# What Does It Mean to Be White?

## Developing White Racial Literacy

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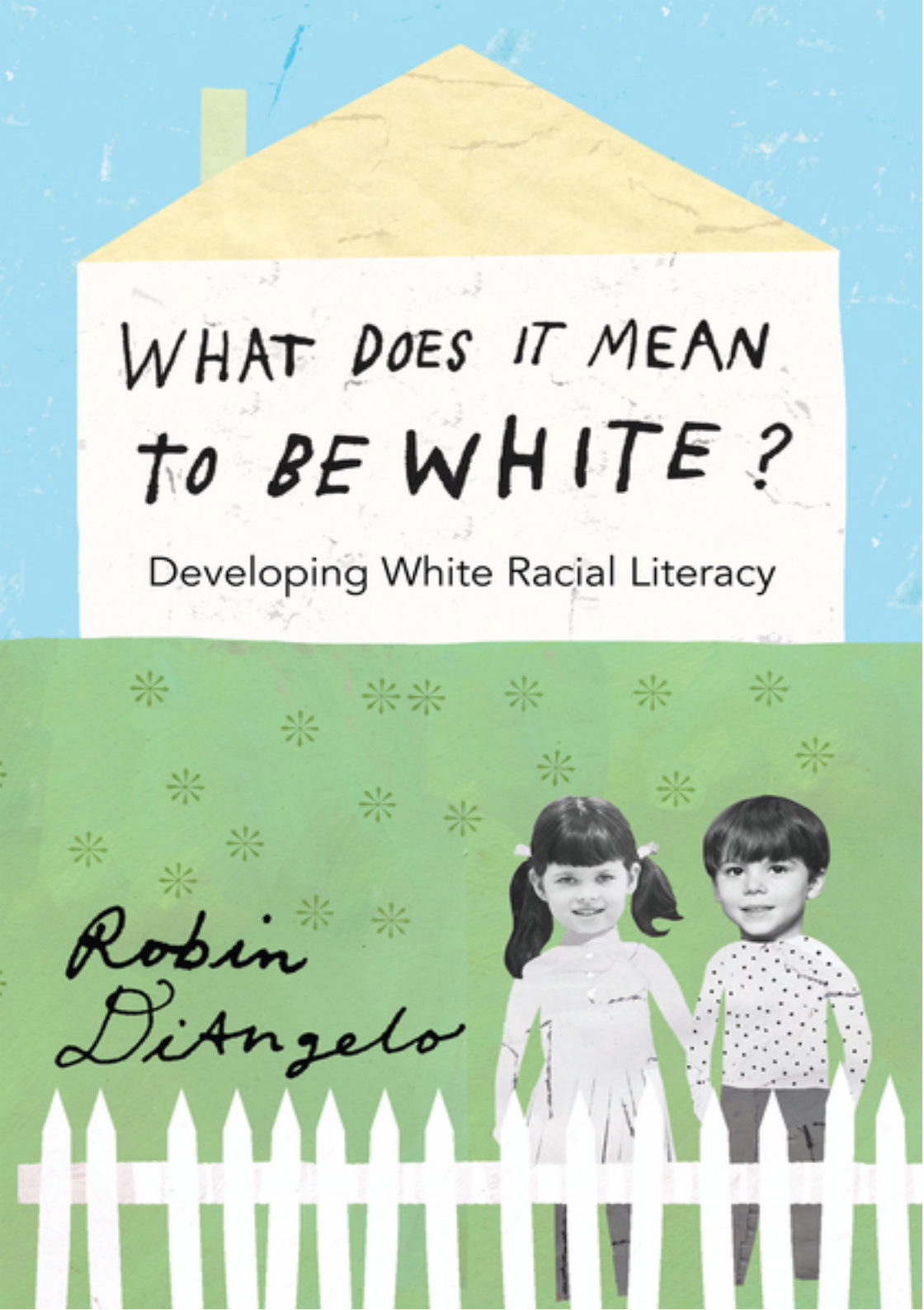

# Introduction

I grew up in poverty, in a family in which no one was expected to go to college. Thus I came late to academia, graduating with a BA in Sociology at the age of 34. Unsure what I could do with my degree, I went to my college's career center for help. After working with the career counselors for several weeks, I received a call. The counselor told me that a job announcement had just arrived for a "Diversity Trainer," and she thought I would be a good fit. I didn't know what a Diversity Trainer was, but the job description sounded very exciting: co-leading workshops for employees on accepting racial difference. In terms of my qualifications, I have always considered myself open-minded and progressive—I come from the West Coast, drive a Prius, and shop at natural food markets such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's (and always bring my own bags). I will admit that I have on occasion told an ethnic joke or two (but never in mixed company) and that I was often silent when others told similar jokes or made racist comments. But my silence was usually to protect the speaker from embarrassment or avoid arguments. Thus, confident that I was qualified for the diversity trainer position, I applied and received an interview.

