

# A Collaborative Inquiry Toward Being Anti-Racist

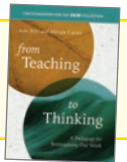
## Part 1

by Margie Carter with contributions from Julie Bisson, Alea Fry, Ijumaa Jordan and Theresa Lenear



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Alea Fry was introduced to early childhood education through a year of volunteering in an Americorps program in 2008. She became a teacher in 2012 and has worked at Epiphany Early Learning Preschool for five years.



Ijumaa Jordan shares a strong interest in helping teachers develop a sense of agency and integrity in her work with children. She has a graduate degree from Pacific Oaks College and has been strongly influenced by faculty there in how to teach adults with attention to issues of power, privilege, and culture.



Theresa Lenear began her journey in early childhood education as a Head Start parent in 1969. Since then, she has worked with many young children in multiple settings in both Alaska and Washington State. Her current focus centers on teaching, mentoring and coaching those wishing to strengthen their skills in providing services and resources relevant to the diverse children and families in their communities. She earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in human development with a specialization in bicultural development from Pacific Oaks College Northwest. She is a faculty member at Goddard College and a part time instructor at Highline College. Working in her community is a cultural expectation and a collective responsibility. Lenear co-leads the Teaching Umoja Participatory Action Research 15 Year Commitment with Dr. Sharon Cronin, examining ethnic identity, bicultural, cross-cultural and trilliteracy development of children of color. This work has been a collaborative effort with diverse co-researchers from across the United States and the communities of Port Royal and Moore Town, Jamaica. As a member of the African American Childcare Task Force and the Culturally Relevant Anti-Bias Education project, Lenear is actively engaged working with others on issues of equity and social justice.

*White people have a very, very serious problem and they should start thinking about what they can do about it. Take me out of it. –Toni Morrison*

Boom! Here I am again, head spinning, recognizing that once again I have encountered my blind spots and participated in one of the many manifestations of how systemic racism works. As my critical friend Ijumaa Jordan patiently (or was that impatiently?) reminded me ONCE AGAIN, "Here is where the distinction between intention and impact is essential to grasp and remember."

Of course, it was not my intention. I do not wear a white hood or burn crosses, but as a white woman, I am a constant beneficiary of racist ideas and institutional structures that privilege white assumptions and norms, not to mention skin color. The thinking and power structures of white supremacy are not always illusive to me, but wow, I still have so much learning to do. I want to write here about this part of my journey and feel challenged to express what I understand without sounding didactic or trite. My desire is to illumi-

nate the value in taking up the problem Toni Morrison describes above: racism is a very serious problem white people need to address. When we assume that responsibility, bumpy as the road may be, we live with more integrity, as fuller human beings.

The back story of this latest bump in my journey flows into the following annotated pages, offered as part one of a two-part collaborative article exploring, in the words of Theresa Lenear, “How important early childhood is as the ‘front end’ of this anti-racist journey. Even though it is difficult, it can be a positive experience and the outcomes far outweigh the struggles.”

Some months ago, in September 2019, a white Seattle director and colleague, Julie Bisson, contacted me about interviewing one of her teachers, Alea Fry, also a white woman, who had a challenging situation erupt between two playmates in her preschool classroom: a white child excitedly and repeatedly announced in front of an African American playmate that “Donald Trump does not like brown and black people,” which was, needless to say, very traumatic for the dark-skinned child. I met with Julie and Alea to review Alea’s documentation and the overall anti-bias work the center was doing with staff, children and families. From my notes of our conversation, I drafted an article and incorporated their further input and edits.

Before submitting the article to *Exchange*, recognizing that we were three white women, Julie suggested we identify a few long-time African American colleagues/friends to request a review. That launched a remarkable process of deepening our learning as each of these colleagues offered “critical friend” feedback on how the article reflected a lack of critical analysis about how racism operates and the unacknowledged, white-centered perspective of the writing. Julie, Alea, and I put the

article on hold to roll up our sleeves and pursue the self-examination and critical thinking that would help us learn and become stronger anti-racist women. This included extended conversations offered by two of our African American colleagues, Theresa Lenear and Ijumaa Jordan, and now we want to describe the process of what happened, what we learned, and some of the ways we have changed.

