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# **Re-storying the “white problem”: Working towards racial justice, Part 2**

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## Setting the scene

This paper builds on an earlier paper on racial justice, that can be read at <https://cmminstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/CMMi-Working-Papers-No.2.pdf>  
In that paper, I wrote

*Resistance can be a significant way of putting social resources at risk in racially challenging contexts, and when it creates dilemmas, contradictions and even paradoxical situations it has the potential for being creative in the sense described by Afuape (2011). For this potential to come to fruition, the resistance needs to be accompanied by learning opportunities for developing new stories that change meaning frames (Penman, 2022, p. 23)*

This proposition acts as the impetus for the current paper. I am concerned with what the learning opportunities might look like, and how we can create them, and what new stories, with their new social resources, we might want to construct. I am also particularly concerned with who these learning opportunities and stories are for.

As I was writing the first paper on racial justice, I was increasingly conscious of the sense that I was writing from a third person position that did not acknowledge my own personal context of meaning in all this—notably that I am white person, with all the accompanying cultural baggage that that can entail. This has some important implications for considering the notion of resistance—viz. whose resistance and to what?—and what new stories are needed.

In my reading for the first paper and for this one, I was also profoundly struck by a particular framing of racism as being, at its core, a “white problem” and that this framing has been done by both Black and White commentators. To set the scene, and the mood, for this paper I invite you to consider this selection of Black and White voices.

In the US in the 1960s, James Baldwin wrote a powerful and eloquent account of Black experience in Harlem in the early 60’s and the problems with Whites. He had this to say:

*White people in this country will have enough to do learning how to love and respect themselves and each other and when they have achieved this—if they ever do—the Negro problem will no longer exist. (Baldwin, 2021)*

In the same era and in the same country, Albert Bigalow, a White commentator, similarly observed:

*What is commonly designated as the Negro problem is really a white problem. Will we whites continue to pass by on the other side and deny or evade the problem? (Bigalow, 1963).*

Roughly 60 years later the same observations were being made in the US by another White commentator:

*Why would we call this a problem of Black America, or Latino Integration, or Native American society? Racism is a problem of white people. White people's racism is a problem for everyone else. It is obvious that if white racism is going to be fought, white people have to fight it. (Norton, 2014)*

This observation is not unique to the US: it is also pertinent for other people in other cultures. One very powerful statement on this was offered by an Indigenous elder in Australia on a current affairs program in 2014. In listening to her voice, it is important to know that the Australian government has never acknowledged the sovereign status of the people who lived in Australia before the White invasion:

*Don't try and suppress me and don't call me a problem. I am not the problem.*

*I have never left my country nor have I ceded any part of it. Nobody has entered into a treaty or talked to me about who I am. I am Arrernte/Alyawarre female Elder from this country. Please remember that. I am not the problem.*

*I am not something that fell out of the sky for the pleasure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured being. (Kunoth-Monks, 2014)*

I take this idea of racism being a “white problem” seriously in this paper, as have a significant number of other scholars. There is, in fact, a burgeoning literature on “whiteness”. And, as inevitably happens when scholars start to consider a problematic area, the meanings and definitions vary as a function of the personal, intellectual and political stakes (Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica & Wray, 2001). The critique of whiteness now covers fields such as education, media studies, sociology, feminist studies and legal studies and includes considerations of white privilege, intersectionality, global and national regimes, the collusion of white respectability and good intention in racism, white denial and ignorance and the codification of whiteness (Hunter & van der Westhuizen, 2022).

I shall touch on many of the above themes as I proceed. However, my major concern is with how being part of the white problem can be resisted and how the story of whiteness can be changed. In my explorations of this question here, I have started with my own cultural context—Australia—and the relationships between white people and the First Nations people of this country. The insights gained from this albeit brief exploration will be linked with material from other countries, especially the US. While there are differences between the provenance of Australian Blacks (as First Nations people) and Black people from the US (as originated in the slavery trade), the dynamics of oppression are the same, as is the “white problem”. I shall also restrict myself in this paper to people who call themselves Black and those who call themselves White; although, again, I believe the dynamics are generally applicable across all ethnic categories of “Other” and especially for People of Color.

## The “white problem” and our colonial heritage

The British invasion and subsequent colonisation of Australia began the process whereby whiteness became constructed and then institutionalised (Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Even the very labels of “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” are white constructs. As Sarah Maddison (2019) observes, before the British invasion of Australia, there were no “Indigenous” or “Aboriginal” people. The words “Indigenous” or “Aborigine” are generic European terms applied to over 500 small autonomous groups or nations, each with its own language, culture, law, and customs. None of these groups, or “mobs” as they are now colloquially called, ever gave consent to the Europeans to take over their land. All of these mobs are now dispossessed First Nations people who have never willingly ceded their lands or their autonomy. As an act of asserting their sovereignty and denying the colonial imposition, many Blacks in the country called Australia by Whites, describe themselves in terms of their “mob” (specific cultural grouping) not as Black Australians. Where I can, I use their terms.

Maddison, and others in Australia sensitive to the issues of the white problem, use the term “settler” for non-Indigenous people in order to convey the reality of the ongoing power relations in settler-colonial societies. Maddison (2019) also emphasizes the importance of recognizing that there are no good settlers, no good colonisers—all settlers are complicit in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples, intended or otherwise, well-meant or not.

This recognition that there are no “good” settlers, is equally applicable to all other countries where non-Indigenous colonisers impose their rule and their culture on those that were there before them—such as the Saami people whose territory is now covered by parts of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia, and the many different tribes of First Nations people whose territory was settled by the white colonists in the US and in Canada. The proposition also holds where the colonisers import Black slaves into their colonised country as a means of furthering their colonial power. In fact, you could well say that this proposition holds for all countries who extended their political and economic power through an imperialist policy.

Many Whites refuse to accept their complicity in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous people or the ongoing oppression of Blacks who were originally imported as slaves. At the least, any such acknowledgement is accompanied by the view that Whites were the winners in the battle over territory, often because of the assumed inherent superiority of Whites. In Australia, colonialism was premised on the idea of *terra nullius*, justifying ownership simply by seizure of what was asserted to be empty land. And even as recently as 2018, an Australian Prime Minister was documented as saying there was nothing but bush when the white settlers came—with the direct implication that the land was therefore worth taking (Watego, 2021). Alternatively, it is claimed, and often by politicians, that all of us, Black and White were settlers at some time in our country's history, and thus all of us, Black and White, have displaced some other culture. For

example, Dunbar-Ortiz (2021) describes how “a nation of immigrants” is a popular US story, pointing by way of example to John F. Kennedy’s 1958 claim that “every American that ever lived, with the exception of one group, was either an immigrant himself or a descendant of immigrants.” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2021, pp. xiv-xv). In Australia, politicians have been known to point to the presumed (and generally unsubstantiated) fact that our indigenous people displaced some other people centuries earlier.

