



Peter Bolland

Dismantling Racism One Insight at a Time

Dismantling Racism

Our great unfinished work in the United States, and the world over, is finally coming to terms with racism in authentic, meaningful, and transformative ways. At root racism stems from deep structures within consciousness, which then get codified into repressive hierarchical systems that benefit the in-group at the expense of the out-group. In this inquiry we will do the important work of peeling back the layers of unconscious bias, laying bare the untold history of supremacy, and raise our eyes to the realization of the promise of America – a land where all are created equal.

Before we begin

- I think it's important to enter this work with the right frame of mind
- Especially for White people
- We do not do this work from a place of guilt or shame or anger
- We root this work deeply in empathy, humility, and compassion
- We do this work not to atone for past sins, but to lovingly, willingly, and optimistically lend our voice, our hands, our hearts, and our minds to the shared endeavor of helping to bend the arc of the moral universe
- We do this work because we believe that all human beings are beings of infinite value, and because we believe that we have a moral duty to wield our tools in the service of truth and justice
- We *do not* do this work as “White saviors” to lift up others – we do this work to lift up ourselves, because racism dehumanizes ALL of us

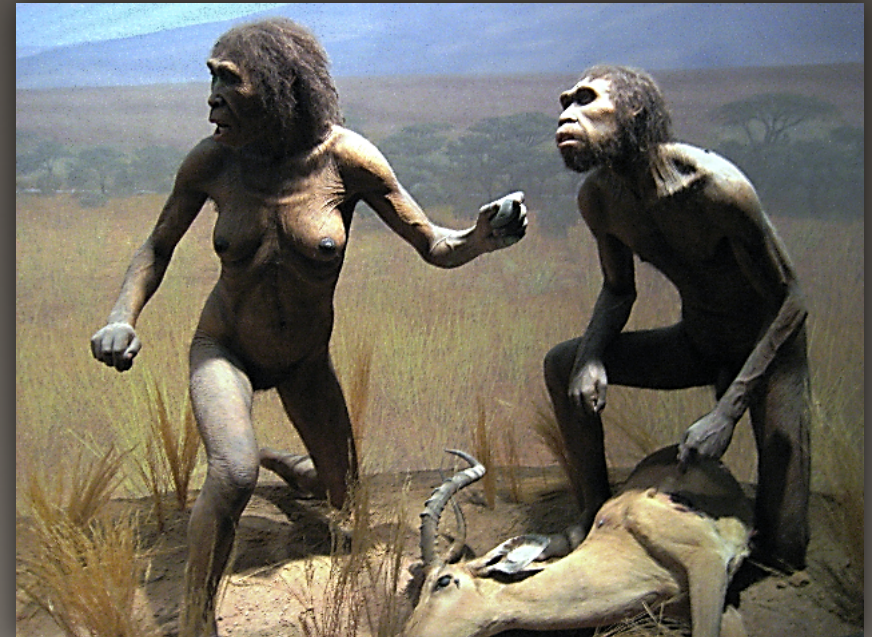
IN THIS TEMPLE
AS IN THE HEARTS OF THE PEOPLE
FOR WHOM HE SAVED THE UNION
THE MEMORY OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN
IS ENSHRINED FOREVER





Racism, bias, and discrimination

- Before we go any further, we need to build a shared understanding around the meanings of a few key words
- What Confucius called “the rectification of names”
- *Racism* is not the same thing as *bias*, *prejudice*, or *discrimination*
- Let’s begin with some common ground
- Our inherited cognitive structures
- How evolution favored “fast thinking”
- Discrimination, bias, and prejudice
- When I see a snake on the trail





Two reasons for this analysis of bias or fast-thinking

1. We need to realize that fast-thinking or bias is a product of our biological evolution, and hard-wired into human cognitive structures by hundreds of thousands of years of habituation – it's neither moral or immoral – it just is. And it has kept us alive.
2. Realizing that we are not personally responsible for innate or unconscious bias makes it easier to reframe it not as a personal failure or flaw, but as an outmoded pattern that no longer serves our highest good. Therefore, there is no shame in acknowledging our innate, unconscious bias – in fact, acknowledging it ought to be celebrated as the first step toward dismantling racism



