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**THE
GOOD
ALLY**

A guided anti-racism journey
from bystander to changemaker

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Introduction

'I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.'

JAMES BALDWIN¹

So here we are: talking about racism. Again.

The fact that you have come to find this book means you probably agree that we are in the most curious of socio-political times. With social injustices rising in frequency, and an increase in far-right movements around the world, the rise in hate against 'the other' and the resistance to moving closer towards equity are palpable.

At a time when it seems like the world is imploding, it feels like I am living in an alternate universe, having an out-of-body experience that I expect to be jolted out of at any moment. But with every headline, every new 'debate' about racism, and broadcasters casually using the 'N-word' like popping bread in a toaster, the continued exposure to normalised racism, and the constant release of studies highlighting racism in healthcare, criminal justice, workplaces, media and even in primary school playgrounds, only reinforce what many have been speaking, writing, studying, protesting about and indeed, dying for, for centuries.

We are repeating cycles and patterns of behaviour. Until we take individual and, in turn, collective responsibility to address racism, nothing changes. If nothing changes, racism will continue to morph and take on new, insidious and destructive forms that strip us all of our humanity.

The good news? Well, you're here for a start and there is also a growing number of people who have been sleepwalking, who are now waking up. People like you who want to be part of change, but often feel helpless or frozen by frustration and don't fundamentally know what to do or how to help. Which often means you regularly feel frightened, angry and hopeless (or all of the above) by the state of affairs, and that generally leads to three things:

1. Inaction
2. Total disengagement
3. Ineffective allyship

All key reasons why we are still talking about race in 2021.

Starting to Heal

At the heart of anti-racism work, or at least my approach to anti-racism, is the process of healing – both individual and collective. If you've ever been in therapy or perhaps broken a bone in your body, you will know it generally feels worse before it gets better. Because, for most of us, intentionally and consciously addressing anything that makes us feel any kind of discomfort, vulnerability or shame, is quite frankly, painful. So we avoid it, like the plague; we bury it.

We keep calm and carry on, we bypass human experiences with 'love and light', or 'just be kind' hashtags and put up appearances instead – because it's what many of us have come to know, what we have been taught to do and ultimately what makes us, well, you, feel comfortable and safe. But history has shown us change will not happen in the cosy corners of our comfort zones.

I often get asked why I do this work. I'll be honest: it was never in my career development plan to become an anti-racism activist. Growing up in Great Britain in a white-majority town meant that navigating racism was always a backdrop to my life. This only intensified as I entered the world of work, from acting and stage theatre, to working in mental wellbeing for ten years. It was during my professional training to work in mental wellbeing that I started to truly get to grips with understanding and working with human behaviour – I found and continue to find our behaviour fascinating.

It was my former wedding business, Nu Bride, birthed out of my own wedding engagement and the vast lack of representation of Black women and couples in the wedding industry, that really was the catalyst to starting this work. I eventually started being asked to consult for wedding businesses, five-star hotels and creative agencies to improve diversity and inclusion in business and I noticed the relative ease in talking about other types of inclusion, like gender, and the contrasting embarrassment, shame, awkwardness and resistance to embed change that came up every single time I spoke about race.

That was my cue to lean into anti-racism. I now have the pleasure of speaking internationally, have a TED Talk on the subject, work with courageous leaders and offer an online anti-racism course that attracts brave human beings from all around the globe who want to role-model change by courageously unlearning their racism, to reduce racial harm and change the world around them. They're a pretty awesome bunch.

I wish I didn't have to do this work. I wish that we didn't continue to live in a racist society and, as a Black woman, I wish I didn't still have to experience the dehumanising impact of racism; not even I am immune to its suffocating grip.

The truth is, I felt a strong calling that is unexplainable, the more I ignored it and pushed it away, the more it came back, a powerful call to arms, a purpose to serve something greater than me, a call that all of my life experiences, my own

racial trauma and my training has led me to be in this moment, to inspire you to role-model change. I don't question it anymore, I just trust that I am acting in service for those who endured and came before me.

