

F R E Q U E N T L Y   A S K E D

# WHITE QUESTIONS

AJAY PARASRAM + ALEX KHASNABISH

EXCERPT

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# FOR FAWQ'S SAKE

Recently, Ajay facilitated an antiracism workshop as part of a youth activism conference, during which a Black student was explaining why she felt degraded, angry, and hurt when white people use the n-word. In his effort to express empathy with her, a young white man in the circle used the n-word several times. Many white people in the room were loudly outraged that the young man had used this word, while others seemed confused as to why so much time was being spent on a word. Ajay and the Black student who had spoken looked at each other. She seemed tired, but neither angry nor surprised. The young white man slumped into his chair and said nothing else for the rest of the workshop.

He was not trying to be an asshole. But he was not adequately prepared to have a conversation about race at the same level as another person his age, someone navigating life as a Black woman. Because he was not prepared, what should have been a great experience for everyone in the room ended up being another example of a racialized person servicing a predominantly white group by sharing their lived experience and gaining nothing from the ordeal. In this context, the

white group did more than just correct the white guy for using the n-word; they were able to perform outrage, signalling their progressive credentials. As is typical in situations of white privilege, the feelings, desires, and sentiments of the racialized woman experiencing the racist aggression (unintended as it was) were used only as fuel for a conversation about and between white people.

And that young white guy? We have no idea what he is up to now, but if he walked out of that workshop feeling ashamed or angry or confused, he likely will not walk back into a space like that soon. It's not far-fetched to think he may have been attracted to a gathering facilitated by people who promote slogans like "It's okay to be white," which happened at Alex's university around the same time. White nationalism is rising in Canada, and white nationalist organizers are clever about how they frame their messages to attract impressionable people.

It's unfair to nonwhite participants in public or educational sessions to have to offer both training and emotional support to the white people around them, as education professor Robin DiAngelo has outlined clearly in her work on the subject of white fragility. It's also unfair to expect white people to understand the politics of race when the very operation of racial politics in Canada has encouraged them to not think or talk about race lest they appear to be racist.

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**White nationalism, *noun***

A political ideology that views white people as a distinct group and calls for the creation of white ethnostates through the expulsion of nonwhite people, often through violent means.

This is one of the fundamental challenges in offering antiracist education: white people have been organized over several generations to ignore race, to be “colourblind.” People who are not white have also been told to forget about race, given the great racial equality battles of the twentieth century are allegedly over (e.g., desegregation struggles, including Viola Desmond sitting in the whites-only section of a Nova Scotian theatre; movements against explicit racial discrimination such as the Chinese head tax, Japanese internment, the *Komagata Maru* incident, and the destruction of Africville; and associated movements for reparations for colonialism). The message has been that if racial equality has been achieved, then to even think in racial terms at all is to *be racist*. However, the conference example above and many instances like it make clear that people need to talk about race if they want to converse and live equitably with each other. Some level of extra help was necessary to get that white male — and those who were quick to performatively condemn him, along with those who thought the n-word was not such a big deal — to understand the politics of race in this country before he could respectfully respond to a Black woman sharing her thoughts.

This experience, paired with a host of similar experiences at public events, work, and in our personal lives, brought Ajay and Alex together over an exceptionally hoppy beverage late in 2019. We wanted to think hard about how we could use our privileges as teachers and researchers to help take the burden of educating white people off racialized people. We also wanted to encourage a practice space for white people to deepen their knowledge of race and social justice issues without fear of conflict. By talking candidly about race, which is uncomfortable for

so many white people, we wanted to proactively prevent them from being welcomed into the waiting arms of white nationalists.

So we hosted a drop-in session called *Safe Space for White Questions* (SSFWQ) in February 2020 at Dalhousie University. The premise was to ask us any question related to race and we would have a nonjudgmental conversation about it. The small in-person event included good discussions about how to teach Black poetry if you are white, how to navigate power relations within the workplace, and more. We envisioned hosting monthly sessions, ideally off-campus, but then in March 2020 COVID-19 put everything on hold. We started again online in September 2020, which had the added benefit of allowing people to pose questions anonymously, and we got a lot of engagement. By December 2020, Fernwood Publishing took notice of the project and volunteered to run the tech for us. We've been recording monthly online drop-in sessions ever since.