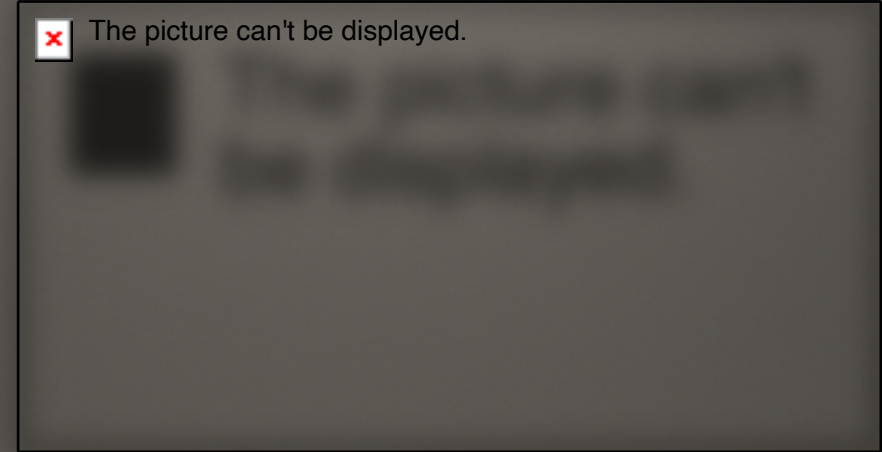
Ventura, California

Nature or nurture?

- So is our universal propensity for bias, prejudice, and discrimination innate? Or is it a product of our environment, education, acculturation, and peer pressure?
- Yes
- It's both
- "You've got to be carefully taught," South Pacific, while an adorable song, is misleadingly simplistic
- This is why the "diversity" training we've been trying for the last 50 years has fallen short – we mistakenly assumed that bias, prejudice, and discrimination were strictly products of our conditioning, and that we could therefore educate ourselves out of this hole
- Turns out "colorblindness" wasn't a step in the right direction
- The tendrils of bias run too deep, unconscious bias is too hidden