Claims of the above nature can be disputed by pointing to empirical evidence that, for example, the color of a person’s skin does not make them more or less superior/inferior. Other claims can be countered by adding missing information or evidence such as the fact that the United States was well populated by First Nations people before any immigrants arrived. I wish to sidestep this countering and disputing process by changing the game here. Rather than a game of fact I want to claim it is a moral game: one of what ought we to do and believe about how we as Whites relate with Blacks. It is this moral game that frames the rest of this paper.

## ***Dynamics of dispossession***

Every settler lives in a cultural milieu which perpetuates a sense of white superiority and privilege—even if we don’t personally believe it. Even the kind-hearted and well-intended White typically relies on a compendium of cultural resources that have emerged from a history of engagement which, implicitly or explicitly, presumes the inferiority of Blacks. And this, often centuries long, history of engagement creates the particular dynamic between Whites and Blacks that brings about the “white problem”. I can identify at least three tactical manoeuvres in the creation and perpetuation of this white problem.

### **1. Create the problem as a “black problem”**

In a lecture in 2000, Yawuru man, and now federal Australian senator, Patrick Dodson, argued that for all governments, at all stages in Australia’s post-invasion history, policy has been about

*“...their solutions to us as the problem...The problem of our being here. The problem of our disposal! The problem of our assimilation! And the problem of having us appreciative of all that governments have done ‘for our own good’.”*  
(Maddison, 2019)

Or, consider the observation of Chelsea Watego, a Mununjali and South Sea Islander woman:

*“Within the current Indigenous social policy context of gap closing, the Aborigine is constructed as a problem: a problem that can be solved statistically, through increased control and surveillance by the state”* (Watego, 2021, p. 54).

Du Bois, an early and insightful Afro-American scholar, also describes the same phenomenon for Blacks in the US when he asks himself, rhetorically, about how it feels to be a problem and answers “strange” (1903/1994). Somehow, being labelled “a problem” does not seem to fit easily with the Black experience, only that of Whites.

As has been observed on numerous occasions, the way in which a problem is defined becomes, in essence, the starting point for the solution. So, when we define the problem as a black one, or that Blacks are the problem or have the problem, the white focus is turned onto Blacks and white solutions are generated for fixing Blacks and their situation.

## **2. Set up the parameters for understanding the problem in white colonial terms**

Chelsea Watego offers a compelling critique of white colonial literature in which there is an all-knowing “white witness”. As she describes it, “[t]he power of the white witness is not in their literary capabilities, but rather in their willingness to sustain coloniser mythologising of ‘the Aboriginal problem’.” (Watego, 2021, p. 56). In describing this, she goes on to write about the “storytelling war” in which there are any number of stories about Blackfellas (colloquial name for themselves) that while unrecognisable in terms of actually describing their being in the world are infinitely recognisable “as oppressive instruments that inform social policy and regulate even the most mundane daily encounters, from which we cannot escape” (Watego, 2021, p. 83).

Clare Land (2015), a Black ally, describes the white person trying to help Indigenous people as so often either a guilty liberal, conservative nationalist, or honorary Black, all of whom become part of the revolving door of Whites trying to help Blacks. In particular, Land (2015) points to a common problematic mode of solidarity that arises from the national settler pastime of worrying about Indigenous people and the felt need to “help them”. Yet, so often, this need to help is interpreted within a white frame of understanding that sees Blacks as lacking in some pre-determined white construal of the problem. In particular, white supporters of Blacks too often fail to understand the importance of Indigenous control over Indigenous affairs and the consequent importance of their definitions of their problems. Clare Land’s account of these nice Whites trying to help Blacks bears a striking parallel with Diangelo’s (2019) account of nice white progressives in the US where their desire to help “the black problem” ends up perpetuating racism rather than resolving it.

## **3. Deracialise whiteness**

Luke Pearson, a Gamilaroi man, describes the act of deracialisation as follows:

*“This act of deracialising whiteness, while continuing the racialisation of everyone else, has created what is often described as “the invisibility of whiteness”. This invisibility leaves whiteness unnamed but ever present. It is the unspoken norm from which everyone else deviates.” (Pearson, 2022)*

As Pearson goes on to write, racial invisibility has been great for white people. It has let them keep the land, the law, the status quo and all the power, while not having to be reminded of the white supremacist means by which they attained them and which they employ every day to justify keeping them. In the US, Marvin Brown (2021), a White academic, refers to this white way of seeing as “white distortion”—where the power that arises from being White in a white man’s world seems “natural”.

White colonials are so much the norm, that their whiteness is never mentioned. You can, for example, see it in accounts of gatherings that typically refer to “a lot of Australians and some Blacks” or, as I heard on the day of writing this, Mitch McConnell talking in the US about “Americans and Black Americans”.

Deracialisation also helps to further establish the white colonial person as the standard by which all others are judged. This inevitably places the Black person in an inferior position to Whites and raises a significant moral dilemma. Martin Luther King describes the import of this as follows:

*In their relations with Negroes, white people discovered that they had rejected the very center of their own ethical professions. They could not face the triumph of their lesser instincts and simultaneously have peace within. And so, to gain it, they rationalized—insisting that the unfortunate Negro, being less than human, deserved and even enjoyed second class status.*

*They argued that his inferior social, economic and political position was good for him. He was incapable of advancing beyond a fixed position and would therefore be happier if encouraged not to attempt the impossible. He is subjugated by a superior people with an advanced way of life. The “master race” will be able to civilize him to a limited degree, if only he will be true to his inferior nature and stay in his place. (King, 1956).*

In the US, John Stewart, a white academic, has more recently observed:

*In the U.S., we Whites have been racialized as White through violence and oppression. White racial identity has been constituted (socially constructed) in ways designed to systematically disadvantage Blacks and others. We are what one author calls “heirs of oppression. (Corlett, 2010). This is our undeniable moral history and it generates our moral challenge. (Stewart, 2016, p. 3)*

### ***The moral challenge and decolonizing practices***

John Stewart (2016) is right to raise racialisation and its consequences as a moral issue and a particular moral challenge for us Whites. As I was describing the above features of the colonial racialisation tactical moves, it struck me quite forcefully how my account of the three major practices bore striking parallels with Bauman’s (1999) account of the social manipulation of morality. Bauman maintained that social organization is able to neutralize the impact of moral action through three complementary arrangements.