The interview committee explained that the State's Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS—the "welfare" department) had been sued for racial discrimination and had lost the suit. The federal government had determined that the department was out of compliance regarding serving all clients equally across race and, as part of the settlement, had mandated that every employee in the state (over 5,000 people) receive 16 hours (2 full workdays) of diversity training. DSHS hired a training company to design and deliver the trainings, and this company wrote the curriculum. Part of the design was that inter-racial teams would deliver the trainings. They needed 40 trainers to be sent out in teams of two. The interview committee, composed primarily of other (open-minded) white people such as myself, agreed that I was qualified, and I got the job. Initially elated, I had no idea that I was in for the most profound learning curve of my entire life.

I showed up for the Train-the-Trainer session with 39 other new hires. We would be working together for 5 full days to learn the curriculum and get ready to fan out across the state and lead the workshops. The challenges began almost immediately. On the first day, as we sat in the opening discussion circle, one of the other white women called out, "All the white racists raise your hand!" I was stunned as virtually every white hand in the room shot up. I was smart enough to realize that for some unfathomable reason this was the "party line" and that I should raise my hand like everyone else, but I just couldn't. *I was not racist*, and there was no way I was going to identify myself as such. Over the next 5 days we spent many hours engaged in heated discussions about race.

This was the first time in my life that I had ever talked about race in such a direct and sustained way with anyone, and I had *never* discussed race before in a racially mixed group. My racial paradigm was shaken to the core as the people of color shared their experiences and challenged my limited racial perspective. Indeed, I had never before realized that I *had* a racial perspective. I felt like a fish being taken out of water for the first time. The contrast between the way my colleagues of color experienced the world and the way I did worked like a mirror, reflecting back to me not only the reality that I had a racial viewpoint, but that it was necessarily limited, due to my position in society. I did not see the world objectively as I had been raised to believe, nor did I share the same reality with everyone around me. I was not looking out through a pair of objective eyes, I was looking out through a pair of *white* eyes. By the end of the 5 days I realized that regardless of how I had always seen myself, I was deeply uninformed—even ignorant—when it came to the complexities of race. This ignorance was not benign or neutral; it had profound implications for my sense of identity and the way I related to people of color.

The next point on my learning curve began when my co-trainer (a black woman) and I began leading the workshops in DSHS offices across the state. I had been expecting these sessions to be enjoyable; after all, we would be exploring a fascinating and important social issue and learning how to bridge racial divides. I have always found self-reflection and the insights that come from it to be valuable, and I assumed that the participants in the workshops would feel the same way. I was completely unprepared for the depth of resistance we encountered in those sessions. Although there were a few exceptions, the vast majority of these employees—who were predominantly

white—did not want to be in these workshops. They were openly hostile to us and to the content of the curriculum. Books slammed down on tables, crossed arms, refusal to speak, and insulting evaluations were the norm.

We would often lead workshops in offices that were 95–100% white, and yet the participants would bitterly complain about Affirmative Action. I will never forget the white man who pounded his fist on the table over and over, his face red with rage as he shouted that white people had been discriminated against in the job market for 25 years and could no longer get jobs! As he pounded his fist and vented his rage, I became unnerved. I looked around that room and saw only white people. I looked out the training room window into the larger office full of workers at their desks—still all white people. Clearly these white people were employed—we were in their workplace, after all. There were no people of color here, yet this man was enraged that people of color were taking their jobs! His emotions were not based in any racial reality, yet obviously his rage was real. I began to wonder how he managed to maintain that perception—how could this man not see how white his workplace was, at the very moment that he was ranting about not being able to get jobs because people of color would be hired over "us"? How were we, as white people, able to enjoy so much racial privilege and dominance in the workplace, yet believe so deeply that racism had changed direction to now victimize us? Of course, I had my own socialization as a white person, so many of the sentiments expressed were familiar to me—on closer reflection I had to acknowledge that I had held some of the same feelings myself, if only to a lesser degree. But I was gaining a new perspective that allowed me to step back and begin to examine my racial perceptions in a way I had never before been compelled to do.