SSFWQ has been cultivated mostly with well-intentioned white people in mind, but it has always been open to anyone who wants to pop in and ask a question they might not want to pose in public or with family and friends. The objectives of the sessions are both educational and political. Educational, because the work of understanding how race operates simply has a lot to do with information that is not easy to access and interpret. Political, because we want to help build racial resilience among all people as a way to build equitable relations; we believe providing practice space for white people to work through racial issues might help them engage confidently and respectfully in public conversations with other white and racialized people in their lives. Calling it a "safe space" has drawn some reasonable criticism,



as the concept of safe space was originated several decades ago by queer and Black organizers, who made the point that all spaces were inherently hetero and white. So it's controversial to use the phrase for white people, who are generally safe everywhere they go, in institutions and spaces that have been built by them, for them. Still, we see it as a reasonable borrow from the long tradition of activism that helps to produce social change, and as a cheeky indictment of the fact that most white people who bemoan the existence of safe spaces for racialized people need a space of their own to discuss relatively basic issues about race.

*Frequently Asked White Questions* (FAWQ) draws on ten recurring themes that run through questions people ask during SSFWQ episodes. We wrote this book because in reflecting on the discussions we've had over the last two years of running the show, we noticed patterns in the causes of anxiety and trepidation for white people who genuinely want to deepen their understanding of racial issues without creating more stress for the racialized people in their lives.

We want this book to be an easy and helpful read for anyone who needs a baseline from which to better understand race. We use Canadian examples wherever possible, as this context tends to be eclipsed by the racial politics of the United States. However, we understand that nation-states are not neat containers, and the politics of race is as much a global phenomenon as it is context specific — something we talk more about in the rest of the book.

While we both study race, racism, white nationalism, and white supremacy in our paid gigs as university professors, we are not especially interested in an academic approach for this book. More than a

hundred years of detailed, meticulous, and groundbreaking academic scholarship on race demonstrates how structural white supremacy is the foundation for modern society — but most people will never read that work. A lot of it is published behind academic paywalls and written in technical language, making it decidedly less accessible to those outside the university. More importantly, most of the work by racialized activists and scholars is concerned primarily with the cause of achieving freedom and liberation for their people. In other words, white people are not necessarily the target audience for much of this work. We think it's crucial that white people learn about the way race affects their lives too. We see this as supporting all of that liberatory work by and for racialized people.

Compounding the issue, in recent years a resurgent right wing around the world has been working to destroy public confidence in scholarly research and evidence. In the United States, our colleagues are being attacked by democratically elected legislators for the crime

### **Racialized**, *adjective / verb*

To be categorized and integrated into society's racial hierarchy based on one's perceived race. The implication is that something is being done to racialize a person; they do not naturally exist in a state of "race." Whiteness is a racial identity as well, but because it is at the top of the racial hierarchy people who are white or white-passing rarely understand themselves in racial terms.

### **White supremacy**, *noun*

The belief that white people not only constitute a distinct people in racial and ethnic terms but are superior to nonwhite people. Institutions and states can be white supremacist based on foundational, historical structures that continue to exist today, even if they are not explicitly run by white supremacists.

of studying and teaching “critical race theory,” a term used colloquially to describe any serious engagement with race in society. According to Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons from the Brookings Institute, Fox News said the phrase “critical race theory” 1,300 times between August and November 2021.<sup>1</sup> By that November, when Ray and Gibbons wrote their article, nine US states had passed legislation effectively banning critical race theory from schools and another twenty had similar kinds of legislation in the works.