I write now to share insights exposed on this part of our journey as three white women who thought we knew a lot about anti-bias practices, but found ourselves rather blind to how we were participating in a white-centered narrative that was actually doing harm in multiple ways. This is not a story about trying to be politically correct, rather a story about uncovering more of what we have not fully understood. We have come to see the limited impact of work on anti-bias goals unless we are explicitly anti-racist. We have learned that being an anti-racist means working on ourselves to uncover and de-center our entitled perspectives, and to move out of our individualism into collaborative inquiry where we truly listen to people of color.

Our colleague, Ijumaa, reminds us that there are three aspects to learning from an encounter with our white-centeredness and racism: self-reflection and inquiry with a critical theory lens; listening and learning in a racially mixed community to hold ourselves accountable; and taking actions to repair and engage in healing. This article is part of our journey of reckoning and repairing damage. In part one, we include snapshots of Ijumaa and Theresa’s feedback, and their voices will be center stage in part two of this article in the next issue of *Exchange*.

## Shaping the Story with a White Lens

As I listened to Alea read her documentation notes, I was both heartsick and interested in the possibilities of learning from it. A black child is distraught after hearing her white playmate repeatedly say, “Donald Trump does not like brown and black people.” Here was another visible example of the scars of racism. Could this story be used as a poignant example of what today’s political climate has unleashed, be written to promote better understandings of how anti-bias work goes far beyond “curriculum ideas,” and to propel *Exchange* readers into more courageous conversations and actions? I began to shape the interview with these possibilities in mind. Reading on you will see how feedback from Ijumaa and Theresa opened my eyes to my unrecognized blind spots, including my unnamed audience of white readers I wanted this story to impact. Also included are examples of feedback for Alea and Julie’s learning.

**Margie:** When you read your documentation notes to me, Alea, it was obvious that you saw a moment to look squarely at how the current American political climate is impacting the lives of the children and families in our centers, whether or not they have experienced an instance of an ICE visit or roundup.

**Alea:** Yes, for me, the incident started when I heard a scream from one of our dark-skinned young girls. This was not a playful scream or a mad scream, this was a scream of pain. So, I ran over to investigate, grateful to not see any physical signs of injury. I asked what had happened and Asha announced that a lighter-skinned girl, Nancy, said, “She don’t like me.” Nancy quickly said, “No, I didn’t say I don’t like you. I said Donald Trump hates black and brown people.”

As soon as I heard Nancy’s words I felt an initial tug to say “That is not true,” or to at least question the statement. But right when I was thinking that Asha said, “I’m brown (pointing to her skin), I’m brown!!” I could feel a sense of deep pain resonating from Asha in response to Nancy, and I knew that discounting those words would not only misrepresent the world we live in, but would also discount this brown girl’s lived experience and what she was facing in the moment. I could also feel a conflicting tug within Nancy—an urgent desire to clarify that she does like Asha, but also an equal desire to talk about Donald Trump hating black and brown people.

**Margie:** So much to consider here! Black and brown people are certainly experiencing a toxic environment with the overt expressions of racism and white supremacy filling the current airwaves. This is not totally new, of course, just more widely experienced and reported. Very young children pick up what is in the [airwaves](#), whether we recognize it or not. What do you

**IJ Ijumaa Jordan**

As part of making the discussion of race an everyday occurrence, it’s important to name the race of the children in addition to describing their skin tone.

**MC Margie Carter**

Thanks for that reminder. We white people need to get more direct with this and not skirt the language of racialized discussions.

