is a good chance you may have been poor at some point in your life, you may have been sick, you may have been discriminated against for being fat or being disabled or being short or being conventionally unattractive, you may have been many things—but you have not been a person of color. So, when a person of color comes to you and says "this is different for me because I'm not white," when you run the situation through your own lived experience, it often won't compute. This is usually where the desire to dismiss claims of racial oppression come from—it just doesn't make sense to you so it cannot be right.

But if you are white, and you are feeling this way, I ask you this: is your lived experience real? Are the situations you've lived through real? Are your interpretations of those situations valid? Chances are, if you are using them to decide whether or not other situations and opinions are valid, you think they are. So if your lived experience and your interpretation of that lived experience are valid, why wouldn't the lived experience of people of color be just as valid? If I don't have the right to deem your life, what you see and hear and feel, a lie, why do you have the right to do it to me? Why do you deserve to be believed and people of color don't?

And if you are a person of color, know this: the world will try to tell you that what you are seeing, hearing, thinking, and feeling is wrong. The world will tell you that you do not know how to interpret what is happening to you and to your community. But you are not wrong, and you have just as much right to be heard and believed as anybody else. If you think it's about race, you are right.

two

What is racism?

IT WAS AN ARGUMENT WITH A COWORKER THAT STARTED where many arguments with coworkers start nowadays, on the Internet. This coworker had posted a meme about how poor people should be given drug tests if they want to get welfare benefits. You know the kind of post I'm talking about, one that sends a message like "If I need a drug test to get a hardworking job, you should have one to get the free stuff my hardworking tax dollars are paying for."

I've seen these memes countless times and they are never anything less than a gut punch to me. I pointed out that as someone who had grown up on welfare and was subjected to this attitude her entire childhood, this sort of stigmatization really hurts poor people who are just trying to survive. Poor people shouldn't have to prove how much they deserve to have a roof over their heads and feed their children.

There are a few ways to react when somebody tells you that your language is unintentionally hurting them. And while I was hoping for a quick apology or maybe just a quick correction, my coworker decided to double down on her claims—and add that she thought that poor people should also be sterilized because "a lot of women take advantage of the system by having more kids to get more money."

Suddenly it was like I was on a TV talk show circa 1984 talking about Welfare Queens. I honestly didn't think that people really believed that myth anymore. A myth that was used to dehumanize a generation of welfare recipients. And, as someone who wouldn't have existed had there been forced sterilization of poor people, I took offense to this comment. In addition, as someone aware of our country's racist history of forced sterilization of women of color, I knew how dangerous statements like these can be.

The discussion became heated quite quickly as my coworker tried to both state that she had not intended to offend me or my brother (who also worked at the same company and was witnessing this argument online), but maybe I needed to be "less angry," because this was why people like me got a bad reputation. Note: "people like you" is a good warning that a conversation is about to head into pretty racist territory. Shit got pretty intense (black-on-black crime was even brought up, I believe), and an entire evening was dedicated to an emotionally draining, and ultimately fruitless, conversation.

The next day, I was talking to a friend about the incident. I was still very upset about what had happened the night before. Believe it or not, I, like most people, really do just want to live in peace and not have four-hour-long arguments about

race and poverty on the Internet. And it is always a bit of a gut punch to realize that someone you have been sitting next to for months or even years secretly harbors views that deny your basic humanity as a black woman. No matter how many times it happens, I have yet to get used to it.

"It's really difficult to realize that you've been sitting next to someone capable of racism like that," I explained over coffee.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, Ijeoma," my friend interrupted, literally putting a hand up to stop me from speaking further, "let's not get ahead of ourselves here."

"Excuse me?" I asked, stunned and confused.

"You can't just go around calling anything racist. Save that word for the big stuff. You know, for Nazis and cross burnings and lynchings. You're just going to turn people off if you use such inflammatory language."

I really *really* wanted this to just be a matter of misunderstanding. I really wanted this to be a case where perhaps he just didn't know how harmful everyday racism is, and once he did, he would change his mind. I tried to explain the real danger of unchecked racism and microaggressions to people of color. But he wasn't going to hear it. There was "real racism" as he defined it, which was a post–reconstruction era horror type of racism, and there was whatever I was talking about (which he wasn't comfortable categorizing but he was pretty sure wasn't that big of a deal)—the day-to-day reminders that I'm less than, that I should just learn to get over or find a more pleasant way to confront. He went on to discuss how his grandma, for example, said some racist things, but she was a kind person and it would be cruel to call a harmless old lady racist and would only make her more

racist. It seemed far more important to him that the white people who were spreading and upholding racism be spared the effects of being called racist, than sparing his black friend the effects of that racism.

