Teachers are often among that group most reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which white-supremacist thinking informs every aspect of our culture including the way we learn, the content of what we learn, and the manner in which we are taught. Much of the consciousness-raising around the issue of white supremacy and racism has focused attention on teaching what racism is and how it manifests itself in the daily workings of our lives. In anti-racist workshops and seminars, much of the time is often spent simply breaking through the denial that leads many unenlightened white people, as well as people of color, to pretend that racist and white-supremacist thought and action are no longer pervasive in our culture.

In classroom settings I have often listened to groups of students tell me that racism really no longer shapes the contours of our lives, that there is just no such thing as racial difference, that “we are all just people.” Then a few minutes later I give them an
exercise. I ask if they were about to die and could choose to come back as a white male, a white female, a black female, or black male, which identity would they choose. Each time I do this exercise, most individuals, irrespective of gender or race invariably choose whiteness, and most often white maleness. Black females are the least chosen. When I ask students to explain their choice they proceed to do a sophisticated analysis of privilege based on race (with perspectives that take gender and class into consideration). This disconnect between their conscious repudiation of race as a marker of privilege and their unconscious understanding is a gap we have to bridge, an illusion that must be shattered before a meaningful discussion of race and racism can take place. This exercise helps them to move past their denial of the existence of racism. It lets us begin to work together toward a more unbiased approach to knowledge.

Teaching, lecturing, and facilitating workshops and writing about ending racism and other forms of domination, I have found that confronting racial biases, and more important, white-supremacist thinking, usually requires that all of us take a critical look at what we learned early in life about the nature of race. Those initial imprints seem to overdetermine attitudes about race. In writing groups we often begin simply with our first remembered awareness of race. Exploring our earliest ways of knowing about race, we find it easier to think about the question of standpoint. Individual white people, moving from denial of race to awareness, suddenly realize that white-supremacist culture encourages white folks to deny their understanding of race, to claim as part of their superiority that they are beyond thinking about race. Yet when the denial stops, it becomes clear that underneath their skin most white folks have an intimate awareness of the politics of race and racism. They have learned to pretend that it is not so, to take on the posture of learned helplessness.

It has become more fashionable, and at times profitable, for white folks in academic environments to think and write about
race. It is as though the very act of thinking about the nature of race and racism is still seen as “dirty” work best suited for black folks and other people of color or a form of privileged “acting out” for anti-racist white folks. Black folks/people of color who talk too much about race are often represented by the racist mindset as “playing the race card” (note how this very expression trivializes discussions of racism, implying it’s all just a game), or as simply insane. White folks who talk race, however, are often represented as patrons, as superior civilized beings. Yet their actions are just another indication of white-supremacist power, as in “we are so much more civilized and intelligent than black folks/people of color that we know better than they do all that can be understood about race.”

Simply talking about race, white supremacy, and racism can lead one to be typecast, excluded, placed lower on the food chain in the existing white-supremacist system. No wonder then that such talk can become an exercise in powerlessness because of the way it is filtered and mediated by those who hold the power to both control public speech (via editing, censorship, modes of representation, and interpretation). While more individuals in contemporary culture talk about race and racism, the power of that talk has been diminished by racist backlash that trivializes it, more often than not representing it as mere hysteria.

Individual black people/people of color often describe moments where they challenge racist speech at meetings or in other formal settings only to witness a majority of folks rush to comfort the racist individual they have challenged, as though that person is the victim and the person who raised questions a persecutor. No wonder then that while discussions of white supremacy and racism have become rather commonplace in individual scholarly writing and journalistic work, most people are wary, if not downright fearful, of discussing these issues in group settings, especially when among strangers. People often tell me that they do not share openly and candidly their thoughts
about white-supremacist thought and racism for fear that they will say the wrong thing. And yet when this reason is interrogated it usually is shown to cover up the fear of conflict, the belief that saying the wrong thing will generate conflict, bad feeling, or lead to counterattack. Groups where white folks are in the majority often insist that race and racism does not really have much meaning in today’s world because we are all so beyond caring about it. I ask them why they then have so much fear about speaking their minds. Their fear, their censoring silence, is indicative of the loaded meaning race and racism have in our society.