**JB Julie Bisson**

This is a 5 year old girl who is African American

**TL Theresa Lenear**

This also brings up a manifestation of internalized racial inferiority – pigmentocracy – “ hierarchical value that viewers place on such skin tones. Lighter skin tones are therefore valued more than darker skin tones. Such preferences have social, economic, and political implications, as persons of lighter skin tones historically were frequently—and stereotypically—viewed as being more intelligent, talented, and socially graceful than their darker skinned black counterparts. Blacker blacks were viewed as unattractive, indeed ugly, and generally considered of lesser value. Europeans standards of beauty thus dominated an African people for most of their history in America.” Retrieved from <https://eaop.ucsd.edu/198/pigmentocracy/Pigmentocracy%20-%20Freedom%20s%20story.pdf>

**IJ Ijumaa Jordan**

I appreciate this honest reflection and the recognition of the harm that was done. This is an important start for anti-racist and anti-bias work.

**IJ Ijumaa Jordan**

This reads as if there is an attempt to be neutral in weighing both sides of this conflict. I’m wondering where is the discussion of what Asha needs and what Asha wants to do after experiencing this racial harm?

**MC Margie Carter**

Perhaps this discussion was in the documentation or our conversation and I jumped over that with my desire to focus on educating white readers. I’m sorry I didn’t recognize that and grateful to have this pointed out.

**TL Theresa Lenear**

As educators, we have the responsibility to create learning environments where children engage in exploring and examining their daily life experiences where there is context given and their meanings clarified. How are we creating opportunities for children to deconstruct and reconstruct their world given the political landscape that is creating a cultural divide amongst its people?

imagine each of these children's perspective/quests are from knowing them and how this conversation **unfolded?**

**Alea:** When I first heard Nancy talking, I was not sure what she was trying to convey. She has a friendship with Asha and I did not think she was trying to hurt her. This was confirmed for me as Nancy continued to say, "I like you" and her tone and body language toward Asha showed she clearly wanted Asha to be okay, so that she could continue to talk about Donald Trump hating black and brown **people.**

I had no question that Asha was genuinely distraught. She was communicating that she was personally affected by this statement: "I'm brown!" Asha also seemed surprised by what she was hearing, her tone seemed shocked—this was her friend saying she was hated. Asha seemed to be trying to understand what Nancy meant; she repeated what she heard Nancy say and it didn't seem to fit Asha's understanding of **Nancy.**

**Margie:** So here you are as a teacher and a program in a critical moment. Social justice is not a workshop topic, an abstract idea you are working with, but a moment presenting itself to you through the **children.** I know you took this situation to your team meeting, as well as your director, Julie. Rather than just hold your breath, hoping this moment would pass, you put your commitment to the task, though you no doubt had some nervous feelings. Beyond speaking to the individual parents of these two children, the decision to convene a full parent meeting for your group was bold and brave.

## Continuing the Story

I zeroed in on the story Julie and Alea told me about the parent meeting held to follow up on this incident, along with some other parent meetings being held across the center working on their

### TL Theresa Lenear

Also thinking that the children's voices show they are engaged in critical thinking about their experiences and have words of wisdom to share.

### TL Theresa Lenear

This, by the way, is a complete visualization of what has always been there, what was constructed specifically to keep people in their place – a pecking order for financial gains/capitalism. Race was constructed to create the division, and class as the glue holding it tightly together. Understanding this construct guides how you help children navigate through. Anti-bias education can be a framework but that's only touching the surface. We need to understand the social construct as the deep structural frame that institutional racism and white supremacy rests upon.

### IJ Ijumaa Jordan

While it's important to consider Nancy's intention, it should not take precedence over the impact of racism Asha experience. (Note: A common norm of anti-racism work is recognizing and prioritizing impact over intention). Also, it would be helpful to hear what was said to the children in this moment because I'm left with the idea that Asha wasn't cared for in this moment and her pain was not addressed.

### AF Alea Fry

What I didn't originally mention is that when I went to Asha and Nancy, I knelt down (both girls were standing facing each other) next to Asha and wrapped her in my arm. She melted back into me. I put my body on Asha's side from the very start because I wanted Asha to feel that I was with her. I felt pulled toward Asha.