Bauman describes the first move as occurring when the distance between action and consequence is stretched so far it is not possible to understand the moral impact of actions. To put this in the racial context, when the problem is conceived as a Black problem and the solutions are implemented by Whites, it is simply not possible for Whites to directly experience the consequences of their white-conceived solutions.

Second, those who might feel the moral import of another's actions are denied any encountering space. Blacks rarely, if at all, get the opportunity to encounter the Whites in charge of their "solutions" and so the Whites never get to see what Bauman calls the "moral glare". This is particularly the case in Australia, where the actual number of Blackfellas is relatively low and their locations are typically physically separate from those of white administrators.

Third, those who may feel the import of another's action are dissembled; they are turned from a human being into a collection of attributes or traits in aggregate form. Chelsea Watego (2021) saw this is a particular problem, especially from her experience as an Indigenous health professional in Australia. As she put it, the Aborigine becomes nothing more than "a problem that can be solved statistically, through increased control and surveillance by the state."

To face this moral challenge head on means we have to, at the least, address the above three complementary arrangements. We have to reconstrue the problem as a white problem so we can turn the consequences onto ourselves and explore them directly. We have to create encountering spaces so we, as Whites, can feel the moral glare of Blacks. And we need to see each and every Black person as a whole person with their own particular ways of knowing and being.

In the literature that has evolved around the moral import of colonial practices, these changes are clearly a part of what has been labelled "decolonizing practices." Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), a preeminent Maori (New Zealand) scholar in this area, sees the role of decolonizing methodologies as follows:

*The exercise of decolonizing methodologies has to do more than critique colonialism. It has to open up different possibilities for understanding and knowing the world differently and offering different solutions to problems caused by colonialism and the failure of the power structures to address these historic conditions.*

According to Land (2015), in the Australian context, an Indigenous, decolonizing research paradigm both tells marginalized Indigenous stories and encourages Whites' stories that interrogate whiteness and its privilege. Korff (2021) also talks about the importance of listening to the voices of Indigenous people as part of the decolonisation process.

In what I've written so far, I have included Indigenous stories and have deliberately used quotes as much as possible so we can hear their voices. For me, this is one way in which

we Whites can subject ourselves to the moral glare of Blacks. Chelsea Watego (2021) has been a powerful voice for me in developing my appreciation of the white problem in Australia. From her story I have identified three important decolonizing practices that we should take seriously.

### **1. Recognizing sovereignty before equity**

Recognizing sovereignty is a constant theme in the Blackfella story in Australia. As a cultural group of people who were resident in Australia long before the white colonialists imposed their rule, the necessity for the indigenous people to have their sovereignty recognised is paramount. From listening to their voices, they see sovereignty in terms of both their land and their culture, as well as a personal sovereignty or autonomy to be what they are. The necessity for this multi-faceted sense of sovereignty goes hand-in-hand with the idea of self-determination.

Stephen Cornell from the Native Nations Institute in the US argues that self-determination has been the only overarching policy that has shown real evidence of actually improving the condition of First Nations people, precisely because self-determination puts substantive decision-making power into their hands (Cornell, 2015). Drawing on decades of research on the resurgence and success of First Nations people, Cornell argues that three important things happen when Indigenous peoples gain power over their own affairs. In the first instance, settler-bureaucratic priorities are replaced by Indigenous priorities and the consequent Indigenous support for initiatives and programs. Second, decisions begin to reflect local First Nations' knowledge and concerns. As Cornell describes it, one of the great fantasies of colonialism, still alive in the Indigenous affairs bureaucracies of the world, is the idea that 'we know what's best for you'. But we white colonialists don't. And the third thing that happens is that decisions get linked to consequences. When Indigenous peoples themselves are in charge, they pay the price for bad decisions and reap the rewards of good ones. Jurisdiction, in other words, creates accountability (Maddison, 2019)

There is a further implication of this insistence on sovereignty that Chelsea Watego points to when she speaks about a critical race theory, "one which foregrounds sovereignty over equity" (Watego, 2021, p. 107). This sense of putting sovereignty first, rather than equity, raises an important question about the very notion of racial justice. It would seem that when equity is promoted it is likely to be promoted within a white colonial framework. Equity may be important for Whites, but what counts as equity in Black terms may be something quite different. Amy McQuire (2022), a Darumbal and South Sea Islander woman, explicitly talks about Black justice in terms of sovereignty.

While the importance of sovereignty to Blacks who are not First Nations people, may not technically be appropriate, the issue about what counts as justice is still pertinent, especially when we ask who defines the notion of justice?

## 2. Reconstructing resistance

In the first paper on racial justice (Penman, 2022), I talked about the importance of resistance in working towards racial justice. Most of us are familiar with the idea of resistance as expressed in marches, protests and the like, where resistance is typically demonstrated in a group context. However, in that first paper, I argued for the importance of distinguishing between destructive and creative resistance (Afuape, 2011).

In a general sense, creative resistance opens up new possibilities and embraces the difference between Blacks and Whites, rather than suppresses, denies or rejects the difference. I believe, however, that we need to consider a more nuanced sense in which we take into account who is doing the resisting, creative or otherwise, and what it is that we are actually resisting.

Consider this account of resistance from Chelsea Watego (and note that “Aunty” is a term of respect for a female elder in Indigenous mobs) that clearly voices a Black sense:

*Aunty Lilla called into question my reliance upon resistance. Resistance she felt betrayed the groundedness of Indigenous sovereignty. ‘We haven’t moved’ she said. ‘We are holding our ground and they just keep battering us, but we are standing strong.’ So in lieu of resistance, I have talked about Indigenous presence as one of insistence and persistence. You see when our sovereignty is framed as resistance, as agitation, as aggression, it is as though we are the antagonists. But we are not. (Watego, 2021, xii-xiii)*

I think this reframing makes a subtle but critical difference. It points to what is really at stake: a Black person’s sense of personal and cultural autonomy. Blacks need to be, as Watego (2021) puts it, insisting on their own self and cultural definition from within their own cultural frame. To resist in the way described by Watego—as agitation and aggression—is to engage in what Martin Luther King (Serwar, 2019) and Taiwo Afuape (2011), in their very different ways, described as negative resistance. The sense of creative resistances as insistence, also helps to point us Whites in particular directions if we want to act as allies. Rather than agitating on behalf of Blacks we need to be developing ways in which we can show respect for their autonomy and most, importantly, ways that change our sense of self as Whites.

