**“You and White Silence” - Excerpted from Me and White Supremacy by Layla F. Saad**

*“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”* Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

WHAT IS WHITE SILENCE?

White silence is exactly what it sounds like. It is when people with white privilege stay complicity silent when it comes to issues of race and white supremacy. Yesterday, we covered tone policing, which is about how you silence BIPOC. Today, we are unpacking white silence, which is about how you stay silent about racism. Both types of silencing arise out of white fragility—a fear of being incapable of talking about race without coming apart. However, white fragility is not the only cause of white silence. White silence is also a defending of the status quo of white supremacy—a manifestation of holding on to one’s white privilege through inaction.

As Dr. King points out in this topic’s opening quote, it is often the silence of good people that hurts the most. For three years, I was best friends with a white woman whom I adored. We had a lot in common: we were both highly introverted, creative visionaries. Though she lived in the UK and I lived in Qatar, we were firmly planted in each other’s lives. Each week, we had two-hour accountability calls to catch up, inspire each other, and support each other on our journeys. After a few years of being best friends, we decided that we were going to create and launch a program together. All was moving along smoothly. That is until I was driven to write and publish my viral letter, “I Need to Talk to Spiritual White Women about White Supremacy,” and then everything changed. She fell silent

I did not realize it at the time, but looking back now, I understand that my words and my work must have triggered her white fragility. She slowly but surely withdrew her presence in my life. Though she saw the public conversations I was having online regarding racism and though she witnessed me experiencing many of the things we talk about in this book, she simply checked out of our friendship. She did not talk to me about my work. She did not ask me how she could support me during this tough time. She did not talk to me about what this work was bringing up for her with regard to her white privilege. She did not say anything. She just fell silent.

And her silence hurt more than any stranger’s racial slur thrown at me because it was the betrayal of a person who loved and supported me…as long as I did not talk about racism. When I asked her in a letter before we ended our friendship why she had not shown up to support me over the last few months, she responded that it seemed I had enough support from the other Black women in my life and she did not think I needed her. It was amazing to me that she had shown up to support me without question over the years of our friendship when it came to other experiences in business and in life, but when it came to racism, she did not feel she had anything to contribute. I came to understand that this was a tragic combination of white fragility and white silence that resulted in the end of our friendship.

There are so many BIPOC who have experienced this feeling of betrayal when someone in their life is there for them as long as they do not talk about racism. And if your friends cannot show up for us, what does that mean for how safe we can feel around other people with white privilege?

**WHY DO YOU NEED TO LOOK AT WHITE SILENCE?**

**HOW DOES WHITE SILENCE SHOW UP?**

Here are a few examples of white silence in action:

* Staying silent (or making excuses/changing the subject/leaving the room) when your family members or friends make racist jokes or comments.
* Staying silent when you see your colleagues of color being discriminated against at work.
* Staying silent when white people treat your biracial family members in ways they would not treat your white family members.
* Staying silent by choosing not to engage in any conversations about race because of your white fragility.
* Staying silent by not attending protest marches against racism like Black Lives Matter or protests for immigrants at risk.
* Staying silent when your favorite famous spiritual teacher/coach/mentor/author is called out for racist behavior
* Staying silent by not sharing social media posts about race and racism in your spaces because of the way it might affect your personal or professional life, or simply reposting the posts of BIPOC but not adding your own voice or perspective.
* Staying silent about your antiracism work for fear of losing friends or followers.
* Staying silent by not holding those around you accountable for their racist behavior.

On the surface of it, white silence seems benign. And if not benign, then it could at least be believed to be a stand of neutrality, like the old adage, “If you can’t say anything nice, then don’t say anything at all. But white silence is anything but neutral. Rather, it is a method of self-protection and therefore also the protection of the dynamics of white supremacy. It protects you, the person with white privilege, from having to deal with the harm of white supremacy. And it protects white supremacy from being challenged, thereby keeping it firmly in place.

Here is a radical idea that I would like you to understand: white silence is violence. It actively protects the system. It says *I am okay with the way things are because they do not negatively affect me and because I enjoy the benefits I receive with white privilege.* When I talk about white silence being violent, I am not just referring to the act of staying silent while observing someone making a racist remark or perpetrating a racist hate crime. Those are the extreme examples that one does not necessarily come across in their day-to-day lives. Remember, white supremacy is not just about individual acts of racism, but rather it is a system of oppression that seeps into and often forms the foundation of many of the regular spaces where you spend your time—school, work, spiritual spaces, health and wellness spaces, and so on. All these spaces are often protected from overt and individual acts of racism while allowing covert and systemic racism to be a part of the accepted culture through white silence.

Here are some ways you use white silence in these spaces: *(see lexicon of terms at end of article for further reference)*

* In schools and educational institutions students, parents, educators and administrators can perpetuate behaviors such as tone policing (implicit or explicit), white saviorism, white superiority, and color blindness against students of color.
* At work, in entrepreneurship, and in corporate spaces employees and leaders can perpetuate behaviors such as white fragility, cultural appropriation, white centering and optical allyship.
* In spiritual spaces, seekers, administrators, and leaders can perpetuate behaviors such as white exceptionalism, tone policing and colorblindness.
* In health and wellness spaces, practitioners, medical staff, healers and teachers can perpetuate behaviors such as anti-Blackness, racist stereotypes, cultural appropriation, and white superiority.

Think about each of these spaces and other spaces where you spend your time. Imagine if each time one of these subtle, covert white supremacist behaviors were not reacted to with silence but instead responded to by people with white privilege using their voices to challenge the culture and demand change. Now understand that no matter who you are, no matter what level of power, influence, or authority you hold, your voice is needed. Not as a white savior, but as someone who recognizes that their privilege can be a weapon used against white supremacy. The BIPOC around you need to know where you stand and whether they can be safe with you with their experiences.

*A quick note for the introverts:* Introversion is not an excuse to stay in white silence. As someone who scores pretty highly on the introversion scale, I understand that our natural tendency and preference is to keep to ourselves and to let the extroverts take center stage. However, when it comes to antiracism, leaning on your introversion as a reason why you stay in silence is actually just an excuse to stay in your comfort zone. You can be an introvert and have powerful conversations. You can be an introvert and use writing to disrupt white supremacy. You can be an introvert and show up to protect marches. You do not have to be the loudest voice. But you do need to use your voice.

**Reflective Journaling Prompts:**

How have you stayed silent when it comes to race and racism?

What types of situations elicit the most white silence from you?

How has your silence been complicit in upholding racist behavior?

How do you benefit from white silence?

Whom in your life do you harm with your white silence?

**Lexicon of Terms:**

**Tone policing**- criticizing a person of color for expressing emotion. Tone policing detracts from the validity of a statement by attacking the tone in which it was presented rather than the message itself.

**White saviorism**- The worldview that regards white people as saviors and other groups as needing to be saved. White savior complex, refers to a white person who provides help to non-white people in a self-serving manner

**White fragility-** Discomfort and defensiveness on the part of a white person when confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice.

**White centering**- White centering is the centering of white people, white values, white norms and white feelings over everything and everyone else.” See <https://www.changecadet.com/blog/2020/7/17/white-centering> White Centering is a form of privilege.