### TL Theresa Lenear

I am also thinking that this did not happen in a vacuum as there were children in ear shot—what is going through their minds? What questions?

### TL Theresa Lenear

Our children of color need to create a strong cultural self. We want our children of color to be bi-cultural where they are able to navigate successfully within the dominant society (where for Whites it is like being a fish in water that nurtures you, feeds you, protects you). To be bi-cultural, children of color need to know the codes of power and the language of power while at the same time as bringing their whole cultural selves to the table. This is about getting children prepared for what is to come. This begins in utero, children's understanding of how their environment is there or is not there for them.

### MC Margie Carter

Another important "of course" for me. The focus of our thinking and responses as educators in these moments must be responding to bias. When children of color or those outside the culture of power are involved, how can we include support for navigating the language and codes of the dominant culture without implying the idea that the culture of power is better than their cultural self? White teachers especially need to learn ways to strengthen children's whole cultural selves. Very helpful, Theresa!

**TL Theresa Lenear**

You totally have to know who your families are. These teachable moments are deep scars that are there. Right now the article sounds superficial and does not go in depth acknowledging the deep and challenging work that Alea has stepped up to engage in. The article reads as a teachable moment devoid of the courage, strength, and commitment that Alea engaged in. That is the story that gives honesty to what it means to engage in this work.

**IJ Ijumaa Jordan**

I'm always cautious of using stories of children of color who are currently in the classroom as "teachable moments" because these teachable moments are usually centered around white people's learning.

**TL Theresa Lenear**

You speak the truth, Ijumaa, and it is sad that we need to say that.

**MC Margie Carter**

Oh, my, that's exactly how my thinking was centered. I really appreciated your strong challenge to me, Ijumaa, that children of color do not exist for the purpose of teachable moments to educate adults. I think we need to do some deeper critiquing of how we handle these teachable moments. First and foremost we tend to the child who was harmed, and in the case of a parent meeting, to the ongoing scars families of color experience hearing what their children have been subjected to. An anti-racist facilitator would acknowledge that the system of white privilege creates the possibility for white people to not face racism and learn how to hold themselves accountable to be an anti-racist ally. I think this goes to the heart of what Toni Morrison says, "White people have a very, very serious problem."

**JB Julie Bisson**

I feel the same way Margie. This was a message that I heard loud and clear from you, Ijumaa. After all these years of addressing teachable moments, I was missing this perspective and I will remember and incorporate this understanding and analysis into all future situations like this one. I am currently revising a tool I have used for years in teacher training called "Guidelines for Teachable Moments" to incorporate this important reality—that children of color and families of color often experience deep pain twice when scenarios like this occur in the classroom: first as the subject of a painful question or comment from a child, but then again if the "teachable moment" is discussed in a larger group like a staff or parent meeting. I have to always consider who this discussion, this exploration, of a teachable moment benefits.

anti-bias goals. Because many of the families in this center are of mixed races and it is less common for white families to directly hear the perspectives of people of color, I was especially keen on reporting what happened in their conversation. Once again, my white-centered perspective shaped the way I told the story, and Alea, Julie and I were rightly challenged by Ijumaa and Theresa.

**Alea:** In the initial short conversation with Asha and Nancy's parents that day at pick up time, I could only relay bare minimum facts and my sense of each child's feelings. After talking with my co-teachers and Julie, our director, we decided to offer a chance for the parents of all the kids in the class to talk about this moment. I first contacted the parents of the kids involved, then expanded the invitation to all classroom parents.

Most of the families in our room attended. I started the conversation by introducing what happened and inviting the parents to comment on their thinking. **This prompted a general wondering from the white parents about how they as parents can help their kids navigate these types of conversations to be an ally to families subjected to experienced racism.** One of the white parents said she hadn't talked about racism at home and wasn't sure how to.

One African American parent responded saying she can't avoid talking about racism with her children and has these conversations every day with her kids.

