CHAPTER 1

DEFINITIONS

RACIST: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.

ANTIRACIST: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea.

SOUL LIBERATION SWAYED onstage at the University of Illinois arena, rocking colorful dashikis and Afros that shot up like balled fists—an amazing sight to behold for the eleven thousand college students in the audience. Soul Liberation appeared nothing like the White ensembles in suits who'd been sounding hymns for nearly two days after Jesus's birthday in 1970.

Black students had succeeded in pushing the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the U.S. evangelical movement's premier college organizer, to devote the second night of the conference to Black theology. More than five hundred Black attendees from across the country were on hand as Soul Liberation began to perform. Two of those Black students were my parents.

They were not sitting together. Days earlier, they had ridden on the same bus for twenty-four hours that felt like forty-two, from Manhattan through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, before arriving in central Illinois. One hundred Black New Yorkers converged on InterVarsity's Urbana '70.

My mother and father had met during the Thanksgiving break weeks earlier when Larry, an accounting student at Manhattan's Baruch College, co-organized a recruiting event for Urbana '70 at his church in Jamaica, Queens. Carol was one of the thirty people who showed up—she had come home to Queens from Nyack College, a small Christian school about forty-five miles north of her parents' home in Far Rockaway. The first meeting was uneventful, but Carol noticed Larry, an overly serious student with a towering Afro, his face hidden behind a forest of facial hair, and Larry noticed Carol, a petite nineteen-year-old with dark freckles sprayed over her caramel complexion, even if all they did was exchange small talk. They'd independently decided to go to Urbana '70 when they heard that Tom Skinner would be preaching and Soul Liberation would be performing. At twenty-eight years old, Skinner was growing famous as a young evangelist of Black liberation theology. A former gang member and son of a Baptist preacher, he reached thousands via his weekly radio show and tours, where he delivered sermons at packed iconic venues like the Apollo Theater in his native Harlem. In 1970, Skinner published his third and fourth books, *How Black Is the Gospel?* and *Words of Revolution*.

Carol and Larry devoured both books like a James Brown tune, like a Muhammad Ali fight. Carol had discovered Skinner through his younger brother, Johnnie, who was enrolled with her at Nyack. Larry's connection was more ideological. In the spring of 1970, he had enrolled in "The Black Aesthetic," a class taught by legendary Baruch College literary scholar Addison Gayle Jr. For the first time, Larry read James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time,* Richard Wright's *Native Son,* Amiri Baraka's wrenching plays, and the banned revolutionary manifesto *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* by Sam Greenlee. It was an awakening. After Gayle's class, Larry started searching for a way to reconcile his faith with his newfound Black consciousness. That search led him to Tom Skinner.

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SOUL LIBERATION LAUNCHED into their popular anthem, "Power to the People." The bodies of the Black students who had surged to the front of the arena started moving almost in unison with the sounds of booming drums and heavy bass that, along with the syncopated claps, generated the rhythm and blues of a rural Southern revival.

The wave of rhythm then rushed through the thousands of White bodies in the arena. Before long, they, too, were on their feet, swaying and singing along to the soulful sounds of Black power.

Every chord from Soul Liberation seemed to build up anticipation for the keynote speaker to come. When the music ended, it was time: Tom Skinner, dark-suited with a red tie, stepped behind the podium, his voice serious as he began his history lesson.

"The evangelical church…supported the status quo. It supported slavery; it supported segregation; it preached against any attempt of the Black man to stand on his own two feet."

Skinner shared how he came to worship an elite White Jesus Christ, who cleaned people up through "rules and regulations," a savior who prefigured Richard Nixon's vision of law and order. But one day, Skinner realized that he'd gotten Jesus wrong. Jesus wasn't in the Rotary Club and he wasn't a policeman. Jesus was a "radical revolutionary, with hair on his chest and dirt under his fingernails." Skinner's new idea of Jesus was born of and committed to a new reading of the gospel. "Any gospel that does not…speak to the issue of enslavement" and "injustice" and "inequality—any gospel that does not want to go where people are hungry and poverty-stricken and set them free in the name of Jesus Christ—is not the gospel."