## 3. Embracing being relational people over colonising people

Relationality is central to the Black way of being in Australia. For Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Goenpul woman from Minjerrabah (Stradbroke Island), Quandamooka First Nation (Moreton Bay) in Queensland, and an international leader in whiteness studies, relationality is where it all begins: the self is part of others and others are part of the self within and across generations. (Moreton-Robinson, 2021)

In the introduction to Chelsea Watego’s book, *Another Day in the Colony*, (Aunty) Lilla Watson observes how Wategos’ stories are told in an “ethics of practice grounded in an

indigenous terms of reference in which knowledge is embodied and relational" (Watego, 2021, p. 1). Watego draws on this relational framework throughout her confronting and moving account of being a Blackfella in a white colony today. Towards the close of her book, she makes a very pertinent distinction "between a colonising people and a relational people" (Watego, 2021, p. 191), that offers us a way forward. How can we Whites change from being a colonising people that are part of the "white problem" to being a relational people that embrace our differences and honour our obligations to others?

In the next part of this paper, I want to take the ideas and arguments offered in the decolonising literature described in this first part, and reconsider them within a relational framework of understanding, drawing on the Theory of the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) to do so. This relational framework allows us to engage in the decolonizing practices of recognizing the role of Whites in their relations with Blacks as the core of the racial problem. These practices also mean we Whites own the white problem and in doing so expose ourselves to the moral glare of Blacks while being open to them as a whole person.

## **The relationally responsive nature of justice**

In the first part of this paper, my focus has been on explicating the idea of "the white problem" and how it brings about racial injustice. This is a significant turn-about from the conventional construal of the "black problem" and our response to it. This turn-about is intended to bring to the fore Whites' responsibility in continuing racial injustice. It is also intended to place focus on where the onus for change lies for us Whites. It is not the responsibility of Whites to help resolve the so-called "black problem"; rather it is the responsibility of Whites to change ourselves. If we do change ourselves, perhaps, as James Baldwin (2021) said, the black problem will no longer exist.

There are some interesting examples in the decolonization/white studies literature of what these changes to Whites' understanding of their problem could like look. Land (2015), a Black ally, describes a series of projects in Australia that appeal to her in this regard; especially because they recognise that, while at this time it is not possible to abolish whiteness or move beyond race categories, it is possible to reconstruct racism. The projects she cites include trying to unlearn whiteness; cultivating a sense of self that predisposes a White to act in ways that acknowledges their privilege and deals with it; practising a playful world-travelling; and being hyper, but pessimistically, active to keep Whites aware of the danger of "ontological expansiveness".

Smith (2021), a Maori scholar, discusses different types of decolonisation projects that she categorises as indigenizing, intervening, reading, reframing and re-storying. These are all important because they do more than critique colonialism. They help to open up different possibilities for understanding and knowing the world that do not rely on a

colonial world view. The importance of the need for a different world view was also emphasised by Watego (2021), when she talks about the importance of being a relational people over a colonial people.

A relational framework not only offers a world view that is potentially more compatible with a Blackfella's way of understanding the world, it also offers a way of further understanding how we Whites can change from being part of the "white problem" to being a relational people that understands justice as a relational phenomenon. When we adopt a relational framework, we actually change the problem definition as expressed in the decolonisation/white studies literature. While the whiteness studies and decolonizing literatures have construed the problem as residing in Whites, this, in effect, ignores the context in which the problem is expressed. Instead, if we construe the problem as how Whites relate with Blacks, then we call forth a different set of considerations that call for a nuanced, and hopefully more liberating, sense of racial justice.

Robin Diangelo, a white academic in the US, has proposed the notion of "radical relationality" as a way of capturing the importance of relationship when it comes to racial justice. She describes it as follows:

*[R]adical relationality—liberatory action informed by the recognition that all living things are interconnected and do not exist independently—is foundational to ending racism. Radical relationality is anathema to white supremacy and the patriarchy it issued from, and can ameliorate the effects of racial weathering while building the coalitions necessary for systemic change. (Diangelo, 2019, p. 14)*

Such a proposal points us in the right direction. However, as with the whiteness and decolonisation studies mentioned earlier, Diangelo's sense of a relational framework is undeveloped or limited. Here I am proposing to draw on the idea of a relationally-responsive, and responsible, form of racial justice that I elaborated on in the first paper in this justice series (Penman, 2022).

There I argued how such a relational framework calls for a tectonic shift in how we construe the issues and how we respond to a perceived need for change. And, although tectonic, this move is also empowering as the onus of responsibility shifts from the state, or other outside forces and/or institutions, to that of people-in-relation. The primary locus of change lies in the joint action, not in structural reconfigurations in society at large. I am not denying that structural reforms can, and do, play a role. However, without the relational changes such structural changes fall far short of the, usually good, intent. As Diangelo (2019) observes in the US, structural policy changes only go so far and she points to the example of US schools remaining largely segregated despite strong support from a majority of whites for the 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. And as Bond & Singh (2020) note for Australia, the "closing the gap" policy of the then Liberal

government for improving Indigenous health has consistently failed over 10 years to meet the health targets. Rather than more of the same, Bond & Singh argue “if we are committed to closing the gap, we should be committed to transforming relationships of power between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.” (Bond & Singh, 2020, p.198)

Conventional structural efforts have limited impact because, in part, they are usually based on Whites trying to resolve the “black problem” or “helping Blacks” and, as a consequence, they all too often act to free Whites from the moral responsibility of how we relate with Blacks as whole people. Instead, what I am proposing here is that we make the idea of transforming the relationships between Blacks and Whites as a higher-order priority, or a higher-order context for action, making any structural reforms a lower-order priority that, although maybe necessary, are by no means sufficient, to the overall task of racial justice.