## From Non-racist to Anti-racist

*\*See the Quick Reference Guide of Terms on page 86.*

I could share more of this initial draft of the article and the critiquing Theresa and Ijumaa offered, but this is a good place to offer another voice, that of Dr. Cynthia Davis-Vanloo, whom our colleague, Charlotte Jahn, suggested we also ask to review the article. While we are acquainted with and admire Cynthia, neither Julie, Alea, or I had an extended history or relationship with her, so she was especially generous to make time to share her initial thoughts. Cynthia's lens as an African American educator reinforced our understanding that we had been constructing this article with a white-centered lens for an unacknowledged and assumed white readership. She pushed our thinking to understand an anti-racist identity is the foundation for an anti-bias activist and genuine white ally.

*"I have been conducting my doctoral work through critical race theory lens for several years. That has deepened my understanding of embedded racism to an extent that makes it nearly impossible for me to give a brief response*

**IJ Ijumaa Jordan**

This is one example of how this discussion of racism centered on white people learning. What did the African American and other families of color learn?

**MC Margie Carter**

Yep, you are right. Probably what the African American and other families of color learned is all too familiar, “These white folks do not get it. They are more invested in protecting their feelings, their privileged interests, than they are in becoming a true anti-racist.” Perhaps what they came away with is a feeling that this center may be focused on anti-bias goals, but they are not necessarily working in our behalf.

**JB Julie Bisson**

This is a good point. In hindsight, I think the families of color were put in a position of “teaching” white families about the impact of the situation.

**TL Theresa Lenear**

And what would run through your and the other white folks minds if the families of color were expressing their dismay and resolve not to be the lesson in an emotional display... what value judgment would be made about “those people”?

**MC Margie Carter**

You are spot on with this question, Theresa. We white folks want to be appreciated for our efforts, not challenged. A perfect example of “white fragility” or entitlement as a defense and deflection against having to face this aspect of our racism.

to your request. So, I will just make a few comments based on my immediate reactions.

*First, I agree with Theresa’s questions about your intent in writing the article. Who is your target audience and why? My sense is that it is for a White audience working to be “allies” with and for your students and families of color, which leads to my next comment.*

*There is a difference between working to be allies and working to be anti-racists. Allies want to make it easier for people of color to fit into cultures and systems of racism. Early learning environments tend to be built from a lens of whiteness and white superiority. By that I mean that the physical environment, curriculum and practices are based in white perspectives and values. This is understandable, since formal education in the country has always been the property of whiteness. Efforts to be culturally accessible to populations of people other than those who identify with, or have close proximity to whiteness, will have limited success toward equity and anti-racism. Whiteness is still centered in many ways. Even in having community meetings to discuss the incident with the two children centers the needs of the white folks in the community—their need to “learn” while exposing people of color to probable microaggressions.*

*I think true anti-racists need to engage in self-reflection and self-directed learning about the embedded nature of racism and around their participation in it, using critical lenses like critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, or Paulo Freire’s pedagogy. You cannot be an effective “ally” if you are not first anti-racist. So for me, while I appreciate that the program has systems in place to help teachers navigate impacts of racism they witness, if you are not asking, “Why was the teacher surprised by the encounter,*

*and what can you do about that surprise?” then you are still working from a place of whiteness centered minimization of discomfort. I do not have any significant relationship with the program, so I am only expressing my reaction to the article.”*

Efforts for Julie, Alea and me to learn from the critical feedback included a number of weeks in solo reflections, phone and in-person conversations in different groupings, doing more reading, and having phone calls with Theresa and Ijumaa. They had us review a useful handout, “White Supremacy Culture,” based on the work of Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun. The handout explains that listing the characteristics of white supremacy culture is intended to help organizations understand how they unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms, desiring to be multicultural but really only allowing other cultures in if they conform. “Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is the first step to making room for a truly multicultural organization.” This handout is now a reference tool for the ongoing work each of us do.

