

We'll
All Be
Free

*How a Culture of White Supremacy Devalues Us
and How We Can Reclaim Our True Worth*

Caroline J. Sumlin

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Caroline J. Sumlin, *We'll All Be Free*

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*To every single person who's ever whispered
to themselves, "I'll never be enough."*

You have always been enough. I hope this book
helps you come home to who you've always been.

To my husband.

You believed in me in my darkest hours, you pushed me when I
wanted to quit, you sacrificed your time so I could have just a few
more hours to write, and you loved me harder when I was most
unlovable. Without you, these pages would not exist. I love you.

To my girls.

You learned to play quietly so Mama could finish up just a
few more paragraphs, you gave more grace than I deserved
when stress got the best of me, and you cheered me on
and told everyone I was the "best writer in the whole wide
world." Most importantly, you always fill my days with
more laughter and love than I could ever imagine. I hope
your memories of these moments light a fire in your bellies
to pursue your wildest dreams. Mama loves you.

To my mom.

You taught me to be strong, be independent, and never
settle. You taught me to dare to thrive in a world that was
built to make our mere survival nearly impossible. Thank
you for always pushing me to a potential I couldn't see.

To my dad.

Watching you choose work that lit your soul on fire gave
me permission to do the same. I miss you every day.

Contents

Prelude 11

Part 1 The Foundation

1. Our Primal Wound 25
2. They Didn't Know Better 40
3. Never Enough 53

Part 2 Reclaiming Our Worth

4. Where We First Learned to Be White 83
5. U.G.L.Y. 108
6. Hustle 131
7. The Crisis We Refuse to See 156

Part 3 Finding Freedom

8. Stop Chasing 175
9. Breaking the Cycle 189
10. We'll All Be Free 202

Epilogue 221

For Further Reading 225

Acknowledgments 227

Notes 229

Prelude

We live in a world that does not value us for who we are. When did you first realize this truth? I'll never forget the day it became a reality for me. It was the day I realized I was Black.

I was in kindergarten. My best friend (who was also Black) and I were playing during recess. Our braids bounced freely as we chased each other around and around before ending up on the ground, our little bodies overcome by laughter. We were in a world of our own, without care. I then led the way toward my favorite slide. It was one of those tunnel slides that are so dark as you go down that you get lost for a moment until you come out the other side.

I eagerly ran up to the entrance of the slide, but a voice stopped me.

“Get out of my way, you BLACK GIRL!”

I lost my breath for a moment as I saw a white boy staring at me with hatred on his face. I couldn't move. I knew he wasn't calling me a Black girl just to point out that I happened to be Black. He was calling me a Black girl to emphasize that I had no business being in *his* way, sharing *his* playground, going down a slide that *he* wanted.

He was calling me a Black girl because he believed that, as a white boy, he was better than me.

He pushed me out of the way and slid down. My friend immediately ran to tell the teacher. I couldn't move, though. Overcome with shock, I sat on the ground, trying to catch my breath and wrap my mind around what had just happened. A lump rose in my throat, but I didn't cry. I just . . . sat.

That was when I learned that being Black didn't just mean that my skin happened to be brown but also that I would forever be perceived as "less than" everyone else in the world.

If I'm being totally honest, I had already sensed that my Blackness wasn't just different from most of what I saw around me; it also wasn't "as good as being white." I had already sensed this because it was everywhere. It was inescapable.

I was one of only two Black girls in my entire kindergarten class, and the two of us were best friends. We immediately gravitated toward each other when we met in orientation because we saw ourselves when we looked at each other. We saw chocolate skin while everyone else had vanilla. We saw thick, textured, plaited hair while everyone else had slick, straight hair that moved with the wind. We heard the sameness in our voices while everyone else's intonation was just a bit . . . different. We didn't know the decisions our subconscious brains were making, but we knew we felt safe with each other. Somehow, we knew the world that surrounded us *wasn't made for us*.

I always subconsciously knew what it meant to be Black, even at the tender age of five. Unless I was with my Black mother, attending our historic Black church in St. Paul, Minnesota, whiteness was everywhere. It was in every store, on the cover of every magazine, and on every television show. It was in the faces of my teachers, classmates, and the pictures in all my textbooks. I knew Blackness

was different. I knew it wasn't seen as being as pretty or as smart as whiteness. My little brain couldn't articulate that, but I *knew*.

However, that day on the playground made what I had sensed *real*. It confirmed my feelings and turned them into truth.

