

## **Gaslit Nation**

Crystal Marie Fleming

Andrea Chalupa

Sarah Kendzior

Crystal Marie Fleming on White Supremacy

### *Theme Music*

Sarah Kendzior: I'm Sarah Kendzior, a journalist, scholar, and the author of the essay collection *The View from Flyover Country* and the upcoming book *Hiding in Plain Sight*. My co-host is Andre Chalupa, a writer and the screenwriter of the journalistic thriller *Mr. Jones*. And together we are *Gaslit Nation*, a podcast covering corruption in the Trump administration and the rise of autocracy around the world.

This week marks two years since the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in which anti-racist activist Heather Heyer was murdered, so it's fitting that we are airing an interview with an expert on white supremacy and global racism, Dr. Crystal Fleming, who is a sociologist and the author of *How to Be Less Stupid About Race: On Racism, White Supremacy, and the Racial Divide*. She is also an associate professor of sociology at Stony Brook University, with affiliations in the Department of Africana Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Andrea spoke with Dr. Fleming: in May, and their conversation will comprise the bulk of this episode. We're very excited to have Dr. Fleming as part of our *Gaslit Nation* Reading Series, and we encourage you to go buy her books. But before we get to her interview, I want to say a few words about Charlottesville, racism, and authoritarianism. The day that Trump was named President-elect, I tweeted out some advice on what subjects to study if you wanted to understand how his administration would operate. I tweeted two things to research to understand Trump. One is the rise of authoritarian states and violent populism broadly, both recent and in history. The other is sanctioned state brutality in the U.S. Toward Native Americans, Blacks, others. White mob violence: it has happened here. Then apply knowledge of foreign authoritarianism to the long history of sanctioned persecution in the U.S., and you will see where we are headed. The point I was making and that we continue to make on *Gaslit Nation* is that you cannot separate autocracy from the long history of state-sanctioned racist brutality in the United States. Authoritarianism is not a foreign import. Authoritarianism has always been in America, selectively applied. From slavery to Jim Crow, to mass incarceration of black men, to the constant battle for voting rights, you see selective authoritarianism in practice. It was obvious in 2016 that any attempt to make the U.S. a fully autocratic state would draw from America's long history of racist brutality, and that is in fact what happened with the Trump administration attacking the rights of non-white Americans first. And now it has continued for two years, with policies becoming more brutal, laws and protections increasingly stripped away, and white supremacist extremism continuing to be mainstreamed by the inaction of politicians and the tolerance of the media. Trump himself was the ultimate example of this in Charlottesville, with his infamous proclamation that, quote, "both sides had good people."

The part of this that should shake you to your core is not that he made this statement—it was predictably vile—but that two years later Trump remains in power with Congress refusing to hold him accountable for his crimes and much of the media is still behaving as his sycophants. His comment should be unforgivable. That such proclamations have become rote, at times greeted with indifference, is an indictment of our country. I'm going

to read you a brief op-ed that I wrote immediately after the Charlottesville violence so that I can bring you back to that time and make you consider what kind of culture has emerged in its wake. So from August 16, 2017: Why Trump blames both sides for Charlottesville, written for the website Fast Company.

"There is a time in the distant era of 2015 when condemning Nazis was a very low bar for an American politician to clear. It was so low that candidates were almost never asked their view on the subject, as the default assumption was not only that the candidate rejected them because they're fucking Nazis, but that Nazis were not enough of a pertinent player in the 21st-century political field to merit inquiry. Racists, yes. White supremacists, maybe. But Nazis? Swastika-wearing, Seig-Heiling, ethnic-cleansing Nazis? Of course not. Of course not. Today that low bar is like a limbo pole under which our president cannot pass, having gorged himself on the worship of white supremacists waving tiki torches in a summer party from Hell. To the surprise of no one who has followed Donald Trump's career over the past 40 years—the 1973 lawsuit over anti-Black discrimination, his persecution of the innocent Central Park Five, his birther crusade, the entire 2016 presidential campaign—the president backtracked on his bold Nazis are bad stance from Monday to say about the, quote, 'Jews won't replace us'-chanting far-righters that there were, to quote, "a lot of people in that group that were there to innocently protest and very legally protest. You had people that were very fine people." As for the counter-protesters, he said they were from, quote, "a group on the other side that came charging in without a permit and they were very, very violent," according to our dear leader. One of those anti-racist protesters, Heather Heyer, was murdered by a white supremacist during an act of domestic terrorism that closely resembled the tactics of ISIS supporters in Europe. After falsely insinuating that Heyer's mother had praised him, Trump castigated the activists who fought alongside her, saying, "There is a group on this side, you can call them the left, you've just called them the left, that came violently attacking the other group. Yes, I think there is blame on both sides." Trump switched from blaming many sides, as he did on Saturday, to blaming both sides. He's right that there are two sides: the tale of the Confederacy and the United States of America, the white supremacists and their targets, the President and the Patriots. It's also obvious he favors the side of the Nazis. This has been evident since Trump launched his campaign. It became clear when he hesitated to denounce David Duke in February 2016. It was blindingly obvious on Saturday in his initial reaction to Charlottesville. That journalists and politicians spent two years grossly underestimating Trump's racism has allowed it to flourish. A dog whistle became the tune of a Pied Piper, inspiring Caucasian partisans to parade their prejudices, and it became a bullhorn once Trump was safely ensconced as President. Despite pundit predictions, Trump never planned to pivot. His goal was always instead to pivot Americans to his sick views, to pull the fringes to the center and make extremism mainstream. He has to some degree succeeded. In 2016, racist ideology reentered not only American political discourse, but the White House itself in the form of Steve Bannon, Seb Gorka, and Steven Miller. Since Saturday, the calls for the resignation of these three advisers have intensified. More tepid is the call for the resignation of Confederacy buff Jeff Sessions. The Attorney General seeks to strip non-white citizens of their rights. Under Sessions, the Justice Department has backed anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Muslim, and anti-voter rights initiatives, proving that this administration's threat is not merely rhetorical. The White supremacist House runs the gamut from nascent Nazis like Miller to respectability racists like Sessions, but they should all be taken down like the Confederate statues their side defends. There are many reasons for Trump to go down with them—emoluments violations, obstruction of justice, high crimes and misdemeanors. With his speech on Tuesday, yet another indicator he's unfit to be President. But who will take Trump on? On