As we move forward in this journey, we do so more conscious of how critical race theory can inform the terms we use to express our understandings, again, a concept very different than trying to be PC. Ibram X. Kendi (2019) reminds us that the opposite of racist is not non-racist but rather anti-racist. If we call ourselves non-racist or anti-bias or a white ally without recognizing and naming how racism is embedded in our mindset or behavior, we have not yet assumed an anti-racist identity. Kendi says, “The only way to undo racism is to constantly identify it and describe it—and then dismantle it.”

Toward the end of this extended period of reflection and conversation, Julie and I committed to hold ourselves

## Quick Reference Guide of Terms

Courtesy of Ijumaa Jordan and Theresa Lenear

### Anti-bias Education

Anti-bias is an essential activist approach to education that sets forth values-based goals and practices that eliminate biases such as racism, sexism, ageism, transphobia, ableism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Anti-Semitism, etc. One of the primary goals is supporting the healthy development of all socio-cultural identities. Anti-bias teaching requires critical thinking and analysis by both children and adults to act against unfairness.

### Anti-racist

Actively working to eliminate racism and the dominance of white culture to create a racially just and culturally responsive world.

### Culturally Responsive Practice

Developed by Geneva Gay and Gloria Ladson-Billings, this describes an approach that empowers students (and families) intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. The use of cultural referents in (teaching) bridges and explains the white mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing the students' (families') own culture.

### Non-racist

A passive stance that results in upholding racism and white supremacist ideology by not taking responsibility for the harm that non-action is causing. Claiming not to be racist is often associated with a colorblind ideology.

### Race

A fluid and erroneous system of classifying human beings that was invented by Europeans, which has consistently functioned over time to concentrate power with white people and legitimize their dominance over people of color.

### Racism

A web of economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systemize an unequal distribution of privilege, resources, safety and power in favor of the white dominant racial group at the expense of all other racial groups.

### White Ally

A white person who is actively working against internalized, interpersonal, and institutional white supremacy, while simultaneously following the lead of and being accountable to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

### White Supremacy

A social construct giving access and dominance to one group of people while at the same time oppressing other groups of people based solely on the color of their skin. This belief that white people are superior to all other races, especially Black people, becomes infused in power systems and organizational cultural norms marginalizing others with different cultural norms.

accountable for the investment of time and friendship our African American colleagues had made in us. We each wrote a summary of what we were learning and actions we wanted to take and sent them to Theresa and Ijumaa, asking Alea to add her reflections. Examples of these reflections follow:

#### Julie:

- Remembering Theresa's point, "Anti-bias practices and an anti-bias lens is one of the tools/perspectives/lenses we want to use, but it does not capture all of it. It is a piece of it, but it is not all of it. We need to be culturally relevant, and we need to be anti-racist."
- Consider who school-wide anti-bias meetings benefit, and who they are on the backs of, or further oppressing.
- Thinking carefully about who benefits and who is harmed when we are following a teachable moment protocol. We need a wider analysis of and protocol for addressing/responding to teachable moments. With the essential input from some Black and African American families at our school, I have learned so much this past year about the impact on the psyche and the identity of children of color when they are the target of comments and questions about diversity. While I had seen teachable moments as an opportunity to learn more about what children are thinking and learning about diversity and to correct misinformation and pre-prejudice, I realize now that most of this is still at the expense of the children of color that the teachable moments are "about." I have a growing, differing perspective on teachable moments now as still beneficial for children but perhaps mostly to demonstrate standing up for children of color who are often the target of the comments and questions, and establishing crystal clear

boundaries about how we will treat each other (especially white children toward children of color).

- The teachable moments guidelines I wrote in 1999 (and still use today) is in the wrong order and very likely missing some key steps. There are seven steps, but not until step five does it suggest teachers set boundaries if necessary, and not until step six does it suggest that teachers comfort children whose feelings are hurt. *The preservation of children of color's psyche and identity needs to be at the top, not at the bottom.*
- I want to continue to learn how a perspective of white cultural superiority shows up in our school. I know it does. I am white and I lead and started the school. Though we are now 70 percent children of color and we have 50 percent staff of color, I know white superiority runs comfortably through our program. I want to unearth this and pay attention to

it and do something about it. Per Cynthia's point, I want to personally, and as a staff, engage in self-reflection and self-directed learning about the embedded nature of racism and our participation in it using critical lenses like critical race theory.