One of the bitter ironies anti-racists face when working to end white-supremacist thinking and action is that the folks who most perpetuate it are the individuals who are usually the least willing to acknowledge that race matters. In almost all the writing I have done on the topics of race, I state my preference for using the word white supremacy to describe the system of race-based biases we live within because this term, more than racism, is inclusive of everyone. It encompasses black people/people of color who have a racist mindset, even though they may organize their thinking and act differently from racist whites. For example: a black female who has internalized racism may straighten her hair to appear more like white females. And yet this same individual might become irate if any white person were to praise her for wanting to be white. She might confront them about being racist while remaining in complete denial about her allegiance to white-supremacist thinking about the nature of beauty. It may be just as difficult to break through this person’s denial about her collusion with white-supremacist thinking as to try to create awareness in a racist white person. Most people in our nation oppose overt acts of racist terror or violence. We are a nation of citizens who claim that they want to see an end to racism, to racial discrimination. Yet there is clearly a fundamental gap between theory and practice. No wonder, then, that it has been easier for
everyone in our nation to accept a critical written discourse about racism that is usually read only by those who have some degree of educational privilege than it is for us to create constructive ways to talk about white supremacy and racism, to find constructive actions that go beyond talk.

In more recent years, as discourses about race and racism have been accepted in academic settings, individual black people/people of color have been to some extent psychologically terrorized by the bizarre gaps between theory and practice. For example: a well-meaning liberal white female professor might write a useful book on the intersections of race and gender yet continue to allow racist biases to shape the manner in which she responds personally to women of color. . . . She may have a "grandiose" sense of herself, that is, a confidence that she is anti-racist and not all vigilant about making the connections that would transform her behavior and not just her thinking. When it comes to the subject of race and racism, many folks once naively believed that if we could change the way people thought we would change their behavior. Move often than not, this has not been the case. Yet we should not be profoundly dismayed by this. In a culture of domination almost everyone engages in behaviors that contradict their beliefs and values. This is why some sociologists and psychologists are writing about the reality that in our nation individuals lie more and more about all manner of things large and small. This lying often leads to forms of denial wherein individuals are unable to distinguish between fantasy and fact, between wishful dreaming and reality.

While it is a positive aspect of our culture that folks want to see racism end; paradoxically it is this heartfelt longing that underlies the persistence of the false assumption that racism has ended, that this in not a white-supremacist nation. In our culture almost everyone, irrespective of skin color, associates white supremacy with extreme conservative fanaticism, with Nazi skinheads who preach all the old stereotypes about racist purity. Yet
these extreme groups rarely threaten the day-to-day workings of our lives. It is the less extreme white supremacists’ beliefs and assumptions, easier to cover up and mask, that maintain and perpetuate everyday racism as a form of group oppression.

Once we can face all the myriad ways white-supremacist thinking shapes our daily perceptions, we can understand the reasons liberal whites who are concerned with ending racism may simultaneously hold on to beliefs and assumptions that have their roots in white supremacy. We can also face the way black people/people of color knowingly and unknowingly internalize white-supremacist thinking. In a class I was teaching recently, we discussed a talk I had given where many white students expressed their disdain for the ideas I expressed, and for my presence, by booing. I challenged the group to consider that what I was saying was not as disturbing to the group as was my embodied young-looking presence, a black female with natural hair in braids. I had barely finished this comment before a liberal white male in the group attacked claiming “you are playing the race card here.” His immediate defensive response is often the feedback that comes when black people/people of color make an observation about the everyday dynamics of race and racism, sex and sexism that does not conform to privileged white perceptions.

Understanding the degree to which class privilege mediates and shapes perceptions about race is vital to any public discourse on the subject because the most privileged people in our nation (especially those with class power) are often the most unwilling to speak honestly about racist biases. Working-class whites in our nation will often speak quite eloquently about the way racist assumptions fuel our perceptions and our actions daily, while white folks from privileged class backgrounds continue to do the dance of denial, pretending that shared class privileges mediate or transform racism. I explained to the group that one of the manifestations of daily life in an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is
that the vast majority of white folks have little intimacy with
black people and are rarely in situations where they must listen
to a black person (particularly a black woman) speak to them
for thirty minutes. Certainly, there were no black teachers
when I was an undergraduate English major and graduate stu-
dent. It would not have occurred to me to look for black
female teachers in other disciplines. I accepted this absence.