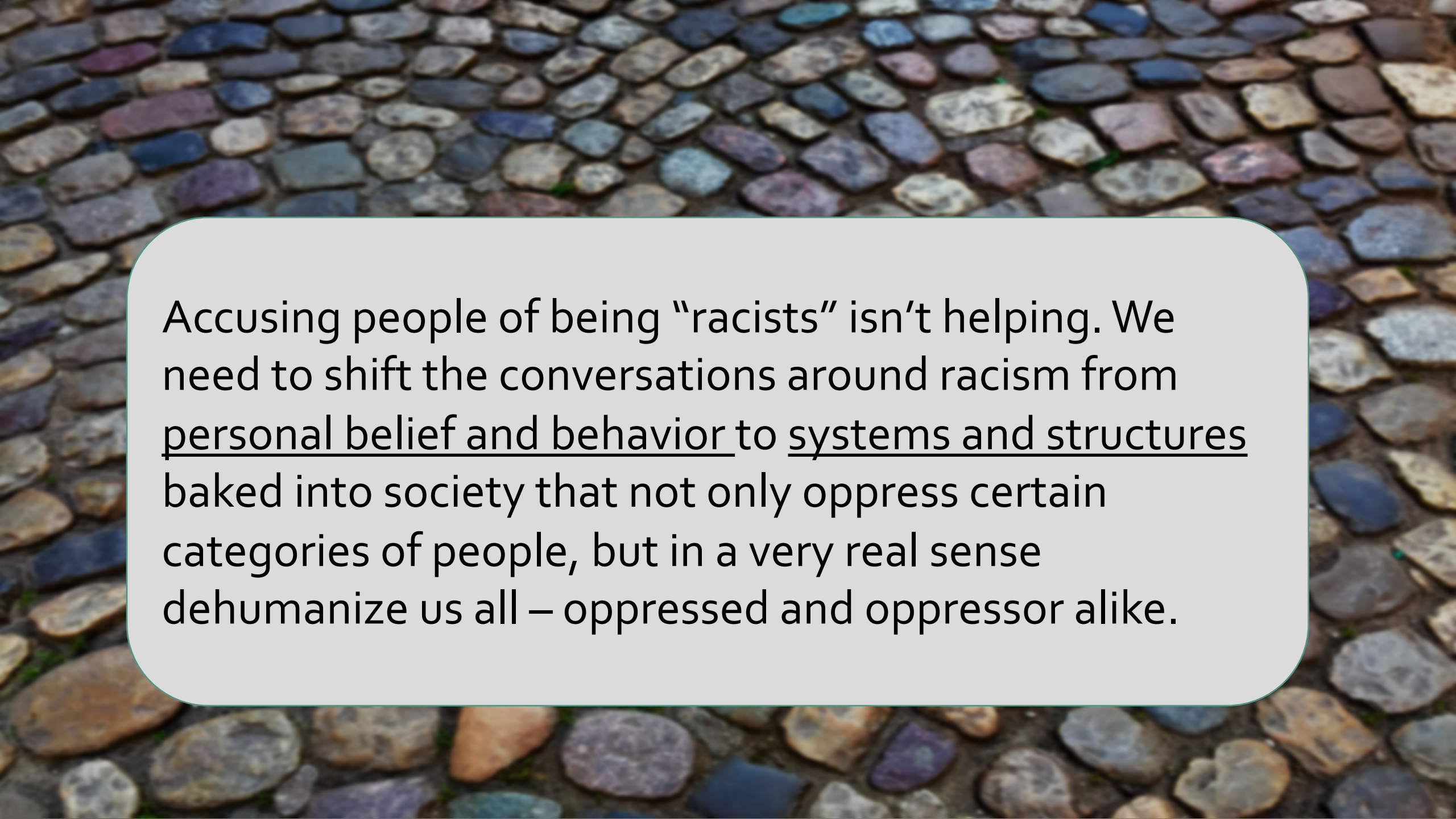
What is “racism?”

- We are reserving the highly charged word “racism” for something much more specific than the universal human propensity for bias, discrimination, or prejudice
- Racism is more than the personal belief that races have specific traits or qualities, and that some races are superior to others – yes, it starts there, but in order to understand the full force of racism we have to include an additional element
- Racism is not just a personal belief – it is **system** or a **structure** built up over many generations within which all members of society exist



Racism

- Racism is a structure or system where the biases held by the dominant group get baked into the institutions of that society – then codified into law and policy
- All systems – economic, governmental, legal, social, personal – are informed from within by the dominant group’s biases and prejudices
- Policing, the justice system, the education system, the banking system, the housing system, healthcare, the way all goods and services are distributed
- It doesn’t matter if an individual member of the dominant group bears no ill will toward the subordinate group – they still benefit from **the system** that favors their race and disadvantages other races
- Even if they had nothing to do with the construction of the system, nor contribute consciously to its maintenance and upkeep
- Even if every White person today authentically and genuinely renounced racism, the structures of racism would remain intact (until a majority of us acknowledged them and agreed to change them)
- “Not all are guilty, but all are responsible.” Abraham Joshua Heschel