I do this work because I want better for us and I want better for you and I want to leave this world in a far better state than when I entered it. But, and it's a big 'but', the only way to tackle something as insidious as racism is to be honest about what we have buried; to be honest about what we have always known, what we've recently come to know, and how that makes us feel implicated. We need to be able to rip off the metaphorical plaster. To deal with the infection that has been mutating underneath the surface of us and our lineage for centuries, to see the messy and ugly reality of what lies beneath. Before we can understand the root cause of an issue, we have to look first, to really look, even if it horrifies you, even if it scares you, then seek to resolve it and finally, to heal.

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Stages of Anti-Racism Work

In my teaching I have come to observe four key stages to anti-racism work, which you will weave in and out of in this book.

1. Listening
2. Unlearning
3. Re-learning
4. Responsive action

As you're reading this book, I suspect you're currently in the listening or unlearning phase and to be transparent, the work is never done. That's why my students (much to their dismay) will never get a certificate or cookie from me. Being a good ally isn't about achieving an academic piece of paper or impressing me or anyone else. It is about serving something greater than you. In this context it means advocating for and working alongside a group or person in a racially marginalised community, supporting them to meet a shared goal. It is about consciously addressing racism in yourself and others. Ultimately, it is about being a better human being. So it's important to remain vigilant to avoid complacency, because anti-racism is an active and intentional practice, one that should not be autonomous.

The process is not linear and you will flit between these stages of anti-racism work throughout this book, as we explore historical events and how they relate to present day experiences of racism, prompts for self-enquiry, in-depth exploration and tools to galvanise what you have learned and put it into tangible action. It is important to be consistent, but please pace yourself. You don't need to eat the pizza in one whole go. To avoid overwhelm, take it in bite-sized chunks. A huge and important component to anti-racism work is practising your own self-enquiry, being

self-aware and honest with yourself. I will be sharing prompts and asking you to reflect throughout this book, so I would recommend documenting your gut responses on voice notes, journaling, and writing notes. Pay attention, not only to your thoughts, but to how this work makes you feel in your body physically. The latter is vital, because we've got very good at numbing when it comes to racism.

This is a life's work and the ultimate goal is that you don't just 'get it' and remember information – anyone with good memory recall can do that. More to the point, we Black folk can easily recognise the difference between those who are just being self-righteous parrots and those that actually embody the work. How? Because when you embody the work, you become the work and you role-model it; it becomes a part of who you are, not just something you 'do on the side'. That has a profound ripple effect in every single interaction you have and how you show up in the world. That's where exponential change happens and is exactly what this book has been created for, if you choose to move beyond the stats and data.

Before we really get cracking, I want to note that this intentionally is not a book filled with academic jargon or reams and reams of stats. Firstly, it is not my style, but more importantly, so much disproportionate weight is placed on evidence and receipt gathering in tackling anti-racism, conveniently ignoring the pre-existing data and crucial work that has already been done by academics. So whilst I will draw on them to highlight points and support your knowledge, this book intentionally centres turning anti-racism into interrogation and accessible action.

If you want a certificate for being a good human, this is not the book for you.

Whilst we will be delving into the foundation of anti-racism, this book is not for complete beginners. If you are coming to this work for the first time, this book will trigger the hell out of you – but this book is definitely for you if you are hungry for more, ready to be challenged and to roll your sleeves up.

This work is *not* comfortable. Nor should it be. Some of what I share will make you want to slam the book shut and you're probably going to hate me at times, but I urge you to keep going. Any discomfort you feel is temporary and pales in comparison to what Black people and People of Colour often have to experience on a daily basis. On the other side of some of the most difficult realisations and exchanges with yourself and others, is huge transformation – that is the work and where change happens.

If you want to be part of change, learn more about everyday and systemic racism, if you're seeking to reduce harm and the impact of racism on Black People and People of Colour including children, and you're ready to expand, experience growth, fear, messing it up, courage, vulnerability and everything in between, then you're in good company.

Welcome.

