

Melina

DENVER, COLORADO

I've lived
on three
continents.

I like skydiving.

I won a
pie-eating
contest.

My journey in thinking differently started in the required Power, Privilege, and Oppression class at Colorado College. I was meeting the class with so much resistance. I can remember ticking off that list of stupid things White girls say—like “yeah, but my best friend’s Black,” or “yeah, but when I’m at my boyfriend’s Sunday dinner, I’m the only White girl and that’s really awkward for me.” I am constantly remembering the emotional labor that my classmates had to invest in order to battle my insistent color blindness.** I think about the patience of my professor. It helps me find compassion for people who are in different places in their journey, because I was in that place one time, of really having no idea.

↑ * Melina’s journey parallels studies like Janet E. Helms’s *Model of White Racial Identity Development*, which begins with the “Contact” stage: “one encounters the idea or actuality of Black people . . . one will enter Contact with either naive curiosity or timidity and trepidation about Blacks and a superficial and inconsistent awareness of being White.”

** Among other characteristics of Helms’s stage 2, “Disintegration”: “one must markedly alter one’s real self in order to be accepted by significant others in one’s environment,” potentially resulting in feelings of “guilt, depression, helplessness, and anxiety.” One’s prior conception of the world is challenged. Stage 3, “Reintegration,” can involve avoiding or expressing fear and anger toward people of color.

Later, I found myself on the other side. My professor was talking about a value in our culture of light or White skin, and a student said that that was changing because now we value tan skin. I raised my hand and said, “No, that’s a class privilege: it used to be that fair skin was an indication of your class status, because you didn’t have to be in the fields working in the sun. Now, having tan skin as a White person is an indication of your class privilege, because you can go on vacation, or you can go to a tanning bed.” In that moment, I thought, “*Oh, I’ve started to switch in my journey,*** to now having some capacity to be able to teach other White folks.*” And when I went to a heavily shame-based training later, I felt lucky to be far enough along in my journey to where I was open to hearing things, and able to connect with other White people to continue this journey together.

I’ve come to realize how I can have a role in all of this: helping other White people**** on their journeys to dismantle systems of

→
*** Stage 4: “Pseudo-Independence”: acknowledging White responsibility for racism, learning how to grapple with new intellectual and emotional learning.

**** Stage 5: “Immersion/Emersion,” often involves seeking out other White people with similar identity journeys and regaining positive emotions toward self that help fuel later activism.

White supremacy. I educate other White people, resource communities and activists of color, and provide marshal or action support. I see activism as intentional work toward social change for justice and equity. Not just equality, but equity. I struggle a little bit with calling my journey one of racial literacy, because that limits people to thinking either you're literate or you're not literate, and once you're literate you're done learning. I really want to challenge myself and others to think about all of this work as a journey with no feasible destination.*****

I talk about *systems*, because dismantling patriarchy is a part of my life too. I call this The Big Three: patriarchy, capitalism, and White supremacy. They're all connected, and together, they create a system of power that's been built up over generations. Capitalism quantifies the value of people. Patriarchy differentiates value of people based on gender. White supremacy differentiates value of people

***** Melina reaches the final stage of Autonomy. She "abandons cultural and institutional racism as well as personal racism," becomes "increasingly aware of how other forms of oppression (e.g., sexism, ageism) are related to racism," and still thinks of it "as an ongoing process . . . continually open to new information."

based on race. All three quantify people as being worth more or less. They feed each other. I question whether you can dismantle one without dismantling the others. I suspect there are absolutely communities and cultures that thrive without those three, but I think part of our struggle in identifying those is that the entire history of this planet has been impacted by colonialism, in almost every corner of the globe.

My partner, a White cis man, is invested in the local Denver comedy scene, and it's been going through some turmoil because female comedians were experiencing sexual harassment. I've been supporting my partner in trying to dismantle the patriarchy there—going to community discussions, reviewing posts, things like that—but I find all the support that I give him utterly exhausting. It triggers my own incidents of being a victim of sexual assault. Any exhaustion around dismantling White supremacy is different, because I don't experience that same triggering emotional labor. One is "I have to do this, because it's my job as a White person who has all these privileges," versus, "I don't have to do this, but I'm choosing to, when I have the energy, because I'm a woman and I do want patriarchy dismantled." The way I describe it to my partner is, "*Conversations around gender are my gift. Conversations around White supremacy are my responsibility.*"

I've experienced economic struggle as a child; however, my White privilege***** meant that that struggle was never life-changing in a way that kept me from being able to benefit from determination and hard work. What's hidden is that I didn't live in a community where I had to fear for my life, where if my family experienced homelessness, there wouldn't be a place for me to go. I didn't live in a community where I was an outsider. I *did* live in a community where systems were set up for my success. My teachers believed in my success, my school believed in my success, my community believed in my success. And I can't separate our history of slavery—that my great-great-grandfather benefited from the ability to own land, which led to my great-grandfather being able to own a farm, which led to my grandmother having the capacity to send my mother to college, which meant that we valued education in our family, and that I knew how to access Pell grants and scholarships and resources. None of that can be separated. So the small inconveniences from some

***** A definition from Francis E. Kendall of White privilege: "Having greater access to power and resources than people of color [in the same situation] do," usually in a way that is both unearned and unquestioned. Alluding to Peggy McIntosh's well-known essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," an article in *Teaching Tolerance* adds, "White privilege is both unconsciously enjoyed and consciously perpetuated. It is both on the surface and deeply embedded into American life. It is a weightless knapsack—and a weapon. It depends on who's carrying it."

economic hardship that I experienced were just small inconveniences. It means that I'm frugal and really careful with my savings. But I benefited from my privileges more than I struggled with my marginalization.

For me, it's been a journey in gaining racial literacy and dismantling my own White supremacist behavior. Am I going to be a person that's like, "Oh, oppression, yeah that sucks," or am I going to be a person that is actively fighting against these systems? I hope to help people learn that you don't have to be an activist to do the latter. Having a thoughtful conversation with your family at the dinner table is dismantling White supremacy. So is questioning your own motives and listening for understanding before responding first. So is educating yourself to be mindful of not exploiting any positions of power you hold—whether that's in the workplace, or in a family. Instead of seeing activism solely as career or volunteer work, we should see how we can be activists in our spheres of influence,

in whatever we do. You're a cook—you cook for the revolution. You're an artist—you design for the revolution. You're in a position of power at an organization—you work to make your hiring processes more inclusive.

The more privilege you have, the more responsibility you have to do it. I know it's a really hard thing for people to do. Power feels good, privilege feels good, it makes life easier. I think it starts with acknowledging our collective humanity. We deny little White boys their humanity when we indoctrinate them into a system of taking what they want, of exploiting, of

raping not just women, but systems, and the earth. I think about my earliest memory of being touched by a classmate in sixth grade, about how the teacher didn't do anything, and yes, I have a lot of frustration and anger about not being supported, but also, what was denied for that boy? When nobody said, "This is not acceptable, this is not the way you treat people, or women," it robbed him too of being better, doing better. And it robbed me of my dignity. Everybody loses in that moment. Everybody loses when The Big Three are allowed to continue.