

The Fragility of White Allyship: Failure to Break Cycles of Power, Privilege, and Oppression

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“I worry about all the support dying down mostly because it’s what happens. Eric Garner. It died down. Mike Brown. It died down. Ferguson. It died down. The hope is that it stays,” remarks Adilka Pimentel, a lead organizer at the grassroots organization *Make the Road New York* who was interviewed by *The New York Times* this past summer. In the wake of the brutal murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, as well as the blatant mistreatment of those like Christian Cooper, Black Americans took to the streets to protest, but this time they were joined en masse by White Americans. Consequently, many are actively searching for ways to be anti-racist every day, not just when a police officer presses his knee onto a Black man’s neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds. In this period of great reckoning and White revelation, those who benefit from the privilege and power of their racial birthright are attempting to reconcile the ghosts of our nation’s sordid past with opportunities for a more perfect and just union in the future. But Pimentel and other Black activists long dedicated to the movement wonder: is protesting trendy for White people, or will their commitment to allyship endure? For more than a hundred years, Southern Gothic authors have grappled with stories of attempted and failed White allyship. Specifically, Erksine Caldwell and Flannery O’Connor provide valuable insights into the consequences of White paralysis that can help guide present-day efforts to dismantle systems of oppression. In Caldwell’s “Kneel to the Rising Sun” (1935) and O’Connor’s “Everything that Rises Must Converge” (1965), failed racial solidarity reveals that successful and holistic White allyship depends on emotion and reason working in tandem. Although protagonists Lonnie and Julian exist in disparate historical periods and locations, their failed solidarity similarly hampers progress and perpetuates racial hierarchies.

In “Kneel to the Rising Sun,” Lonnie’s connection to and genuine friendship with Clem enables him to see Black Americans as powerful agents and emotionally capable humans, but his intellectual framework ultimately prevents him from achieving true allyship when Clem’s life is on the line. While proximity to Clem does not immunize Lonnie against acting on profoundly rooted racist attitudes, Clem and Lonnie’s authentic friendship serves as a counter to the demonization of Black Americans. Caldwell presents cross-racial and cross-cultural friendship as a semi-effective antidote to racism as these characters cultivate empathy for one another. Emotional connections break down prejudice inherent in the “us vs. them” mentality. Universal human understanding results in a rejection of the idea that some races are innately less deserving of dignity and human rights than others. It is challenging to maintain entirely racist views in light of friendship, especially as Clem repeatedly encourages, listens, and “was the only person there who would help [Lonnie]” (3). When hogs kill Lonnie’s father and rip apart his body, “Clem leaped over the fence and began swinging the singletree at the hogs,” trying to drive the hogs back (9). Despite the strong friendship and understanding between the two, Lonnie reflects the sentiments and general attitudes of much of White America during the post-Reconstruction era as “he was unable to move forward or backward” (16). Lonnie simultaneously respects and fears Clem’s courage as “he could not figure out how a Negro could be braver than he was” (3). Lonnie considers the many times in which “he would have given anything he had to be able to

jump into Clem's shoes and change places with him (3). Clem's strong acts of self-determination prod Lonnie to react with a dangerous combination of jealousy, admiration, and resentment.

Lonnie is subconsciously complicit in perpetuating the South's discriminatory culture as his White superiority complex and allegiance to exclusionary systems confine his allyship. Caldwell writes that Lonnie "[jumps] when he [finds] himself nodding his head to Arch" (14), reflecting that his subconscious is at war with his more conscious awareness of his friendship and obligation to Clem. Lonnie's betrayal reflects how he prioritizes his position as a White male and his relationship with Arch over his connection to his only true friend. While Arch and his boys ritualistically hunt down Clem, hoping to extinguish Black agency, Lonnie remains complicit. Lonnie reminds readers of so many White men who have walked away untouched from the unspeakable violence they watch enacted against Black men. His most repeated phrase is "Mr. Arch, I . . ." portraying his loyalty to Arch, who represents the traditional, dominating White figure of the old South.

Lonnie is surrounded by those who have the will to stand up and push back against authority, but his lack of autonomy and submission to Arch leaves him to exist as a shell of a man. Lonnie's subservient identity is tightly bound to Arch, and he fears losing what little control and authority he has in society. His actions reveal that he feels as though his stature and class as a White American are threatened, and ultimately his inability to stand up for Clem results in the death of an innocent Black man. After Clem's murder, Lonnie "[tries] to say things he had never thought to say before" as the "face of Clem Henry [gleams] in the rising sun" (16). Lonnie loses the only friend he had, the only person encouraging and supporting him who truly understood the harsh life of sharecropping under Arch. Lonnie's attitude, unfortunately, discloses to readers that it takes more than just an interracial friendship to allow White Americans to understand their role in the American system of justice and the institution of race.

