

# A Collaborative Inquiry into Becoming Anti-Racist

## Part 2

by Theresa Lenear and Ijumaa Jordan

In the March/April *Exchange*, Margie Carter and colleagues described their process of accountability as white educators writing about anti-bias education and racism. This second article represents our response to the process of giving feedback to the original article, which was written by Margie Carter, Julie Bisson and Alea Fry. The two pieces are related because they are reflections on an experience shared across racial differences, but they are necessarily different. Our collaboration was successful because of the trust we have built and our ability to bring our whole selves to one another. This two-part article was created in the same way.

We will share the relational and historical context of anti-racism that informs our anti-racist work in general, as well as the article feedback we gave. You will find four core understandings of anti-racism work in early care and education and a call to action. Our article is intentionally written within our individual and collective racial and cultural context, and the reading

experience will include storytelling, direct expression and truth telling. Our communication style is conversational and high-context with limited explaining, which is outside of the white cultural norm of “professional writing.” The article is meant to spark more anti-racist dialog and work that centers the voices and knowledge of Black, Indigenous, and people of color in our field. It will be helpful to read Part One (March/April 2020) for more context of this article.

### Ijumaa Jordan

When I read the article that Margie Carter was planning to publish, I felt angry and sad that a Black preschool child had experienced racial harm and it was used as a “teachable moment” to mostly teach white adults about racism. While the racial harm caused was unintentional by the white child and the white educators, I felt that familiar fatigue that blankets me when I have to tell my white colleagues that their behaviors, policies, and practices are founded in and reinforcing white dominant culture, and that these

things are interpersonally and institutionally hurting children—especially Black and Brown children. It is exhausting to give this feedback and have it met with denial and dismissal most of the time. Common responses are:

“I have been an ECE leader for a number of years and have hired people of color and have families of color that attend our program. No one has ever complained.”

“My partner/best friend/child/relative is a person of color.”

“I have studied and been trained in anti-bias education and culturally responsive practice; how can I ever do anything racist?!”

So, I was uncertain if my initial feedback to Margie, Julie and Alea would be dismissed. Fortunately, it was not. They expressed their surprise and a lack of understanding of early childhood education from a critical race analysis. That conversation started us on this collaborative inquiry over several months.



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 in 1969. Her current focus centers on teaching, mentoring and coaching those wishing to strengthen their skills in providing services to the diverse children and families in their communities. She is engaged in working with others on issues of equity and social justice. She earned both her BA/MA in human development with a specialization in bicultural development from Pacific Oaks College Northwest.

### Theresa Lenear

When I read the draft article, which I was asked to respond to back in September 2019, my brain began to process, which in turn caused me to be reflective and write down my thoughts and ideas that began to flow like a gushing river. I was certain that the feedback would not be dismissed, as I knew very well two of the individuals and they knew my values. Part one of this article offered insight into the socio-political context of doing racial justice work in the State of Washington and particularly in Seattle.

Reflecting I have become more aware of the tremendous risk it is for me as a Black woman to openly call out racism even in well-established personal and professional relationships. No matter how much I care about my white friends and colleagues, I worry that they will choose whiteness over our relationship. Thankfully, I took the risk; it resulted in our introduction and the honor of working with you on this article. It was a privilege for you to share with me about your journey in anti-racist work in ECE, particularly in Washington state on our initial phone call. You reminded me of this quote from Fannie Lou Hamer, a fierce civil rights advocate.

*I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired.*

—Fannie Lou Hamer (1964)

Fannie Lou Hamer's words really say it all for me. As a mother of six adult children of color—five sons and one daughter—the theme of “sick and tired” ebbs and flows in a rhythm that is like waves of the Pacific Ocean as they beat against the Washington coastline.

In the 1940's, my parents headed “North to Alaska” to pursue ample work opportunities afforded by the war. There were ongoing construction demands fortifying Alaskan territory (“Seward's Folly”) as a front line of defense against Russia in the Cold

War. I returned here, to Washington, the state of my birth, in 1987. Within a few years of my return to Seattle, I was actively engaged with others in anti-bias theory, practice and reflection. But I encountered this kind of teaching much earlier.

A smile comes to my face remembering when I first became acquainted with the “red book”; “Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children” by Louise Derman-Sparks and the Anti Bias Curriculum Task Force. I was a Head Start teacher in a Fairbanks center-based program teaching young 3-year-olds and providing curriculum development support to our home-based program. Our center served Alaska Native families and thus our learning environment reflected the families we served, especially their culture and language. Yes, you read that sentence correctly. In the 1970's we were providing a program that was developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant and culturally responsive and we did not know it! What a novel idea.

Unfortunately, there are those times when you must steel yourself for the nastiness which you know is coming, not once or twice but many times—too many times. As I read the draft article, there was a moment of experiencing both the disequilibrium and the emotional and physical pain that the Black 5-year-old girl felt upon hearing the words, “Donald Trump does not like Brown and Black people,” exploding from her white 5-year-old friend's mouth. As a Black mother, I tried to prepare my children for their first of many attacks upon their cultural essence and felt anger at needing to undertake this preparation.