Saturday, the GOP placed blame squarely on the side of the neo-Nazis and white supremacists and deemed the murder of Heyer an act of terrorism. On Tuesday, Paul Ryan, Marco Rubio, and others tweeted once more against Trump's racist rhetoric. But will they act? Trump's speech showed his utter disregard for their critiques, wiping out whatever goodwill he accumulated during his disingenuous denunciation on Monday. As the legislative majority, it's up to the GOP to decide whether Trump represents a repugnant neo-Confederacy, or whether he represents them, and the rest of the U.S.

For a normal president, Charlottesville and its aftermath would be a disaster. For Trump, it's a gift he gave himself. He has stoked and cultivated his racist base for years, and now they may provide what he craves most, an act of violence so severe you can use it as a pretext to strip away citizens rights. Trump has never hidden his hunger for riots, repeatedly deeming them a cleansing force. He's threatened to have, quote, "the feds" invade cities like Chicago purely because of crime. His response to terror attacks, when not smug self-congratulation, has been demands for darker policies.

In other words, Trump may do what autocrats have always done: create or exploit a crisis in order to consolidate power. By framing Charlottesville as caused by two equally violent sides, Trump is developing a framework through which to crush opponents of racism, who also happen to be opponents of Trump. By showing he will protect his neo-Nazi followers, he encourages them to act again, as they will not be blamed by him. The blame would fall squarely on the anti-racist protesters, who Trump would claim provoked the violence. This propaganda would likely be aimed at his eroding base of moderate Republican supporters. This group has grown frustrated with Trump, but—and this is important if you want to understand that the power Trump has over them—highly value law and order. This gross manipulation cannot stand. Trump's neo-Nazi adherents will likely continue their activity whether or not Trump is in office, though how emboldened they may be may depend on who is in power. White supremacist groups have been on the rise for nearly a decade, but in the 21st century it's only under Trump that their activity is sanctioned by the executive branch, that their opponents are demonized from the presidential podium, and that their clashes may very well be used as a pretext for an overhaul of civil liberties. As he's done for two straight years, Trump is flaunting future plans and perverse prerogatives, daring you to be bleak enough to believe him.

You should. The history of fascism speaks volumes, but so does Trump in his own words."

So that's the end of that. I can name a lot of examples of how this bore out two years later: the demonization of and death threats towards Ilhan Omar come to mind, as well as the endless excuses made for people like Steven Miller, and others who plot the torture of migrant children. But I don't want to keep you from Dr. Fleming's interview any longer, so I'll end my part here. I hope that this week you remember Heather Heyer and other victims of white supremacist violence, and I hope that in this interview with Dr. Fleming, you grasp the broader sociological context of white supremacy, media representation, political power, and other issues affecting all of us in America today. So here is Andrea Chalupa's interview with Dr. Crystal Fleming.

Andrea Chalupa: So thank you so much for coming to Gaslit Nation. We love your book. Thank you so much for writing it. It is an essential multivitamin for anybody who wants to survive, especially this upcoming election, and just be able to talk about one of the most critical, urgent, dangerous matters right now in the world today, which is white supremacy, of course, and white supremacist terrorism. So we're gonna get into all of this today and

demystify and un-gaslight people with your help and with your leadership and expertise. We're very grateful to have you on the show.

Crystal Fleming: Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited for our conversation.

Andrea Chalupa: Okay, so I want to say your book is incredibly funny. I was not expecting that. And what I love about it so much is that you share your own personal journey, like your own humility in being aware of white supremacy yourself, and racism yourself, because you write about how your mother for so long, growing up in Tennessee, even though she was an activist for civil rights and was of course politically socially conscious, she protected you. She sheltered you from all these issues, and so you write so beautifully and with such vulnerability and humor and warmth about your own journey in waking up to racism and white supremacy, and how it all works, and sort of the wishful thinking and savior syndrome that you yourself fell into. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Crystal Fleming: Yeah. So my mom raised me, and as you mentioned we're from Tennessee, from Chattanooga, Tennessee. I wouldn't describe my mom as an activist, at least not when I was growing up, although she is definitely an advocate for social justice. But that's important, because I grew up in a really apolitical household, so it's not just that we didn't talk about racism and race, we weren't really talking about politics, and so I grew up in an environment where I had this kind of, and it was because my mother wanted to instill this in me, but I had this belief that I could do, you know, anything was possible, and if I work hard, I'll succeed. Just the typical American individualism and American dream. That was kind of my household. So even though I was a black girl from Tennessee, I had no idea what odds were stacked against me personally, and my mother and our family, because we didn't talk about it. It wasn't taught to me in school, and so it took quite a while. I mean, what felt like a long time, but it took really until college for me to have an opportunity to learn more about not just racism but about oppression and power and class and so on. That was a really big awakening for me, and as I began to study and then research these issues, then my mom began to share more of her own experiences, share just how she has had to encounter multiple forms of oppression and discrimination and attempt to overcome them. So that's become something that we talk quite a lot about, but it's fairly recent.

