

From Set Free: A Journey Toward Solidarity Against Racism  
by Tobin Miller Shearer, Regina Shands Stoltzfus, and Iris  
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## Preface

The first answer this book offers is that racism is a name-caller. The final question it poses is, "So what?" Somewhere between that first cryptic answer and the surly query that follows, we hope you will find words worth reading and insight worth taking on your journey.

We do hope, and yet we are cautious in that hope. We do not come as experts in the writing. Neither do we come as strugglers from the grassroots. Rather, we are a group of three, connected to a national Mennonite service agency, who have been blessed with the space, support, and opportunity to take time to reflect on our small part of the antiracism struggle. It is neither the only part, nor the most significant, but it is the one into which we have been called to enter. We aim to share insight from that struggle here.

Even as we recognize the small size of our offering, we are also aware of the power of printed words. Particularly in book form, they amplify and extend the weight and significance of the perspectives written down. By contrast, oral traditions rarely carry such weight in this information age. And so our hope that these pages hold some worthwhile insight is further tempered by our recognition that what we write here has certainly been said by others elsewhere. We are deeply grateful for what we have learned from the many teachers and co-strugglers who have entered our lives in profound ways.

We also write as members of specific communities. While together we represent the broad racial groupings of African-

American, Latino, and white, we also bring specific regional experiences from the Southwest, West Coast, East Coast, and Great Lakes. Likewise, we write as women and a man, mothers and a father, daughters and a son, wives and a husband. Most importantly we want to be clear that, while we will make systemic observations throughout this book, our voices do not represent all people of color groups or the breath of national identities that racism continues to mold into whiteness.

Our aim in this work is to focus on the identity-shaping power of racism. We will work to describe the two primary forms this level of racism takes: internalized racist oppression (IRO) and internalized racist superiority (IRS). For this reason, we say we start with the answer that racism is a name-caller. For we who are white, racism calls out "racist." For we who are people of color, racism calls out "victim." In our experience, we all have been taught to believe the names racism speaks.

We begin by focusing on internalized racist oppression. Regina and Iris have written three chapters each that explore the systemic and personal ramifications of internalized oppression among Aboriginal, African-American, Latino, and Asian communities in the United States. Following those six chapters, Tobin has written three additional chapters exploring the realities of internalized racist superiority as expressed in white people.

We have chosen to give more space to the discussion of internalized racist oppression because currently there are far fewer written resources focusing on this reality than on the realities of white privilege, power, and superiority. But, we have also chosen to write about both themes in one book because we are committed to the principle of people of color and white people struggling together to dismantle racism. Every team that is trained through our Mennonite and Brethren in Christ based antiracism program, Damascus Road, is required to reflect that racial balance. Likewise, we never agree to conduct a workshop or training unless our training team reflects a similar racial and gender mix.

The final four chapters bring the theory and reflection of the first nine chapters down to a practical level as we write about ways to respond to the "So what?" question. We look specifically at what white people need from people of color in solidarity relationships, what people of color need from white people, where opportunities have been missed, and finally, where opportunities to engage in antiracist action have been taken.

The stories you will encounter here come from our lives. We have tried to be as vulnerable and transparent as we can be in the telling. In the seven years that we have worked together there have been many tears shed, mistakes made, and disagreements discovered. Likewise, we have laughed long, worshiped deeply, and just hung out. We hope both realities are reflected in the stories that we tell.

In order to understand these stories and our focus on the name-calling nature of racism, we want to make clear a number of assumptions we bring to this exploration.

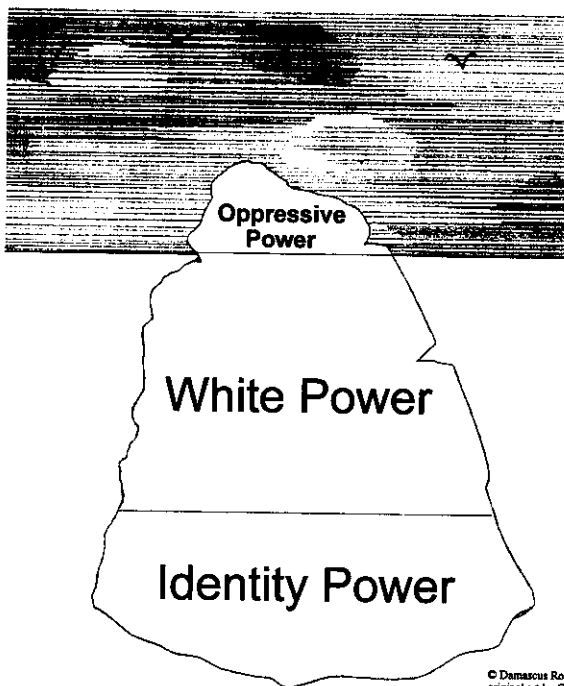
The first is that we write as Christians. We are sustained and strengthened in our work to dismantle racism through our faith in a loving God and our belief in the example, ministry, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We live and experience that belief as members of Mennonite congregations where we draw from a long tradition of resisting and naming as evil all powers that seek to deal death in this world.

Christian belief also informs our understanding of the nature of racism. More than anything else, we are convinced that racism is a demon. Or, to use less dramatic language, we understand racism to be a principality and power that is made manifest in the world in which we live. Thus, racism is not simply a force that can be broken down into quantified chunks through the tools that sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science offer us. While we find those tools helpful and readily use them, we believe that racism is, at its root, sin and thus holds spiritual dimensions that science cannot describe.