The freedom that these participants felt to express irrational hostility toward people of color when there was only one person of color in the room (my co-facilitator) was another aspect of how race works that I was trying to understand. As a woman I felt intimidated when an older white man erupted in anger. But at least I wasn't the only woman in the room, and his target was ultimately not me, but people of color. His lack of concern for the impact his anger might have on my co-facilitator, who *was* the only person of color in the room, was confusing. Driving home, I saw the devastating effect of this hostility on my co-facilitator as she cried in hurt, anger, and frustration. How could these white participants not know or care about this impact? How could we forget the long history of angry white crowds venting racial rage on

an isolated person of color? Where was our collective memory? And what about the other white people in the room, those not yelling like this man but supporting him nonetheless through their silence? How might his ability to act so insensitively across racial lines depend on that silence? If we as white people did not speak up to challenge him, who would? How much more emotionally, intellectually, and psychically draining was it for my co-facilitator to speak back to him than for me? Yet it had always been socially taboo for me to talk directly about race, and in the early days of this work I was too intimidated and inarticulate to raise these questions.

We had 5,000 employees across the state to train, and the project took 5 years to complete. As the years went by and I was involved in hundreds of discussions on race, clear and consistent patterns emerged, illustrating the ways in which white people conceptualize race and thus enact racial "scripts." Once I became familiar with the patterns, it became easier for me to understand white racial consciousness and many of the ideas, assumptions, and beliefs that underpin our understanding of race. I also had the rare gift of hearing the perspectives of countless people of color, and—in time—I became more articulate about how race works and less intimidated in the face of my fellow whites' hostility—be it explicitly conveyed through angry outbursts or implicitly conveyed through silence, apathy, and superficiality.

Because I grew up poor and understood the pain of being seen as inferior, prior to this experience I had always thought of myself as an "outsider." But I was pushed to recognize the fact that, racially, I had always been an "insider"; the culture of whiteness was so normalized for me that it was barely visible. I had my experience of class marginalization to draw from, which helped tremendously as I struggled to understand racism, but as I became more conversant in the workings of racism, I came to understand that the oppression I experienced growing up poor didn't protect me from learning my place in the racial hierarchy. I now realize that poor and working-class white people don't necessarily have any "less" racism than middle- or upper-class white people. Our racism is just conveyed in different ways, and we enact it from a different social location than the middle or upper classes. (I will discuss this in more depth in Chapter 11.)

As the foundation of the white racial framework became clearer to me, I became quite skilled at speaking back in a way that helped open up and shift perspectives. Although I learned a tremendous amount from all of the trainers I worked with over those years, by the end of that contract there were

only two of us left; myself as a white trainer and my African American co-trainer Deborah Terry. I had been given an extraordinary gift in having the honor of working with Deborah, a brilliant, compassionate, and patient mentor. She and I went on to lead similar workshops with other groups, including teachers, municipal workers, and police officers. (I thought the DSHS crowd was intimidating—police officers didn't want to attend these sessions either, but they were armed!) Over the years I realized that I had been given an opportunity that few white people ever had—to co-lead discussions on race on a daily basis. This work had provided me with the ability to understand race in a profoundly more complex and nuanced way than I had been taught by my family, in school, from the media, or by society at large. Nothing had previously prepared me in any way to think with complexity about race. In fact, the way I was taught to see race worked beautifully to hide its power as a social dynamic.

I wanted to apply my new knowledge beyond these workplace discussions in order to impact a wider audience. I decided to earn my doctorate in Multicultural Education and Whiteness Studies so that I could disseminate what I had learned through teaching and writing. I completed my doctorate in 2004. My graduate study added more layers to my knowledge—6 additional years of scholarship and study. I now had empirical research and theoretical frameworks to support all I had experienced in my years of practice. In graduate school I co-led courses that trained students to lead interracial dialogues. For my dissertation study, I gathered an interracial group of students together to engage in a series of discussions on race over a 4-week period. A trained interracial team of facilitators led the discussions. I sat quietly in the back, observing while the sessions were video-recorded. This observation was the first time I was not in the position to either lead or participate in the discussion, and the opportunity to simply observe provided yet more insight into how whites "do" race.

I now understand that race is a profoundly complex social system that has nothing to do with being progressive or "open-minded." In fact, we whites who see ourselves as open-minded can actually be the most challenging population of all to talk to about race, because when we believe we are "cool with race," we are not examining our racial filters. Further, because the concept of "open-mindedness" (or "colorblindness," or lack of prejudice) is so important to our identities, we actually *resist* any suggestion that there