Andrea Chalupa: What I love, love, love about your book, and what we're always trying to go on and on about on the show, is historical consciousness and taking the long view, and just accepting the fact that history matters. Could you talk a little bit about that specifically?

Crystal Fleming: Yeah. So I think some people are surprised when they read the book, because it's by a sociologist, by all of the historical references. There's a lot of effort on my part to convey a historical consciousness, and partly, sure, it's because I'm trying to provide folks with a context for understanding where racism comes from, why it exists. Because I think that without that context we can't really make sense of things like racial disparities. But having said that, it also is one of my intellectual areas of interest. My first book is called *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*, and that's all about issues of collective memory, and how racism and slavery and colonialism are debated and discussed in France today. So in that book, one of the concepts that I develop and introduce is racial temporality, and basically, I'm trying to argue that we need to pay more attention to how people think about race and racism across time. So sure, the impact of the past and the present, but also what an anti-racist future might look like. And so with *How to Be Less Stupid about Race*, I wanted to convey a temporal historical

understanding of racism and anti-racism, because I think that's connected. I think if you have a historical consciousness about racism and other systems of oppression, that gives you a sense of not only what we're dealing with now, but what we would have to do to build a different and better world.

Andrea Chalupa: Obviously, there are centuries of slavery that existed on the land that's now America, and that was just total dehumanization, women being bred like cattle, child rape, families being separated, all of it. The long holocaust that lasted for centuries that our country was founded on. But what's really interesting is that this sort of institution of slavery, even after the Civil War, how it changed into different various forms over generations, and obviously hasn't completely gone away today with the military-industrial complex and so forth. And so in taking this historical view, what's really stunning was one example right after the 2016 election, with Donald Trump being President of United States, being the elect and about to be sworn in office, I was in Paris, and I went to an exhibit at—and you spent more time in Paris than me, so you could correct my accent here—Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, the museum right on the Seine, which had a stunning exhibit called The Color Line: African-American artists and segregation. And what the exhibit does is it walks you through art from the colonial days and slavery all the way through reconstruction, and so forth, and the Harlem Renaissance.

And as you're going through the African-American experience, through African-American artists and other leading thinkers, what you're seeing, again and again, is that every bit, every bit of progress was met by white rage. And so when you walk out of there, you think you know about slavery, think you know about MLK, but when you see it, when you're confronted with it, the little moments in history throughout that add up to the total experience, what you're left with is, of course, the first black president is going to be followed by Donald Trump. That is the American story, and that's how that story has been carried out generation after generation.

Crystal Fleming: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. I think when you look at our history, particularly the Reconstruction era, so what occurred after the Civil War, after the putative end of slavery, although we know that it remained legal in the context of imprisonment. Reconstruction was this era in the latter part of the 19th century where white supremacy was firmly institutionalized in the United States in the wake of the abolition of slavery. And so we're dealing with in this country not just, yes, the legacies of slavery, but more specifically the maintenance of white supremacy throughout our history in these different eras, so that, yes, we can see policies enacted and political backlash to every advance in civil rights and human rights. And so yes, you're right. In that context, it's not especially surprising that you do get a Donald Trump after a Barack Obama.

Andrea Chalupa: Could you go into what is white supremacy and how does it work?

Crystal Fleming: Sure. Yes, in 10 seconds or less. [laughter] Well, white supremacy as I define it is the social, political, and economic dominance of people socially defined as white. And so what it simply means is that we're dealing with a system of power in which being socially recognized as white or labeled as white gives you access to a certain set of resources, and those resources can be economic, political, social, and otherwise. But it also means that we have a racialized hierarchy in which whiteness has been institutionalized as not just a signal of superiority, but really as a pathway to, again, access to resources. So when I write about and talk about white supremacy in this way, what I'm trying to do, and the intervention I'm trying to make, is to correct the misperception that

white supremacy is just the KKK, or that it's only extremism, or that it's just white nationalism. Because of course those things are also part of white supremacy, but white supremacy is the air that we breathe in the United States. And what's important to be able to acknowledge is that even as we certainly can look at metrics of progress; we can look at policies that were overtly white supremacist that have been dismantled. Certainly, the dismantling of Jim Crow in the United States matters. I think it would be foolish to suggest that these changes don't matter. But yet still what has occurred, and there've been a number of folks who've studied this very well, but we've seen that as there has been progress in civil rights and human rights, there's also been the morphing of white supremacy to accommodate those changes. And so whether you think about it in terms of a backlash or whether you think about it in terms of sort of a reconfigure of the status quo, I think the bottom line is whether you're looking in 2019, 1919, 1819, or 1719, in this country, whiteness is associated with economic and political power, and particularly being a white male, if we're to get a bit more intersectional in our discussion. But that has continued over time, even as we've had increased civil rights, and so on.

Andrea Chalupa: And in terms of, you talk a lot about exposure, like personal exposure to people of color, for instance, and sort of how on the interpersonal level we have to sort of carry on this awareness and conversation and we have a responsibility there. Could you speak a bit on that?

