White Supremacy Culture – Still Here

Tema Okun | May 2021

For a more extensive exploration of this article, go to http://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/

Active links are available on website.

A Short History of the Original Article

This article is an update of the original *White Supremacy Culture* article published in 1999. While I wrote the words on the pages that became the *White Supremacy Culture* article all those years ago, I want to make it clear that I do not consider the original article, or the website that is an extension of the article, my work. I feel a sense of stewardship rather than of ownership. The article was informed by my decade of experience facilitating racial equity workshops and work at that time, starting with my original colleague the inestimable James Williams and followed by a 12-year partnership with Kenneth Jones. I was deeply steeped in my own learning curve over the course of that decade. In addition, I was fortunate to be mentored by Sharon Martinas, who was organizing the The Challenging White Supremacy Workshop series; Sharon was the one who advised me to include antidotes. I also attended a People's Institute for Survival and Beyond workshop in the Bay (one of many I was lucky to attend). This workshop was co-facilitated by Daniel Buford, a lead trainer at PISAB at the time the original article was written. He was doing extensive research on white supremacy culture and linguistic racism and you will see the portions that he informed both on the original article and here marked by an asterisk.

The original piece also built on the work of many others who informed the curriculum and training that Kenneth and I were leading at the time as well as colleagues in the work with us. They are listed in the end notes as well as on the website.

I will also say that the original article was my one and only experience of producing something that came through me (see endnotes for the whole story). The original article, the updated website, and the work I continue to do is in honor and memory of Kenneth, who helped me become wise about many things and kept me honest about everything else. I love him and miss him beyond words. His laugh, his caring, his wisdom are with me always.

This Update

A lot of time has passed since the original article on White Supremacy Culture was published. While the article seems to be getting a lot of use in this time of resurgent anti-racist movement building, it badly needs updating and revising. For example, I (and colleagues) have come to see other central elements of white supremacy culture that need to be named: fear is an essential characteristic, as is the assumption of "qualified" attached to whiteness. Defensiveness needs to be broadened to include denial, which is included in the list in this current iteration. A class lens

and issues of intersectionality are important to address. And a caution against weaponization of the list seems critically important right now.

I decided to update and revise the original article in the form of a website, which allows flexibility as well as the ability to link to so many who are doing important and groundbreaking work to help us understand how to navigate white supremacy culture.

I want to be clear that the website and this article is offering one way of understanding white supremacy culture, not the way. Many people have written, spoken, offered brilliant wisdom about how white supremacy culture operates, both before and after the original article was published. May this be a small contribution to a larger understanding.

This update leans heavily on those with whom I have been working in the decades since the original article was published. For a complete list of all those who have informed my work, please visit the website. For the purposes of this article specifically, please note the valued additions from the following wise and brilliant people who I am privileged to know: Bevelyn Ukah, Calvin Allen, Cristina Rivera Chapman, the late Cynthia Brown, Justin Robinson, Kari Points, Scot Nagakawa, Tami Forte-Logan, Vivette Jeffries-Logan, as well as these activist scholars and writers: Alice Walker, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Parker Palmer.

About White Supremacy

The term white supremacy refers to the ways in which the ruling class elite or the power elite in the colonies of what was to become the United States used the pseudo-scientific concept of race to create whiteness and a hierarchy of racialized value in order to

- disconnect and divide white people from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC);
- disconnect and divide Black, Indigenous, and People of Color from each other;
- disconnect and divide white people from other white people;
- disconnect and divide each and all of us from the earth, the sun, the wind, the water, the stars, the animals that roam(ed) the earth;
- disconnect and divide each of us from ourselves and from source (see below).

The power elite constructed white supremacy (and construct it still) to define who is fully human and who is not.

Intersectionality

The power elite constructed (and continues to construct) white supremacy to intersect with (thank you Kimberlé Crenshaw), support, reinforce and reproduce capitalism, class oppression, gender oppression, heterosexism, ableism, Christian hegemony, to name a few. These in turn function to support, reinforce, and reproduce white supremacy. So, for example, capitalism teaches us profit is more important than people while systematically advantaging those in the white group (although not equally). Classism teaches us the wealthy are deserving and the

poor are to be blamed while reproducing racism in the disparate reproduction of wealth and deadly exploitation of labor. Sexism and heterosexism teach us white men are superior to women (and all "others"), gender binaries are "normal" while gender fluidity is threatening, with the degree of threat (targeting all who defy gender binaries) tied to race and racism. Christian hegemony teaches us that Christians (and a certain kind of white Christian at that) are divinely capable of shaping and defining reality for the rest of us. The power elite design these ideologies to teach us who is valuable and human and who is not in the name of power and profit.

In other words, white supremacy operates in collaboration with other oppressions; they reinforce and reproduce each other.