Back in the days of Jesus, "there was a system working just like today," Skinner declared. But "Jesus was dangerous. He was dangerous because he was changing the system." The Romans locked up this "revolutionary" and "nailed him to a cross" and killed and buried him. But three days later, Jesus Christ "got up out of the grave" to bear witness to us today. "Proclaim liberation to the captives, preach sight to the blind" and "go into the world and tell men who are bound mentally, spiritually, and physically, 'The liberator has come!' "

The last line pulsated through the crowd. "The liberator has come!" Students practically leapt out of their seats in an ovation—taking on the mantle of this fresh gospel. The liberators had come.

My parents were profoundly receptive to Skinner's call for evangelical liberators and attended a series of Black caucuses over the week of the conference that reinforced his call every night. At Urbana '70, Ma and Dad found themselves leaving the civilizing and conserving and racist church they realized they'd been part of. They were saved into Black liberation theology and

joined the churchless church of the Black Power movement. Born in the days of Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and other antiracists who confronted segregationists and assimilationists in the 1950s and 1960s, the movement for Black solidarity, Black cultural pride, and Black economic and political self-determination had enraptured the entire Black world. And now, in 1970, Black power had enraptured my parents. They stopped thinking about saving Black people and started thinking about liberating Black people.

In the spring of 1971, Ma returned to Nyack College and helped form a Black student union, an organization that challenged racist theology, the Confederate flags on dorm-room doors, and the paucity of Black students and programming. She started wearing African-print dresses and wrapped her growing Afro in African-print ties. She dreamed of traveling to the motherland as a missionary.

Dad returned to his church and quit its famed youth choir. He began organizing programs that asked provocative questions: "Is Christianity the White man's religion?" "Is the Black church relevant to the Black community?" He began reading the work of James Cone, the scholarly father of Black liberation theology and author of the influential *Black Theology & Black Power* in 1969.

One day in the spring of 1971, Dad struck up the nerve to go up to Harlem and attend Cone's class at Union Theological Seminary. Cone lectured on his new book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*. After class, Dad approached the professor.

"What is your definition of a Christian?" Dad asked in his deeply earnest way.

Cone looked at Dad with equal seriousness and responded: "A Christian is one who is striving for liberation."

James Cone's working definition of a Christian described a Christianity of the enslaved, not the Christianity of the slaveholders. Receiving this definition was a revelatory moment in Dad's life. Ma had her own similar revelation in her Black student union—that Christianity was about struggle and liberation. My parents now had, separately, arrived at a creed with which to shape their lives, to be the type of Christians that Jesus the revolutionary inspired them to be. This new definition of a word that they'd already chosen as their core identity naturally transformed them.

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MY OWN, STILL-ONGOING journey toward being an antiracist began at Urbana '70. What changed Ma and Dad led to a changing of their two unborn sons—this new definition of the Christian life became the creed that grounded my parents' lives and the lives of their children. I cannot disconnect my parents' religious strivings to be Christian from my secular strivings to be an antiracist. And the key act for both of us was defining our terms so that we could begin to describe the world and our place in it. Definitions anchor us in principles. This is not a light point: If we don't do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can't work toward stable, consistent goals. Some of my most consequential steps toward being an antiracist have been the moments when I arrived at basic definitions. To be an antiracist is to set lucid definitions of racism/antiracism, racist/antiracist policies, racist/antiracist ideas, racist/antiracist people. To be a racist is to constantly redefine racist in a way that exonerates one's changing policies, ideas, and personhood.

So let's set some definitions. What is racism? Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities. Okay, so what are racist policies and ideas?

We have to define them separately to understand why they are married and why they interact so well together. In fact, let's take one step back and consider the definition of another important phrase: racial inequity.

Racial inequity is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing. Here's an example of racial inequity: 71 percent of White families lived in owner-occupied homes in 2014, compared to 45 percent of Latinx families and 41 percent of Black families. Racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing. An example of racial equity would be if there were relatively equitable percentages of all three racial groups living in owner-occupied homes in the forties, seventies, or, better, nineties.

A racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people. There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups.

Racist policies have been described by other terms: "institutional racism," "structural racism," and "systemic racism," for instance. But those are vaguer terms than "racist policy." When I use them I find myself having to immediately explain what they mean. "Racist policy" is more tangible and exacting, and more likely to be immediately understood by people, including its victims, who may not have the benefit of extensive fluency in racial terms. "Racist policy" says exactly what the problem is and where the problem is. "Institutional racism" and "structural racism" and "systemic racism" are redundant. Racism itself is institutional, structural, and systemic.

"Racist policy" also cuts to the core of racism better than "racial discrimination," another common phrase. "Racial discrimination" is an immediate and visible manifestation of an underlying racial policy. When someone discriminates against a person in a racial group, they are carrying out a policy or taking advantage of the lack of a protective policy. We all have the power to discriminate. Only an exclusive few have the power to make policy. Focusing on "racial discrimination" takes our eyes off the central agents of racism: racist policy and racist policymakers, or what I call racist power.

Since the 1960s, racist power has commandeered the term "racial discrimination," transforming the act of discriminating on the basis of race into an inherently racist act. But if racial discrimination is defined as treating, considering, or making a distinction in favor or against an individual based on that person's race, then racial discrimination is not inherently racist. The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist. Someone reproducing inequity through permanently assisting an overrepresented racial group into wealth and power is entirely different than someone challenging that inequity by temporarily assisting an underrepresented racial group into relative wealth and power until equity is reached.

The only remedy to racist discrimination is antiracist discrimination. The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination. As President Lyndon B. Johnson said in 1965, "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have

been completely fair." As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun wrote in 1978, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently."

The racist champions of racist discrimination engineered to maintain racial inequities before the 1960s are now the racist opponents of antiracist discrimination engineered to dismantle those racial inequities. The most threatening racist movement is not the alt right's unlikely drive for a White ethnostate but the regular American's drive for a "race-neutral" one. The construct of race neutrality actually feeds White nationalist victimhood by positing the notion that any policy protecting or advancing non-White Americans toward equity is "reverse discrimination."

That is how racist power can call affirmative action policies that succeed in reducing racial inequities "race conscious" and standardized tests that produce racial inequities "race neutral." That is how they can blame the behavior of entire racial groups for the inequities between different racial groups and still say their ideas are "not racist." But there is no such thing as a not-racist idea, only racist ideas and antiracist ideas.

So what is a racist idea? A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society. As Thomas Jefferson suspected a decade after declaring White American independence: "The blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."

An antiracist idea is any idea that suggests the racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences—that there is nothing right or wrong with any racial group. Antiracist ideas argue that racist policies are the cause of racial inequities.

Understanding the differences between racist policies and antiracist policies, between racist ideas and antiracist ideas, allows us to return to our fundamental definitions. Racism is a powerful collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and are substantiated by racist ideas. Antiracism is a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas.

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ONCE WE HAVE a solid definition of racism and antiracism, we can start to make sense of the racialized world around us, before us. My maternal grandparents, Mary Ann and Alvin, moved their family to New York City in the 1950s on the final leg of the Great Migration, happy to get their children away from violent Georgia segregationists and the work of picking cotton under the increasingly hot Georgia sun.

To think, they were also moving their family away from the effects of climate change. Do-nothing climate policy is racist policy, since the predominantly non-White global south is being victimized by climate change more than the Whiter global north, even as the Whiter global north is contributing more to its acceleration. Land is sinking and temperatures are rising from Florida to Bangladesh. Droughts and food scarcity are ravishing bodies in Eastern and Southern Africa, a region already containing 25 percent of the world's malnourished population. Human-made environmental catastrophes disproportionately harming bodies of color are not unusual; for instance, nearly four thousand U.S. areas—mostly poor and non-White—have higher lead poisoning rates than Flint, Michigan.