When we take on board the proposed relational framework, the locus for change is squarely on the joint action and, concomitantly, the impetus for change shifts from a rights-based argument to an obligation-based sensibility. A rights-based approach starts from the perspective of the individual and their entitlements: a person has a right to speak, vote, not be discriminated against, and so on. This rights-based approach is one usually adopted by the typical social justice advocate. In contrast, an obligation-based approach arising from the CMM ethos starts from the perspective of the other and asks how we ought to communicate with them. Given our current focus on racial justice, the shift from rights to obligations moves our focus from advocating for the rights of Blacks, to reflecting on how we, as Whites, can meet our obligation to the other as Black.

I don't want to suggest that rights are unimportant but, from a relational framework, our obligation to the other is primary. As Levinas has argued (e.g. see Pinchevski, 2005), because we are irreducibly relational beings our primary ethic resides in being responsive and responsible to the call of the other. From the Levinasian perspective, it is not the presence of I, the participant, that counts, but rather the extent to which the other commands responsibility from I. As a simple analogy, think about our everyday encounters with people in the street, where once you have caught the eye of the other you feel compelled to acknowledge the other (well, at least some of us do). In the same manner we can feel the call of the other whenever we are conscious of that other. It is this call of the other that acts as the underlying logical force for action and that is, almost by definition, missing in racially unjust practices. Our challenge here is to consider how we can call on a felt sense of obligation to the other to guide us in re-storying our sense of whiteness.

At this point I want to draw attention to three important considerations. First, being able to develop more complex and richer stories to live by requires changes to both our perceptual and communication skills and that these necessary changes are profound. In other words, it is not enough to merely come up with a different story out of thin air that, superficially at least, appears to reflect a different story of “whiteness”. The stories need to be worked on, to emerge from lived experience.

Second, a new story has to emerge from the lived experience of our relating with others—from out of the joint action—and our reflections on this relating. This relating and reflecting process has to provide us with sufficient social resources for maintaining and elaborating the new, and better, story of whiteness.

Third, the resources for a better story emerge out of a “community” of relating. By this I mean, the resources need to evolve from many different relationships and many of these will be casual, one-off or only occasional meetings. Indeed, for many Whites, and certainly those in Australia, the chance of anything more when it comes to meetings between Whites and Blacks is quite low. Even in other countries, the differences between races are such that many of the interactions between them are likely to be of a non-intimate form. These non-intimate forms include the public social worlds we move in with our neighbours, co-workers, casual acquaintances and the like. It is our encounters in these public social worlds that act as an important social resource for generating a better story,

With the above considerations in mind, there are three questions I want to address. What skills can we bring into play to best meet our primary ethical obligation to Black others in our everyday public life? What social resources can we construct that honor this primary ethical obligation? And how can we reconstrue our relating to become more racially just?

## **The dynamics of re-storying**

Re-storying is not a simple matter, especially when we are concerned with something as culturally embedded as the “white problem”. We have many different stories by which we live our lives and they can be complexly related. Changing one story impacts on and can be impacted by other stories. The CMM hierarchy of meaning model captures this complexity.

In the first paper on racial justice (Penman, 2022), I used the CMM hierarchy of meaning framework as a way of accounting for the interpersonal dynamics that can emerge in racially challenging situations. In CMM terms, we are always acting and making/managing meaning within multiple contextual levels of meaning. Some of these contexts include our definitions of the episode (the situation at hand), our relationship (intimate friends, casual acquaintances, etc.), our self (e.g. ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, political, religious, national), organizational/group/ family cultures, world-views or philosophical stances, and many more. It may be helpful to think of these various contexts as nesting one within another. Larger (or higher-order) contexts can be thought of as encompassing smaller (or lower-order) contexts and thus influencing the action and meaning making that takes place.

The impact of the different contextual levels on each other in meaning-making is described in CMM terms in terms of logical forces. Simply put, logical force is the

pressure or sense of obligation we feel to respond in one way and not another. We can experience different types of forces that operate on us in different ways. One of the more significant forces arises from our understanding of the context in which we are interacting with another.

Taiwo Afuape (2021) argues that racism acts as the highest order frame in dominant white cultures, especially where ethnocentrism is the norm, and this acts as a powerful contextual force affecting all meanings. As such we have cultural stories of white superiority affecting, or bringing about, our lower-order stories of relationships, life-scripts, and organization. In contrast, implicative, or reflexive, force arises when our current actions with another are intended to directly affect the nature of the context in which it is occurring. Rather than feeling pressure from the context, we apply pressure to change or intentionally reaffirm the understanding of the higher order context. The challenge here, then, is to create a way for Whites to relate with Blacks that has a reflexive impact on the higher order racially imbued cultural context

### ***Using respect as our guiding principle***

When we focus on interactions in everyday public life, as we are here, intimacy is not a relevant yardstick for guiding those interactions or assessing their quality. And yet, as Richard Sennet (e.g. 1976, 2003) has astutely pointed out, our “ideology of intimacy” makes it much harder for us to engage in everyday public life in any meaningful, yet non-intimate, way. We, in fact, simply don’t know how to engage in public life in such a way that community prospers. Instead, any encounter is treated either as having the potential for ensuing intimate friendship or as not worthy of continuing with because it does not have intimate potential. According to Sennet, every time we reject, or avoid, non-intimate encounters with others: on public life:

*No insult is offered the other person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not seen—as a full human being whose presence matters. When a society treats the mass of people in this way, singling out only a few for recognition, it creates a scarcity of respect. (Sennet, 2003, p. 3)*

The demand for recognition is a key element in many arguments on behalf of minority groups, including those racially discriminated against. According to Taylor’s account of the politics of recognition:

*The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (Taylor, 1994, p. 25)*

Both Sennet and Taylor point to recognition and the subsequent display of respect as a vital ingredient in quality non-intimate encounters and Rom Harré, a distinguished British philosopher, elaborates on this importance further. For Harré, “the most fundamental of all the structural principles around which human life is organised is that which informs the institutions of respect and contempt (Harré, 1978, p.15). And even though his treatise was developed over 40 years ago now, we have no reason to doubt the same claim still holds. For Harré, this fundamental dimension of respect and contempt is of significant value in generating accounts of human social life for at least three major reasons.

First, while making no claim to universality, Harré does claim that respect and contempt are expressed widely across many societies and social practices. Showing and feeling respect and contempt seems to capture a common human experience, albeit the precise ways we express the feelings may vary.

