

# Introduction



Everyone has heard of “Black Lives Matter.” #BlackLivesMatter went viral in 2013. It is a seemingly innocuous slogan that has caused a great deal of rancor among some Americans. It is a social movement that expanded globally and has inspired millions of people but seems to have dissipated over the past couple of years. Many folks believe either that the Black Lives Matter movement is (or was) focused primarily on uprooting police brutality or, on the other end of the spectrum, that it is (or was) simply an anti-police rallying cry. Neither of these impressions captures its essence or its vision. Furthermore, the movement has not dissipated but instead has evolved, as social movements tend to do. In this book, we take a step back not only to debunk certain myths about this social movement but also to illuminate the lessons that this contemporary Movement for Black Lives provides to people who are interested in being effective racial justice advocates and antiracists.

Black Lives Matter—the hashtag, the slogan, the movement—is an effort to bring attention to the precarious nature of Black lives in the United States. It is concerned with the various ways that Black people across an array of identities—including those who are gay, lesbian, queer, transgender, poor, formerly incarcerated, undocumented, and/or differently abled—face special challenges that must

*all* be attended to in order for *all* Black people to attain equality in the United States and in order for the United States to truly say that it is an egalitarian and free society.

In this book, we use our expertise as scholars and educators to get you thinking about why a movement called Black Lives Matter rose to prominence during the *first* self-identified Black president's *second* term in office. Relatedly, we'll get you thinking about how this moment in American political life relates to a deep history of structural racism. We'll have you critically examine many things that you probably take for granted or perhaps have never considered—including the ways in which you may participate in reproducing racial inequality—and do so in a way that brings otherwise-dry social science scholarship to life.



## Who Should Read This Book?

*Stay Woke* participates in the public discussion about race in order to guide people through the structural and ideological systems of contemporary American racism. We aim to enrich our readers' understanding of the role that race and racism play in American society, treating the twenty-first-century Movement for Black Lives as a teachable moment. With that said, we know that not everyone will get on board with what we have to say, but that's not what we're looking for. Instead, we aim to convince enough people that until Black lives begin to matter, the United States of America will never be a liberal, egalitarian democracy. We know that not everyone will get on board with this book because they will not believe the information we share; the facts we provide will be new, shocking, and sometimes inconceivable to some. But, as they say, truth is stranger than fiction. We cannot make this stuff up, and we have not. We rely on accurate portrayals of US history and society. We rely on peer-reviewed books and articles, well-researched reports from reputable organizations, and data publicly provided by the US government. We integrate aspects of critical race theory with social science

inquiry. We know that not everyone will get on board with this book because we are “academic elites with an agenda.” Yes, we have an agenda, best characterized as an effort toward antiracism. The interpretations and perspectives are our own, and as Charles L. Edson, an affordable-housing attorney, wrote, “If any are controversial and serve to keep the reader awake, so much the better.”<sup>1</sup>



## How Should You Use This Book?

*Stay Woke* is a little unorthodox, but the structure of this book is inspired by the many conversations we have had with our students, generational peers, colleagues, and college administrators, as well as folks from social justice organizations and antiracist trainings. Each chapter provides some insight into a contemporary or historical aspect of anti-Black racism in order to cultivate the reader’s identity as an antiracist or “one who strives to change the norms and practices that allow racism to exist,” as explained by the prominent sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.<sup>2</sup>

We begin in chapter 1, “On the Matter of Black Lives,” by looking at why the Black Lives Matter movement is necessary. By illustrating how structural racism operates and detrimentally impacts the lives of Black people, we set the table for collectively thinking about how to enact change. We know that there are plenty of people who are looking to fight back, so throughout the book we provide tools and ideas about how to do so—especially for those of us who benefit from white privilege.

We have noticed that progressives and conservatives do a lot of talking past one another. They throw around all kinds of esoteric words and reference concepts that seem universally understood, but both groups often have different meanings in mind. To facilitate your way around the bumpy terrain of racial language, we have placed a glossary near the front of the book, in chapter 2, “All the Words People Throw Around” (as opposed to in the back of the book, where most glossaries are relegated) so that we can all be on the same page

about some basic (and advanced) racial terminology. You can read each entry one by one as they appear or out of order; you can refer to them when they come up in the book (we boldface these concepts as they appear throughout the text) or when the pundits on the news bring them up; but ultimately, it is a toolkit we have built for folks who want to know more so they can do more.