No matter what I said, no matter how I described the effects that this sort of racism had on me and other people of color, he was not going to accept me using the word "racist" to describe it.

That was when I learned that this was not a friend I could talk to about this really important part of my life. I couldn't be my full self around him, and he would never truly have my back. He was not safe. I wasn't angry, I was heartbroken.

We couldn't talk about the ways in which race and racism impacted my life, because he was unwilling to even acknowledge the racism that was impacting my life and he was unable to prioritize my safety over his comfort—which meant that we couldn't talk about me.

PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST TELLING SIGNS THAT WE have problems talking about race in America is the fact that we can't even agree on what the definition of racism actually is. Look at almost any discussion of race and racism online, and you'll see an argument pop up over who is racist, who isn't, and who has the right to claim they are suffering from racism. The most common definitions of racism (in my own summation) are as follows: (1) Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race. Or (2) Racism is any prejudice against someone because of their race, when those views are reinforced by systems of power. While these two definitions

are very close to each other in many ways, the differences between these two definitions of racism drastically change how you look at and address racism in America.

For the purposes of this book, I'm going to use the second definition of racism: a prejudice against someone based on race, when those prejudices are reinforced by systems of power. And this is a definition I recommend you use in your day-to-day life if your goal is to reduce the systemic harm done to people of color by racism in America. Let me explain why.

When we use only the first definition of racism, as any prejudice against someone based on race, we inaccurately reduce issues of race in America to a battle for the hearts and minds of individual racists—instead of seeing racists, racist behaviors, and racial oppression as part of a larger system.

There are a lot of individual, unapologetic racists out there. They're easy to spot—they're the people sharing the Obama = monkey memes. They are the people sewing swastikas to their jackets and talking about "White Genocide." This book is not for them and they are not my primary concern. This book will not tell you how to get unabashed racists to love people of color. I'm not a magician. Furthermore, many of those people have very little real power on their own and tend to stay on the fringes of society. We, as a society, like our racism subtler than that. What special power virulent racists do have can often be thwarted by just staying away from wherever you see "Obama is a Muslim" signs.

What is important is that the impotent hatred of the virulent racist was built and nurtured by a system that has much more insidiously woven a quieter, yet no less violent, version of those same oppressive beliefs into the fabric of our society.

The truth is, you don't even have to "be racist" to be a part of the racist system.

The dude shouting about "black-on-black crime" is reinforced by elected officials coding "problem neighborhoods" and promising to "clean up the streets" that surprisingly always seem to have a lot of brown and black people on them—and end with a lot of black and brown people in handcuffs. Your aunt yelling about "thugs" is echoed in our politicians talking about "super-predators" while building our school-to-prison pipelines that help ensure that the widest path available to black and brown children ends in a jail cell. But a lot of the people voting for stop-and-frisk crime bills or increased security in schools would never dream of blaming racial inequity on "black-on-black crime" or calling a young black man a "thug."

In contrast, a lot of the racists holding "white power" signs aren't even registered to vote. It's the system, and our complacency in that system, that gives racism its power, not individual intent. Without that white supremacist system, we'd just have a bunch of assholes yelling at each other on a pretty even playing field—and may the best yeller win. But there is no even playing field right now. Over four hundred years of systemic oppression have set large groups of racial minorities at a distinct power disadvantage. If I call a white person a cracker, the worst I can do is ruin their day. If a white person thinks I'm a nigger, the worst they can do is get me fired, arrested, or even killed in a system that thinks the same—and has the resources to act on it.

Looking beyond the differences in impact of these two definitions of racism, how we define racism also determines

how we battle it. If we have cancer and it makes us vomit, we can commit to battling nausea and say we're fighting for our lives, even though the tumor will likely still kill us. When we look at racism simply as "any racial prejudice," we are entered into a battle to win over the hearts and minds of everyone we encounter—fighting only the symptoms of the cancerous system, not the cancer itself. This is not only an impossible task, it's a pretty useless one.

Getting my neighbor to love people of color might make it easier to hang around him, but it won't do anything to combat police brutality, racial income inequality, food deserts, or the prison industrial complex.