Once your eyes are opened to a truth, it becomes impossible to close them. Once you know, you see it everywhere. From that moment, there was no escaping the fact that I was Black and there was no escaping the message that surrounded me that “**Whiteness is better.**”

Before I go any further, let me introduce myself. Hi, my name is Caroline. I'm a thirtysomething wife and homeschooling mama of two who has fumbled around most of my life feeling like a worthless mistake. Maybe you can relate to that. Until recently, the only language I was fluent in was self-hate. You'll learn more about my story as you read this book. Right now, I want to thank you for being here. Thank you for trusting my flawed, passionate self to help you on your own self-worth journey. Thank you for choosing to let me in. Thank you for trusting me.

You may be feeling a tad confused right now, asking yourself, *Did I pick up a book about racism, white supremacy, or self-worth?*

Yes. All of the above.

You may also be asking yourself, *Is this book for me? Or is this book for Black women? Or white women? Black men, maybe?*

Yes. This book is for everyone.

Am I safe here?

That is my number one goal.

You are here because you are ready to reclaim your self-worth. Once and for all. If you're like me, you've tried everything else. You've tried manifesting it, hoping that if you just think your way

into loving yourself, you'll finally love yourself. You've tried praying for your self-worth, only to feel immense disappointment the moment you finish your prayer and unworthiness hits you like a ton of bricks . . . again. You've tried faking it until you make it. You've tried avoidance. And most of all, you've probably spent your whole life *chasing after it*.

Chasing it with perfectionism.

Chasing it by hustling.

Chasing it with titles and status.

Chasing it with low-calorie diets and skinny teas.

Chasing it with Instagram filters and the perfect contour.

Chasing it with flawless church attendance.

Chasing it by chasing after every single standard society tells you will finally make you feel *good enough*.

And now you are here. Because you are tired of chasing. You're out of breath. You're over it. And every manifestation and affirmation has done diddly-squat. So you picked up this book, hoping and *begging* that it will finally lead you *somewhere*.

This time you aren't manifesting and you aren't chasing. You are uncovering the *truth* about the root of your battle with unworthiness, and that root is white supremacy culture.

In this book, we will dissect the different ways white supremacy culture has led to **every single one of us believing an inherent lie of self-unworthiness** as it has attempted to destroy the minds and bodies of those who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), as well as every other marginalized community. Together we will deconstruct the lies white supremacy culture has fed us so we can break free from the chains of unworthiness that are weighing us down and walk in the true liberation we all deserve.

I promise that if you stick with me, you will not only see white supremacy in a completely new light but also see yourself in a com-

pletely new light. You will be able to see the person who has been hidden inside you since the moment the world began tainting your perception and you began to believe the lie that you aren't good enough.

Growing up, I used to think that my struggles with unworthiness were unique to me, my childhood trauma, and the unfortunate cards I'd been dealt. I thought I was the only one who felt this deep self-loathing. Everyone else seemed to totally love and believe in themselves and have their self-worth game down. It wasn't until recently that I realized we are all walking through different versions of the unworthiness battle.

We are all chasing worth and validation because our society was intentionally built to keep us chasing.

Our collective struggle with self-worth is so ingrained in us that it shows up in ways we have completely normalized as a society. Imposter syndrome, self-doubt, a constant striving for achievement and perfection, feeling guilty for resting or not being productive, feeling guilty for asking for help, putting ourselves last, living in fear, and having to announce and qualify a need for self-care so we can justify that we, in fact, earned that self-care—these are all ways unworthiness infiltrates our daily lives. We are all living through the lens of having something to prove, as if just living is not good enough.

You may be nodding your head in agreement right now as you recognize yourself in this collective battle with unworthiness, but you may also be wondering what in the world this has to do with white supremacy.

Traditionally we have been taught that white supremacy only exists within the realm of the KKK and other white nationalist groups that represent extreme ideals within our society. The idea that white

supremacy is something found in more than just a few extremist groups is one that most of us are just beginning to grapple with, let alone understand how much it has deeply affected all of us to our detriment.

Before we go any further, we need to accurately define *white supremacy* and *white supremacy culture*.

White supremacy is

[A] political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.¹

This is the system our Western society has been built upon since the earliest days of colonization, when the concepts of race and whiteness were created to justify colonization and the institution of chattel slavery. This system is so normalized and ingrained within us that we must willfully take off our collective blindfold to see it. Once that blindfold is removed, we will see that it's not only everywhere but is the literal *definition* of the society we live in.

White supremacy is like the brick foundation that our home (our nation and the Western world) was built on top of. The pillars of our society are also white supremacy, as systems and structures have continued to be created throughout our four-hundred-year history to ensure it is always upheld. This foundation and these pillars have created our entire culture: the house of white supremacy in which we all live. There is a world that exists outside this house, but unless we open the door and fully step outside, we will never see it.

