

Foreword by Michael W. Waters

**GOOD
WHITE
RACIST?**

Confronting Your Role
in Racial Injustice

KERRY CONNELLY

White People's Posse

(Or, *You Just Think You Need to Call the Police*)

The list is already long and is still growing: How many reasons can white people find to call the police on Black people who are just . . . being Black? Whether Black people are picnicking in a park, dozing in their dormitory common room, waiting for a friend at Starbucks, or visiting a friend's gym, a strange sort of spell seems to come over the white people in the vicinity, and for some reason, they think it's time to call the police.

Actually, who am I kidding? It's not a spell. It's *racism*—good white racism, to be exact.

But what's going on here really? Why do white people feel the need to call the police on Black people who are just living their lives, not bothering anyone, especially when white people do the same things all the time and are never perceived as a threat? I believe it has to do with two main issues: the social contract (and more specifically, the *racial* contract) and the white ownership of space.

The Racial Contract

Centuries ago, philosophers came up with the theory of the social contract—essentially, the idea that people who live in a society come to a certain unspoken agreement, in which everyone agrees to live by certain rules and to expect certain benefits and securities in return. One of the agreements we enter into as members

of so-called civilization is the relinquishment of certain freedoms. As citizens, we give up the complete, individual freedom of our natural state and consent to be governed, to abide by certain laws, and to share resources. We consent because it's in our best interest; cooperation with the society at large offers us safety and security and access to resources that might be otherwise difficult to obtain, so we willingly agree not to do things like run stop signs or steal from each other. We agree to be governed and to participate in that governance, even if that's just by being upstanding citizens. Note immediately that at its essence, the social contract is about power and its relinquishment. As individuals, we give up a certain amount of power in order to enjoy the benefits of civilization.

The social contract can be divided into two subcategories: the *political* contract, in which we agree to whatever form of government our country has as well as our responsibilities as citizens, and the *moral* contract, which is the foundational code that tells us how to behave in society. Here we find basic social mores that tell us, for example, that murder and stealing are wrong. But we also find other, more fluid restrictions, such as what sexual practices are unacceptable, what clothing should not be worn in public, and when it's not cool to dance on someone else's table at a local restaurant. That last one may seem ridiculous, and it is. But it's also an example of how the unspoken social contract of morality works to control thoughts and behavior. The fact that we think the idea is ridiculous demonstrates that the moral contract defines the way we think, even if we don't notice that happening. You simply don't dance on someone else's table at a restaurant. You'd be judged as strange, and probably a jerk. And someone would probably call the cops to control your behavior and align it with the social contract. You big weirdo.

More recently, scholars have added another subcategory to the social contract—the racial contract—and here's where it gets interesting. Racial contract theory attempts to explain how certain individuals are placed in a society; it examines social hierarchy and each person's place within it. The racial contract—much

like the moral contract—is both descriptive and normative. In other words, it describes how things are, but it also describes *how they should be*.¹

There are a few important things to understand about the racial contract. First, and most obviously, it is the societal agreement that not only separates but also subordinates nonwhites from whites. This is the agreement we've all made—unconsciously, in most cases—that creates a lower civil standing for nonwhite people and that plays out in interactions BIPOC have with both the nation-state as an entity and with white people interpersonally. The purpose of the racial contract is really nothing more than self-maintenance. It's designed to benefit white people and to allow for the exploitation of BIPOC communities—their bodies (slavery), their land (think the American colonies and First Nations people), and their resources (consider the way South America has been raped for its natural resources, such as coffee, cocoa, and lumber). According to Charles W. Mills, author of *The Racial Contract*, all white people are beneficiaries of the racial contract, even if they don't necessarily agree with or desire it.