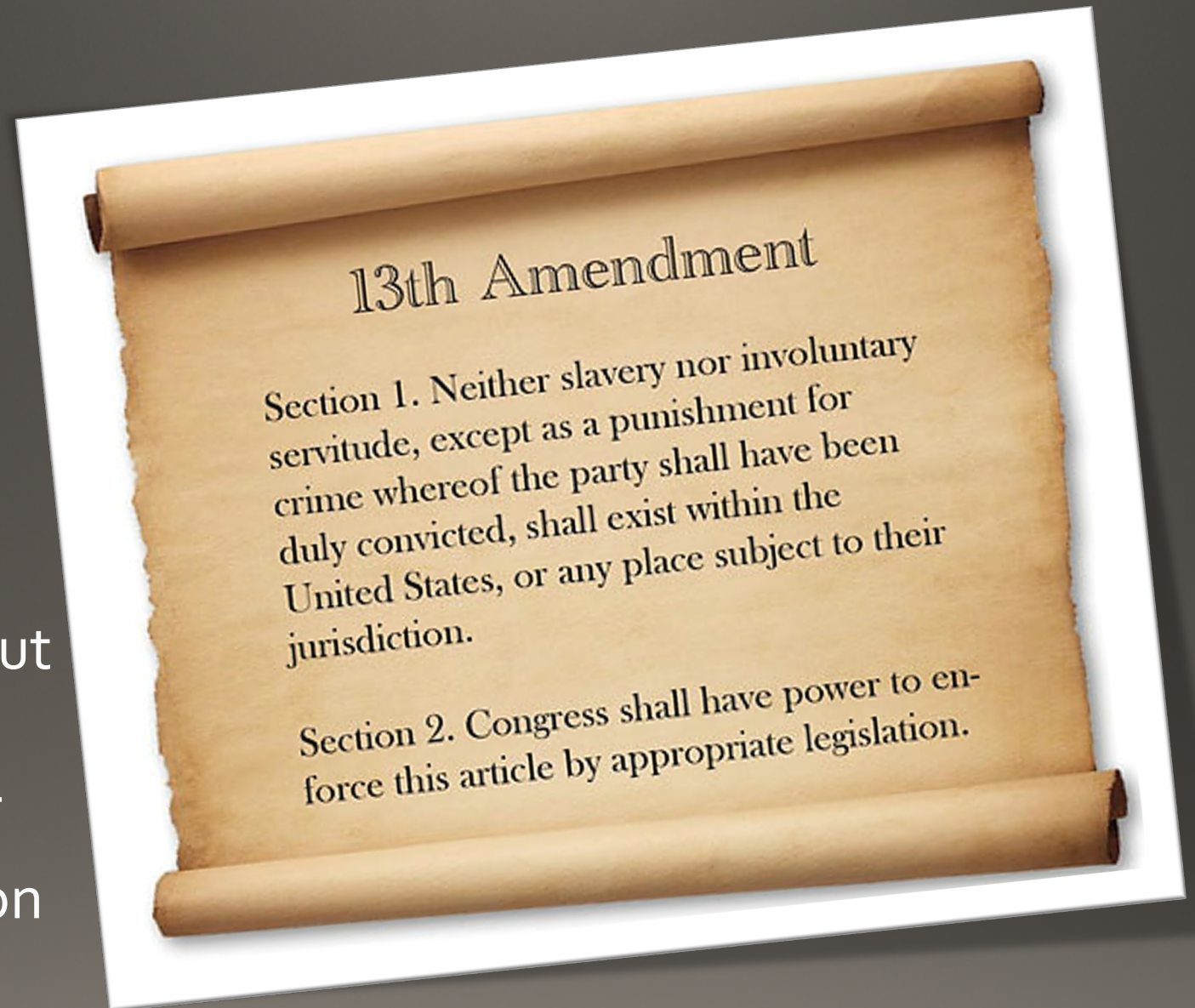
Accusing people of being “racists” isn’t helping. We need to shift the conversations around racism from personal belief and behavior to systems and structures baked into society that not only oppress certain categories of people, but in a very real sense dehumanize us all – oppressed and oppressor alike.

So What Exactly is Structural or Systemic Racism?