Second, respect and contempt refer to both publicly expressed attitudes and social acts as well as to private feelings one may have for another and it is not necessarily the case that the public expression matches the private feelings. Indeed, as Harré points out, much giving of public respect and contempt is ritualized and is enacted regardless of whether the feelings match. The discrepancies between public and private here can contribute to some complex and even stressful interpersonal dynamics.

Third, respect and contempt are what Harré calls, “socially marked relations”: any act of respect or contempt calls for a reciprocated action that marks the nature of the relationship between the two people. You may show respect for another by admiring their action/person or having due regard for them as a person and the other accepts this with some form of acknowledgment, from condescension to mutual respect. In contrast you may show contempt, by disdain, denigrating or ignoring the other, to which the other can respond in a servile manner, show resentment or even retaliation. Whatever the response, it is the fact that an act along the respect-contempt continuum calls forth a response on the same continuum.

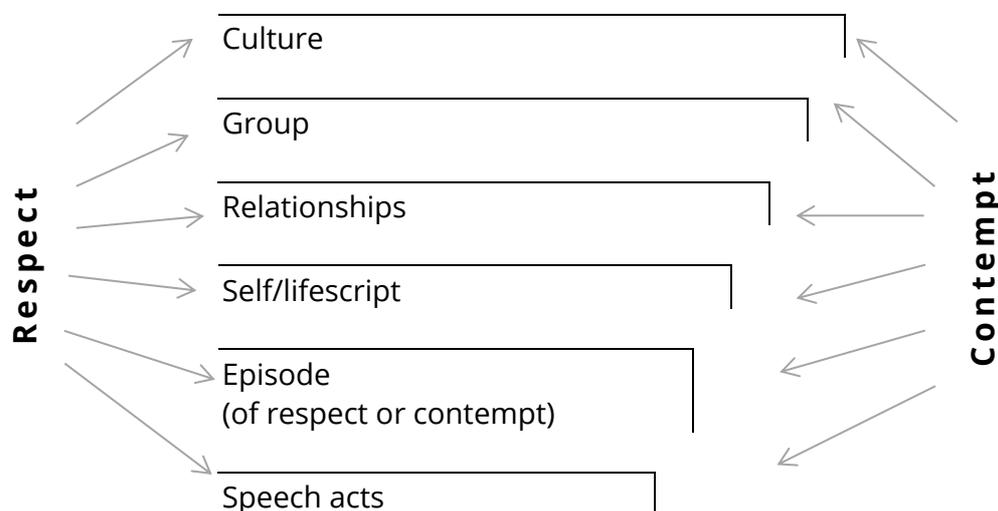
Harré’s (1978) elaboration of the respect-contempt dimension, helps us in our considerations here in a number of ways. First, the show of respect fits the relational requirement outlined earlier of meeting our primary obligation to the other, regardless of difference. Because respect is, as Harré points out, a marker of relational quality, it by default means we are recognising the call of the other on our actions. The demonstration of respect also fulfills Diangelo’s broad requirement for a “radical relationality”: viz. that it is “informed by the recognition that all living things are interconnected and do not exist independently” (Diangelo, 2019, p. 14).

Second, the respect-contempt dimension can be used to elaborate a relational sense of justice that does not rely on the equity principle. In part 1 of this paper, I pointed to this idea of equity as being far less important than the idea of sovereignty for Indigenous people. It is not the equal treatment (or attempt at it by Whites) that is crucial for justice

in an Indigenous framework, but the recognition of the sovereignty of those people. The idea of equity is also problematic when you ask the question of on whose terms is equity measured? As Chelsea Watego (2021) pointed out in her account of the white problem, the yardsticks by which Whites measure “justice” are white yardsticks, not black ones. Instead of equity, then, as the guiding principle for assessing justice, I would like to propose that showing respect to the other opens up new possibilities for justice that evades the “white problem”.

Third, in adopting respect as a guiding principle for our re-storying, we are led in different behavioural directions. Notably, the very act of showing respect as a White, makes it very hard to impossible to act in a superior or privileged way and, at the same time allows us to interact well with others without the necessity for intimacy.

Fourth, the guiding principle of respect is applicable across the many different levels of our hierarchy of meanings. John Burnham’s (2017) valuable modification to the CMM hierarchy of meaning model shows us how the same theme, or dimension, can run through all levels of the hierarchy. Burnham captures this with a vertical dimension on the hierarchy of meaning and actually illustrates it directly using the theme of respect and contempt. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below (adapted from Jensen, 2020, p. 50).



**Figure 1. Levels of meaning and the vertical dimensions of respect and contempt**

Figure 1 captures the idea that each level of meaning in the hierarchy can be described in terms of respect (or contempt). We can show respect in our greeting of another, (speech act); describe a respectful or disrespectful encounter with another (episode

level); we can describe an important life script as one of being respectful to all others; we can nominate respect from others as a key requirement in relationships; and we can describe our cultural stories along a respect-contempt dimension. We can effect change at any of these levels, however, the nature of the change needs to have an upward implicative force on our higher order social and cultural stories, as well as a reinforcing/respectful force on lower-level stories.

Given that the primary aim of re-storying the white problem is to change the stories by which we Whites live our social lives, I would suggest that one primary point of leverage here is to adopt the overarching theme of “insisting on being respectful to all” in the lifescipt of Whites. When this theme is implemented in a heart-felt manner, it goes well beyond simply saying I am a “non-racist” or an “anti-racist”. The latter descriptive claim however well-intended, does not necessarily challenge the superiority/privileged aspect of being a White; it is far narrower in scope in terms of relational implications and does not directly implicate positive action.

I’d also like to draw attention again to Chelsea Watego’s (2021) distinction between resistance and insistence and its implication for action. While we construe our actions as Whites as one of resistance, in the form of being anti-racist, we are in effect agitating for the resolution of a “black problem”. That is what we earlier called negative resistance. In contrast, the sense of creative resistances as insistence, helps to point us Whites in particular directions to deal with our own problem. Rather than agitating on behalf of Blacks we need to be developing ways in which we can show respect for their autonomy and most, importantly, ways that change our sense of self as Whites in relation to Blacks.

### ***Being respectful through listening***

At the beginning of this paper, I wrote about the importance of listening to the voices of Indigenous people as part of the decolonisation process and I consciously chose to use quotes from Indigenous people as much as possible so we can hear their voices. For me, this is one way in which we Whites can subject ourselves to the moral glare of Blacks and in doing so we can truly show respect.