Members of the BIPOC community don't sign up for the racial contract; they don't agree to be subject to it. Rather, it is an agreement that *white people make with one another, over the non-white population*.² Here's where this gets really interesting: while the social contract discusses the transition of humanity from our “natural state” to the “civil/political state,” the racial contract is about *our transition into whiteness or nonwhiteness*.³ The assumption is that white people in our natural state are already “civilized,” and nonwhite people are not. Nonwhite people are considered “savages,” biologically somehow unable to completely assimilate into civilization—at least not without a whole lot of help. Under this construct, the “savage” nonwhites are deemed as childlike, incapable of self-rule, and wards of the state—in other words, a problem the white civilization has to manage. Remember the chapter on education, in which white teachers feel that BIPOC children require more attention in order to meet the same requirements as whites? Yeah, *that*.

Ugly Beauty + the Savage Beast: The Savage Construct

In case you're thinking that all this social contract stuff doesn't apply to you, let's do a little thought experiment. Have you ever been surprised to discover that a member of the BIPOC community, who maybe is dressed in baggy jeans and a hoodie on the day you meet them, has a PhD? Yeah, well, that feeling of surprise you have, where you're all impressed? That's the "savage construct" at work in your psyche. Ever caught yourself thinking, "Wow, she speaks really well for a Black person"? Savage construct. Ever been surprised that the immigrant from El Salvador is a lawyer? That the Black kid has two parents at home? That the Black person walking in the hallway of your fancy apartment building actually lives there? Savage. Construct.

Once whiteness uses the savage construct to infantilize the BIPOC community, we get to then feel really awesome about ourselves for dominating them for their own good. After all, it's the moral thing to do. Way back in the day, when theories of race emerged as a pseudoscience, this white European moral theory that says whiteness is naturally superior was quick to follow. (Remember Derrida and how binaries always beget hierarchies?) We saw people of color, we determined them savage and "less than," and we decided that the moral thing to do was to dominate them—for "their own good" and the good of society.

This is why racist ideologies like the savage construct are so deeply embedded in our thinking. Our white European tribal morality—remember how deep these safety mechanisms of tribal power go in our psyches—tells us that the natural state of whiteness is superior to nonwhiteness and so it is our moral responsibility to dominate anyone who is not white. Somewhere deep in our brains is this little psychic worm that tells us being *racist* is essentially *good*.

And we wonder where all these good white racists come from.

Here's another thing that, if you're like me, might make you a little sick to your stomach: This agreement we've made somewhere deep in our collective psyches that racism is actually our moral responsibility—the white empire's gift to the world—is

also *a collective agreement to remain misinformed*.⁴ It requires us to continue to go along with the “officially sanctioned truth” that whiteness is naturally superior rather than the objective truth, because, let’s face it—and get ready to clutch your proverbial pearls—objectively there is plenty of evidence that BIPOC are perfectly normal human beings.

Shocking, I know.

It takes a consolidated effort on the part of white people to continually misinterpret the objective truth, with the understanding that our misinterpretations will be validated by white authority.⁵ Think about how many unarmed Black people have been shot by police who are then found not guilty; here is our collective agreement in action. Society agrees that young Black men are dangerous and require additional force to be controlled. This misinterpretation of truth is validated with every not-guilty verdict handed down to violent, out-of-control police officers. Members of the BIPOC community who protest these misinterpretations can be ignored because of their agreed-upon lower civic standing. White people who call out these misinterpretations are understood as rebelling against their civic duty to toe the line of our collective fantasy. White people who point to the objective truth—say, that innocent people being shot by the police might indicate that *Houston, we have a problem*—are considered traitors to the tribe, to the white empire.

But what does any of this have to do with white people calling the police on BIPOC? Well, now that we understand the bug in our brains called the racial contract, we can begin to examine how that impacts the white ownership of space.

White Ownership of Space

Scholars tend to agree that the concept of race came into being at the same time the Europeans began their campaign to conquer the world. That campaign—whether we call it imperialism, colonialism, or general assholery—was, in essence, all about space. Europeans sought to go out and discover the world—a very natural human desire, and not one that is inherently evil. It’s the

domination part that sucks. It's the part where they said, "Once I 'discover' a land, it's mine, regardless of who might be living there." It's about the ownership of space.