#### Margie:

- With how I focused the article, I created a narrative that prioritized white people's learning over tending to the hurt of a child and their family. The real harm this child experienced was not addressed. Ijumaa's comment, "This reads as if there is an attempt to be neutral in weighing both sides of this conflict" helped me see this is not a neutral negotiation of issues between children. In cases where racial scars, dignity and identity are at issue, especially in a context when racism and white privilege are not perceived by young children, we need to re-think our

#### TL Theresa Lenear

I remember in some of our workshops that we did together, we talked about scars and those scars being ripped and left open because of an action... it never really heals because of daily aggressions.

habitual teacher approach of trying to negotiate and problem solve.

- Work with the distinction between equality vs. equity in facilitating discussions with children and with adults. In the context of institutionalized racism, when all voices are not equally valued, trying to get everyone's voices out is not being an anti-racist ally.
- Continually unpack the distinction between intention vs. impact. Here a white child's pronouncement to an

African American child, “Donald Trump doesn’t like brown and black people,” means that words hurt. Racist words rub salt into wounds, subvert self-confidence and self-respect. First priority: take care of the hurt child and reinforce a positive sense of identity and resiliency. Work with Ijumaa’s suggestion of talking about why it is hurtful, especially from a child’s perspective—when a person who holds power, like the president, says he does not like me, I am in trouble.

#### Alea:

- Remember it is okay to ask for help.
- It is important to see the big picture while also caring for the emotional well-being of individual children. When spicy situations happen with regard to racialized conversations, they are not an isolated event and need to be thought of carefully and with intention.

### White People Addressing *Our* Very, Very Serious Problem

The Toni Morrison quote that opens this article came to my attention by way of a white mother, Anastasia Higginbotham, who is a children’s book author and illustrator. Her book “Not My Idea: A Book about Whiteness” has some very helpful ways for white people to understand our very, very serious problem. The pages include thoughts like these:

*Racism is a white person’s problem and we are all caught up in it—mostly by refusing to look at it. You can face this.*

*Racism was not your idea. You do not need to defend it. You can bring your curiosity to learn about it and see that it is true.*

*The only way to undo racism is to constantly identify it and describe it—and then dismantle it.*

*Racial justice is possible. But only if we are honest with each other and ourselves.*

*You can be white without signing on to whiteness.*

Alea, Julie, and I realized we had overestimated our understandings about being a white ally and working toward equity. We know there are still holes in our analysis of racism and white supremacy culture. Our learning will not only come from reading, workshops and self-reflections, but must include being in community with people who have a critical racial analysis. Our learning must not impose on people of color to teach us, but we must listen closely to what people of color want us to see, hear and understand. We must be brave and not only go to the “safe” person of color, the one who will not challenge or make us feel uncomfortable.

Facing those assertive, uncompromising and critical voices is important for our learning, for committing ourselves to accountability, and for doing the repair and healing work of an anti-racist. We also need to just move over, way more often, to create a space for the self-directed voices and perspectives people of color want to offer. Toward that end, keep an eye out for part two of this article, which will be written by Ijumaa Jordan and Theresa Lenear.

#### TL Theresa Lenear

And so important to understand “whiteness” needs to be present in order for “whiteness” to continue, to intensify as it gives the rationale of superiority and all others as inferior. Remember “white” was created to hold the goodies... are you ready to lose those goodies and reclaim your humanness?

#### MC Margie Carter

That gets to the heart of it, Theresa, both in terms of how “whiteness” and “race” were historically constructed to unite different ethnic groups to maintain superiority/supremacy over dark skinned people; and I appreciate your point about the humanity we can reclaim as white people when we let go of that institutionalized, unearned privilege.

### References

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