I shared with the class that in my daily life as a member of
the upper classes, living alone in a predominantly white neigh-
borhood and working in predominantly white settings, I have
little organic contact with black females. If I wanted to talk with
or listen to black women, I have to make an effort. Yet here was
an upper-class white man living in a predominantly white
world, working in a predominantly white setting, telling me
that white folks have no trouble listening to black females
teach them, listening to black females express beliefs and val-
ues that run counter to their own. I asked the group to con-
sider why the response to my initial ideas about the rarity of
white folks having to listen to black women talk and/teach was
not: “Gee. I have never thought about how race determines
who we listen to, who we accept as authorities.” It would have
been interesting had the white male colleague who vehe-
mently disagreed withheld his comments until he had given
the matter serious thought, until he was able to present cogent
reasons why he disagreed with my statement. By evaluating me
(i.e., suggesting I was being false and “playing the race card”) he
avoided having to present the fact-based and/or experien-
tial reasons he thought differently from me. His response per-
sonalized an observation that I do not consider personal.

Given the nature of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist
patriarchy as a system shaping culture and beliefs it is simply a
fact that most white folks are rarely, if ever, in situations where
they must listen to black women lecture to them. Even the
white folks who have black maids and housekeepers working in
their homes daily do not listen to these women when they talk.
This reality was graphically depicted years ago in the 1950s’ box office hit, *Imitation of Life*, when Laura, the rich white woman comes to her black housekeeper/maid Annie’s funeral and is awed that Annie had friends, was a highly regarded church woman, and so on. Certainly the biographies and autobiographies of white women who were raised by black female servants abound with testimony that they did not dialogue with these women, or listen to them tell their stories, or share information they did not want to hear.

We operate in a world of class privilege that remains undemocratic and discriminatory so that most upper-class black folks in white settings are isolated and must make an effort to hear black females talk and/or lecture for thirty minutes. My honest testimony to this fact was a critical intervention that created a moment of pause in the minds of those students who were not operating with closed minds. They could ponder my comments and relate them to their lives. They could ask themselves “who do I listen to?” or “whose words do I value?” I offered Oprah Winfrey as an example of a black female who daily commands the attention of masses of white folks, and yet her role is usually that of commentator. She listens and interprets the speech of others. Rarely does she express her particular views on a subject for more than a few minutes, if at all. In many ways she is seen in the racist imagination as “housekeeper/mammy,” not unlike that of Annie in *Imitation of Life* whose primary goal in life is to make sure white folks can live the best possible life. Remember that for fifteen years Annie sent the old milkman her hard-earned money every Christmas pretending that it came from the selfish, rich, white woman. This was Annie’s way of teaching by example. Her motivation is to make Laura a better person and, of course, by doing so she reveals what a good person she herself is.

Annie is the black woman who knows that her place is to be subordinate and to serve; she serves with acceptance, dignity, and grace. She does not confront the white mistress with ideas
and critical perspectives that white females do not want to hear. This is the model offered black females by the racist, sexist imagination. That model is represented currently in almost every Hollywood representation of black womanhood. No wonder then that so many white folks find it hard to “listen” to a black woman critic speaking ideas and opinions that threaten their belief systems. In our class discussion someone pointed out that a powerful white male had given a similar talk but he was not given negative, disdainful, verbal feedback. It was not that listeners agreed with what he said; it was that they believed he had a right to state his viewpoint.

Often individual black people and/or people of color are in settings where we are the only colored person present. In such settings unenlightened white folks often behave toward us as though we are the guests and they the hosts. They act as though our presence is less a function of our skill, aptitude, genius, and more the outcome of philanthropic charity. Thinking this way, they see our presence as functioning primarily as a testament to their largesse; it tells the world they are not racist. Yet the very notion that we are there to serve them is itself an expression of white-supremacist thinking. At the core of white-supremacist thinking in the United States and elsewhere is the assumption that it is natural for the inferior races (darker people) to serve the superior races (in societies where there is no white presence, lighter-skinned people should be served by darker-skinned people). Embedded in this notion of service is that no matter what the status of the person of color, that position must be reconfigured to the greater good of whiteness.

This was an aspect of white-supremacist thinking that made the call for racial integration and diversity acceptable to many white folks. To them, integration meant having access to people of color who would either spice up their lives (the form of service we might call the performance of exotica) or provide them with the necessary tools to continue their race-based
dominance (for example: the college students from privileged white homes who go to the third world to learn Spanish or Swahili for “fun,” except that it neatly fits later that this skill helps them when they are seeking employment). Time and time again in classes, white students who were preparing to study or live briefly in a non-white country talk about the people in these countries as though they existed merely to enhance white adventure. Truly, their vision was not unlike that of the message white kids received from watching the racist television show *Tarzan* (“go native and enhance your life”). The beat poet Jack Kerouac expressed his sentiments in the language of cool “the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me.” Just as many unaware whites, often liberal, saw and see their interactions with people of color via affirmative action as an investment that will improve their lives, even enhance their organic superiority. Many people of color, schooled in the art of internalized white-supremacist thinking, shared this assumption.