The white, European thought process is a mindset of conquest and domination and taking spaces. Ownership rights rule in the minds of these conquerors, and with that ownership of land comes the right to "own" and dominate the people in those lands. Strangely enough, they did this in the name of a savior who eschewed such worldly endeavors as property ownership and domination, asked his followers to instead sell their property and give the proceeds to the poor, and said the meek would inherit the earth. (Of course, the powers that be in Jesus' day didn't much appreciate those ideas either.)

When it comes to BIPOC communities, there are a few ways that white people think about space through the lens of the racial contract theory. We might bring people of color into white spaces as so-called subordinates (think slavery and domestic servitude), we might exclude them (think reservations and ghettos), or we might deny their existence and/or exterminate them (consider the Holocaust). In general, white people tend to move freely through space but will avoid spaces they believe to be primarily Black. However, members of the BIPOC community must participate in society in order to receive its benefits like everyone else, and they must move through white spaces in order to do so.

Though white people today aren't sailing around their local communities in ships trying to conquer their neighbors' backyards, bearing grill spatulas and baffling children on their swing sets with their forced takeovers of suburban lawns, we do still like to think we own space. We may not say it outright, but every time we feel a little suspicious of a person of color, every time our brain jumps to the conclusion that a person of color must be shoplifting when they're in a fancy store or trespassing when they're in an expensive neighborhood—that's the racial construct at work within the white space. This makes driving while Black, barbecuing while Black—hell, just standing around and breathing while Black—a dangerous prospect for anyone who dares to, you know, *exist* in the skin they were born with.

Because of the savage construct that is still at work deep in our psyches, not only do we like to think we own space—especially public space—but we also like to think that it is our civic duty to police Black and Brown bodies who may be moving through white space in ways we perceive as threatening. Or even not so threatening—like, very often, not threatening at all.

As good white racists move through space, we believe that we have not just a civic duty but a *moral responsibility* to police Black and Brown bodies for their own good. Moral responsibility often trumps civic duty—look at, for example, the way religious objectors can avoid serving in the military. A moral responsibility is a deeply embedded neurobiological drive (see earlier chapters that discuss tribal think and the reticular activator) that's about survival. A moral responsibility—even one that we have collectively agreed to continuously misrepresent and believe in—is the kind of thing that can cause LGBTQIA folks to commit suicide rather than come out to their churches or parents. It can cause couples to stay in miserable marriages for decades. It can cause a whole generation of people to grow up sexually dysfunctional because of a so-called purity culture that wasn't really pure at all. In other words, these things are powerful motivators of behavior, even if they happen to be incredibly misinformed.

Now take the white empire's approved set of behaviors and coded language, and bring them into the public space. When BIPOC move through those same public spaces and perform behaviors that in any way seem out of the norm of prescribed whiteness, the good white racist will respond with an attempt to regain the status quo. We have an entire justice system ready to back us up, and we're not afraid to use it.

In fact, we have been programmed to use it. Police shows on television and gang member in movies suggest the inherent criminality of Black and Brown bodies. The newscasts that show mug shots of Black perpetrators and yearbook photos of white perpetrators reinforces this imagery. Our good white racist tendencies—the ones that make us think it's our moral responsibility to maintain law and order over the BIPOC community for their own good—make us think that it's perfectly acceptable and

normal to call police when Black and Brown bodies are simply moving through white spaces.

Like most discussions about race, this is all about white comfort levels, and sameness breeds comfort. When a white person walks into a Starbucks and sits down to wait for a business prospect to arrive before ordering, most white managers barely even notice, much less call the police. I mean, the idea seems ridiculous. I can't tell you how many business meetings I've had in coffee shops where I never bought anything until my guest arrived. But two Black men—what with their inherent criminality, their lower civic status, the obvious savage traits they are exhibiting by sitting there minding their own business in their button-up shirts and their khakis—obviously, these men are a threat. The police must be called.