The idea of listening has been subject to various elaborations over the years and distinctions have been made between different forms, including active and dialogic (Stewart & Thomas, 1995). Here I propose that dialogic listening is the most important form for providing the grist for re-storying our own white self-concept.

Dialogic listening is a special form of listening that is a prerequisite for dialogue; indeed, it is usually asserted that dialogue cannot occur without this form of listening that lets the other happen to us. Dialogic listening can be contrasted with hearing; where the former requires an engaged attention to the other, while the latter is merely aural perception. Moreover, this active engaged attention requires more than just focused listening: it also needs listening-by-questioning—a form which preserves an orientation

to openness, prevents premature closure and which involves genuine curiosity designed to open up the other.

This idea of dialogic listening lies at the heart of the broader understanding of dialogic civility that I have argued is an overarching framework for living with difference (e.g. Penman, 2022; Penman 2021b). While not acknowledged directly as such by the original proposer of the idea of dialogic civility (Arnett, 2001), it makes sense to argue that acting in a dialogically civil manner calls for listening and listening profoundly at that. Lisbeth Lipari captures this link between dialogic civility, and listening thus: listening is the “dwelling place from where we offer our ethical response, our hospitality, to the other and the world” (2010, p. 350). In like manner, John Shotter (2009) talks about this way of listening as one that recognizes and realizes the world of the other through responsive talking—a way of seeking in one’s talk to afford the other opportunities to tell of themselves—and a way of listening that tells the other they have been heard. Without this form of listening, we proceed in a manner oblivious to the call of the other: we act, as Buber would say, in a seeming (c.f. being) manner

Lisbeth Lipari (2004) has explored this form of listening specifically in terms of Buber’s and Levinas’ arguments and the textual encounters between them. She uses her considerations to propose that the relation with alterity, or otherness, in communication ethics is enacted primarily through the process of listening rather than speaking. As she describes it (Lipari, 2004), listening to the alterity of the other means that you have given the other the rights to determine meaning and have renounced your own inclination to control. By way of contrast, you are merely hearing when you fix the meaning of your words over the other.

Recalling the observation made by Watego (2021) about the “all-knowing white witness”, it seems clear that the white witness hears but does not listen. The white witness imposes their white meaning with their coloniser mythologising of the Black problem. In contrast, dialogic listening is the essential mechanism for developing and implementing the range of decolonising practices described by Smith (2021) and Land (2015).

It is important to emphasize here that the form of dialogic listening that I am describing is not the same as empathic listening. With empathic listening emphasis is placed on getting into the other’s “shoes” and thus being able to feel what the other is experiencing. In contrast, dialogic listening orients participants to their joint activity where each participant’s understanding is seen as a co-constructed process. In dialogic listening the focus is on what is going on between the participants, not what is inside their heads.

There is, however, some merit in acknowledging that there are different forms of empathy (McGonigal, 2016). As described above, empathic listening relies on what McGonigal calls soft empathy. Soft empathy is feeling-based such that when you see or hear of someone else experiencing something that you’ve experienced, you feel for them. On the other hand, hard empathy is more cognitive-based and is called for when

you have not had a similar experience to the other. Hard empathy is what we need when we are engaging as Whites with Black others.

As McGonigal (2016) points out hard empathy takes practice. We have to work at it by imagining what it might be like to experience what the other talks about, even if you have not had such an experience. Dialogic listening can play an important part in developing our imagination, especially when we engage in that aspect of listening described by Shotter (2009) that recognizes and realizes the world of the other through responsive talking—a way of seeking in one's talk to afford the other opportunities to tell of themselves.

### ***Being relationally reflexive and changing***

Being respectful and listening and talking responsively to Black persons, opens the way for change through the co-construction of new meanings and understandings that have not been imposed by Whites and thus do not reflect the dominant white story. This change becomes possible through the exercise of reflexivity. In its simplest sense, we are acting reflexively whenever we consider ourselves in relation to our context. However, when we are considering our specific social context, especially with different others, we need to exercise relational reflexivity.

In the preceding paper on racial justice (Penman, 2022), I described relational reflexivity as the capacity to be both aware of, and to reflect on, our relationships with others. According to John Burnham (2005), this form of reflexivity creates opportunities for considering, exploring and experimenting with different ways of relating. When it comes to racial injustice experienced in interpersonal encounters, the capacity to be relationally reflexive and to use it creatively is a key element in bringing about change. And one of the best ways of cultivating this relational reflexivity is to ask questions. Asking questions is also one of the key requirements of dialogical listening, particularly when the questions act to afford the other opportunities to tell of themselves.

### **Reflexive questioning**

While asking questions is typically something we do with others, here I would like to suggest that if we are to genuinely change the white story for ourselves we need to question ourselves. We need to be asking questions of ourselves specifically in terms of how we relate with Black people. In effect, we need to interrogate our relating and I can think of no better way to do this than through the use of systemic questioning.

The idea of systemic questioning was first introduced in the family therapy context and linked directly to CMM theory by Karl Tomm (1987, 1988) shortly after. Tomm observed that certain forms of questions made what he called circular assumptions about the nature of how we think and act with each other, and communication in particular was seen to be a circular, interactive process of co-creation. He identified two forms of questioning based on this circular assumption: circular and reflexive. For Tomm, circular

questions are exploratory and intended to bring forth the "patterns that connect" persons, objects, actions, perceptions, ideas, feelings, events, beliefs, contexts, and so on, in recurrent or cybernetic circuits." (Tomm, 1988, p. 5). Reflexive questions, on the other hand, are "oriented toward enabling clients or families to generate new patterns of cognition and behavior on their own. The therapist adopts a facilitative posture and deliberately asks those kinds of questions that are liable to open up new possibilities for self healing." (Tomm, 1987, p. 167)

This distinction of Tomm's—between circular and reflexive questions—seems to have fallen by the wayside, with most people adopting the category of circular as the broader one that also includes the reflexive form (e.g. see Cronen, Lang & Lang, 2007; McKay, 2021). Yet I find some merit in drawing on the specific idea of reflexive questioning for further developing our explorations in re-storying here.

Tomm (1988) developed this idea of reflexive questions directly from CMM theory and particular on his understanding that reflexivity is an inherent feature of the relationships among meanings within the belief systems that guide communicative actions. That in itself is important to the account of re-storying being developed here however further importance arises from the assertion by Barnett Pearce that reflexive awareness of coordination patterns is one core requirement for a better social world (Lannamann, 2014). Moreover, by focusing on the specific form of reflexive questions we continue to reinforce our development of relational reflexivity.