Ultimately, Clem and Lonnie's emotional connection is not enough to overcome centuries of prejudice and bigotry. Lonnie cannot understand how Clem could stand up to Arch and how a Black man could be more confident than he is as he explains that "he could not take sides with a Negro, in the open, even if Clem had helped him" (12). Lonnie exists in a White supremacist culture where even those who legitimately want to do good are reluctant to be led by a Black person. The early twentieth-century American South subjected Lonnie to White supremacy and disciplined him to resist Black advancement. Sarah Bellamy, a stage director and scholar, characterizes White betrayal as a desperate expression of strength in a society where we are all "crushed under the normalizing and brutalizing forces of white supremacy." When Clem repeatedly asks, "Wouldn't you stand by me?" Lonnie never responds out loud, but his silence speaks volumes. While Lonnie had progressed in terms of his recognition of Clem as a friend, Caldwell ultimately suggests that to be a productive ally, one must understand and acknowledge racism itself in addition to the emotional connection of friendship.

In the years preceding Caldwell's "Kneel to the Rising Sun," the Klu Klux Klan witnessed a resurgence and lynchings devastated Black communities. A pervasive fear of the "other" dominated civil discourse. After first arising during the Reconstruction era, the KKK viciously employed acts of violence during the 1920s to assert their supremacy. The revival of this domestic terrorist group demonstrated how society coped with racial progress. White anxiety

around Black and immigrant advancement hindered racial progress, so these existing social circumstances influenced Caldwell's plot and Lonnie's actions as they existed within an extremely discriminatory culture steeped in racial stereotypes. The lack of premeditation in Clem's murder underscores how just a small spark in a setting rife with violence could explode into a devastating lynching, and how White supremacists put such little value on Black lives. In the end, Lonnie did not dare to fight back against a system bent on hurting those with the same skin color as Clem.

Unlike Lonnie in "Everything that Rises Must Converge," Julian possesses the intellectual capacity to understand the socially constructed nature of White superiority and Black inferiority, but his inability to connect with the emotional weight of discrimination and prejudice ultimately subverts his allyship. While Lonnie has overcome emotional barriers and considers Clem to be a friend, Julian "had never been successful at making any Negro friends" (6). Julian discounts the fact that racial issues are inherently emotionally charged and that holistic understanding and allyship equally depend on empathy and intellectual comprehension. Lonnie and Clem exist on a relatively similar socioeconomic plane, but Julian narrowly categorizes African Americans into worse and "better types" (6). Julian ponders making friends with "some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring[ing] him home to spend the evening" (6), highlighting his bias as he would only surround himself with African Americans of a particular profession and stature. Julian substitutes classism for racism as a way to feel above his mother, and he continues to look down on and blame Black Americans who fail to meet his standards.

Julian is embarrassed by his mother's unabashed and blatant racism, and his desire to correct his mother's wrongs rather than the idea of authentic, equitable inclusion drives his character's arc and mentality. When Julian rides buses, he makes a point to sit next to a Black person "in reparation as it were for his mother's sins" (3). He considers allyship to be transactional as he believes he can counteract his mother's racism through his actions, thus achieving a state of racial equilibrium. He is motivated by preserving a state of equanimity instead of independently acting to restructure racist institutions and confront exclusionary policies. In addition, Julian takes pleasure in elevating himself relative to his mother. Julian imagines exposing his mother's bigotry and all the various ways "by which he could teach her a lesson" (6). He refrains from discussing African Americans' plight in the United States or the specific impact of the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, he selfishly conjures scenarios in which he can use African Americans to upset his mother and feed his ego. Julian states that he might bring home "a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman," asking his mother to "persecute [them]" and "drive her out of here, but remember, you're driving me too" (7). In this manipulative way, he aims to exploit African Americans' low standing in society's racial hierarchy for his personal gain.

Because he positions the Black people he encounters as objects of his humanitarian endeavors, Julian's paternalistic behaviors subvert his allyship. This paternalism, sometimes referred to as a "missionary ideology," reveals an internalized superiority that exists alongside genuine attempts at allyship and acts of goodwill (Spanierman). Julian is a representative of how well-intentioned efforts can reinscribe the status quo of White dominance. In particular, Julian's paternalistic posture sustains White privilege and neglects to challenge systems of dominance and institutions of oppression. Despite his selfish nature, the scenarios Julian constructs in his head reveal his understanding that cross-racial relationships upset the current racial order and threaten those who

