

Expert Available for Comment:

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Author of: [*What Might Be: Confronting Racism to Transform Our Institutions*](#) (Princeton University Press, February 2025)

SUSAN STURM is the George M. Jaffin Professor of Law and Social Responsibility and the Founding Director of the Center for Institutional and Social Change at Columbia Law School. Her scholarship and teaching focus on advancing racial equity and full participation in educational, legal, and cultural institutions, increasing access to justice, and the role of law and leadership in advancing institutional and social change.



Professor Sturm collaborates with a wide variety of higher education, legal, artistic, government, criminal justice, and community-based organizations and networks pursuing full participation through organizational and cultural change. She is the co-designer of courses and workshops on Lawyer Leadership: Leading Self, Leading Others, Leading Change and Access to Justice for People in Prison. She is the architect and creator of the Centering Change Skills Hub, an online platform aimed at cultivating leadership and building the capacity to address race in law schools, court systems, and communities. She has served as the Vice President and Director of Policy for the Tony Award-winning Broadway Advocacy Coalition (BAC) and is the co-creator with BAC of *Theater of Change: Reimagining Justice*, a highly acclaimed course offered at Columbia Law School. She is the recipient of the Presidential Teaching Award for Outstanding Teaching at Columbia University. Along with numerous scholarly publications, she is the author, with Lani Guinier, of *Who's Qualified? A New Democracy Forum on the Future of Affirmative Action*.

THEMES AND IDEAS THAT PROFESSOR STURM CAN DISCUSS:

*****Professor Sturm can speak to the following issues, specifically in the areas of higher education policy, criminal justice policy, and culture change*****

- How to pursue institutional change advancing full participation in the current climate, and how to maintain a focus on issues of race amidst legal and political minefields
- How everyday people can become change agents, and how to do that work without letting formal leaders off the hook
- How to build a community of people engaged in tackling the problems facing our troubled world, including race, and move forward in a courageous way
- How to build bridges across racial divides and trust amidst distrust

- Building multiracial communities of change agents that coalesce around linked fate

ABOUT WHAT MIGHT BE: CONFRONTING RACISM TO TRANSFORM OUR INSTITUTIONS:

In Professor Sturm's new book, *What Might Be: Confronting Racism to Transform Our Institutions*, she explores how to navigate the contradictions built into our racialized history, relationships, and institutions. She offers strategies and stories for confronting racism within predominantly white institutions, describing how change agents can move beyond talk to build the architecture of full participation. Professor Sturm identifies three persistent paradoxes inherent in anti-racism work (the paradox of racialized power, the paradox of racial salience, and the paradox of racialized institutions) and shows how people and institutions can cultivate the capacity to straddle these contradictions, enabling those in different racial positions to discover their linked fate and become the catalysts for long-term change. Including thoughtful and critical responses from Goodwin Liu, Freeman Hrabowski, and Anurima Bhargava, *What Might Be* draws on Professor Sturm's decades of experience researching and working with institutions to help them become more equitable and inclusive.

A Conversation with Susan Sturm about WHAT MIGHT BE

Q: *What inspired you to write What Might Be?*

A: I wrote this book to support people grappling with the question: what do we actually do to make change in institutions and communities confronting the contradictions built into anti-racism efforts? My life's work has taught me that anti-racism paradoxes must be navigated to make institutions more equitable, humane, and effective. Drawing on my decades of research and experience, *What Might Be* provides people with ways to close the gap between the unacceptable "is" and the desired vision—the "ought" of full participation in their communities and their institutions.

Q: *How can institutions and communities address anti-racism?*

A: The goal of full participation enables people to locate racial issues within broader shared goals that speak to everyone's thriving, success, and well-being. People can create these "microspaces" where people who see the world differently can come together to create a smaller version of the world they want to see more broadly. It's important to have an affirmative definition of the change we want to see. If you only express what you *don't want* to see, you end up looking in the rearview mirror. For anti-racism work to be sustainable, it must build collective capacity to identify linked fate and redefine our institutions to advance the full participation of all people.

Q: *Why is it important to speak about race at this moment?*

A: "Full participation" is the value that we are trying to advance, but we can't do that without addressing racism. The temptation in the current environment is to step back from these complex issues, especially those involving race, but it is crucial to remain engaged with confronting racism as part of our everyday work in communities and institutions—especially when you feel like you can't make a difference at the federal level. This can happen when people who are most affected by racism and injustice are empowered to define their own futures and the futures of our institutions. By engaging

with race even when it's challenging, we make it clear that these issues are about everyone's ability to be treated equally, be included, feel like they matter, and shape their futures.

Q: How can institutions foster an environment for anti-racism efforts?

A: We can learn from examples of effective and lasting multi-racial collaborations that produce meaningful change benefitting everyone in the organization. People continue to find ways to support each other in doing this work—in higher education, legal, and cultural institutions. They have been able to connect issues of race to everyone's linked fate. People at every level of an organization are in positions to take these steps to enact transformational change and to be someone who can rethink how they exercise their power. We need to encourage the sense that we can all be change agents.

Q: How can small steps move toward big goals?

A: Navigating the paradoxes of anti-racism requires a kind of transformative incrementalism. Because racism is baked into the current culture, it is necessary to rescript the standard and entrenched operations in every context to avoid perpetuating the status quo. Yet the risk is that wholesale efforts to change the system all at once will overwhelm participants and they will invariably run out of steam. Successful efforts have found ways to identify a challenge or opportunity that is big enough to make a difference and small enough to accomplish. They then ask whether these incremental steps are moving in the direction of more transformative change, laying the foundation for the next round of experiments, and building momentum and support for staying in the work over the long haul.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from What Might Be?

A: I'm hoping the book will enable people at every level of an organization to see themselves as change agents, and to work effectively in multiracial collaborations striving for full participation. We can't make transformational change in a vacuum, and we can't do the work only alongside people like ourselves. It's important to know that being a change agent is a long-term investment of time and energy. These efforts can become a joyful struggle, with transformational effects that extend far and wide. I also hope readers realize that effective transformational leaders are comfortable asking questions, admit when they don't know something, and acknowledge that they are in a very open process of learning from successes and failures and collaborating with others.

TO BE IN TOUCH WITH SUSAN STURM:

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