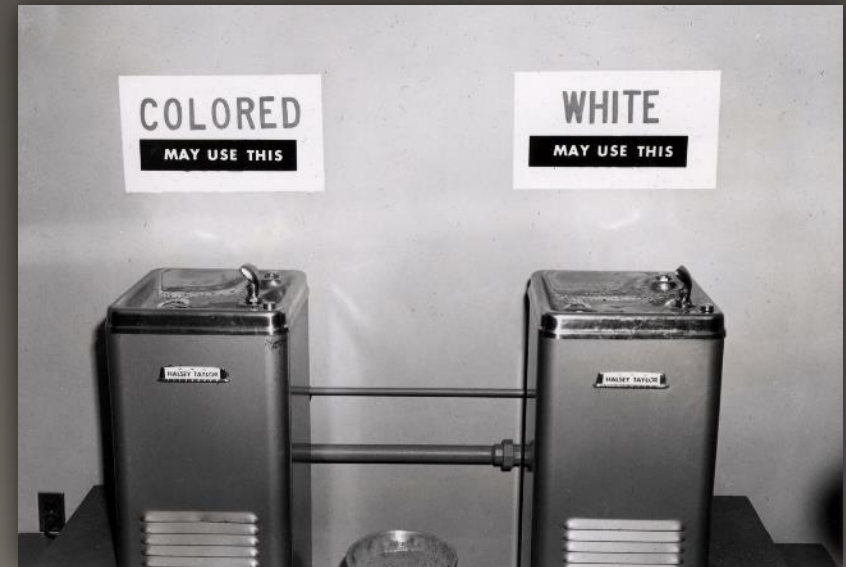
The 13th Amendment

- In late 1865, the 13th amendment to the Constitution was ratified
- Note the exception...
- No 40 acres and a mule
- Not hired for jobs, then arrested for vagrancy
- Prison work gangs leased out to industry
- The criminalization of color
- And all the social destruction that follows from that




Black Codes and Jim Crow

- When the 4 million slaves were freed, most states enacted “Black codes” greatly restricting all aspects of African American life
- Segregation laws (“Jim Crow”) institutionalized discrimination and deprived Black families of access to economic stability
- Freed, but not free
- The lie of “separate, but equal”
- Let’s think about how generations of Jim Crow impacted multi-generational Black wealth
- WWII and the GI Bill



The GI Bill and Redlining

 The picture can't be displayed.

- Creating the middle class through home ownership
- Low cost loans, college tuition, unemployment insurance
- Segregationists wrested control away from the feds and gave it to the states
- Blacks excluded
- Multi-generational wealth
- Red lines dividing cities and towns into White and Black neighborhoods

Black Family Wealth vs. White Family Wealth

- The average White American family has a net worth of \$170,000
- The average Black American family has a net worth of \$17,000
- That's a factor of ten
- This is what happens when you let centuries of unfettered systemic racism run rampant
- The difficult truth – despite its promise of being a place where all are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, the fact remains that racist consciousness is baked into our national structures and systems. Those of us alive now did not design or create these systems. But people who look like me benefit from them.
- This is what is meant by “White privilege”

White Privilege

- In our anti-racism work, “White privilege” is one of the more charged and problematic concepts
- Perhaps “unearned advantage” would be easier to swallow
- White privilege does *not* mean that White people get everything handed to them or have it easy
- It simply means that when you show up in a White body, you have access to a whole host of advantages not available to people in non-White bodies
- As White people, the proper response to learning about White privilege is not guilt and shame – no living person built this system – but the willingness to explore and acknowledge its existence

White privilege

- The classic example of Band-Aids, that “flesh colored” is the color of White people’s skin
- But it’s so much more than the ubiquitous way Whiteness is centered or featured as “normal,” and non-White skin is not
- It’s how we’re treated, often unconsciously, by store security, by loan officers, by realtors, by police, by salespeople, by teachers, by college admissions officers, by hiring committees
- Job applicants with White sounding names are 50% more likely to get a call-back than applicants with non-White sounding names. This includes companies that explicitly state that they value diversity .