My second oldest son gave me a glimpse of the impact of racism from his world view. He wrote me a letter as he was reentering the world after some personal life struggles. He recalled an incident that happened when he was 4 years old, when our Head Start classrooms were all going on a field trip. As we were descending the stairs heading

for the vans, he heard the white child say to his mother, “Why is his skin so dirty?” It felt like an eternity that those words hung out there awaiting for his mother to speak. My son wrote, “You looked down at me at that moment with such love in your eyes, as you broke the silence with your supportive words ... that look in your eyes has pulled me out from under the darkness many times.”

I was so angry about having to educate both the white child and his mother. Why could she not have taken ownership to engage in a conversation with her child instead of simply saying, “Shhhhh!”

### Ijumaa Jordan

Yes, why could she not take ownership instead of defaulting into denial of the racial harm that occurred? This is another example of white privilege and why we are sick and tired. You and your son deserved better. I know you and I could fill volumes of books documenting the interpersonal and institutional racial harm we have experienced. What I also know is that we have a strong sense of our racial identity and our collective Blackness. My positive racial identity brings me joy, supports my resilience, energizes me to keep applying a critical racial lens and advocating for racial justice.

We have so much experience and expertise with these patterns. Our response goes beyond analyzing just one classroom incident of racial harm. Understanding systemic racism in early care and education is vital to ensuring that we create physical and socio-emotional environments in which racial harm is addressed. Here are four core understandings for racial justice and equity work in ECE. These core understandings go beyond the typical “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” discussions, which rarely address white dominant culture or center the needs and desires of BIPOC.

## Core Understanding: Working in Community is Essential to Racial Justice Work

**Theresa Lenear**

The current atmosphere is very hostile, especially for People of Color. You can feel the hate in the air and I found myself needing to express this tension...

"I am sick and tired of being sick and tired!" I posted this on Facebook. This was my current mantra, which was followed by the lyrics from a song by Otis Redding, "But I know, but I know, a change is gonna come, Oh yes it is..." I MUST believe and keep hope alive that a change is gonna come.

Margie Carter sent our group a link to an article she wanted to share. She also noted two of her modern day heroes and asked "Who are yours?" I felt the stars must be aligned; as life's pathway is demanding my thoughts to be captured for posterity. Yes I am smiling! I am engaged in another literary opportunity; a work of love and belief in the power of our communities of color. We share strategies that nurture, support, and give voice to our children. This work of love has spanned several years and included peer researchers from across the United States, in collaboration with three communities in Jamaica. We are very close to finalizing and publishing. In our introduction, we are asked about our heroes and the following is my response to the question posed:

*I have often thought about which person I would choose to be my hero. It never crossed my mind that it also could be a woman—my heroine. Throughout the 15 years of my good Catholic education, I learned that a hero was not only a courageous and brilliant leader, but also a great orator who was strong in his conviction and strength. The hero was a man, a famous man, a famous white man who accomplished what he set out to do by any means necessary. These heroes of high esteem were looked upon favorably and placed upon a pedestal for all to*

*aspire to be somewhat like. I do not remember people who looked like me being present in the mix. People who looked like me were neither recognized for their good deeds nor visible in pictures placed within the great books of knowledge.*

*In high school, there was a mention of two or three "colored" folks identified as the exception to the rule, and of course they were men. As for the women—society seemed to play this line over and over again: "This is a man's world" (James Brown). Fast forward to today, when the scene is so much different from the time I was growing up. History has changed where the truth is to be told—the faces of the heroes and heroines are more reflective of the diversity of their people, but one message still is carried: heroes and heroines are famous people who are known and admired by many.*

*But what of the everyday people who strive to be change makers and change agents to bring equity and social justice to those around them? What of those who work behind the scenes for the good of people-kind? Are they not heroes and heroines? Do they not deserve recognition for their contributions to their communities? A resounding YES!! I think of my parents, Beatrice Lee and Robert Rufus Coleman, as my heroine and hero. It has taken me a while to recognize and value their contributions working for the equal rights and justice for people of color in the 1950s and 60s. They were both hard-working people. We were among the few African Americans (families and individuals) living in Fairbanks and experienced the ills of racial segregation, as well as other forms of racism regularly. I remember my parents holding meetings at our home to organize and strategize about what action steps to take. My mother was very skilled and eloquent, using her voice through not only the written word in the local newspaper but also speaking to groups as she addressed the inequities people of color experienced. My father was known for his integrity—his word was his bond—and people gravitated to him as they had trust and respect in his work. My parents working together to make their community a better place for all to live is the memory I carry and try to emulate as I do my work within my communities.*

## Core Understanding: Critical Race Analysis Informs Racial Justice Action

**Ijuma Jordan**

The capacity to apply critical race analysis to every aspect of our work is essential to anti-racist work. This theoretical base gives us the language to name and address racism, which then informs action. Most of us living in the United States are socialized and educated in white supremacy culture. Black and Indigenous children were directly and indirectly taught that our racial and cultural selves were deviant and wrong. The best we could do would be to assimilate and accept a colonized mindset. We also learned quickly that school is inhospitable to our authentic personhood. Assimilation and colonization are demanded of us to survive, while white children are socialized and educated to have a cultural and racial identity based in white supremacy.