The power elite constructed (and continues to construct) white supremacy to serve capitalism, to commodify and dehumanize all living things in the name of power and profit for a few at the expense of the many. And they did this well (and still do), and they did this cleverly (and still do), constructing white supremacy to be ever more adaptable. So while historically those who benefit most from these constructions were and are white, male, owning class, gender conforming, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, English speaking ... (etc.) ... white supremacy has evolved to constantly extend an invitation to many of us, inviting us to join when assimilation (or joining) serves the ability of the power elite to profit at our expense.

This construction of white supremacy is alive and well. For just one example, we are living through a period where the U.S. Republican Party is overtly and boldy claiming a white supremacy, autocratic agenda. For more about this, sign up for Scot Nakagawa's online newsletter.

White Supremacy is a Project of Conditioning

White supremacy is a project of psychic conditioning and toxic belonging.

I have found my own participation in this ideology both enraging and heartbreaking. What I know is that the invitation to join is toxic to all who say yes. When I say yes, when we say yes, we visit this toxicity on others and everybody suffers, including us. And when I say no, when we say no - for we have among us those who have said no from the very beginning - when we say no, we discover the secret of joy (thank you Alice Walker).

White Supremacy is a Project of Colonization

White supremacy is a project of colonization - a project of "appropriating a place or domain for one's use" (according to the Oxford Dictionary). White supremacy colonizes our minds, our bodies, our psyches, our spirits, our emotions ... as well as the land and the water and the sky and the air we breathe. White supremacy tells us who has value, who doesn't, what has value, what doesn't in ways that reinforce a racial hierarchy of power and control that dis-eases and destroys all it touches. When I say, as I do elsewhere, that our goal is to get free, what I mean is that we are engaged in the collective project of freeing ourselves from this project of colonization. We are

decolonizing ourselves - our minds, our bodies, our psyches, our spirits, our emotions, our work, our homes, and the land, water, sky, and air.

White Supremacy Culture

Culture reflects the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of a group, a community, a town, a state, a nation. **White supremacy culture** is the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, **teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value**. It teaches us that Blackness is not only valueless but also dangerous and threatening. It teaches us that Indigenous people and communities no longer exist, or if they do, they are to be exoticized and romanticized or culturally appropriated as we continue to violate treaties, land rights, and humanity. It teaches us that people south of the border are "illegal." It teaches us that Arabs are Muslim and that Muslim is "terrorist." It teaches us that people of Chinese and Japanese descent are both indistinguishable and threatening as the reason for Covid. It pits other races and racial groups against each other while always defining them as inferior to the white group.

White supremacy culture is reflected in the current realities of disproportionate and systemic **harm and violence** directed towards BIPOC people and communities in all aspects of our national life – health, education, employment, incarceration, policing, the law, the environment, immigration, agriculture, food, housing. We would not allow any of the ways in which our society prioritizes profit over people if we did not have dominant cultural beliefs that make normal what is deeply and alarmingly inhumane.

White Supremacy Culture Comes After All of Us

We are all swimming in the waters of white supremacy culture. We are all navigating this culture, regardless of our racial identity. We are not all affected in the same ways – some of us are encouraged to join and collude without awareness that an invitation has been extended, some are invited to participate at the cost of separating ourselves from our communities and families, some are shamed because we can never fully join no matter how hard we try, some are denied any invitation in order to be targeted or exploited or violated.

White supremacy culture is constantly encouraging all of us in all our racial identities to cooperate and collude. Because we all live in this white supremacy culture, these characteristics have the potential to show up in the attitudes and behaviors of all of us, particularly as we strive to survive and gain a foothold in institutions and fields that either overtly or covertly adopt white supremacy culture values.

White supremacy culture always operates to target Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities and individuals while in theory “benefitting” white communities and people. My current position is that this culture and its characteristics are toxic to all of us. They are damaging because they are self-perpetuating and promote white supremacy thinking and

behavior, which is the source of our social, mental, emotional, and material disconnect. I am *not* suggesting that the harm white supremacy culture inflicts on white communities or white individuals is similar to or proportional to or comparable to the harm it inflicts on BIPOC communities and people. I *am* suggesting that white supremacy culture harms us all.

White supremacy culture invites white people into a silencing, a numbing, and a disconnection from our basic humanity in service of a false safety based on the idea that those of us who are white are both better and normal. Being encouraged into this ideology might offer short-term satisfaction and material gain, yet I agree with public theologian Ruby Sales, who tells us that "whiteness is a death sentence." We see this death sentence reflected in the extremely high addiction, suicide, and depression rates in the white community. The generational legacy and price of gain based on the psychic, mental, physical, and spiritual violation of others is a heavy one.