Chinese writer Anchee Min captures the essence of this worship of whiteness beautifully in *Katherine*, a novel about a young white teacher coming to China, armed with seductive cultural imperialism. Describing to one of her pupils her perception that the Chinese are a cruel people (certainly this was a popular racist stereotype in pre-twentieth century America) she incites admiration in her Chinese pupil who confesses: “Her way of thinking touched me. It was something I had forgotten or maybe had never known. She unfolded the petals of my dry heart. A flower I did not know existed began to bloom inside me . . . Katherine stretched my life beyond its own circumstance. It was the kind of purity she preserved that moved me.” The white woman as symbol of purity continues to dominate racist imaginations globally. In the United States, Hollywood continues to project this image, using it to affirm and reaffirm the power of white supremacy.
When people of color attempt to critically intervene and oppose white supremacy, particularly around the issue of representation, we are often dismissed as pushing narrow political correctness, or simply characterized as being no fun. Writing about cultural appropriation in *English is Broken Here* Coco Fusco explains: “The socialization I and many other affirmative action babies received to identify racism as the property only of ignorant, reactionary people, preferably from the past, functioned to deflect our attention from how whiteness operated in the present . . . To raise the specter of racism in the here and now, to suggest that despite their political beliefs and sexual preferences, white people operate within, and benefit from, white supremacist social structures is still tantamount to a declaration of war.” When white supremacy is challenged and resisted, people of color and our allies in struggle risk the censorship that emerges when those who hold the power to dominate simply say to us, “You are extremist, you are the real racist, you are playing the race card.” Of course the irony is that we are not actually allowed to play at the game of race, we are merely pawns in the hands of those who invent the games and determine the rules.

Every black person and person of color colludes with the existing system in small ways every day, even those among us who see ourselves as anti-racist radicals. This collusion happens simply because we are all products of the culture we live within and have all been subjected to the forms of socialization and acculturation that are deemed normal in our society. Through the cultivation of awareness, through the decolonization of our minds, we have the tools to break with the dominator model of human social engagement and the will to imagine new and different ways that people might come together. Martin Luther King, Jr. imagined a “beloved community,” conceptualizing a world where people would bond on the basis of shared humanness. His vision remains. King taught that the
simple act of coming together would strengthen community. Yet before he was assassinated he was beginning to see that unlearning racism would require a change in both thinking and action, and that people could agree to come together across race but they would not make community.

To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination. A body of critical theory is now available that explains all the workings of white-supremacist thought and racism. But explanations alone do not bring us to the practice of beloved community. When we take the theory, the explanations, and apply them concretely to our daily lives, to our experiences, we further and deepen the practice of anti-racist transformation. Rather than simply accept that class power often situates me in a world where I have little or no contact with other black people, especially individuals from underprivileged classes, I as a black person with class privilege can actively seek out these relationships. More often than not to do this work I must make an effort to expand my social world. In recent years, individual white peers who have always seen themselves as anti-racist have adopted children of color, only to realize (what should have been apparent) that they did not really have intimate friendships with people of color. They need to do their active unlearning of white-supremacist thinking (which says you are superior because of whiteness and therefore better able to raise a non-white child than any colored person) by seeking to forge relationships with people of color.

Time and time again I have observed white peers working to unlearn white supremacy as they become aware of the reality that they have little contact with non-white people. They open their “eyes” and see that there were always non-white folks around them that they did not “see” when they were blinded by white privilege stemming from racist foundations. Time and time again I come to do anti-racist work at liberal
arts colleges that I am told are “all white” only to find that the majority of support staff and service workers are non-white. The presence of black people and/or people of color who are not seen as class peers is easily ignored in a context where the privileged identity is white. When we stop thinking and evaluating along the lines of hierarchy and can value rightly all members of a community we are breaking a culture of domination. White supremacy is easily reinscribed when individuals describe communities of students and faculty as “all white” rather than affirming diversity, even if it’s evident only by the presence of a few individuals. Anti-racist work requires of all of us vigilance about the ways we use language. Either/or thinking is crucial to the maintenance of racism and other forms of group oppression. Whenever we think in terms of both/and we are better situated to do the work of community building.

