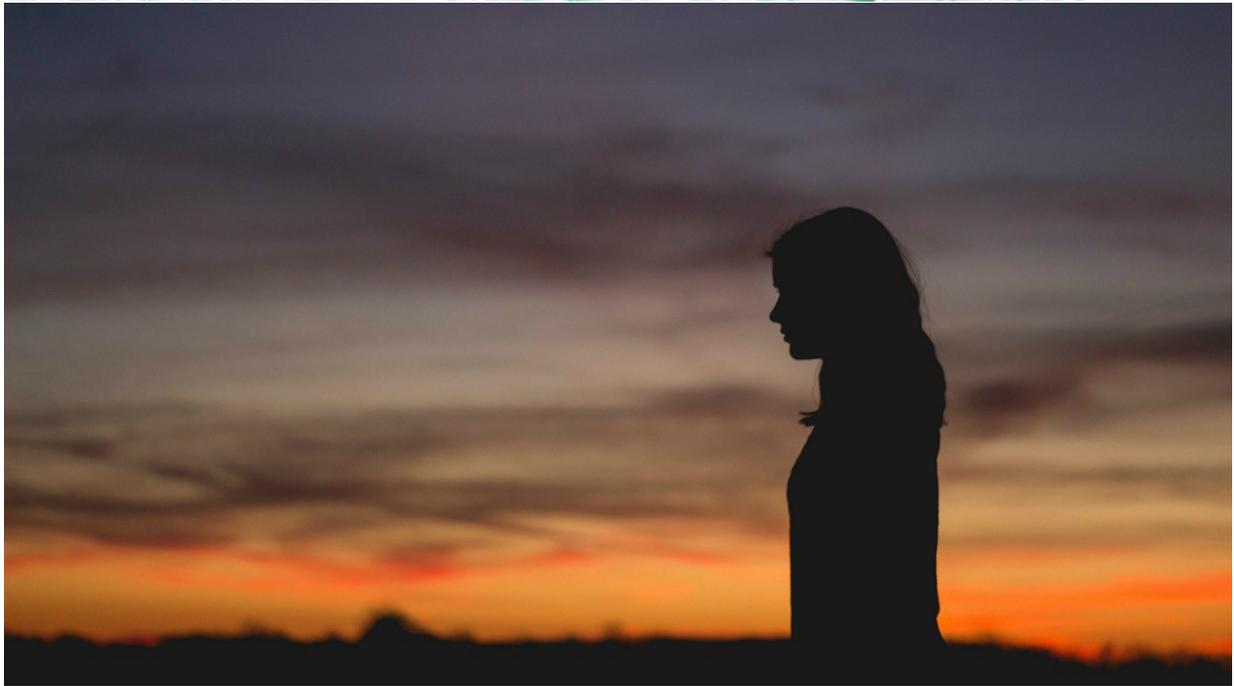


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## **White People: I Don't Want You To Understand Me Better, I Want You To Understand Yourselves**

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*Your survival has never depended on your knowledge of white culture. In fact, it's required your ignorance.*

**By Ijeoma Oluo**

Hi white person in my DMs, let me respond here in the hopes that I never have to again.

Almost every day I get a message like yours from a random white person—on Facebook, Twitter, or email—offering to provide me with the “white perspective” that they think that my work on race and feminism is missing. “Just to give a more well-rounded picture,” they’ll explain, or “Having been a white person my whole life, I think my insight would be useful to you,” or, “I think I can help you understand how this issue looks to white society.”

To which I say: Physician, heal thyself.

No, I do not know everything. I do not cover every angle all the time. Sometimes, I’m flat-out wrong. But here’s the thing: I do know white culture. I know white culture better than most white people know white culture. I know white culture, white history, white politics. I know it better than you because if you knew why you were really in my DMs right now, you’d be embarrassed. Why do I know white culture so well? Because I’m a black woman. And while I, and just about any person of color who

has spent their lives in a white supremacist society, know enough about white culture to write a book or two on whiteness and option the bestseller movie rights, y'all know almost nothing about us and even less about yourselves.

Why? Because you don't have to.

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*Why do I know white culture so well? Because I'm a black woman.*

I may be coming across as arrogant but honestly, I'm just exhausted. From the moment I was born my life has been steeped in whiteness. Not just the MTV I grew up with or the Disney characters I loved, but the white history I learned from white teachers, the white art I learned to revere above all else, the beauty standards I knew I'd never live up to. I know what songs y'all like the most, who your biggest movie stars are, how you achieve the hottest hairstyles in your magazines, what fashion you're appropriating. I know what your "ideal" family looks like, what your definition of "American values" is. I know what you find funny and romantic. I know your definitions of success.

But it's more than that, much more. I had to learn to talk to my white teachers in a way that didn't seem "too boisterous," and I learned why enthusiasm would be disruptive from me yet welcomed by white boys. I had to learn what level of eye contact with cops seemed respectful, what seemed evasive, and what seemed challenging. I had to learn why clerks in the grocery store were following me. I had to learn why the same white people who clutch their purse around me when they have a coin will come running to me for help when they don't.