Crystal Fleming: The reality is the research is pretty conclusive here. The vast majority of white Americans have zero friends of color. Zero. And so what that means is that tens of millions of white Americans quite literally lives in a white echo chamber. Most of them don't realize that they are missing out on something important, on many things that are important. People of color are not a monolith, obviously. There are folks who are not white who are racially ignorant, and yet we also know that because people who are racialized as non-white tend to experience discrimination or racism, they tend to know more about it than their white counterparts. So if we're looking to try to better understand racism, we need to look towards people of color. We, of course, need to look towards anti-racist whites who have also been, yes, a minority, but there have been anti-racist whites throughout our country's history that have been working for anti-racist change. But I think realizing that when you live in an echo chamber of whiteness you are missing out on the knowledge of people of color, of course, you're also missing out on relationships with people of color, and that there's a cost to that, is important. So I think if you consider yourself anti-racist, thinking about how to desegregate your life and to learn from people of diverse backgrounds is part of anti-racist praxis.

Andrea Chalupa: One thing I want to put in the time capsule for everyone is the years before the 2016 election, there was this fiery debate which I'm now nostalgic for because I would totally trade it for what Twitter looks like today, over P.C. culture and whether it was going too far. And when Trump won, there were even these so-called thought pieces springing up saying, "It's all P.C. cultures fault. People were voting against political correctness." Do you remember that? I mean, obviously, that's your job, to record all those. I just want to remind everyone of that, because that was the debate for years.

Crystal Fleming: Yeah, I think that's one of those echo chambers of whiteness moments. To think that, you know, "Oh, the backlash to Obama is explained by political correctness," in a way I feel that...okay, let me put it this way, because I touch on it a bit in the chapter of the book that's called Trump Country, so the chapter that's about how do we get this president. So there's part of that chapter where I reflect on this interview. I've been

listening to this podcast on New York's NPR station WNYC. And part of the podcast was chronicling the experiences of white Trump voters or Trump supporters in the lead up to the 2016 election. And there was this one woman, I think her name was Patti, and I was listening to this on my way home from teaching at Stony Brook University, so I was driving from Long Island in New York City, and it just kind of stopped me. It just took my breath away, because this woman, this white Trump supporter, began crying as she listened to Trump decry political correctness, and she was just saying that this man was speaking for her, and she's been so tired of political correctness, and so on and so forth, and so I mention this because, yes, there is a certain reaction from not only some folks on the right, because even amongst Democrats there are some white Democrats who feel this way, that there's just been too much emphasis on political correctness. I think part of how Trump mobilized a lot of his supporters was through his perceived—it's really quite an astonishing irony—but through his perceived authenticity, right? We have a politician who lies pathologically, and yet he is viewed as authentic, particularly in his presentation and his style, by his supporters. And I think that there is a way in which, and it's a bit complicated, the argument that I make in my book, but there is a way in which Trump does breach a kind of, you could call it political correctness. Whatever, we'll just call it that for now. But he breaches basically the kind of culture of duplicity, of racial duplicity that became kind of taken for granted and institutionalized in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. So what happened, one of the things that happened after the Civil Rights era is that whites were taught, for the first time in our country's history, white people were taught that being racist was a bad thing. So the moral stigmatization of the word racist, that's a relatively recent phenomenon, because for most of our country's history, being what we now call racist was the law of the land and proudly so. It was the American way. So part of my critique, and in making this critique I'm drawing on the work of other sociologists like Leslie Pinker and Joe Fagan, whose book *Two-faced Racism* really explores this in great depth, but we see that white folks have been socialized to talk a certain way about race, or to not talk about it in public, and to allow, to engage in, and to normalize racial and racist discourse in private, particularly in spaces where there are only other white folks or people believed to be white. So in white spaces. If you look at the research, the way that Trump talks about race in public, but also not just Trump, if you think about sort of explicit racist discourse, that never disappeared from white folks' lives in private. It's not like that disappeared after the Civil Rights Movement. No, that continued. It's been uninterrupted in sort of its backstage existence, but what became normal was to sort of say in public, "Oh, I don't see color. I don't see race," or to engage in what some think of as P.C. language. And Trump ruptures that in a way that I think is very satisfying for folks who have felt constrained by the duplicity of the way many whites are socialized, just sort of if not themselves making racist or racial comments in private, at least allowing those around them to do so, and the study by Leslie Pick and Joe Fagan, that was based on self accounts of white students about how the people in their lives—their family members, their friends, and themselves—how they talk about race in private versus public, and that's why it's called *Two-faced Racism*, because there's this kind of institutionalized duplicity.

And so yes, in my critique of our country's racism, and how we get Trump, I do draw on that research, and I do kind of discuss political correctness in that way. But I think it would be too simplistic to sort of, you know, I'm not saying the same thing as the folks who were writing after the election, that, "Oh, well he won because of all that bad political correctness." No. He won because this is a racist country, and there were tens of millions of people who were very willing to vote for a man who is not just openly racist but openly sexist, and you just go down the line. So the thing, though, is that it still would have been a racist country even if he had lost, and I think that's where I differ from maybe some other

analysts and observers, in being very insistent that Trump winning didn't turn this country racist, and it's not also the case that there was the creation of new racism after Obama. No, it never stopped being a racist country. It just sort of manifests differently over time.

Andrea Chalupa: So you're saying it's not economic anxiety that all these white people are voting for him.