Here is where the agreed-upon misinformation of the racial contract comes into play in the white collective psyche—a group fantasy in which, despite all evidence to the contrary, whiteness is superior to nonwhiteness. And when the police arrive on the scene and remove the two Black men instead of fining the white manager for wasting the officers' time, that's whiteness affirming the collective fantasy. That's the societal agreement to remain misinformed at work.

That's some solid good white racism right there.

What's important to notice here is the system at play. Everyone is participating in the fantastical white world of misinformation, from store managers who are not only more suspicious of Black and Brown bodies but who also have higher expectations of them than they do of white people, to the police who automatically assume the white manager is in the right. In this real-life example, in which two Black men were arrested for sitting in a Starbucks without buying anything while they waited for a friend, they were also denied access to the bathroom because they had not made a purchase. Meanwhile, a white woman claimed she had been at the Starbucks for hours and not bought anything.⁶

The manager—a white person in a position of authority through having dominion over this space—called the police, who did not question the manager's story but simply told the two men they had to leave. The police did not seek the men's side of the

story or ask them questions. They ignored the other customers in the store—many of whom were white—who told them the men had done nothing wrong. The officers simply sided with the store manager, affirmed the misinformation she was perpetuating, and arrested the men. Here, whiteness used the justice system to back up the racial contract, affirm the “official truth of misinformation,” and maintain the white person’s comfort level. This is a congruence of power systems, both tangible and intangible, that impact the freedoms of Black and Brown bodies while privileging those assigned whiteness, because white people never have the police called on them for just sitting in a Starbucks.

When it comes to power and its abuses, these kinds of stories are myriad and frustrating for their obvious racist tendencies. But for the BIPOC community, they could become nothing short of deadly. For most of us, the police are the first—and for white people, often the only—experience with the criminal justice system. Most middle-class white people tend to have a healthy respect for police, to see them as characters in a Norman Rockwell painting, in which the friendly beat officer tips his hat and buys the lost kid an ice cream cone. The BIPOC community does not have the same experience.

My friend Stefan is a Black man with a career as a public defender as long as his dreadlocks. He is a family man who not only attends church regularly but also mentors youth, paints in his spare time, and leads a busy, suburban life. One hot summer day, while driving home from vacation wearing the seasonal wardrobe of shorts and a T-shirt, his family in the car with him, he got pulled over. He told me, “Kerry, the only thing I could think of was *Is this the day my little girl sees me get murdered by the police?*” He knew through the entire incident that keeping his hands on the wheel was an issue of life or death. When it was over, he felt a rush of relief and, at the same time, the fear of what might have been.

White people do not have this type of fear in dealings with the police.

Not only do we not have this kind of fear—we can’t even begin to understand it. But we do know it exists in the minds and hearts of the BIPOC community, and that’s what we’re counting

on every time we call the police on a person living while Black. Though we may not be aware of what we're doing at the time (except for, you know, those times when we're totally aware of it), there is a not-so-subtle power dynamic that we are taking advantage of when we police the bodies of people of color in public space. It's sticking the flag in the space and saying we own it. It's reminding them who actually has the power.

That's why the slate of "while Black" stories in which white people call the police on Black people just living their lives is about so much more than mistaken identity or a lapse of judgment. It's nothing short of racial terrorism. It is the modern day, good white racist's form of cross burning. Except our crosses wear blue. They carry guns and billy clubs, badges and handcuffs.

Our crosses, like the original instrument of Jesus' execution, are agents of the state.

Action Items

Learn: Learn about the many "while Black" stories to get a true understanding of the magnitude of the problem.

Think: How would you feel if you were policed the way the BIPOC community is policed in public spaces? Does it feel strange or dangerous to you to think about it? Do you have different standards for people of color than you do for white people in public spaces?

Act: Prepare an action plan for if you ever find yourself in a place where a person of color is being policed "while Black." How will you show up as an ally? Thinking about this ahead of time will make it more likely that you will act in the moment.