Imagine the difference: on one campus I hear that white people remain the larger group but are made diverse by the presence of non-white individuals and that the majority wants to become diverse. On another campus, I hear that “we are all white,” which negates the value of the presence of people of color, however few in number they may be. The language we use to express these ideas is usually awkward at first, but as we change to more inclusive language and normalize its use that awkwardness becomes less. Much of the white-supremacist thought and action we have all unconsciously learned surfaces in habitual behavior. Therefore it is that behavior we must become aware of and work to change. For example: black mothers frequently come to me to ask what they can do when their children come home from school saying they want to be “made white.” Often these women will share that they have done everything to instill love of blackness. However, in every case the woman seeks to change her appearance to look lighter or to make her hair straighter.

In every case the individual resists the notion that the child “reads” her hypocrisy, that the child assumes that “if I cannot
even be seen as beautiful, acceptable, worthy by my mother then that larger world that is telling me white is better every day must be right.” This is a direct quote from a beautiful black female student in her early twenties who shared that this is what she used to tell herself. And as an adult when individuals would tell her how beautiful she is this is the message her inner voice would offer as a reminder. Even though many scholars and intellectuals mock the world of self-help, it is an important realm of self-recovery for the racially colonized mind. Speaking aloud daily affirmations to change long-imprinted, toxic messages is a useful strategy for cleansing the mind. It promotes vigilant awareness of the ways white-supremacist thinking (daily encoded in the world of advertisement, commercials, magazine images, etc.) enters our system and also empowers us to break its hold on our consciousness.

When I first chose to write books on the subject of love, I simply assumed that my audience would be interested readers of any race. Yet when I came to the table of decision-makers in the publishing world, I was asked to identify who the audience would be. It was explained to me that it might be difficult for me to attract “white readers” since I was associated with black liberation. I believed that I could transcend the race-based consumerism that is often the norm in our society. (If a movie has only white characters, it is presumed to be marketed in the direction of all consumers; it is for everybody. However if the movie has only black characters, it is perceived to be directed at a black market.) When I wrote All about Love. New Visions, I never identified my race in the book, though clearly the photo on the back showed my color, because I wanted to demonstrate by this gesture that black writers who write specifically on the subject of race are not always only interested in race. I wanted to show that we are all complex thinkers who can be both specific in our focus and universal. The either/or thinking that is at the heart of the white-supremacist–based Western metaphysical dualism teaches people they must choose to like either
black images or white images, or see books by white people as written for everybody and books by black people for black people. The inclusive nature of both/and thinking allows us to be inclusive. As a child I never thought that Emily Dickinson wrote her poems just for white readers (and she was truly the first poet whose work I loved). When I later read the work of Langston Hughes I never though he was writing just for black readers. Both poets wrote about the world they knew most intimately.

As my awareness of the way white-supremacist thinking shapes even our choices of what books we read, what books we want to display on our coffee tables, intensified, I developed strategies of resistance. When my second book on love, *Salvation: Black People and Love*, looked specifically at the experiences of black folks, I had to challenge the use of the phrase “black love” by white and black readers. I had to make the point that I was talking about the same ideas of love I had written about in the first book (which no one called a book about white love) but now focusing on the impact those ways of thinking about love had made on the consciousness of black people. The assumption that “whiteness” encompasses that which is universal, and therefore for everybody, while “blackness” is specific, and therefore “for colored only,” is white-supremacist thought. And yet many liberal people, along with their more conservative peers, think this way not because they are “bad” people or are consciously choosing to be racist but because they have unconsciously learned to think in this manner. Such thinking, like so many other thought patterns and actions that help perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, can be easily unlearned.

Thirty years of talking about racism and white supremacy, giving lectures and facilitating anti-racism workshops has shown me how easy it is for individuals to change their thoughts and actions when they become aware and when they desire to use that awareness to alter behavior. White-supremacist backlash, which has sought to undermine both the legacy of civil
rights and the new focus on critical race theory and practice, continues to push the notion that racist thinking, particularly in white minds, cannot be changed. This is just simply not true. Yet this false assumption gained momentum because there has been no collective demonstration on the part of masses of white people that they are ready to end race-based domination, especially when it comes to the everyday manifestation of white-supremacist thinking, of white power.

Clearly, the most powerful indicator that white people wanted to see institutionalized racism end was the overall societal support for desegregation and integration. The fact that many white people did not link this support to ending everyday acts of white-supremacist thought and practice, however, has helped racism maintain its hold on our culture. To break that hold we need continual anti-racism activism. We need to generate greater cultural awareness of the way white-supremacist thinking operates in our daily lives. We need to hear from the individuals who know, because they have lived anti-racist lives, what everyone can do to decolonize their minds, to maintain awareness, change behavior, and create beloved community.