White supremacy culture also promises to reward BIPOC communities and people who collude in an effort to survive; the encouragement to assimilate and adapt to these characteristics often promises the illusion of safety while in reality rarely doing so. Whatever safety is offered can be and is bought at the expense of authentic relationship with community and self. Whatever safety is offered is ripped away whenever a community or person begins to speak and act with integrity about the racist realities of white supremacy culture.

One of the ways that white supremacy culture comes after us is in how we fail to distinguish between tools and weapons. Please take a minute to read the end notes, which include a section where I ask you to avoid weaponizing this list.

Refusing to Comply

The good news is that while white supremacy culture informs us, it does not define us. It is a construct, and **anything constructed can be deconstructed and replaced.** We are not victims; our history is both witness to and record of how many of us refuse(d) to cooperate, how many of us are brave and bold enough to vision a future we often do not live to see. We honor our radical freedom fighting ancestors, those on the front lines, those whose names we will never know, those who fed the babies and swept the floors and offered nurture while committed to living with mutual dignity, respect, and love. We are here because of them.

Given how others have shown us the way, the good news is that we can and must be equally brave, bold, and fierce ancestors for those who come with and after us.

A Word about Class

The original list of white supremacy characteristics is really a list that defines and expresses **white middle and owning class** values and norms. White middle- and owning-class power brokers embody these characteristics as a way of defining what is "normal" and even "aspirational" or desired – the way we should all want to be. We know this because of how those who do not

belong to the white middle and owning classes are required to adopt these characteristics in order to assimilate into this desired norm (when such assimilation is allowed). As a result, many poor and working class white people report they have not and do not internalize some of these norms. For example, fear of open conflict does not reflect the lived experience or value of all people in the white group.

These characteristics are not meant to describe all white people. They are meant to describe the norms of white middle-class and owning class culture, a culture we are all required to navigate regardless of our multiple identities.

I also want to acknowledge that none of these characteristics stand alone; they intersect and intertwine in devastating ways. I have combined some that act as best buddies: one right way and perfectionism, for example, and right to comfort with fear of open conflict.

One of the ways that white supremacy comes after us is how we internalize these characteristics into our very personalities. So, for example, people often ask me, when I am facilitating a class or workshop - isn't the perfectionism you just admitted to simply part of your personality? "Isn't that just who you are?" they ask. My response is "yes it is." My personality is deeply informed by my embodiment as an upper class cisgender white woman.

White supremacy culture would have us believe that we can (and should) pinpoint our motivations or actions to determine if they are based on our racism (those of us who are white) or some other aspect of our personality. The idea seems to be that if we "prove" our perfectionism isn't motivated by racism, then it's "all right," when in fact, our perfectionism is never all right. Thank goodness our commitment to our own growth and development as anti-racist white people allows us to see the ways in which our internalizations of superiority warp our relationships not just with BIPOC people and communities, but with other white people and with ourselves. This is the magic of racial justice work. Our commitment to racial justice is a healing practice for all aspects of our lives.

THE CHARACTERISTICS

The invitation for this and every characteristic is to investigate how each and all characteristics and qualities lead to disconnection (from each other, ourselves, and all living things) and how the antidotes can support us to reconnect. If you read these characteristics and qualities as blaming or shaming, perhaps they are particularly alive for you. If you find yourself becoming defensive as you read them, lean into the gift of defensiveness and ask yourself what you are defending. The description of these characteristics are meant to help us see our culture so that we can transgress and transform and build culture that truly supports us individually and collectively. Breathe into that intention if you can.

Fear

White supremacy culture's number one strategy is to make us afraid. All of the characteristics listed here are driven by fear. We fear not being good enough, not being enough, not being lovable. When we are afraid, whatever the reason, especially when we don't have the skills to hold that fear, we are easily manipulated by any false yet powerful sense of safety. The promised safety is false because it is always based on the abuse and misuse of power that shows up as everything from microaggressions to deadly violence directed at whoever or whatever we are told to be afraid of. Often it is the racialized other. Often it is ourselves.

White supremacy, white supremacy culture, and racism are fear-based. White supremacy uses fear to disconnect us in multiple ways, to ...

- disconnect us from each other across racial identities,
- disconnect us from each other within our racial groups,
- disconnect us from ourselves,
- disconnect us from the earth, wind, and sky, and all the creatures that roam the earth,
- disconnect us from source, god, creativity ... or whatever you call the wisdom we carry inside us.

White supremacy, white supremacy culture, and racism use fear to divide and conquer, always in the service of profit and power for a few at the expense of the many.

White supremacy culture cultivates our fear of not belonging, of not being enough. Living in fear that we are not enough, white supremacy culture teaches us to fear others (or hate others) in an attempt, sometimes overt, sometimes unspoken, to prove to ourselves that we are ok. An easy way to prove we are ok is to point the finger at all those who are not. An easy way to belong to each other is to hate and fear all the others who do not (thank you Cristina Rivera Chapman).