Crystal Fleming: Well, I'm not not saying that either. I think that Trump follows in a long line of white economic elites who have instrumentalized the economic anxieties of other white folks who are not as prosperous. However, Trump also is very popular amongst whites who are not a poor or working class, and so that doesn't explain everything. But I think part of, if we go back to sociology and go back to history, if we look at the work of W.E.B DuBois, as I write about in *How to Be Less Stupid about Race*, he called it a very long time ago in his book *Black Reconstruction*, and in other pieces he's written. But one of his arguments is that white working-class people were sort of socialized into prioritizing their whiteness over their economic interests a long time ago. That is also kind of just a page from the American playbook. And what that means, and the term that he used, DuBois, to describe this is "the wages of whiteness." His argument was that even though it makes more sense for white working-class folks to be in solidarity with African-American working-class folks and other folks of color who are also working class, that in this country's system of white supremacy, white identity is presented as an option for white working-class folks to feel better than African-Americans and then other groups that are deemed as non-white. And that psychological wage is enough for many, not all, but for many whites to kind of vote against their own economic interests. So that is an old argument that you could find in the work of folks like DuBois, but that doesn't explain why white millionaires love Trump as well. So I think there's a lot going on.

Andrea Chalupa: So in terms of the larger danger right now the world is up against, which is white supremacist terrorism, which the FBI has said is one of the great threats to our country right now, and that threat is growing worldwide, and we're seeing, of course, horrific story after horrific story of shooters of mosques and synagogues, not only in our country but in Canada New Zealand, of course. And that's being driven by the President of United States himself, Donald Trump. And he of course was brought into power in large part by Steve Bannon, the nationalist Steve Bannon, who is literally building a fascist academy in Italy, a country right now with a fascist government that is proudly aligned with the Kremlin, which has a very xenophobic propaganda machine and funds all these far-right movements, that is aligned with all these far-right movements. And a march in Russia turned into a big neo-Nazi march, one that Putin launched, and so forth. We've got all these horrific examples of this global threat, and it's a global movement, and it's intentionally built to be a global movement. And it's a multi-headed monster with all these goals because they have secessionist movements, not only the United States, but fanning that in Ukraine as well, with the Kremlin's invasion, and so forth. I know that's a lot I just packed in there, but I'm just trying to paint like a horror scene for people because it's such an urgent topic. So could you speak a little bit to that, on Steve Bannon himself as a leader of this, and also comment on why do you think mainstream media, from *The Washington Post* to *NBC News*, continues to give Steve Bannon a platform? Why do they continue to invite him? *The Economist* invited him to speak at an event. Why, given his track record, given the dangerous statistics, given that innocent lives are being slaughtered because of this ideology of hate, why does Steve Bannon still have such a big welcome mat in mainstream media and mainstream society in America and Europe?

Crystal Fleming: The simple answer is because this is a white supremacist country. I mean, it's simple. When you were saying the point about the FBI admitting that white supremacist terrorism is this great threat, I couldn't help but just kind of roll my eyes, because there is this untenable irony for the federal government, a bureau of a federal government that was literally founded on white supremacist violence, to now in 2019 admit that it's a problem. So we have at the core of our political institutions this predicament. Right? Because if white supremacy is wrong, and it is, and if you know a shooting in which dozens of people or hundreds of people are targeted is a horror, and it is, then what do you call a political system built on genocide? What do you call a system built on the oppression of millions, the white supremacist oppression of millions of enslaved human beings? What do you call a system that is not just built on these things, but then establishes and celebrates white supremacy for centuries, and then you get to 2019 and it's like, "Oh, well actually you know this is not great."

I don't know how folks who aren't familiar with our history think about these issues, but when I see mainstream media roll out the red carpet for Bannon despite all that he represents with regard to white nationalism and white supremacy and overtly embracing those things, I simply read it as consistent with the fact that this is a white supremacist country and has always been so. And so white supremacy—here's the thing. It's not actually viewed as a problem for most white Americans. It's not viewed as a danger for most white Americans, because it has been the core of the system that has created the opportunities for most white Americans. So I think yes, it's pretty telling when Bannon continues to receive invitations, opportunities to speak in these mainstream venues, but I think it's consistent with the fact that what he represents is not actually viewed as a horrific thing for many of the folks in the decision making positions who greenlight those invitations and allow for him to have space to widen his sphere of influence.

Andrea Chalupa: I want to go back to the FBI because we discussed that on the show before, the irony, the painful irony that the FBI today is under attack. The FBI is essentially in a slow-motion purge by President of the United States. You have Bruce Orr, Peter Struck, Lisa Page, all who are organized crime investigators who become mainstream names because the president attacks them relentlessly just for doing their jobs. And the irony is that the FBI is under such vicious strain right now by this white supremacist in the White House and his far-reaching, far-right propaganda movement of bots and Fox News and so forth, which he wields against them, to target them and harass them. The irony of it is that the FBI for so long, as you, of course, pointed out, was an instrument of violence against Black communities, certainly with their illegal operations at Oakland, where they're infiltrated target and purposely try to weaken in black communities in Oakland. The activist Fred Hampton was killed in his bed by an FBI raid, and so forth. So you have this long history by the FBI of racial violence and white supremacist terrorism and now they're the victims of it themselves.

Crystal Fleming: It will be interesting to see what historians write about this period a generation from now. I will just say, going on the record, I do not feel comfortable making assumptions about what's really going on between the White House, the FBI, and all that. I really don't know. I just know that for most of our country's history, the FBI has not been on the side of Civil Rights, so as far as whatever is happening right now, I assume that there's more than appears in the headlines, but the headlines don't look great. But again, I think it will be important to see when Freedom of Information Acts are invoked, and again, when historians turn back to this period to kind of peel back the layers of what is really going on, because I find it all pretty mystifying. And you know, I think it's also important to point out

that the era of the FBI being implicated in white supremacy, it's not just like something that happened in the 70s or 60s. It's ongoing. It's not just to single out the FBI; it's part of the infrastructure of our country. So everything from, I don't know if you remember, but there was this notion of the black identity extremist, and I saw that the ACLU as of this year has had to sue the FBI to hand over records on whatever that means. So yeah, it's all quite complicated, but I'm just going to assume that there's more going on than I can make sense of from what's being publicly reported.