I know what "articulate" really means. I know what "thug" really means. I know what the words "tough on crime" will do to you and us. I had to learn why a black President scared the shit out of so many of you. I had to learn how many times I could voice my opinion in a work meeting before I was labeled "difficult." I had to learn how loud I could raise my voice before I was labeled "threatening." I know why so many of you want to say "nigger" so bad. I know what face you make when you are about to shout it at me. I had to learn why so many of you think that people like me are why you are poor. I know why you co-opt our movements. I know why you still expect a thank you. I had to learn why your needs are default but mine are "divisive." I had to learn how to not get suspended by white teachers, how to not get arrested by white cops, how to not get fired by white supervisors.

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*I know what the words 'tough on crime' will do to you and us.*

I know right now why so many of you will feel compelled to make me understand that I'm not talking about *you* here before you will consider reading further.

And to know all of that about you, I had to learn how race was invented as a function of capitalism to justify the brutality of genocide and forced free labor. I had to learn how slavery was repurposed into the prison industrial complex and the school-to-prison pipeline. I had to learn how your police force was created to return black people to slavery and maintained to control brown and black populations to manufacture a false sense of white security. I had to learn how the Southern Strategy

was able to capitalize on the racism that you dared not see in yourselves, even though we could see it clear as day. I had to learn how the Irish became white when we could not. I had to learn how you could claim to rightfully own stolen land and how you still can today.

You have not had to know these things; even if you studied some of these topics in school, you did not *have* to know them. People of color, on the other hand, have lost so much when we've gotten it wrong. We have been fired for wearing our hair in ways you don't like, for not hiding our bodies that you decided to hypersexualize, for having too many opinions, for answering too honestly, for using our own accents and dialogue instead of yours, for believing you when you said you didn't tolerate racism in the workplace, for teaching history you refuse to acknowledge, for celebrating our beauty that you don't want to see. We have died for walking with a certain swagger, for reaching for our wallets, for asking for help, for speaking with the wrong tone, for giving a menacing look, for playing our music too loud, for not walking away, for walking away, for marching in peace.

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*I had to learn how race was invented as a function of capitalism to justify the brutality of genocide and forced free labor.*

Your survival has never depended on your knowledge of white culture. In fact, it's required your ignorance. The dominant culture does not have to see itself to survive because culture will shift to fit its needs. This shift is cheaper and easier when you don't look too closely at how it's being accomplished—if you never ask who is picking up the check. And no, you hardly see us at all—even if you love us. You can't; we don't exist as whole people in most of the places that you have been getting your information from.

And as much as I'd like you to see me—as much as I'd like systemic racism to simply be a problem of different groups not seeing each other—I need you to see yourself, really see yourself, first. This is the top priority.

Because I and so many people of color have had to stand by and watch you declare we live in a post-racism world when Obama was elected, when we could see how much of the legacy of slavery and brutality was still lodged deep in your bones. I had to watch the Tea Party rise from your fear of losing the centuries-long promise that you'd always get more because we'd always get less, all while you brushed it off as fringe lunacy. I had to watch you high-five each other and celebrate an election already won while I could see that your parents, your uncle, maybe even your spouse was going to vote for White Supremacy, because deep down part of them knew that they didn't earn all that they enjoy in this world, and in a couple of years they wouldn't have the votes to protect the parts they stole.

And when the election for the extension of White Supremacy was won, I had to watch you say that it was not White Supremacy, it was the economy or it was identity politics or it was the Clinton legacy. And when white people across America started doing Nazi salutes in high school gymnasiums and political gatherings, when white people

started adding swastikas to their profile pictures and painting swastikas on walls, I had to watch you turn to the nearest person of color and ask, “how did this happen?”

And while I *get it*—I understand how the entire history of this blood-soaked racist country and its entrenched self-delusion would lead us here—I do not actually know what it will take to get you to see it as well.

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*The dominant culture does not have to see itself to survive because culture will shift to fit its needs.*

Because we have been trying, very, very hard, to show you. None of this—not a single word I’ve written in this essay or in my entire career—is new. People of color have been begging you to see what you are doing and why. We’ve been begging you to see what you came from and the true legacy you have inherited. We’ve begged you to see your boot on our necks as long as it’s been there.

Find yourselves white people. Find yourselves so that you can know what whiteness is. Find yourselves so that you can determine what you want whiteness to be. Find yourselves so that you can stop your loved ones from voting for a definition of whiteness that you no longer want to subscribe to. Find yourselves so that racism no longer surprises you. Find yourselves so that maybe I can try writing fiction for a change.

Find yourselves so that next time you offer up the “white perspective,” you might actually say something that surprises me.

Source: <https://theestablishment.co/white-people-i-dont-want-you-to-understand-me-better-i-want-you-to-understand-yourselves-a6fbedd42ddf#.q0x3u6v1f>