Critical race theory, along with words like “intersectionality,” is a lightning rod for white people who believe our society is already free and equal. Whether the charge is “cancel culture” or “social justice warriors” allegedly destroying the fabric of modern civilization by removing statues or renaming streets, we take up these concerns throughout the book. In some important ways, critical race theory and intersectionality are tools with which to build the world that many middle- and upper-class straight white men think they already live in.

To the casual observer, it may seem like the pushback against social justice came about during the reign of former US president Donald Trump, but this is a nearsighted view. The resurgence of the right is much older than Trump; he was preceded internationally by career politicians including Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte. The very important and still incremental gains made recently in Western countries, including talking about racism as a real thing and beginning to reckon publicly with ongoing colonial violence, have been met by an overwhelming response from right-wing white nationalists. They have done an exemplary job of producing easy-to-consume propaganda to convince people that

“social justice warriors” or “postmodern neo-Marxists” are trying to destroy all that is good and sacred in this world. Those who have power have always resisted changing the structures that give them power. Beneficiaries of unearned power and privilege (e.g., a trust fund kid who never had to work three part-time jobs while going to school) are especially vocal about defending society as it is rather than supporting changes to make it fairer for everyone.

One of the best ways to understand forms of oppression is learning the difference between agents and structures. We return to this point throughout the book’s chapters, because like the proverbial chicken and egg, it’s not about which one creates the other but rather how the two re-create one another in practice. We may not always be explicit about structure and agent, but you can keep score as you read and see how many times you can catch us explaining structure and agent in different ways!

#### **Agents and structures, *noun***

Society is composed of agents, or individuals, who are part of many kinds of structures, or institutions. A structure can refer to a place, like a parliament, or it can refer to a form of social power, such as heterosexuality. Agents are embedded within structures in any given society, and structures shape people’s understanding of what is “normal.” At the same time, structures can shift and transform as a result of pressure exerted by agents within them.

#### **Populism, *noun***

An approach to politics that emphasizes the interests of “the people” over those of the elites who exercise control in society. It can take the form of right-wing populism, as seen with former **US** president Donald Trump and Canadian politicians Maxime Bernier and Pierre Poilievre, or left-wing populism, as exemplified by the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

We wrote FAWQ to confront the rising tide of white nationalism and right-wing populism. We also wrote it because our students, friends, comrades, and fellow travellers have asked for a straight-to-the-point analysis they can recommend to people in their lives who are not interested in dense theory. Ultimately, we wrote this book because we believe helping white people understand race helps everyone build the kind of world we deserve and urgently need. If you want to learn more about racial justice but do not want to overburden your nonwhite friends with questions, this book is for you. If you feel shy or intimidated by not knowing the right lingo to use without inadvertently offending someone, this book is for you. If you struggle to find the words to help your peers or loved ones understand how race and economic justice go together, this book is for you. And if you are just damn tired of having to explain things to people who seem convinced the only way to understand something is to play devil's advocate, we hope this book can offer you some reprieve as well.

Without further ado, here are the top ten most frequently asked white questions we get:

- ✦ Can you be racist against white people?
- ✦ How do we fix past wrongs without creating new ones?
- ✦ How does racism relate to other forms of oppression?
- ✦ How can I make antiracism part of my family life?
- ✦ How can I talk about social justice without turning people off?
- ✦ What's the difference between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation?

- ✦ Can members of an oppressed group be oppressors?
- ✦ How can white people be involved in antiracist struggles without centring themselves?
- ✦ How can I be an antiracist in my everyday life?
- ✦ How can we build the world we deserve?

Each question is addressed in a chapter, and the chapters are all deliberately short. Within each of these thematic questions, we explore different facets of frequently asked white questions that overlap with one another in ways we hope you will find mutually reinforcing as you read. At the conclusion of each chapter, we distill its main point, and at the end of book is a compilation of the top ten principles for thinking about racial politics as a white person. We take time to define important terms, which form the glossary at the end of the book. And in case you are interested in reading more, alongside our references for this book is the reading list we have kept over two years of answering questions during SSFWQ.

We hope you will engage with this book, share it with your friends and family, fight about it, disagree with it, and ultimately get some use of it.