Andrea Chalupa: Yeah, and certainly Trump's Kremlin ties and Russian organized crime ties, that was all going back decades, and the FBI knew or should have known who they dealing with, certainly with Paul Manafort. Just to not catch them sooner or bring them to justice sooner, there's certainly, given a long history, a racial component to that, like why Trump and Manafort and their whole sort of squad—they're committing crimes! For so [long]. We can go down the list. I mean, that's part of the interview series this summer. Craig Unger's book—Vanity Fair contributor Craig Unger—House of Trump, House of Putin lists all of those ties going back decades, which the FBI should have been all over like they're all over black activists in America. So there's definitely that racial component for sure, without question.

Crystal Fleming: I mean, there's an economic component where who is pursued for crimes in this country and who are held accountable tends to be predicated upon a number of factors, one of them being class, and also race. So I think, you know, intersectionally speaking, to see white men—and I should clarify—rich, extremely rich, wealthy white men somehow not held accountable again, is consistent with this country's history of white male supremacy. And you also have the issue of the laws themselves, and what counts as a crime, and how crimes are defined. All of that is socially constructed and shaped by power. And when the laws don't suit those in power, they either break them with impunity or rewrite them. So I think, again, when you look at the history and the sociology of where our country came from, it's disheartening to see these dynamics continue to play out, but not surprising.

Andrea Chalupa: Speaking of power, let's talk about the media. So obviously journalism jobs have been on the decline. It's been a huge loss of newsroom jobs. Investigative units are often the first to go. Journalism jobs of desks abroad are often the first to go. So what that means is with newsrooms shrinking, you're getting less investigative journalism. You're getting more clickbait, and you're getting less coverage of what's going on in other parts of the world. I saw abysmal coverage, for instance, of Ukraine's revolution by journalists that were stuck to their desks in CNN's bureau in Atlanta, and these guys just didn't know what they were writing about, because they were just stuck to their desks. So it's had a big toll on many issues for us, and it certainly has been this shrinking watchdog. One thing that is also damaging is that for those who do hold those coveted newsroom jobs in America, the recent studies have shown, which we've gone over on this show, which you have an entire chapter dedicated to and your book is that those who remain in these newsroom jobs are predominantly white people, predominantly white males. Could you speak a little bit about that and why that matters?

Crystal Fleming: Yeah, absolutely. This also kind of connects back to your question about Bannon, like why is Bannon still getting reception in mainstream media. Well, part of it has to do with how white supremacy manifests in the media. It shouldn't surprise us to see that white supremacy and systemic racism is a constituent feature of the media, but we don't often maybe hear it described in those terms, particularly not from the media, because

they have a vested interest in not sort of acknowledging these things. So white folks dominate sort of every step in the production of the news. I think people sort of assume that we've made a lot of progress in this area, but we really haven't. One of the things I point out in the chapter of the book called Fake Racial News is that over 600 print and online news organizations, only 16.6% of journalists and other employees are people of color. 16%. And if you look at editors, which, that's such a, as you know, a powerful and influential position, 86.5% of news editors are white. And three-fourths of news organizations have no minority representation at all amongst their top editors. At all. So we're dealing with a media infrastructure that is overwhelmingly white, and one in which the perspectives of people of color, to go back to your other question about why is it important to have relationships with people of color, well, you see so much racial stupidity in our media because people of color are systematically excluded from the newsroom and systematically excluded from positions of power. But I also want to be clear: it is not the case that if you just happen to include some journalists of color or some editor who's non-white that necessarily that means that you're going to have anti-racist journalism. One of the points I make in that chapter of the book is that there was this horrific piece in The New York Times a couple of years back that was published about Mike Brown, and it sort of started with, you know, "Mike Brown was no angel." And it's this very just shameful and racist and anti-Black portrayal of Mike Brown, and it turns out it was written by a black man. Being able to recognize and acknowledge the complicity of people of color, of some people of color, in maintaining the white supremacist status quo, and I'm not saying that every piece by that journalist does that, but certainly the "Mike Brown was no angel" article was, I hope, a low point for that journalist.

But I just think of course we need to think beyond superficial diversity. But the fact that there are so few persons of color in newsrooms, we see the consequences of that in this kind of white echo chamber of media coverage that we get, and we miss out on critical perspectives on alternative perspectives that more diverse newsrooms could present.

Andrea Chalupa: You write in your book about the infamous Dapper Nazi pieces, and how they're all born from that, essentially. Could you shock our listeners by explaining how Bannon had a deal with the New York Times in the 2016 election?

Crystal Fleming: Yes, so the New York Times and The Washington Post sort of had these sort of strange relationships with Bannon, and I think part of what was at play was this thirst to, I don't know, just clickbait, or just to get eyeballs on the page in the lead up to the 2016 election, and I think there also was perhaps an effort by some to undermine Clinton, and I think that is evident in part of what happened with Bannon. So yes, there was this deal that Bannon had with the New York Times, one of his companies, to feature some of their work. Part of what I show in the book is that some of these mainstream outlets like The New York Times, also like the Washington Post, they were for Bannon before they were against them. In fact, I don't think that we could say that they're actually against Bannon all the way. But certainly, there was eventually a critique that began to be reported on. But yes. Bannon had this kind of deal to publish oppositional research literally targeting Hillary Clinton, and this is a deal that he had with a number of publications, so New York Times and The Washington Post amongst them. And then, as I point out in the book, a year after this deal, both the editorial boards of The Times and The Post then suddenly condemned Bannon, and specifically condemn Trump's decision to name Bannon as his Chief Advisor. So I think there's just this ongoing duplicity that we find in our media around its implication in white supremacy, and it's complicated, because many of these media institutions also publish the occasional anti-racist article, and they have writers and