White supremacy, in conjunction with our capitalist society, is the overarching system that reproduces and reinforces other systems of oppression such as classism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism. Each of these systems strategically marginalizes and dehumanizes one group of people to protect and maintain the power of another group of people. From these systems of oppression, which flow through our society the same way blood flows through our veins, emerges *white supremacy culture*. The system of white supremacy is what creates **white supremacy culture**.

Let's take a quick look at the Merriam-Webster definition of *culture*:

Culture: the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group.

Also: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or way of life) shared by people in a place or time.²

While Western society is a conglomeration of many different cultures, we cannot forget we also exist under one umbrella, which is an overarching white supremacy, or white dominant, culture we all have had no choice but to succumb to. The systems of white supremacy have created norms, customs, values, beliefs, and standards that have taught us that whiteness is better, whiteness is success, and whiteness is value—and unless you assimilate yourself to strive for whiteness, you are forever not good enough.³ This is white supremacy culture.

We have one more definition to comprehend before we continue, and that is the definition of *whiteness*. I completely understand this may make you want to run if you are a white person who is reading this. I know this can be a sensitive topic. But do me a favor and bear with me.

White supremacy was developed out of the concept and belief that whiteness is superior to all other races and/or ethnicities. In short, *whiteness* is the absence of Blackness. Since the creation of race, Blackness has been considered the lowest tier of humanity in our society and whiteness has always been the top tier, with every other race falling somewhere along this spectrum. This is why the definitions of success, beauty, status, and value have always been assigned to the white population.

Besides the obvious discriminatory problem with this, the standard of whiteness has become a standard that is nearly impossible for anyone to achieve—white people included. This one standard—of success, of beauty, of intelligence, of value—leaves 99 percent of the population believing there is something wrong with them if they don't achieve it. In order to justify the chase to achieve that one standard, a culture of white supremacy emerged, and within it, toxic characteristics of white supremacy culture have become our norm.

As we go on, you will learn what those toxic characteristics are and how they have contributed to the beliefs we have about ourselves that lead us to say, “I'm not enough.”

It may be difficult to comprehend how a societal structure that was originally built to marginalize and suppress its Black and Indigenous populations could also harm everyone else under its domain. Maybe you were even tempted to put this book down as you read the previous sentences, assuming that this book is not written for you. I'm glad you didn't heed that temptation, because this book is for all of us.

White supremacy culture has taken our humanity away from us. Every single system that falls under the umbrella of white supremacy has confused us into believing that our humanity and our worth are conditional, and we've honestly fallen for it. We have cultivated a culture that has abused power, neglected emotions and trauma, degraded people for having imperfections, and dehumanized us for

our differences. Every single one of us is affected by this. Whether you're Black, white, male, female, or something in between, you have more than likely believed you have to *do more* and *be more* to be worthy of love, freedom, abundance, or joy.

If we don't fight these systems and beliefs that have told us for too long that our worth is conditional on our achievement and our whiteness, we will collapse. Heartache, trauma, and oppression will break us down, and there will be no standing up again.

On January 6, 2021, I woke up.

I woke up to the reality of America. When I saw that evil, terrifying display of white supremacy as an angry mob stormed our nation's Capitol, everything changed for me. That was the moment I realized I had been trying my entire life to exist in a world that was strategically built against me. Those kindergarten realizations were confirmed once again. This world didn't want me. And I would never be good enough for it because I would always be Black, and I would always be a woman, and I would always be a Black woman. No amount of "progress" this country seemingly made was ever going to change the fact that white supremacy would always win.

You would think that these feelings would have driven me to throw in the towel. What was the point of fighting anymore? White supremacy had won. And I was tired.

I was tired of being Black. I was tired of being Black in America. I was tired of swallowing my pain. I was tired of holding back tears. I was tired of always having to prove myself. I was tired of constantly feeling unworthy of my humanity.

I had a choice to make. I could let the weight crush me. Or I could unapologetically start screaming and let the weight gradually fall off my shoulders with every scream.

I chose the latter. I started speaking up. I started talking about racism and white supremacy and how they have tried to destroy us for far too long. I began recognizing just how big of an impact white supremacy and racism have had on my life. An impact I once dismissed as normal and had faulted myself for not being strong enough to deal with.

The more I cried and spoke out, the more revelation I received. I began digging into the research, desperate for answers for the pain white supremacy has caused me and my BIPOC brothers and sisters. I began learning about exactly what white supremacy is, the culture it created in our society, and how it has crippled not only BIPOC lives but the lives of every single one of us.