Further, this approach puts the onus on me, the person being discriminated against, to prove my humanity and worthiness of equality to those who think I'm less than. But so much of what we think and feel about people of other races is dictated by our system, and not our hearts. Who we see as successful, who has access to that success, who we see as scary, what traits we value in society, who we see as "smart" and "beautiful"—these perceptions are determined by our proximity to the cultural values of the majority in power, the economic system of those in power, the education system of those in power, the media outlets of those in power—I could go on, but at no point will you find me laying blame at the feet of one misguided or even hateful white person, saying, "and this is Steve's fault—core beliefs about black people are all determined by Steve over there who just decided he hates black people all on his own." Steve is interacting with the system in the way in which it's designed, and the end result is racial bigotry that supports the continued oppression of people

of color. Systemic racism is a machine that runs whether we pull the levers or not, and by just letting it be, we are responsible for what it produces. We have to actually dismantle the machine if we want to make change.

So a good question to ask yourself right now is: why are you here? Did you pick up this book with the ultimate goal of getting people to be nicer to each other? Did you pick up this book with the goal of making more friends of different races? Or did you pick up this book with the goal of helping fight a system of oppression that is literally killing people of color? Because if you insist on holding to a definition of racism that reduces itself to "any time somebody is mean to somebody of a different race" then this is not the book to accomplish your goals. And those are real and noble goals when we call them what they are—we really should be more kind to each other. But when I look at what is putting me and millions of other people of color at risk, a lack of niceness from white people toward me and people who look like me is very far down the list of priorities.

However, if you came with the second intention—to fight the systemic oppression that is harming the lives of millions of people of color—then you are who I have written this book for. But either way, I encourage you to keep reading, because understanding the truth about racism in America might help you make more friends of different races, too—and they have a better chance of being *real* friends who will feel safe with you.

If you are not yet convinced that the definition of racism as racial prejudice backed by systems of power is the one to go with, I'm fairly confident that the rest of the chapters in this

book will do the trick. When reading the subsequent chapters, remember that the concepts and issues discussed in the book were not born from the ether, nor are these racial oppressions the work of a bunch of random white people waking up each morning and saying to themselves, "Today I will do what I can to oppress a person of color" coalescing into the creation of a society with racial disparities of socioeconomic well-being so large and entrenched that they trap multiple generations in the same expectations of success or failure. We live in a society where race is one of the biggest indicators of your success in life. There are sizable racial divides in wealth, health, life expectancy, infant mortality, incarceration rates, and so much more. We cannot look at a society where racial inequity is so universal and longstanding and say, "This is all the doing of a few individuals with hate in their hearts." It just doesn't make sense.

We cannot fix these systemic issues on a purely emotional basis. We must see the whole picture. How do you fix the school-to-prison pipeline on an emotional basis? How do you fix an economic system that values the work done traditionally by white males over that done by women and people of color on an emotional basis? How do you change an education system tailored almost exclusively to the experiences, history, and goals of white families on an emotional basis? How do you address an overwhelmingly white system of government on an emotional basis? We can get every person in America to feel nothing but love for people of color in their hearts, and if our systems aren't acknowledged and changed, it will bring negligible benefit to the lives of people of color.

Furthermore, ignoring the factor of institutional support of racial bias as a component of racism means that we erase the real harm done by that institutional support. When we say, "all racial prejudice is equally harmful," we are denying a large portion of the harm done to people of color and cutting ourselves off from opportunities to repair that harm. But when we acknowledge racism as a part of a system, instead of being limited to our ability to win over racists, we can instead focus on how our actions interact with systemic racism. No, the problem isn't just that a white person may think black people are lazy and that hurts people's feelings, it's that the belief that black people are lazy reinforces and is reinforced by a general dialogue that believes the same, and uses that belief to justify not hiring black people for jobs, denying black people housing, and discriminating against black people in schools.

We have to remember that racism was designed to support an economic and social system for those at the very top. This was never motivated by hatred of people of color, and the goal was never in and of itself simply the subjugation of people of color. The ultimate goal of racism was the profit and comfort of the white race, specifically, of rich white men. The oppression of people of color was an easy way to get this wealth and power, and racism was a good way to justify it. This is not about sentiment beyond the ways in which our sentiment is manipulated to maintain an unjust system of power.

And our emotions, ignorance, fear and hate have been easily manipulated to feed the system of White Supremacy. And we have to address all of this, our emotions, our ignorance, our fear, and our hate—but we cannot ignore the system that

takes all of that, magnifies it, and uses it to crush the lives and liberty of people of color to enrich the most privileged of white society.