If we take Tomm's (1987, 1988) definition of reflexive questioning and reconsider it in the light of re-storying, reflexive questions are intended to trigger ourselves and others-in-relation to reflect upon the implications of current understandings and actions in relation to the other(s) and to consider new options. In particular, reflexive questions are intended to have a generative effect on the persons-in-relation. Reflexive questions also focus heavily on an explicit recognition of the autonomy of the people-in-relation in determining the nature of the change. generated

Tomm (1987) identified eight groupings of reflexive questions, although he acknowledged that his list is by no means exhaustive. Three of the eight groups seem to be particularly relevant for Whites to ask themselves in their journey towards re-storying the "white problem".

The first group consists of future-oriented questions. These are an important set of questions and are intended to help the person-in-relation see beyond the current problem situation and step away from past difficulties. Their intent is, in effect, to help guide the person to creating a better future. These questions include operationalizing vague goals ("how will I know when my goal of being a Black ally has been achieved?"), anticipating outcomes ("how much progress do I think I'll make in six months?") potential consequences, ("what might happen if I don't achieve this goal?"), exploring catastrophic consequences, ("what is the worse I can think of if my attempts to be a Black ally are rebuffed?") and instilling hope and optimism ("when I do find a way of

being a good Black ally, who would notice?" how would it improve your relationships with Black others?").

The second group consists of observer-perspective questions. This group of questions is orientated to helping the person-in-relation to step back and look at the communicative patterns as an observer. Such questions are based—not unreasonably—on the assumption that becoming an observer of a phenomenon or a pattern is a necessary first step toward being able to act in relation to it. Typical of this group are questions to enhance self-awareness ("when I responded as I did, how did I feel about it?"), to explore interpersonal perception ("what does she think that I think when I act ..."), to explore interpersonal interaction ("what do I do when I am called a privileged White? And when I get frustrated and angry with being called this, what does the other do?")

The third group consist of unexpected context-change questions. These questions are designed to generate speculations on what might happen if the context is unexpectedly different from normal. The questions are intended to bring forth that which has been hidden, lost or unsaid in other ways. Typical questions in this group explore the opposite context ("when is it that I am not accused of being a racist/privileged White?" "What is it that I do that avoids this or does not call it forth?"), or to explore the need to maintain the status quo ("assume there is an important reason to continue acting as a privileged White, what could it be?")

All of these reflexive questions, if asked genuinely of ourselves, can help build up a very nuanced set of considerations for re-storying our lifescrypt from (perhaps inadvertent) privileged White to Black ally or shamefully acknowledged privileged White colonial or something along similar lines. These are clearly difficult and challenging questions and there is no expectation that a generative change will be either easy, stable or permanent. With every Black other with whom we Whites relate, there will be specific relational differences that call for a differentiated responsiveness. It will be the respect shown for the general socially constructed racial difference as well as for the special particulars of each exchange that will be the mark of our relational responsiveness. And it will be the continual exercise of this relationally reflexive practice that will mark the making of a better social world that includes better racial justice.

### **Standing in the tension of the change**

We do, however, need to be constantly aware that the path to making a better social world is continual. We are not changing our white story to meet the goal of racial justice as an end product; rather we are engaging in ongoing change through being relationally aware of the need to engage with Black others in ways that are responsive to them. We are not trying to solve the problem of racial injustice and we, as Whites, are most importantly not trying to solve the "black problem". And nor are we, as Whites, trying to understand Blacks in any soft empathy way in order to develop a shared understanding. Instead, we are trying to develop practices that (re)produce our social

world in such a way that racial justice is experienced in our recurring communicative practices.

Understanding, and accepting, that change which matters is an ongoing process and a very messy and uncertain process at that, is perhaps one of the more difficult aspects of striving for better social worlds. And yet, more often than not, it is out of the messiness and uncertainty that new opportunities for changing arise. It is the moral commitment to continue engaging with the other in the face of the mess and the uncertainty and the concomitant moral commitment to dialogic civility that constitutes the second requirement for making better social worlds identified by Lannamann (2014).

Lannamann (2014) describes this second requirement for making better social worlds as part of the CMM approach to dialogue that highlights the creative tensions of staying in the conversation with others while confronting their differences. This dialogical tensionality arises from the tension of holding one's own position while allowing the other the space to hold theirs without needing to oppose or assimilate them. In conversations between Whites and Blacks this tensionality can be profound and yet it is not something to be smoothed over or ignored; remaining open to it and moving on together is what is called for.

I would like to suggest that the evolving (and getting better) white story using respect as a guideline helps us significantly through this continual change process. Starting from the stance of respect, rather than the white colonial one that reflects contempt, however implicit and/or unintended, helps us stay in the tension of working and living with differences between Whites and Blacks.

### ***In sum...***

In this paper I have drawn in the decolonization and white studies literature to show the importance of reconstruing our understanding of racial injustice from being a "black problem" to being a "white problem". This radically changes the focus of the problem of racial injustice and places the onus for change on Whites to change themselves. A range of decolonialization practices have been offered in that literature for dealing with the "white problem", notably the need to re-story the sense of whiteness that perpetuates racist behavior.

Re-storying is a complex and challenging process and, as with all things in our social world emerges from our communicative practices. Here I have laid out a relational framework for understanding the dynamics of re-storying based on an appreciation of the complexities in our hierarchy of meanings and logical forces that produce and reproduce better or worse stories and relationships. This approach builds on the suggestions from the white studies and decolonization literature and takes it further.

Rather than basing a story of a white self on the broader cultural colonial one premised on privilege and superiority, I have offered respect as a guiding principle for re-

inventing who we Whites are in relation to Black others. I have also proposed that this re-storying process, using respect as a thematic guideline, best takes place through the use of dialogic listening and reflexive questioning. These communicative practices can all contribute to the development of a better white story, although the very same practices mean that there is no single better white story: as with all stories they can and should change with and reflect the specific contexts of their use. Nevertheless, using the recommended communicative practices will also ensure that whatever new stories are being generated they will be orientated to making better social worlds.

The approach to bringing about better racial justice outlined in this paper, turns the idea of racial justice as an end goal to be achieved through solving the black problem into an ongoing relational process that we, Whites and Blacks, need to continually work on.

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