I don't know your story. I don't know how you're feeling, what you've gone through, or how our society has played a role in your personal experiences. What I can say is that as a society we have shut down humanity for far too long, and it cannot go on any longer. We each deserve to walk in the fullness of our humanity, our broken pieces and battle scars on full display without shame, healing without apology, and paving the way for the cycles of dehumanization to finally end.

Let's make our generation the last generation that ever has to feel ashamed of their humanity. Let's make our generation the last generation that ever has to question the worthiness of our existence.

Enough is enough.

It's our turn to take on this world and create lasting change that says, "Oppression has no place here. Marginalization has no place here. Dehumanization has no place here."

Only humanity has a place here. Only equity has a place here. Only love has a place here. Only freedom has a place here.

There was a "you" that existed before you began hiding. By the end of this book, you will have begun to be reacquainted with this person you never even knew you were searching for.

Here's what you can expect as we embark on this journey. I've broken this book up into three parts. In part 1, you will learn about how white supremacy was constructed and how that led to the culture of white supremacy we live in today. You will also begin to make connections to how the foundation of white supremacy is directly correlated to the roots of your own feelings of unworthiness. You will also learn a lot of accurate, truthful history throughout this book—but no worries, I've written it in such a way that it is interesting and digestible. I bet you'll want to dig further into many of the topics we discuss, which I highly encourage. In my opinion, history is always the missing piece of the puzzle that is staring us right in the face as we look high and low trying to search for it. Also, at the end of each chapter are a few journal prompts to help you digest what you've learned and take actionable steps toward reclaiming your true worth.

Part 2 looks at a few major sectors of society that are constantly telling us we are never enough: the school system, the beauty and diet industry, and hustle culture. You will learn the specific white supremacist roots of each of these sectors and how those roots have led these sectors to be the primary drivers of the white supremacy culture machine, thus further increasing the unworthiness you feel. Most importantly, you will begin to see the full picture coming together, from the lies you have been told that have disguised themselves as standards to the truths you can begin replacing those lies with. You will start to feel a weight lift from your shoulders.

In part 3, you will find freedom. You will take actionable steps that will help you break up with white supremacy culture for good, reclaim the worth it has stolen from you, walk in true freedom, and work toward doing the redemptive work of creating a future that is free from the chains of white supremacy. This book will give you

the tools you need to get started as well as pointing you toward more tools to add to your liberation tool kit. You will have what you need to fight the battle for your mental health and your liberation and to finally be able to look in the mirror and say “I love me” without reserve.

Always remember, you are safe here. This is a journey. It is not a race. Take your time but stay consistent. Even if you have to pick this book back up twenty-five times, just make sure you keep picking it back up. I will be here with you every step of the way. We are on this journey together. While I may be a few steps ahead of you, reaching back and taking your hand, I am still walking along the same path. It is a path that does not end on this side of heaven. It is a lifelong journey, a lifelong commitment to healing, fighting, resting, and declaring our liberation.

You’ve got this. I promise.

Part 1

The Foundation

1

Our Primal Wound

I don't know much about the day I was born.

I know the date and the time. I know some of the names of the people involved. But other than that, I don't have a lot of information.

That always bothered me.

Most people know how much they weighed at birth. I don't. Most people know how much hair they had on their heads. I don't. Most people know the details of their birth story, because their mothers were able to relive that day and share it with them. Not me. I've never had a story. Just a few pieces of paper: an original birth certificate and a few handwritten forms that reveal so little information you would think they were trying to keep a secret.

One day, shortly after I turned sixteen, my adoptive mother told me she had something to give me. She went to the depths of the basement while I sat feeling confused, twiddling my thumbs and anxiously waiting to see what she had for me. There was something about my birthday that always reignited my adoption curiosity, which led me to inundate my mother with questions around the same time every year. Was I finally going to get some new answers?

She returned with a thin manila folder in her hand. “These are your adoption papers,” she said. “Now that you’re sixteen, I think you’re old enough to have them.”

Looking down at my toes, I inhaled, taking a deep, shaky breath that I tried to hide. Emotion filled the pit of my stomach, but I couldn’t let it bubble over. Showing my emotions in front of others, especially my mom, was a huge no-no for me.

“Thank you,” I responded, slowly reaching to take the folder from her hands.

Inhaling again, this time a little less shakily, I opened it. This wasn’t the first time I was hearing about my adoption, but it was the first time I had seen any official documentation about it.

Until then, I had always summarized my adoption story in a few sentences: “I was born in New York. My parents were mentally challenged, so they couldn’t take care of me. My grandmother took care of me until my mom adopted me when I was two and a half.”