subscribe to a White supremacist ideology. Julian fundamentally understands racism as much as someone of his time can, but there are consequences to Julian's allyship existing within a conceptual framework. Julian is unable to engage in critical self-reflexivity regarding his assumptions and biases about race. The old southern plantation home of his family "remain[s] in his mind as his mother had known it" (3), signaling to readers that Julian views the world through an inherited lens of bias and bigotry. Julian has not reached the level of an ally or antiracist because "being an antiracist is an action, it's a verb" in that it is "not something that you just learn and you stop, it's about how you change your behavior every day, every week, every month, every year" (Stewart). Readers wonder whether Julian is ready to have these tough conversations about the implications of his privilege in preserving a racial hierarchy. For instance, Julian toys with the idea of sitting side by side with African Americans in a public sit-in demonstration but ultimately drops it, unwilling to fight publically and openly for an end to racial discrimination (7). For Julian, true equality threatens his privilege. He represents a White demographic who supports racial justice in thought but not in practice, severely constricting his allyship's possibilities. O'Connor utilizes Julian's failed example to show readers what not to do as members of dominant racial groups who continue to benefit from racially stratified systems.

In 1964, just a year before Flannery O'Connor published "Everything that Rises Must Converge," over 700 young white liberals descended on Mississippi to register Black voters. During this period deemed the Freedom Summer, the influx of White Americans helped rally support in Washington to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was the most sweeping and comprehensive racial equality legislation since Reconstruction-era policies. However, White backlash and failure to be productive allies too often dictate the pace of American racial progress. Just months after the ratification of these progressive laws, A *New York Times* survey found that "most White New Yorkers believed that the civil rights movement had gone too far" (Blow). Hostile White mobs violently opposed the increased pace of racial justice activism and legislation. White Americans' solidarity failed once again but even more drastically when they began to perceive themselves as victimized by African Americans calling for fundamental human rights. In response, Martin Luther King, Jr. probed the limits of White allyship during his 1967 speech at Stanford University, stating that "many of the very people who supported us in the struggle in the South are not willing to go all the way now... Some of the people who came quickly to march with us in Selma and Birmingham weren't active around Chicago" (King). In confronting his audience, King challenged them to appraise their actions and ask themselves whether they were motivated by shame rather than believing in genuine equality for African Americans. King implored his audience to sustain a permanent commitment to racial justice even when protests inevitably subsided. *Dayton Daily News* reporter Dave Allbaugh observed in 1963 that Americans "were mildly in favor of a better break for Negroes—as long as it wouldn't affect them personally" (Glickman). What Allbaugh and Dr. King so aptly detailed for White Americans is true for O'Connor's character Julian; he failed to obtain emotional and psychological sympathy. Durable change is far too often eclipsed by those like Julian and their White savior complexes, socioeconomic anxiety, and embarrassment.

White Americans who supported the growing Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020 were also often moved by embarrassment or images of overt cruelty rather than a legitimate desire to overhaul racist institutions in the United States. Charles Blow, a journalist, commentator, and op-ed columnist for *The New York Times*, worries that Black Lives Matter

protests have turned into a “summer street festival for people who have been cooped up for months, not able to go to school or graduate, not able to go to concerts or bars.” So the supposedly enlightened White allies who hijacked this movement for their own fulfillment must remember that “this is not the social justice Coachella” and “this is not systemic racism Woodstock” (Blow). Similar to the remarks of Dr. King, Benjamin O’Keefe, a Black political organizer in Brooklyn, asks White supporters, “Are you really in this? Do you really understand the stakes?” or if they are simply there “for an Instagram picture” (Mann). White Americans should never flaunt their allyship as a badge of honor because it should never be a performative “wokeness;” it is a lifelong commitment to actualizing statements of solidarity, justice, and equality. When White Americans agree that “Black Lives Matter,” they agree with a minimum acknowledgment of humanity, and while this is not enough, it certainly is a starting point.

Although racial attitudes among Americans have been shifting radically, racism is nowhere near extinct from America. Published decades ago, “Kneel to the Rising Sun” and “Everything that Rises Must Converge” could be featured in *The Best American Short Stories 2020*. Similar to 1935 and 1965, today we still need to facilitate racial self-exploration among White Americans, encourage discussion about historical inequalities, and explore the detrimental ways in which White privilege manifests itself. According to the Pew Research Center, in the wake of police violence in Minneapolis, White adults’ public support for Black Lives Matter surged to 60% in June. In September, only 45% of White adults expressed the same sentiments, reflecting a perpetual tension between progressivism, conservatism, and constructive allyship in the fight for racial equality (Horowitz et al.). Throughout history, Black political theorists from Frederick Douglas to Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) have disagreed about the exact role of White allies. But they found common ground in the idea that “the Black community must unambiguously take the lead in its liberation” because “agency is essential” (Parker). As a White American, I listen to the advice of Douglas and Ture. So, I will now step back and hand it over to Christopher Coles, a Black activist and poet in Rochester, New York, for this essay’s last word on White allyship: “You get to be an ally one day and just White the next. You get to live and lean on your privilege. But if you’ve got privilege, start motherfucking spending it.”

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