalism.” If you’re not familiar with this term, we can boil it down to a simple definition. White exceptionalism is the belief that you shouldn’t have to check your own white privilege because you don’t believe you’re racist.

The author observes that white exceptionalism usually isn’t something people are conscious of. Although some racist people might proudly assert that they are white supremacists, white exceptionalism exists under the surface in a more subtle way; it’s not an identity that people tend to acknowledge or be vocal about. Instead, it can manifest in other, quieter ways. For example, when other people say that they’re doing some reading to learn more about being actively anti-racist, someone who believes in white exceptionalism might feel that they don’t have to do that because they don’t have any racial bias to overcome. Put simply, a white exceptionalist believes that they are the exception to the rule because they are not racist. However, the author observes that this is both misleading and untrue.

Everyone has a racial bias to overcome-- whether it’s conscious or unconscious-- and that doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re racist. In many cases, it simply means that your whiteness prevents you from fully understanding the experience of people of color. A good way to put this into context is to consider a phrase that frequently circulated on social media following the murder of George Floyd. The phrase said simply, “I understand that I can never understand. But nevertheless, I stand.” This means that you acknowledge the difference in your experience as a white person. You understand that you want to be part of the solution and you want to be an ally for people of color. But you also understand that you will never know

what it's like to experience racism, discrimination, or police brutality because of the color of your skin. No white person is an exception to that rule, so there's really no need for white exceptionalism!

Unfortunately, however, many white people get offended when they're asked to investigate their own racial bias and have real conversations about racism. This leads to another, more problematic response known as "white fragility." White fragility occurs when white people feel threatened by conversations about racism. Instead of admitting that they can't possibly relate to a person of color's experience, some people feel that any conversation about racism is a personal attack on them. As a result, they respond as though they are being accused of being racist themselves and they make themselves out to be the victim in the conversation. This can lead to such ridiculous assertions as, "I can't be racist, I have Black friends!" or "This is reverse racism!"

This is incredibly silly and demeaning on multiple levels. For starters, there is no such thing as reverse racism. And for another, having Black friends doesn't mean you aren't racist. The author observes that confronting your own bias can be difficult and uncomfortable. It requires you to take a close look at yourself and do a great deal of soul-searching. Many people are afraid of this process or they're afraid that they will say or do the wrong thing when discussing racism. So, because of this fear, white people sometimes avoid saying or doing anything at all. But staying silent and ignoring racism doesn't help anybody. If you really want to be part of the solution, it's important to educate yourself, challenge your own bias, and be willing to do your part to deconstruct and eliminate white supremacy.



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“I Don’t See Color” is Not a Helpful Statement

In an episode of the popular NBC comedy series *Superstore*, the employees at a big-box store are required to attend racial sensitivity training. The irony and hypocrisy of the training session is made apparent from the outset as viewers see that the training video is being led by a white woman and an animated cloud. The overwhelming whiteness of the presenters prompts a Black employee to sarcastically remark, “Wow. When I woke up this morning, I was hoping I’d get to hear a white lady tell me about racism.” The video only gets more ludicrous when it ends with the statement, “Remember- - color blind is color kind!” When we see it in that context, it’s easy for the average viewer to observe that the topic of racism is not being handled well. We can laugh at the self-righteous hypocrisy of the video presenters who believe that, as white people, they are qualified to lecture people of color about racism.

But this comedic moment also touches on an important truth in its satirical delivery of that final statement: “color blind is color kind!” Because we actually hear that statement quite often from well-intentioned liberal white people. (Although it’s usually phrased as “I don’t see color!”) Because they recognize that the racism we explored in the previous chapter is toxic and problematic, some well-intentioned crusaders for equality attempt to take things in the opposite direction. They think that by saying they “don’t see color,” they are stating that they see all people as equals and that they are avoiding the racist behavior of those who treat people differently because of the color of their skin. As a result, many liberal people who care about social justice feel that they are promoting a healthy and progressive worldview.

Unfortunately, however, nothing could be farther from the truth. Why? Well, for starters, the freedom to say that you “don’t see color” is already an example of white privilege. Those who have never been judged by the color of their skin can afford to say they “don’t see color”; they’ve never had to worry about it. But because racism is so prevalent, Black people can’t escape the negative experiences that are a part of their reality as people of color. So,

when you say you “don’t see color,” you’re not actually helping and you’re not promoting an idea that contributes to a positive solution. Instead, you’re invalidating the experiences of people of color and ignoring their struggle with systemic racism.

The author acknowledges that “not seeing color” is problematic in other ways as well because it also erases the positive aspect of Black culture. Although we should absolutely be concerned about racism and we should definitely work to end it, it’s important to remember that being Black isn’t bad and it isn’t limited to negative social experiences. Being Black is something to be proud of and Black heritage includes a rich and beautiful cultural history that should be celebrated. So, the important take-away from this chapter is that you’re not being kind when you say you’re “color blind.” Instead, it’s better to adopt a worldview that considers both the positive and negative experiences of people of color. This perspective will enable you to celebrate cultural differences while working to create a better and more inclusive future.