Imagine a five-year-old girl reciting these lines when asked. I didn’t understand what it all meant, but I recited this narrative with confidence as if I were perfectly content with the adoption and had no questions whatsoever about the details of my story.

Except I *did* have questions. Questions that plagued me, such as, *Did my mother scream when they took me away? Why couldn’t she take care of me? What does “mentally challenged” mean? Why am I here? Am I a mistake?*

Those questions lingered in my mind as I walked the giggle-filled hallways at school, stroked a yellow tennis ball during tennis practice, and cried myself to sleep at night when my existence felt like the biggest disappointment.

As a young child, I didn’t have the words to articulate this, but at my core, I had felt like a mistake for as long as I could remember. Everyone I knew had two parents who lived together. But I had

always lived with only one parent. My adoptive father lived across town, and while I saw him often and he was a pillar of strength in my life, I was still envious of those who had the privilege of both parents tucking them in every night. Plus, their parents had been theirs from the beginning. They had been born to and allowed to go home with the *same* parents. They didn't have to "earn their parents" like I did. They didn't have to "wait for love" as I had. They didn't have a big black hole at the beginning of their story.

But I did. I had a void that made me question the worthiness of my existence from my earliest memories. This void whispered to me daily.

You aren't supposed to be here.

You are a mistake.

Your mother is going to send you back.

She doesn't really love you.

These whispers threatened my childhood innocence, sense of wonder, and ultimately my self-worth.

What I didn't realize at that time was that those words were a response to trauma. I didn't know that very real psychological trauma occurs when babies are separated from their biological mothers. Their responses mimic what occurs when someone experiences the death of a parent.¹ And if a baby continues to experience trauma during infancy and toddlerhood, that trauma is more psychologically detrimental than trauma experienced during later stages of childhood due to the vital brain development occurring in those first years.²

I didn't know I had experienced a primal wound. I didn't know that my birth itself was traumatic and that I would be left picking up the pieces for the rest of my life. I didn't know that my infant and toddler years had also been harrowing. To my adoptive mother's best recollection, I had spent them in a pseudo-foster care situation,

abandoned in a crib for hours at a time. (The story that my biological grandmother had taken care of me for two years turned out to be mostly untrue.) I didn't realize that my heart had already shattered into a million pieces before I had seen my third birthday.

The moment I laid eyes on those papers, the reality of the trauma I had endured hit me like a jolt of lightning. Emotion continued to rush through my body like a tidal wave, but I kept my facial expression stoic as I read and reread my original birth certificate with a stranger's name listed where it said "mother." My stomach felt as though I was riding a roller coaster, and I hated roller coasters. I could not stop staring at this woman's name. I had heard that name before. Anytime I asked my adoptive mother questions about my adoption, she never hesitated to offer what details she knew. She'd told me the name of both my biological mother and father before, but something about seeing their names on this document from the day of my birth made what happened to me so real. There was really a woman out there who had carried me for nine months, only for us to not continue our lives together as most babies and mothers get to do.

I was beginning to realize that I had experienced trauma. Trauma I had spent an entire childhood waving off as "normal," as if it had no effect on me. Until then, I thought my feelings of unworthiness were my fault—I felt unworthy because I must have *been* unworthy. But now it was starting to make sense. I had been wounded. Deeply, deeply wounded. And I never addressed the wound.

Your story is probably different from mine. You may not have been adopted, but you most likely have your own heart-wrenching story. (And if you were adopted, I see you.)

Maybe you remember a moment in your life when everything changed and your innocence was shattered and you had to grow

up too fast. Maybe you spent years begging for someone to just see you, hold you, or love you. Maybe the people who were supposed to love you the most made you feel like you were a burden to them—and you took them at their word. Maybe you tried your hardest in school, but your struggle was interpreted as laziness. Maybe your teachers' negative comments are still echoing in the back of your mind. Maybe your parents set impossible standards for you, and no matter how hard you tried, you just couldn't meet them. Maybe you were the only Black kid in your class, and your peers and teachers reminded you of it every single day. Maybe you ate lunch alone in the cafeteria because you didn't fit in. Maybe an abusive relationship stripped you of your worth and dignity.

Whatever your story, you probably received the message at some point, from someone or something, that *you are not worthy*. And you have been living your life trying to prove yourself worthy ever since.

If you're anything like me, you don't have just one story that contributed to the belief in your unworthiness. Most of us have more than one moment, more than one story, that has filled our unworthiness bucket.

But the thing you may not realize is that these messages were not just the results of isolated incidents or exclusive to the person(s) in your life who hurt you. They were rooted in something much deeper than an individual experience. I want to help you uncover the truth about how white supremacy culture is a primary source of the unworthiness we feel. By dismantling those lies, we can reclaim the liberation that we are worthy of living every single day. But more on that later.