Why it's so hard to talk about racism

- In her book *White Fragility*, Robin DiAngelo makes clear that for too long we have equated “being racist” with “being a bad person”
- In other words, when the issue of racism comes up, many White people get defensive. When (allegedly) more “woke” White people call them racist or accuse them of harboring racist consciousness they feel backed into a corner, judged as bad people, and they shut down
- By making racism a moral failing we've sabotaged ourselves – we've made it virtually impossible for any White person to admit that yes, they have biases
- And until all of us can acknowledge and admit that we have biases, no progress can be made
- Only when we acknowledge that racism is a structure into which we've all been programmed can we begin to undo the damage

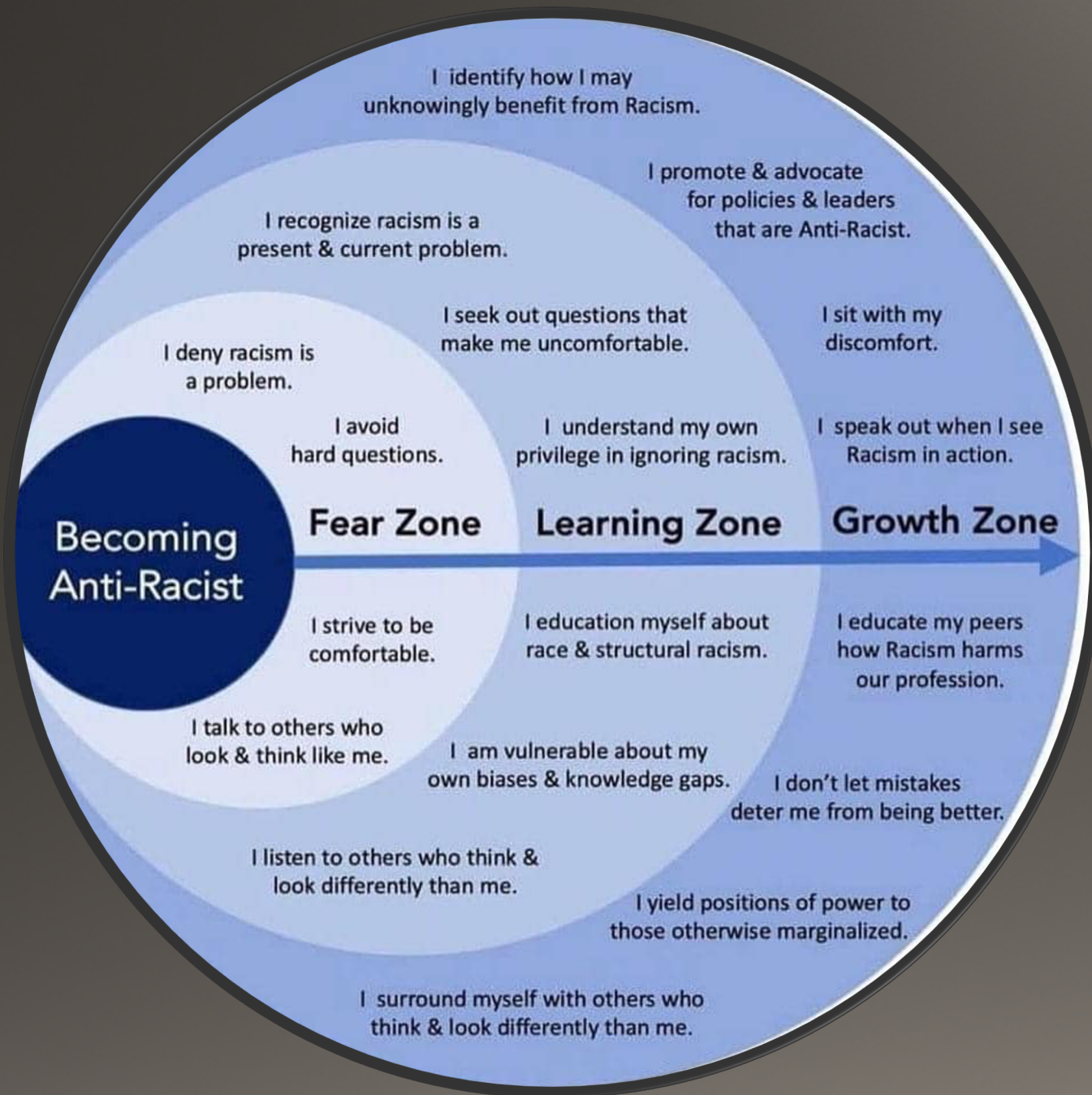
The Resistance to the Idea of Structural Racism