journalists of color, as well as some white anti-racists, who are doing good work. That happens, too. Yet unfortunately what happens is that the occasional anti-racist column or editors who are trying to do a consciousness-raising around social justice issues, that those very pieces get used to obscure the complicity of these mainstream news outlets with white supremacy. And so we have to be clear that just because the Times happens to publish the work of an anti-racist writer or a journalist that we respect, it doesn't change the fact that nevertheless the Times and other mainstream media continue to publish quite a lot of overtly racist things. And it wasn't it just a month ago that The New York Times published—I think it was the international edition—but they published an anti-Semitic cartoon.

Andrea Chalupa: Oh, yeah.

Crystal Fleming: Yeah, so this is what we're dealing with. We're dealing with a media ecosphere that is—and it's not just American racism; it's global racism—but for reasons that won't surprise us, there is very little public reflexivity and acknowledgment of these dynamics on the part of media organizations, and so I hope that my book helps bolster those who are making the critique, and some of them are in the industry themselves.

Andrea Chalupa: Your book should be required reading for the newsrooms of The Washington Post, The New York Times, all of these powerful legacy media institutions. Like it should just be required reading. How do we do that?

Crystal Fleming: Well, thanks for saying that. I think part of what would be great is if journalists when they go to journalism school if they not only had to read my book but if they had to take at least one class on systemic racism. Most journalists, like, by the way, most professionals, can make it through their entire education without ever having to actually study the history and sociology of racism. And so, of course, we see gross incompetence in the coverage of these issues from folks who never actually had to learn about it, and from newsrooms that overwhelmingly exclude the perspectives of people of color. So, of course, you're gonna have abysmal coverage. And the fact that we have any anti-racist news coverage at all is astonishing, but it does exist. I think if there could be a kind of shift in the education of journalists, where we could see folks having to take at least a class to give some kind of competency for understanding and reporting on race and racism, I think that would be huge.

Andrea Chalupa: So I wanted to leave off on because we had the election coming up, so what is your advice in terms of media literacy for voters? Because they're going to get bombarded with the same stuff. There's been no self-reflection of the media. I mean, just the other day, The New York Times had this Hope Hicks piece that set everyone up into an uproar, where they're basically glamorizing Hope Hicks, and creating whether she should show up for a subpoena, which by law she must, as an existential crisis. People turned it into an album cover, a perfume ad because I was the treatment Hope Hicks was given because she's white and beautiful and all of that, and so the media is simply going to betray the public again in 2020. All signs are pointing to that, so what advice do you have for voters going into that whole mess?

Crystal Fleming: A lot of people ask me, like, "Well, okay, if you have a critique of these mainstream media outlets, who should we read? Or who do you read? Who do you turn to?" I know it sounds maybe a little corny, but I say turn to Chomsky. Really, like if you could just if you have not read *Manufacturing Consent*, I think you should, before going

back to kind of thinking about how to make sense of the news of the day. Because the reality is, even if we look at independent press, too, I think having a critical view of what's being publicly reported and kind of understanding that what you're gonna get is gonna be skewed by power, and kind of trying to at least triangulate what you're reading and not rely on mainstream sources all the time. Sometimes yes, trying to read independent journalism, but nevertheless, to still kind of have a critical perspective on that, that's what I recommend. There's no source that I read that I'm like, "Oh wow, this is the iron-clad truth." I think that we have to kind of be savvy and kind of understand that yes, there is a lot of money being poured into media to mislead folks. I think another thing, too, and I'm kind of practicing this as well, is maybe taking a step back also from social media to an extent. I mean, we saw how certainly there was a lot of public attention around Russian efforts to influence people through social media, but we have to be clear: that is something that every major government in the world including the United States has an active agenda around. This is one of the things I tweeted about some years ago, actually, but the United States government has publicly written about how the Internet and social media is viewed as an arena of warfare. Okay? So that means that there are lots of vested interests in shaping how you think, what you think, what news you're supposed to think is important, and I think folks need to be careful of being distracted from what's not being treated as the trending news item of the day, and to kind of just stay aware of international news that's not being reported on in the United States, and again, independent sources, to the extent that should not rely on the mainstream news.

Andrea Chalupa: And for candidates in this election, when they talk about, you know, "it's the economy, stupid," what advice do you have for candidates to address that "it's the economy, stupid," but also keep in mind that you can't divorce racial justice from economic justice?

Crystal Fleming: Yeah, you know, I really wish that, for example, we'd see movement from folks like Bernie Sanders on issues like reparations for racial injustice. I'm not sure where he stands on this now, but last I heard from Bernie, reading, again, the headlines, is a couple of months ago he was still against reparations, or in any case, he wasn't for it. And I think that's really unfortunate. You know, I would love to see folks who are progressive really bridge right the economic concerns of so many millions of people with a reckoning with racial injustice, because those two things have always been connected in our country. They've always been connected, and it shouldn't be the case that it's sort of viewed as plausible to say, "We're going to take on the banks," but then say, "Oh, but when it comes to reparations, that's going one step too far." Why? Why is that going one step too far? Why can't we support racial justice, and economic justice, and take on the patriarchy, and support trans rights? Why can't we support all these things? I think we should think in very broad terms about social justice and well-being. And unfortunately, I think sometimes what happens is that there is a concern about alienating white voters who aren't ready to take that step, but I think there's never been a moment in our country that's been more propitious than now for folks to really boldly advance racial justice as part of a broad umbrella of social justice advocacy. I really think that this is a moment and a time to be bold in that advocacy, and not to shirk and think, "Oh, we don't want to alienate people." There are lots of folks who are waking up. There are lots of folks who are coming to understand that their economic anxieties are also tied to a system of white supremacy and that we need to—those of us who kind of see this—we need to work within our sphere of influence to build intergroup solidarity and to promote a really broad intersectional platform for social justice. I'd love to see more of that in this election cycle. I am waiting to see it, and hopeful that maybe we'll see things moving that direction. And I have to say, the one