Uncovering Primal Wounds

I was sobbing again. I was twenty-two and fresh out of college. The grief would come to me in waves. It was as if the experiences of my

entire life had caught up to me in just a few short months. The grief felt so foreign yet so familiar at the same time. Emotions washed over me that no words could adequately describe. What was left were streams of hot, salty tears, gasps for air, and a deep ache to fill the void that had been familiar since my earliest memories.

Desperate for an explanation for my tears, I frantically googled to find “adoptee support” in my local area. I couldn’t ignore the trauma any longer. I found an adult adoptee support group that met biweekly on Thursday evenings. The location was about a forty-five-minute Metro ride from where I lived, but I knew I had to be there. I needed answers. I was desperate.

I only made it to one group session, but that was enough to tell me almost everything I needed to know: I had to stop ignoring my trauma.

Being ripped away from my biological mother opened a primal wound the moment my newborn body was not reunited with hers, and that primal wound was still oozing twenty-two years later, after years of neglect and zero attempts to heal it.

The primal wound theory holds that “severing the connection between the infant and biological mother [through adoption] causes a primal wound which often manifests in a sense of loss (depression), basic mistrust (anxiety), emotional and/or behavioral problems and difficulties in relationships with significant others . . . affect[ing] the adoptee’s sense of self, self-esteem and self-worth throughout life.”³

I learned about the concept of the primal wound during that meeting, and every single dot finally connected. When I first looked at those adoption papers when I was sixteen, I realized there was pain and trauma surrounding my birth, as well as my infant and toddler years, and I realized the trauma was having a negative impact on

the way I viewed myself and how I believed everyone else viewed me. The night of the adoption meeting, six years later, I was finally able to put a concrete definition to the trauma I had experienced. I had uncovered the root of all of my pain. Unbeknownst to me, I had been digging for this root all my life, but inconsistently. I'd start digging a bit, get frustrated and put the shovel down, and continue doing what I did best: ignoring the oozing wound and only picking the shovel back up when I could no longer outrun the pain. That night, my shovel finally hit the root. And I realized it was the root I had been searching for all along.

Adoption is often portrayed as a miracle story. *They all lived happily ever after. Adoption saved this child's life and all is well.* Except all is *not* well. The lost connection between a mother and child is not the same as losing a sock, yet we are often conditioned to treat it that way. You cannot buy a replacement maternal connection like you can buy another sock. If a family chooses to adopt a child, the trauma the child has experienced must be handled with the utmost care. Yet adoption trauma, like most other trauma, is often labeled as shameful and swept under the rug.

I can't speak for every adoptee and adoptive family, but the majority of us have very similar stories. The trauma that was left by our primal wound, in combination with insufficient support and knowledge about what we were enduring internally, has led to a lifetime of deconstructing false beliefs about ourselves and healing the wounds we did not inflict but often feel like we caused. My own daily childhood battle with my unresolved adoption trauma left me feeling ashamed, unworthy, and even suicidal at times.

I lived my life through the filter of this trauma. Anytime I made a mistake, I feared my adoptive mother would stop loving me. When kids at school rejected my friendship, the PTSD from the abandonment I had experienced at birth sent me down a spiral of self-hatred,

a place I camped out in for most of my life. When I began to be interested in romantic relationships, I settled for anyone who would show me an ounce of attention, because I was desperate to feel like I was worthy of love. *Oh look, evidence of the primal wound theory in real life!*

It astonishes me that the evidence of my trauma was so blatantly obvious yet ignored for so long. The red lights had been flashing for quite some time. But often when you're knee-deep in such trauma, you can't see it—especially when you're a child, which is why much of childhood trauma is not dealt with, which further complicates the lasting physical and mental damage childhood trauma causes. Data shows us that unresolved childhood trauma increases one's likelihood of struggling with alcoholism, biological and/or neurological disorders, chronic depression and/or anxiety disorders, substance use disorder, suicide, and more.⁴

I was unaware of my trauma during those tender childhood years, but I knew how tumultuous I felt inside whenever someone told me how lucky I was to be adopted. I didn't dare to express that I felt the exact opposite of lucky. I didn't dare share that I frequently grieved the loss of a woman I had never met. I didn't dare admit how depressed I felt and how often I questioned whether I belonged on this earth. So, as many adoptees do, I suppressed my anguish, put a smile on my face, nodded, and said, "I sure am."