They may learn not to be overtly interpersonally racist; no racial slurs, no excluding because of race, not teasing someone of a non-white culture. In fact, we often indirectly teach white children that as long as they're nice, they do not have to be accountable for the harm they cause. But we rarely name or counter the institutional racism that upholds white supremacy culture. What if when a white child does racial harm we resocialize them to reject whiteness by naming it and addressing it? What if white teachers also spoke up against racial harm and did not leave it solely to Black and Indigenous teachers to notice and address harm? What if we simultaneously support Black, Brown and Indigenous children's healthy racial and cultural identities? What if we address the institutional anti-Blackness embedded within early care and education?

**Theresa Lenear**

As a college instructor, a consultant, and a mentor, it has been my priority to change the cultural lens that addresses the pedagogical frame that considers early childhood educational cultural norms, best practices, and policies that support positive, healthy development of children, specifically children of color. It is about elevating our experts of color such as Geneva Gay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Antonia Darder, Sharon Cronin, Janice Hale-Benson, Debra Sullivan, bell hooks, Lisa Delpit, Paulo Freire, Asa Hilliard, Edwin Nichols and Ramirez III and Casteneda to name a few. Their theory and implementation strategies provide a strong foundation to ensure that our children and families are visible, valued, and validated. As students engage with these experts' expertise, the students

*What do you see when  
you see a child?*

*I see a miracle with  
talking eyes,*

*a form that art defies.*

*When you see the children  
what do you see?*

*A rainbow of shades  
and tones*

*blending all together,  
to never stand alone.*

*When we see the children  
what must we do?*

*Be a mentor, a model,  
be available, be wise*

*for miracles we see with  
talking eyes.*

*(author unknown)*

find their voice, find the sense of their own power and find the ability to support their communities where they work and live.

## Core Understanding: Cultural Humility

In white supremacy culture, white people are socialized to believe that they have the best and superior culture. White culture is the default and normal culture. White people also believe that they hold the exclusive understanding of their own culture and everyone else's culture. Because they think they have a superior culture and knowledge, they believe it is their right to impose their culture on all other people because "those" people's cultures are primitive and deviant. They have also built systems and institutions to uphold and enforce dominant white supremacy culture.

Instead of this white hubris, what is needed is cultural humility. White supremacy culture is not superior; it is dehumanizing and deadly. For example, when we consider living through a global pandemic, my critical race analysis has helped me anticipate the rise in public displays of white individualism, the demand of BIPOC labor for white convenience—despite the increased exposure and spread of the virus, continued over-policing, and the heartbreaking killing of Black people with no consequences or justice, etc etc etc.

## Core Understanding: End White Saviorism

I have received feedback about part one of this article from white educators and leaders eager to fix racism and protect Black children from racism in their programs. They share what they are currently doing and what they plan to do. Initially, I ask how they came

up with the action plans. Did the Black children and families tell them that is what they wanted them to do? Unsurprisingly, no one centered the needs and desires of Black families in the plans because they thought they knew what was needed. They acted from their white hubris and the idea of the "white man's burden" to save the "poor Black children."

But these children do not need saving; they need the end of white supremacy. They need educators and leaders to build equitable and authentic relationships so that they can be invited to work within and be accountable to communities of Black, Indigenous, and people of color that are engaged in anti-racist and equitable education.

**Theresa Lenear**

In response to white saviorism, my Seattle network responded as a community and worked within and across our cultural and ethnic groups on behalf of our children and families. Thus emerged the culturally-specific Child Care Task Forces (African American, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, First Nation, and the beginning of the East African group). The various groups did their own research, wrote their findings and made recommendations for their communities. Some of our white colleagues tried to enter into the different groups under the guise of ally-ship, and respectfully we denied entry. Instead, we invited them to attend the community sharing of the work and to identify how they could support our various recommendations.

## Conclusion: The Path Forward

This may have been a hard and emotional article to read, and readers may have generated more questions or be struggling with the feeling of lack of closure. Good! We have opened a door to move away from the comfort of white supremacy into the risk of anti-racist work in early care and education.

We are calling on all educators and leaders to be sick and tired of the harm that white supremacy culture inflicts.

We hope that educators and leaders who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color find here some validation and inspiration to continue their work, thriving despite the impact that white dominant culture has on their lives. We hope they continue working in their communities or find communities where they are cared for and supported in their racial justice journey.

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