WHILE ALL OF THE ABOVE MAY MAKE SENSE AS YOU ARE reading it now, I understand that it does little to help in conversations where people are entrenched in their definition of racism that does not consider systems of power. So how do you move forward in discussion of race when accusations of "reverse racism" and "racism against whites" start flying?

First off, understand that this is almost always a defensive reaction to feelings of fear, guilt, or confusion. This is an attempt either to move conversation to a place where the person you are talking to is more comfortable, or to end the conversation completely.

Consider restating your intention in engaging in this conversation and ask the person you are talking to to confirm what they are talking about: "I am talking about issues of systemic racism, which is measurably impacting the health, wealth, and safety of millions of people of color. What are you talking about right now?"

Often, if somebody is just trying to use "reverse racism" arguments to shut you down, this is where they will just repeat themselves or claim that you are a hypocrite if you will not shift the conversation instead to the grievances against them that they just decided to bring up. If this happens, it is pretty obvious that you aren't actually having a conversation and it is probably best to walk away and maybe try again later if productive conversation is actually your goal.

But if somebody does want a productive conversation and genuinely believes that being called "cracker" is the same as being called "nigger" and feels angry and invalidated by the insistence that both do not meet your definition of racism, they will say so. This is an educational opportunity. This is a great way to let that person know that you do hear them, and that your experiences do not erase theirs because even though their experience is valid, it is a different experience.

A response I've used is, "What was said to you wasn't okay, and should be addressed. But we are talking about two different things. Being called "cracker" hurts, may even be humiliating. But after those feelings fade, what measurable impact will it have on your life? On your ability to walk the streets safely? On your ability to get a job? How often has the word "cracker" been used to deny you services? What measurable impact has this word had on the lives of white Americans in general?"

In all honesty, from my personal experience, you are still not likely to get very far in that conversation, not right away. But it gives people something to think about. These conversations, even if they seem fruitless at first, can plant a seed to greater understanding.

If you want to further understanding of systemic racism even more among the people you interact with, you can try to link to the systemic effects of racism whenever you talk about racism. Instead of posting on Facebook: "This teacher shouted a racial slur at a Hispanic kid and should be fired!" you can say all that, and then add, "This behavior is linked to the increased suspension, expulsion, and detention of Hispanic youth in our schools and sets an example of behavior

for the children witnessing this teacher's racism that will influence the way these children are treated by their peers, and how they are treated as adults." I do this often when I'm talking about racism, and pretty regularly somebody will comment with something like, "That's an aspect of this situation I hadn't considered, thank you."

If you hear someone at the water cooler say, "black people are always late," you can definitely say, "Hey, that's racist" but you can also add, "and it contributes to false beliefs about black workers that keeps them from even being interviewed for jobs, while white workers can be late or on time, but will always be judged individually with no risk of damaging job prospects for other white people seeking employment." That also makes it less likely that someone will brush you off saying "Hey, it's not that big of a deal, don't be so sensitive."

Tying racism to its systemic causes and effects will help others see the important difference between systemic racism, and anti-white bigotry. In addition, the more practice you have at tying individual racism to the system that gives it power, the more you will be able to see all the ways in which you can make a difference. Yes, you can demand that the teacher shouting racial slurs at Hispanic kids should be fired, but you can also ask what that school's suspension rate for Hispanic kids is, ask how many teachers of color they have on staff, and ask that their policies be reviewed and reformed. Yes, you can definitely report your racist coworker to HR, but you can also ask your company management what processes they have in place to minimize racial bias in their hiring process, you can ask for more diversity in management and cultural sensitivity training for staff, and you can ask what

procedures they have in place to handle allegations of racial discrimination.

When we look at racism as a system, it becomes much larger and more complicated than it seemed before—but there is also more opportunity to address the various parts of it. And that is what the rest of this book attempts to at least begin to do, chapter by chapter. So now that we know what racism is, let's get to work.

three

What if I talk about race wrong?

When my white mother gave birth to me, and later my brother, in Denton, Texas, she became the subject of a lot of racial commentary in her conservative southern community. But surprisingly, my mother and I had our first really substantive conversation about race late in my life, when I was thirty-four years old. I was well into my career in writing about culture and social justice and my opinions and identity around race were pretty well documented by then. But the truth is, like many families, our conversations growing up mostly revolved around homework, TV shows, and chores.

While I was growing up, my mother had given the obligatory speeches that all parents of black children must give: don't challenge cops, don't be surprised if you are followed at stores, some people will be mean to you because of your beautiful brown skin, no you can't have the same hairstyle as