While the primal wound theory specifically pertains to adoption, I believe the concept can be transferred to most of us, regardless of our origin stories. Let's break this phrase down and define both words separately. *Primal* is defined as "relating to an early stage in evolutionary development; primeval," as well as "essential; fundamental."⁵ *Wound* is either a physical injury or "an injury to

someone's feelings or reputation.”⁶ When you put these definitions together outside of the context of adoption, a primal wound can be experienced by anyone who has endured trauma during their early years. And unfortunately, I don't think any of us is exempt from this affliction. Are we all aware of our primal wounds? That's a different story.

Whether we know it or not, our primal wounds have been busy serving as the filter from which we navigate life since the moment they were inflicted upon us. They affect how we handle every interaction, perceive every encounter, and make every decision. They are the blueprint from which we build our lives, even though most of us have no idea that we're using a blueprint to begin with.

Hold on to the revelations you are having right now. You're going to need them in just a bit.

The Primal Wound of a Nation

Adoption was my original traumatic event that laid the foundation for how I navigated every corner of my life. The longer I went without working to heal and reverse its effects, the longer I spent building a structure that allowed the repercussions of that trauma to lay a foundation and erect large pillars in my life.

In a similar way, our society has ignored and denied the traumatic truth of our nation's founding cataclysm and its aftermath.

We have been taught that our society is *perfect*. We are the land of the free and the home of the brave! Our nation was founded on ideals and principles that promise freedom for every human being. Right? Well, even if you were taught the most whitewashed version of our nation's history, you probably know that freedom was not a reality for all human beings when America was founded. And much like the way an adopted child is told to gloss over their primal

trauma, we are taught to move on from the “imperfections” of our country’s racist “past.” We are taught to believe that once Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, all Americans were free and generations of state-sanctioned trauma and inequality were instantly healed.

In reality, we as a nation (and Western society as a whole) have failed to discern how the entire structure of our country was built on the foundation of creating a system that benefitted a specific type of person (wealthy white men) through colonization, chattel slavery, and capitalism. And those three Cs are based on the premise of white supremacy. Society wants us to downplay the reality of our nation’s primal wound while simultaneously convincing us that any lasting effects are just our imagination. What we are left with is a population of humans who are walking through a cloud of normalized trauma that isn’t our fault while fully shouldering the blame for it.

Our society’s warning lights are worn out from flashing.

We are desperate. We are a desperate society filled with people who feel unworthy of life, love, and true liberation, and that is because societal structures and standards that were constructed from our nation’s founding have led us to believe that we are not enough.

If we don’t hold our society accountable, it will never change. The next generation will be left to deal with these unhealed wounds while society continues to perpetuate deeper injury, dispensing only small Band-Aids and no true healing.

Trauma cannot be ignored. Period. Yet, our society loves to show an ignorant neutrality toward the imprint of our nation’s initial wound, which only serves to perpetuate that wound, because there is a deep desire to hold on to the hierarchical systems it created as

a result. So society chooses to blindfold itself and pretend it cannot see the harm the construction of white supremacy has caused. This has allowed for the foundation of white supremacy to evolve into a white supremacy culture. The more we continue to pretend this wound does not exist, the more it spreads and the deeper it gets. Just like with our own individual primal wounds.

We must take the blindfold off. This is the only way we can start to heal. We don't have room for neutrality. We don't have time for further ignorance. Reclaiming our enoughness depends on us becoming aware of the structures and systems that have been constructed for our oppression. Our collective humanity is at stake.

The wound of white supremacy created the disease of white supremacy culture that has led you to believe that you are not enough. This system in which we all reside created unwritten rules that have convinced you that your humanity is conditional upon following those rules. I'd even go as far as to say that white supremacy and its culture are *directly linked to your own trauma*, no matter what it is.

Getting to the Roots of Our Wounds

Like most adoptions, my adoption wasn't an isolated incident but rather the result of a deeply broken child welfare and foster care system. This doesn't mean that adoption can't be beautiful, meaningful, and even necessary. But have you ever stopped to think about what causes a child to need to be placed for adoption in the first place? What events, systems, and structures make a mother and father unable to care for their child? How have we normalized and ignored the trauma of adoption in the name of self-centered saviorism?