A third assumption we bring to this book is that racism is not the same as racial prejudice. Where racial prejudice is

held by many of us regardless of our skin color, racism is only present when a given racial group in society has the power to enforce their racial prejudices so that they receive more benefits and privileges than other groups. Because we have found it to be such a helpful tool in establishing a common language and paradigm to work together across racial lines, we use a definition of racism common to many antiracism groups in this country: Racism = race prejudice + misuse of systemic power.

Racism, however, is not as one-dimensional as this definition suggests. It can be found in three primary manifestations: individual, institutional, and systemic. Likewise, each of those manifestations has three levels: Oppressive Power, White Power, and Identity Power.<sup>1</sup> And so, our next assumption is that racism is an iceberg.



As the diagram on the opposite page suggests, most often we only see the tip of the iceberg, or Oppressive Power. This is the level of racism at which people of color are harmed whether individually, institutionally, or systemically. Most often, and especially for white people and society, we only know that racism is a bad thing for people of color. While afloat on the multicultural boat, we work hard to avoid doing bad things to people of color. Usually it is white people who control the steering, and as they design programs to meet this level of racism, they only know to avoid what they see, the tip of the iceberg. The other 9/10ths of the iceberg go unnoticed.

### **Examples of Oppressive Power include:**

- Overt physical or verbal attacks on people of color such as the June 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr., when he was dragged to his death behind a pickup truck in Jasper, Texas (individual manifestation).
- Redlining policies that prohibit the distribution of housing loans, taxicab service, newspaper delivery, police protection, and pizza delivery to communities of color (institutional manifestation).
- The practice of “killing the Indian to save the man” as expressed in Bureau of Indian Affairs Boarding schools where aboriginal children were removed from their parents and communities, forced to speak English, shorn, stripped of culture, and shamed into denouncing their people (systemic manifestation).

Beneath the surface of the water is the next level of the racism iceberg. At the level of White Power, we discover the core or purpose of racism to be that white people and society are given power and privilege. This is the bulk of the berg and is the part most difficult for white people to see. White Power is what most often goes entirely unnoticed by those steering the multicultural boat of white-controlled institutions. It is here that we examine the countless ways white people receive power and privilege through individual, institutional, and systemic forces.

## **Examples of White Power include:**

- The many times Tobin has received the bill for a restaurant meal when the party included both men and women of color, some of whom were his direct supervisors, as well as the myriad ways white people receive quicker service, less harassment, more inclusion, and fewer negative messages in course of daily life at work, in public space, during school, and while at recreation (individual manifestations).
- An institutional policy to allow staff to listen only to “Christian, classical, or easy-listening music” in the office environment and then to enforce that policy according to white-defined examples of those music styles, as well as any time an institution decides to develop policies based on white norms, standards, and values (institutional manifestations).
- Walt Disney’s repeated use of light-skinned, European-featured characters as the heroes of movies like *Pocahontas*, *El Dorado*, *Hercules*, etc., as well as the repeated and overwhelming equation of beauty with white examples in popular culture magazines, movies, and television shows (systemic manifestations).

There is yet another level of the racism iceberg. This third level, Identity Power, is where we must have a theological lens to understand the power of racism as it attempts to shape our identities. It is here that we see how racism tries to usurp God’s authority to tell us who we are. As racists and victims are shaped by racism, the two topics of this book come into focus: internalized racist oppression and internalized racist superiority. This book attempts to go deep below the surface of the water and examine the bottom of the berg. Again we will look at all the manifestations or sides of this level: individual, institutional, and systemic.

## **Examples of Identity Power include:**

- Any Horatio Alger story, or the many others like it, that portray white people “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” and believing that they have done it by themselves (IRS), or the funeral plans of some young gang members of color who do not believe they will reach adulthood (IRO) (individual manifestations).
- The involvement of people of color in institutions that are overtly oppressing other people of color such as border patrol agents at the Mexican-American border (IRO), or the proliferation of white-led, controlled, and designed short-term mission programs that are far more focused on the needs of the white sending agency than the communities of color in which they so often operate with no identifiable accountability (IRS) (institutional manifestations).
- When some Native churches reject indigenous forms of worship, refusing to believe that ways of knowing, communicating, or worshiping stemming from their communities are just as valid as white ways of doing the same (IRO), or the appropriation of African-American, Latino, Native, or Asian culture by white people as their own, as exemplified in contemporary advertising campaigns such as the way in which Kentucky Fried Chicken has turned Colonel Sanders, an icon of the plantation South, into a caricature of a black man (systemic manifestations).

As we indicated above, we will expand, in particular, on the examples and themes of Identity Power in the first nine chapters of this book. The final four chapters deal with all levels and manifestation of the iceberg in an integrated form.

Our fifth and final assumption is that, while we will always have sin to struggle with in this fallen world, we are convinced that we can melt the iceberg of racism. If nothing else, we are called to this task as children of God who live in a sinful world. We do not pretend that the work will be easy, short-term, or without significant setbacks—even failures. We are struggling with a demonic power, but one that Christ

has already overcome. We pray that these pages might be of encouragement and direction as we together answer the call to resist racism in this world.

We have many thanks to offer those who have been of support to us in this undertaking. First, we offer praise and thanksgiving to God, our provider and source of strength, for calling us to this task. Second, we want to thank our families for their willingness to see us through this project and the work of antiracism that so often takes us away from home. With deep appreciation, love, and honor, we thank you Andres, Art, Cheryl, Danny, Dylan, Isabelle, Leo, Matthew, Joshua, Rachel, Toni, and Zachary.

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Peace,

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