- Many Americans don't believe that there is such a thing as systemic or structural racism – they hold to the idea that “racism” is a personal flaw, a negative view of other races held by an individual
- They say things like, “I'm not racist. I served in the military alongside people of all races. We got along fine.”
- Or they say things like, “There is no such thing as systemic racism. Barack Obama was elected President – twice! Racism is in the past.”
- Or, “I'm not a racist. I have a black friend. How could I have a black friend if I was a racist?”
- Or, “There's no such thing as white privilege. I'm white, and I'm not privileged – I've had it tough, and I've had to work for everything in my life.”
- Or, “I don't see race. I'm colorblind. I judge a person by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, just like Martin Luther King said.”
- Or, “Why do you people always have to make everything about race? All this talk about racism just turns people of color into victims and keeps them down.”

What's in the Way of Ending Racism?

The Twin Pitfalls of Universalism and Individualism

- Universalism
 - By this we mean the pushback against further discussions about racism on the grounds that we're all one, I don't see color, why do you keep trying to divide us, we're just souls or spirits, race doesn't matter, stop talking about race, love is the answer, just being a nice person is enough
- Individualism
 - By this we mean the pushback against further discussions about racism on the grounds that no one is defined by their race or their circumstance or the outer conditions of their lives – all of the outcomes in our lives are solely the product of our choices, each of us is the sole author of their lives
- Both of these are forms of “racism skepticism” or “racism denial,” the view that racism is no longer a major problem.
- Both of these stances are rooted in White fragility, and the denial of the existence of racism
- And simply put, the denial of racism is racism – evidence of how deeply entrenched and unconscious racism really is



Moving from fear, to learning, to growth

- It isn't enough to *not* be a racist
- Racism, as we've seen, is a structure that needs dismantling
- Becoming anti-racist
- And doing it with joy, humility, and honor

Three Different Areas of Anti-Racism Work

- Political work
 - Seeking change in laws, political institutions, and structures
 - Rewriting curriculum, redesigning structures (policing, judicial, economic, education, etc.)
- Social work
 - Deepening our relationships with one another, having honest, humble, and loving conversations with people inside and outside our racial group
- Inner Work
 - Unpacking unexamined unconscious bias, releasing old ways of thinking and being, becoming a student, cultivating “beginner’s mind,” reading “Waking Up White,” “White Fragility,” “How To Be An Anti-Racist,” watching “13th”, committing to filling in the gaps in our incomplete educations

Why We Do the Work

- Because we have a moral obligation to contribute to the healing of the world (tikkun olam)
- Because it is our dharma (duty) to be the presence of wisdom, compassion, courage, and service
- Because “however you treat the least of these you treat me”
- Because all human beings are “beings of infinite value,” and reason alone imposes moral obligation to treat all people as ends in themselves, never merely as means to an end
- Because as MLK said, “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” and we must all contribute to the bending of the arc

How We Do the Work

- We do the work not in anger, not in shame, not in guilt, but in love, humility, joy, and the consciousness of service
- We do not swoop in as “White Saviors,” centering White voices and White solutions – instead, we listen more than speak, and follow more than lead
- It is not Black people’s work to educate White people – you know how to use Google – use it
- Begin with yourself – read, watch, listen, learn
- Be gentle with our fellow White folks who are a little behind us on the curve toward anti-racism – draw them into the work, don’t push them away with self-righteous anger, name-calling, or belittlement – we need all hands on deck
- Our deep, long-term goal is widespread recruitment – if enough White people in America understood, acknowledged, and accepted the things we’ve been discussing today, change would happen

Building the Beloved Community