The roots are found in white supremacy. Just take a look at these disparities within the foster care system:

- While Black children only make up 13.71 percent of the population, they make up 22.75 percent of children in foster care.
- American Indian/Alaska Native children account for less than 1 percent of the population, yet they account for 2.4 percent of children in foster care.
- White children represent 50.5 percent of the population, yet they represent only 44.37 percent of children in foster care.⁷

These numbers are not a coincidence. These data points don't exist because communities of color collectively make inferior parenting choices at higher rates than white families. That may be what society has hinted at—or even straight up told you, depending on your upbringing—but it's just not true. These statistics are joined by many others that prove the realities of systemic racism, which is the primary weapon our society uses to uphold white supremacy. These statistics also directly mirror the poverty disproportionalities within our society, and poverty is the number one reason children enter foster care. Again, these disproportionalities don't exist because communities of color just can't seem to “get it together” or “work harder to get a better job.” They exist because our society placed systemic barriers on communities of color that enforced higher numbers of poverty so that the socioeconomic hierarchy would serve as a tangible data point to back up the racial hierarchy our country was founded upon. When you combine these systemic barriers with the subconscious (and conscious) bias toward Black families that leads to Black families and other families of color being investigated at higher rates by Child Protective Services, you are met with the perfect equation for overrepresentation of BIPOC families

within the child welfare system.⁸ And please understand: none of this is by accident. None of it.

Remember those adoption papers with very little information? Well, there was enough written on them to help me paint a picture of my circumstances and fill in the blanks with conclusions I drew in my imagination. My biological mother was a Hispanic woman (according to the paperwork). What ethnicity, specifically? That was left out. Regardless, she was a Hispanic woman who was intellectually disabled (formerly known as mentally retarded in the '90s) and a ward of the state. She lived in a home with other intellectually disabled adults that was located in a lower income area of Harlem, NYC. My biological father was African American, also intellectually disabled, and from what I understand, in and out of homelessness. Both of my biological parents had a history of alcohol and substance use disorder in their immediate families, neither of them had a formal education, and Child Protective Services had already signed the dotted line for my removal immediately upon my birth.

You can imagine the circumstances beyond their control that led them to having their baby ripped from their arms in the delivery room. I often wonder how life could have been if my biological parents weren't born into a world that predetermined their fate because of their racial, socioeconomic, and disabled identities. But mostly, I grieve for the life they never got a chance to live. I grieve for all that white supremacy stole from them. I grieve for that fateful day—April 11, 1990—where their lives and mine forever changed.

Systemic white supremacy led to the circumstances surrounding the traumatic event of my birth and adoption, which led me to spend my early life believing there was no possible way I was worth anything as a human being. The culture of white supremacy deepened that trauma, convincing me that the only thing I could do to prove my worth was follow society's rules of achievement and

perfection. It also made me feel totally crazy for being affected by the separation from my biological mother and placed into a family that was not (originally) my own. It's all connected.

(Please understand: this is not a slight toward my adoptive family. I love my family. They are my rock, and without them I could not stand. The existence of love within your adoptive family does not negate the trauma surrounding adoption and the tragic events that led to that adoption. Two things can be true.)

I won't pretend to know your story, but I want you to know that your deepest emotions are safe with me. You are safe.

Before we go any further, know that you *are* enough. You are more than enough. However, *you* must believe that you are enough, which means you need to heal. I cannot tell you exactly how to heal, but this book can be a crucial step in your healing if you allow it to be. Once we take off our universal blindfolds, look white supremacy squarely in the face, and confront it for what it really is (a socially constructed lie of dehumanization), healing can begin.

If you have grown up believing that you are a burden, it is because you live in a society that loves to minimize anything that isn't connected to achievement, leading you to believe that asking for help is a weakness, thus neglecting your needs. If you struggle with body image, it's because you live in a society that tells you there is only one standard of beauty and you are unworthy if you don't meet that standard. If you were taught that you had to pursue perfection in all you do, it is because society glorifies success over humanity. If you have suffered from abuse silently, it is because society has not created a safe place for you to be heard, often offering protection and excuses for abusers instead of victims. And you may even be able to trace other points of trauma in your life to systemic pitfalls

brought about by the structure of our society. If you're not quite there yet, you'll be able to connect more dots as this book progresses.

With each chapter, we will dig deeper. Questions may be popping up for you right now, but resist the urge to get ahead of yourself. Jot them in your journal and then release them for now. Then turn to a fresh page. Think about your own story and what lies you have believed about yourself that have caused you to feel unworthy. I want you to confront those stories to the best of your ability. Your journal is your best friend. If you see a therapist, bring these stories up during your next session. If you're reading this book with a friend, make a coffee date to chat about this first chapter and share your stories with one another.

We will be confronting many of the lies the structures and practices of our Western society have told us. Together we will deconstruct them piece by piece so we can reclaim the liberation that rightly belongs to us.

Grab your journal, and I'll meet you in chapter 2.

Journal Prompts

1. What was my primal wound?
2. How has my primal wound led me to believe the lie that I am not good enough or am unworthy?
3. How will I devote myself to showing up as I read this book, fully committing to breaking up with white supremacy and owning my healing?