



# No Whites Allowed



Cynthia Malouf in Race2bhuman

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It's my first week at a new job. The organization I'd just joined was hosting their annual conference. The morning session was the perfect introduction, replete with team building exercises, school chants, and an inspirational keynote from our CEO. I was overwhelmed with the love and devotion that seemed to pervade the room of twelve hundred educators. I remember feeling humbled and excited to be part of what felt very much like a family.

I also remember a new feeling. For the first time in my professional and personal life, I was without question in the minority. And though I noticed a handful of white team members, for the most part, the organization was comprised of Black, Indigenous and People of Color. Being in the midst of a sea of non-whiteness was a dose of reality I wasn't quite prepared for, but I waded through whatever discomfort I was feeling with an open mind and a curiosity about my own feelings of insecurity. And then came lunch. We made our way up to another level, and I walked off the elevator to see two signs pointing toward different spaces where lunch was being served. I honestly don't recall the exact language on the signs, but one sign clearly stated that the space to the left was for Persons of Color only and the space to the right was an invitation for all. No whites allowed to the left. I read the sign again to make sure I was understanding it correctly, tucked my white tail between my

legs, and took my place in the space within which I was welcome.

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I mustered up the courage to ask another white team member what that meant, and she casually said, 'we just want to make sure that all of our team members have a safe space to eat lunch.' I nodded in tacit agreement, as if I understood, but I honestly had no idea what she meant. What wasn't safe about little ol' white me? I'm a good person, why wouldn't anyone want me in the room, because I was white? Nobody even knew me, what could I possibly have done to make anyone in the room feel unsafe or uneasy by my very presence? How utterly naive.

I remember feeling both defensive and curious. And while I didn't understand why my whiteness wasn't safe, I also sensed that I was the only one there that wasn't in on the secret. Clearly I was missing something. I think in that moment I decided that I could better tolerate the feelings of rejection than seem ignorant. But I didn't know what I didn't know. So I stayed silent and found a table where I could disappear into very small talk. I recall having to temper my typical gregarious ways, I'm usually the one at the table that commands attention, tries to connect the conversation on a slightly deeper level, makes

people laugh. Not today. Today, I was a wallflower. And then we hit the break out sessions.

The breakout sessions were a means to learning more about a range of topics. Most of which I knew little about, so I remember feeling excited. I walked into a small room, about 20 seats, went to the front row and took mine. As the presenter spoke about the educational and academic trends of Black and Latinx youth, I noticed the trajectory of outcomes take a dive after 2016, so I raised my hand to ask whether she thought the impact of the increased racial tension from the current administration was at play. I didn't think that was a loaded question, but from behind me, a woman, who I sensed was aggravated by my question, asked me what I meant by that question. I remember my heart racing and wondering, what did I just say? I turned around to address her question, and realized I was the only white person in the room.

Now, keep in mind, I am a person who is comfortable in almost any situation, I typically do not get nervous or shy, but in this moment, I wanted to disappear. I mustered up an answer that reworded the question, but I could tell, I wasn't getting at what it was that she felt was offensive in my line of thinking. And I didn't feel like it was a safe space to delve. I shrunk and turned around in my seat. And from that very moment to this day, my perspective has shifted from a knower to a learner.

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After having spent the past two years encountering moments where my white privilege was (ever so gently) called out, I think about that turning point for me, and how naive I was in that moment. My profound trivialization of who is really not safe in a moment I felt unsafe. How my white privilege had protected me from having to even be aware of what it might mean to navigate the world as a Black, Indigenous and Person of Color. How clear cut my white fragility was, and how resistant I was to engage in any real conversation about the implications of racism, simply because it didn't overtly affect me. How shallow my understanding was (and still is!) of colonization, oppression, discrimination, neglect, and marginalization at the systemic level. How I've maintained and upheld white supremacy through my complicit allegiance to white privilege. Most importantly, for me though, is the unintentional harm I have caused to Black, Indigenous and People of Color, specifically to people I love, through racial aggressions I didn't even realize I've spent my whole life reinforcing.

I have only just begun to grasp that as a white person I have been born into a system that has granted me unearned privileges, — white privileges — protection, and inherent power. I have also begun to see how that system actively harms those who don't hold those privileges. How white privilege isn't just a way of thinking, but how our systems and institutions are

structured to uphold this white dominance. And even how this paradigm forms the foundation from which all norms, societal rules and even our laws are created and amended. The largeness of these thoughts are daunting, and lead me to believe that somewhere along the way, I must have shut down a part of my humanity in order to participate in white supremacy. And then I feel the weight and shame of my own, albeit complicit, racism.

Aside from the heaviness that brings to my heart, it triggers what apparently is one of the most profound impediments to becoming truly anti-racist, the 'either/or' white dominant norm. If I've upheld my end of the white privilege invisible contract I was born into, I have been complicit in maintaining white supremacy. If I've maintained the doctrines of white supremacy, I must be racist. If I am a racist, I must be a bad person.

But I'm not a bad person. I'm a good person who now understands that racism does not have to be conscious or intentional in order to count or do harm. But once it is conscious, 'once the mind is enlightened, it cannot again become dark'. And no matter how bad it feels for me to wake up to the guilt and remorse of my own racism, if I've learned anything these past few years, those feelings will never come close to the pain Black, Indigenous and People of Color feel as a result of my racism.

And though this journey will likely be lifelong for me, and I'm ready to stumble along the way, right now I seek to do less harm. I know I can and will do better.

*Cindy Malouf's journey is continued at [race2bhuman.com](http://race2bhuman.com)*

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