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Racism Results in Damaging Stereotypes

You have only to turn on the television-- to pretty much any channel!-- to see that women are overly sexualized in every context. It's also common knowledge that little girls are increasingly sexualized at younger and younger ages. But although this is a universal female problem, studies show that Black girls experience this type of objectification and discrimination at significantly higher rates than their white counterparts. Rebecca Epstein, executive director of the Georgetown University Law Center's Center on Poverty and Inequality, conducted a study on this topic and discovered that "...black girls face even greater skepticism by the figures that wield such authority over their lives than other victims of sexual violence." Epstein also co-authored a 2017 study with leading female academics Jamilia J. Blake and Thalia González which revealed that Black girls are viewed by adults as being more sexually mature-- and therefore, less innocent-- than white girls.

This has a number of alarming implications for Black girls growing up in our society. For starters, this pervasive prejudice means that although social crusaders are likely to campaign against the sexualization of children, their sympathy is often withheld from Black survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Because even well-intentioned reformers can hold the belief that Black girls are less innocent and more sexually mature, Black victims are less likely to receive the help they need. They are also less likely to be believed when they do report cases of sexual assault. Epstein aptly sums this up by affirming, "Black girls face unique forms of bias that need to be addressed and that requires different consideration than the racism faced by boys. Hypersexualization is the epitome of that difference."

But sadly, this is just one form of discrimination that innocent little Black girls face. Many other negative experiences abound, including white people's fetishization of Black bodies. The author observes that this attitude is a relic of the slavery era and it needs to go! Because the bodies of Black women legally belonged to their white "masters" during this time, white people assumed that they had the right to objectify and sexualize their "property" as

they pleased. During the time of slavery, this meant that white people were free to rape and assault Black women with impunity. And unfortunately, it remains a deplorable fact that even though slavery has been abolished, white people are still likely to get away with sexually assaulting a Black woman. But the rise of the modern era has also generated new microaggressions against Black women.

For example, how many times have you heard or seen a white person ask a Black woman if they can touch her hair? Or, as is perhaps more common, how often does a white person simply invade Black privacy without asking in the first place? The author asserts that, whether you ask permission or not, touching a Black woman's hair is not only offensive, it is a violating form of fetishization. It is an act that invokes the blatant fetishization of the slavery era, when Black bodies were put on display for white people to gawk at. So, when you touch a Black woman's hair as though she and her hair are mysterious and alien to you, you are behaving as though that woman is an exhibit in a freak show or a circus animal. You are literally communicating to another human being that she is an animal for you to pet or a freak for you to marvel at.

Many people might resist that idea, however. "But I really just think her hair is so pretty!" some might say. Or, "I just wanted to touch it because it's so different from my hair; I just want to know how it feels." That doesn't matter. Why? Because, quite simply, it's not your hair. And the behavior you're exhibiting is also something that, as a white person, you would be unlikely to encounter yourself. Sure, you may have fond childhood memories of braiding a female friend's hair or patting a friend's head as they fall asleep beside you on a long drive home from a school field trip. But both of those examples are different. In each of those cases, you touched your friend's hair as a loving gesture of equality. You both knew that you were on an equal playing field; if you were touching each other, it was as a gesture of love or assistance. Under no circumstances were you communicating, "You're weird and different to me and I want to touch you to see how you feel." When you frame the situation in that light, anybody can see how that comes across as creepy. So, just don't be creepy!

It's also important to remember that, in addition to violating someone's sense of agency and personal space, you're also making a political statement. How? Well, the author reminds readers that Black hair-- much like Black female bodies-- has been fetishized, legislated, and discriminated against for centuries. Because white has been viewed as the default for far too long, Black hair in its natural state has been vilified as being "unprofessional" or "inappropriate." As a result, many Black women have been pressured and intimidated into making their hair conform to white beauty standards. Controlling someone's body in this manner should never be a part of holding any job! But when Black women dare to go against the grain and wear their hair in its natural state, it's a political statement, a way of saying that they refuse to bow to white oppressors. So, if you try to treat that hair as an exhibit in a freakshow, you're not only violating someone's personal space, you're invalidating their expression of their personal identity and their political protest.



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Final Summary

White supremacy is woven into the very fabric of our society. It's as much a part of our world as water is part of the ocean. As a result, all white people benefit from white privilege. Whether you consider yourself to be racist or privileged or not, the reality is that all white people benefit from a system that privileges whiteness. As a result, if you want to be actively anti-racist, it's important to be aware of your own privilege and use your voice to help eliminate white supremacy.

The first step is to start by eradicating white exceptionalism, white fragility, and unconscious bias in yourself. You can also avoid such thoughts or statements as "I don't see color" or actions that make Black people feel alienated and fetishized. Deconstructing this bias can be hard work, whether you're doing it at home, at work, or within your own heart, but it's important to keep up the fight. Remember that the conversation on racism is not about you-- it's about people of color. And if you say something wrong and get called out on it, try not to get offended. Instead remember that unlearning white supremacy is a lifelong process and it requires constant growth.



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