politician I'm excited about who's not actually running for president is AOC, so we'll have to see what becomes of her and folks who are sort of in her circle. But we'll see what happens.

Andrea Chalupa: Yeah. AOC, we're huge fans of hers as well. We have to make her the norm of the Democratic Party because that's just the direction it has to go. And when you have this opportunity of an election, it's like, you can't bury issues. You have to use it as leadership, to have conversations, further conversations, plant seeds, bring people into the political process. And these conversations, leadership is about educating people. Leadership is the responsibility to educate people and not abdicate that responsibility. So if you look at, for instance, an issue like reparations, all reparations means is investing in people. Investing in communities. If you look at some of the most solid democracies in the world, the Scandinavian countries, yes, they're not known for whatever high taxes, sure, but we can examine that and examine our own tax history closer to really see what we're talking about. What one incredibly wealthy businessman who lives in the heart of Copenhagen told me is that he's happy to pay his taxes. He's proud of it, because what he's doing is he's investing in the minds of everybody in this country, and if those minds are at their peak potential, then he's gonna make a stronger country. That's how you have to think of reparations is that you're investing in communities that have been oftentimes violently deprived of their rights for generations. And we know from a scientific standpoint that that trauma gets passed down through the DNA. It's DNA level trauma.

So I think the whole thing of reparations is actually self-serving for white people because what you're doing is you're strengthening your country.

Crystal Fleming: You know, we need more white people to acknowledge not just the fact that reparations means investing in people, but also that it means acknowledging the moral wrong that was done, and that was done for generations to African-Americans. I think it would be interesting to think about reparations for Indigenous people as well. And I think it's important to think about reparations not just for slavery but for systemic racism. And I have to say, I've had my critiques of some of Ta-Nehisi Coates' writing, but I think he did very well in his piece for The Atlantic on reparations to make the case, the moral case for it. I think it's incontrovertible that reparations are owed. But part of leadership, I think, in 2019 it should be a low bar. But I think if you consider yourself progressive, reparations should be part of your platform. It's a no-brainer for me. And even better, if you can help folks understand that the cause for racial justice is connected to the cause for economic justice as well and that these things are connected, I think that that's essential.

Andrea Chalupa: So the other bit of advice for 2019, 2020 is what is—I know this might be an oversimplification—but if you were advising candidates, like if they all came to you and you had their attention, what would you tell them to answer when they're asked, "Do black lives matter? Why should we say Black lives matter?" Because what we saw recently was Nancy Pelosi giving Joy Reid an All Lives Matter answer to Black Lives Matter. You know, and she mentioned she's proud to be there when Black members of Congress are getting sworn in. She's the third most powerful person in the country, and so that's it we're talking about, is you can't hide these issues under the rug. You have to seize your leadership, and leadership is educating people. So what I'm saying is people, the candidates, need help answering this. So what would be sort of your advice to them? What should they say when they're asked about Black Lives Matter?

Crystal Fleming: So we're dealing with politicians, right? So they're trying to—not all, but many of them are trying to hold onto power and win votes, and they're not necessarily all motivated by, for example, the cause for racial justice. So when it comes to politicians saying All Lives Matter in response to Black Lives Matter, I don't know if that's coming from a place of actual ignorance. For example, does Nancy Pelosi really not know that this country has been set up in a way in which black lives have made to matter less, that black lives have devalued for centuries and that that is part of the system of white supremacy that we're still living with today? Does she really not know that, or does she know it, but she finds it expedient to say All Lives Matter because that will help keep her in power? I don't know the answer to that question, but I think that for those who want to exercise anti-racist leadership as part of their progressive platform, and I don't know that Nancy Pelosi falls into that category, but for those who do, I think that you need to sort of as part of your leadership educate the public so that they understand that the country has devalued black lives for generations, and the reality is that people don't generally learn this in school, so writing a book like *How to Be Less Stupid About Race* is part of my effort to help people have that historical perspective, to go back to what we're discussing at the beginning of our conversation, that historical consciousness. Part of anti-racist leadership is acknowledging that history. And so when people respond All Lives Matter, that is gaslighting, because you are not acknowledging the historical and ongoing reality that made it necessary for black women activists to use the phrase Black Lives Matter and get people to sort of understand, "Oh, wait. Black lives have been made not to matter. That's why we have to say it." So I think that kind of acknowledgment of history is sorely needed, and when politicians and others fail to do that, they are unfortunately reproducing the racial status quo, and that's white supremacy.

Andrea Chalupa: Thank you so much. This was such an exciting interview. We were really thrilled to feature your work, and like I said, it should be required reading. We would live in a much different country if it were required reading, especially in newsrooms across America.

Crystal Fleming: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate having this conversation with you, and I hope this isn't our last conversation. Let's stay in touch.

Andrea Chalupa: Our discussion continues, and you can get access to that by signing up on our Patreon at the truth teller level or higher.