There are also some commonsense notions that we aim to reexamine here. In chapter 3, “The Politics of Racial Progress,” we evaluate the extent to which US society is on a steady march toward a postracial reality. We make clear that although Americans love the idea of racial progress, it is not inevitable. Racial progress is the product of resistance, demands, and vigilance. In chapter 4, “Are You Upholding White Supremacy?,” we consider how difficult it is to see what is right in front of us: our own behavior. Here, we highlight how average Americans—progressives and conservatives across racial lines—talk *around* race. We bring attention to this issue in order to show how even well-meaning patterns of behavior can serve to the detriment of the most vulnerable people in society.

Afterward, in chapter 5, “It Doesn’t Have to Be This Way,” we elucidate the fact that the policies that cause the most problems are drawn up and implemented at the state and local levels of governance. What this means is that we don’t need to have the ear of someone on Capitol Hill; instead, we each can take on leadership positions and advocate for the changes we need most in our own city halls and state legislatures. As the civil rights and human rights activist Ella Baker explained, we are better off with ten thousand candles rather than a single spotlight.<sup>3</sup> You’ll find that in chapters 3 through 5, taken together, we cover what we believe are essential points of information for those who want to dig in to learn more as well as resources for political action.

At the time of this writing, justice-minded Americans are protesting a lot because there is a lot to protest—neo-Nazis and the so-called alt-right have been emboldened to come out of the shadows of the internet, migrant families are being separated, water rights and environmental regulations are being scaled back, and white citizens are calling the police on Black people for napping

while Black, grilling in the park while Black, or waiting for their friends at Starbucks while Black. We want this book to inspire political novices to action and to reinvigorate those activists who are in the streets, so in chapter 6, “Twenty-One Affirmations for the Twenty-First Century,” we provide bite-sized food for thought to nourish the racial egalitarian in us all.



## One Last Thing

We are both mothers, wives, and daughters. We are both political scientists and experts in our fields. One of us was motivated to earn her PhD because she wanted other people to know that Black women are perfect . . . ly able to produce knowledge, inspire students, and interrogate some of society’s most difficult questions. The other was motivated to receive her doctorate, in part, because Black mentors told her that was something she could and should do and modeled how to use that platform to advocate for social change. One of us is a Millennial. The other is a member of Generation X. Together, the two of us have a combined twenty years of classroom experience at seven universities and colleges in six states.

We have spoken to some unknown large number of students, faculty members, rooms full of college administrators, and social justice activists about matters of race and racism. And we have both noticed many of the same patterns of thinking and speaking about race, racism, and potential solutions to eradicate racial inequity. What we find is that an overwhelming proportion of people we talk to genuinely value the idea of a racially equitable society, but they are uneasy about talking about racism. Some have never had the opportunity to talk about racism, and they do not want to use the wrong words. Some are unsure about whether the United States is inches or miles from officially being declared a racism-free country. Some want to make sure that they are doing everything to not be a racist, but they are not yet aware that more is required of them if they actually want to work for racial justice.

We wrote this book because there are many people who want to help bring about racial equality and have been looking for help to take steps in the right direction; these people bring us hope. We wrote this book because we love Black people. We also wrote this book because we fear for the lives of our children, our husbands, our extended families, and our students who have a higher probability of being victims of state violence or of a vigilante who is suspicious of their presence and doubtful of their humanity. As mentioned, we hope to convince and encourage more people to live out their lives in a way that pushes us closer to living in a society where all Black lives matter. We use our expertise to do so, but we know that we are not above critique. We write from a posture of intellectual humility, which means that we are well aware that we don't know it all. In fact, sometimes we disagree with each other, but through our friendship and respect for each other, we are able to offer fresh perspectives, persuade each other, or teach the other something new. We invite our readers to challenge us, share their perspectives, and teach us.