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A Black British Lens

I intentionally approach this book with a Black British lens. As a Black woman, it's not only my experience, but is where I have chosen to focus my education and teaching and, therefore, where I can speak from integrity and my most powerful place of truth. In my experience, attempting to address multiple lenses of race and lumping anyone that isn't white into one homogenous group (something that happens all too often and ends up conflating Black experiences) dilutes the message. As a result, you miss the nuances and are less able to identify and address specific needs. I also cannot do all of these stories the justice they deserve in one book. There are some great books on racism and the impact on Indigenous communities and other Marginalised Ethnic Groups that will only add to the richness of your journey, and my recommendation is you seek those out and absolutely devour those too.

I am also intentionally choosing to centre Blackness to help you understand what the concept of race is and more importantly, where it came from.

Now, it is important for me to reinforce that race is a social construct. It is not real. It was born out of a race hierarchy developed primarily by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in 1758² who felt the need to turn his passion from studying plants, to people. In doing so, Linnaeus outlined four key groups of humans that could be identified by colour. These were:

1. The Americas (Red – Indigenous Americans)
2. Europe (White – Europeans)
3. Asia (Yellow – Asians)
4. Africa (Black – Africans)

And then after that, monstrous and feral humans (yup, I'll leave you to figure that one out). This race hierarchy was then developed by several others, including a German scientist called Johann Friedrich Blumenbach who adapted this into a more rigid race hierarchy to 'classify' human races. He placed white (Europeans) at the top and Black (Africans) at the bottom with everyone else, all of these other 'colours', somewhere in between. What was ultimately an idea created by human and cultural bias and, in some cases, falsified tests, the notion of this race hierarchy became a prominent fixture from the eighteenth century. And it was this pseudoscience (aka lies) that created 'race' as we know it today and was used to justify the inhumane violence under white supremacy and the human trafficking and enslavement of millions of Black Africans.

There is absolutely no scientific evidence or biological fact that backs up the claim that white people were superior to any other human based on the colour of skin. None. But unfortunately, because we have all been fed this lie for so long, many have come to believe it, consciously and unconsciously.

'22 per cent of UK adults still think some races are born less intelligent than others.'

What this means is that anti-Blackness has become the bedrock of racism, born out of this race hierarchy. The impact of this is so powerful as it doesn't just feed into the subconscious of white folk, it also permeates the minds of non-Black People of Colour who can also project intercultural race hatred based on the false belief that Black people, especially those with darker skin, are least superior. And we are not unscathed either – this lie has seeped into Black people too.

This is why I choose to centre Blackness because, in order for us to truly understand the essence of what racism is, we need to understand its birthplace.

Some people think we can just end racism with statements like 'we're only one race, the human race', expecting us to just forget the race construct and merrily-we-roll-along into the sunset. Though well-intentioned, this phrase is often used as a way to shut down conversations about racism. In theory, yes, biologically this is true, however, it can be reductive. Whilst the construct of race is not real, the identities and communities we have built around this construct are real and, more importantly, the evidence of the continued impact of racism is very, very real. In fact, it's deadly.

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Getting Uncomfortable

Racism is built on so many lies that in order for us to be antiracist, we absolutely have to start being honest with ourselves and one another – that means choosing to take responsibility for our own complicity. For centuries, we have been taught to uphold and maintain destructive systems of oppression as the norm, without question. We've been conditioned to go along with that powerful current because it's easier than swimming in the opposite direction or, worse still, drowning.

Fear, no doubt, has also been a powerful driving force because you have learned to centre your own feelings ahead of speaking up on issues that matter, and perhaps not even noticing the injustice to begin with. You have learned to prioritise your comfort over courage. Would you say you have struggled to be a 'good ally' in the past or even now, through fear of causing offence, saying the wrong thing or not feeling like it's your place to say anything? When this happens, it subconsciously means you place your fear of causing offence as being more important than helping. No blame, no judgement.

To be truly anti-racist, to be able to withstand, and do this work without experiencing regular burnout, you will need to embed and prioritise self-care (don't worry – I've written a chapter on this which I encourage you to use as a resource whenever you need it throughout this journey). Please don't underestimate this – I would not be able to do this work without it. So before you engage with this work (or

any other in-depth anti-racism work), please be self-aware and be honest with yourself about whether you currently have the emotional and psychological capacity to engage. Only you can be responsible for that.

Anti-racism work is about unlearning discrimination that has been normalised; consciously and continuously disrupting the status quo, in society, in work, in others and ultimately, in yourself.

That WILL feel uncomfortable.

It may even feel discombobulating.

You are going to feel guilt and, most probably, shame.

So when it feels tough, when you want to stop, or skip to the easy bit at the end, that is when I want you to slow it down and lean in a little closer and lean into the truth about what is making you want to disengage. To commit to doing the work properly and not undermining the process, or the labour that has gone into creating this resource for you.

We're going to go on a journey. and I will be right here with you. You'll want to laugh, curl your toes, cry, shout and scream. You'll feel joy, at times despair, but beyond that, I promise you, is hope.

The truth is, the more you do this work, the more you'll know what to do.

The more you do this work, the easier it will be to know what to say.

The more you do this work, the clearer it will be and the more glaringly obvious instances of systemic racism will become.

The more you do this work, the more clarity you will have. It will be like seeing the world with a new pair of glasses, but the difference is, instead of feeling helpless, by the end of our journey together you will know exactly how to help role-model change, because once you start, you just can't unsee it, you can't go back.

So as you go through this book, when things start to smart a little or challenge you (because they will), I invite you to start to love the word *curious*. That is going to be your superpower in unpacking your own racism and helping others come to terms with and unlearn theirs. When something challenges you, get curious about why it feels challenging, with why your heartbeat is suddenly racing, or your jaw clenching. Just notice. And, if at times it feels overwhelming, pause if you need to, but come back to the work.

I invite you to be courageous and get comfortable with being uncomfortable, because right now, we are on the cusp of powerful and seismic change and I want you to be part of it. This is change that will go down in the history books, and we all have a chance to contribute and play a role in how this chapter will end.

Mind Your Language

One last thing before we dive into it, let me give a few notes about language. I know this is a bone of contention, and I don't want you to get too stuck on it before we've even gotten started.

In this book, I know some fellow Black and Brown people will be reading this too (I see you – please take care, as I will be sharing some racist language and experiences of racism to highlight events that can trigger racial trauma), either to unlearn their own anti-Blackness or to better understand how to navigate white supremacy in peer groups. This book, however, has been curated to talk to people who are white. When I use the term ‘white’ I am talking about people who are racialised as white. I understand our identities are not one-dimensional and you may also fit into a less than satisfactory ‘White Other’ box or be of mixed heritage, but perceived to be white – in short, if you benefit from proximity to whiteness, I am talking to you too, kiddo.

When I say ‘us’ or ‘we’, I generally mean Black people, or, if I am feeling generous, I mean all of us, perfectly imperfect humans. I hope as we get to know one another, you’ll start to easily distinguish between the two.

I am not a personal fan of acronyms to describe groups of people, such as ‘BIPOC’ (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) or ‘POC’ (People/Person of Colour). Some of my mixed-heritage and non-Black peers are fans, so I will still use these descriptions from time to time to encompass their identities, but not my own. I will generally use the terms Non-Black People of Colour or Marginalised Ethnic Groups to describe all other groups outside of the African diaspora that experience racism and, where possible, when referencing Indigenous communities, I will name them specifically.

I am definitely not a fan of ‘BAME’ (Black Asian, Minority Ethnic Group). None of these are racist terminologies, but they are often misused as a comfort blanket for people who are still not comfortable saying the word ‘Black’. It also lumps us all in one group, which we aren’t. Our ethnic groups make up thousands and as such, our experiences of the world and how racism and prejudice impacts us – though we may share common experiences – are vast. I do not speak for every Black person in the Western world. We are not a monolith.

I use ‘Brown’ quite fluidly to describe Black mixed-race/mixed-heritage people from within the African diaspora, or to be literal about the actual colour of my skin. I may also use Brown like some others, to refer to and encompass people who are of South Asian, Indian, or Pakistani heritage, for example.

Becoming anti-racist also means recognising language in this sphere changes rapidly and people will have their own individual preferences. Don’t overthink it. You’ll soon get used to my preferred language and others’ too.

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OK. Are you ready? Take a deep breath.

Let’s get started, we have got important work to do and change to make.

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