If we want to defeat white supremacy, then we have to get skilled at meeting our fear(s) so that we are not manipulated by those who delight in seeing us go after each other (and ourselves) while they maintain power and control. If we want to transgress white supremacy, we have to get good at belonging - belonging to ourselves and welcoming each other into belonging. This requires emotional maturity and responsibility, mutual accountability and support, and knowing ourselves well enough to know when we can step up to belonging and when we need to step back and take care of ourselves.

This is not easy. This is necessary. And the prize is belonging - belonging to beloved community.

The antidotes to fear include first and foremost naming it when it arises, whether in a group or in us individually. We must collectively and individually develop skills to meet our fear, sit with our fear, name our fear, and work to avoid letting fear drive our beliefs, actions, and decisions. I am so excited by the growing understanding of somatics in navigating fear and trauma, which is one of the ways we can begin to change our relationship to the fears that we hold in our

collective and individual bodies. Meditation, silence, music, dancing, poetry, drawing, singing, resting, brainstorming, compassion ... we have lots of options for how to meet and sit with our fear. If you and your community do not yet have a fear practice, begin to strategize what that might look like for you. Luckily for us, resources abound from Resmaa Menaken's ***My Grandmother's Hands*** to Adrienne Marie Brown's ***Pleasure Activism*** to a wide array of meditation and body movement options. Choose options that are grounded in respect for lineage and movement building.

Perfectionism*, One Right Way, Paternalism, and Objectivity*

Perfectionism shows up as:

- little or no appreciation expressed among people for the work that others are doing; when appreciation is expressed, it is often or usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway;
- more common is to point out either how the person or work is inadequate;
- or even more common, to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to them;
- mistakes are seen as personal, i.e. they reflect badly on the person making them as opposed to being seen for what they are – mistakes;
- making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong;
- the person making the "mistake" or doing something "wrong" rarely participates in defining what doing it "right" looks like or whether a "mistake" actually occurred;
- little time, energy, or money is put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice, in other words there is little or no learning from mistakes, and/or little investigation of what is considered a mistake and why;
- a tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, define, and appreciate what's right;
- often internally felt, in other words the perfectionist fails to appreciate their own good work, more often pointing out their faults or 'failures,' focusing on inadequacies and mistakes rather than learning from them; the person works with a harsh and constant inner critic that has internalized the standards set by someone else;
- linked to the characteristic of one right way, where the demand for perfection assumes that we know what perfection is while others are doing it wrong or falling short.

Another word about perfectionism: There is no relationship between perfectionism and excellence. Perfectionism is the belief that we can be perfect or perform perfectly. The question has to be asked: according to who? Who decides what perfect is?

Perfectionism is the conditioned belief and attitude that we can be perfect based on a standard or set of rules that we did not create and that we are led to believe will prove our value. Perfectionism is the conditioned belief and attitude that we can determine whether others are showing up as perfect and demand or expect that they do so. White supremacy culture uses perfectionism to preserve power and the status quo. As long as we are striving to be perfect

according to someone else's rules, we have less energy and attention to question those rules and to remember what is truly important.

We can be perfectionist in our social justice circles when we assume or believe there is a perfect way to do something and we know what it is. When we look more closely at our own perfectionism, we see that the perfectionist tendency is always in service of our own power or the current power structure. We might be fighting power out in the world but when we are perfectionist about how we do that, we preserve a toxic power structure internally.

Excellence has more potential to be defined by and for us. We can talk about what we think excellence is and hold ourselves and each other accountable to a shared and collectively defined standard of excellence. We can rock the boat with excellence. We can care for each other with excellence. We can write and lead and work and teach and cook with excellence. We can forgive with excellence. Excellence requires making and learning from mistakes.

And even as I distinguish perfection from excellence, I also want to add that we don't have to strive for excellence either (thank you Bevelyn Ukah). Sometimes we just want to have fun, try something out. Sometimes, often times, we arrive at a new way of thinking or doing that comes from playfulness and/or a lack of striving towards any particular standard. And even excellence is in the eye of the beholder.

And here's the main point; we are already perfect. We are made perfect. We do not have to prove our perfection to anyone, even to ourselves (no matter what our inner voices may be telling us). We may have lost touch with how perfect we are and when we do, our perfectionism becomes a way to try and prove to ourselves and others that we are worthy. But we are already worthy. We are already invaluable. No proof necessary.

One right way shows up as:

- the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it;
- when a person or group does not adapt or change to "fit" the one right way, then those defining or upholding the one right way assume something is wrong with the other, those not changing, not with us;
- similar to a missionary who sees only value in their beliefs about what is good rather than acknowledging value in the culture of the communities they are determined to "convert" to the right way of thinking and/or the right way of living.

Paternalism shows up as:

- those holding power control decision-making and define things (standards, perfection, one right way);
- those holding power assume they are qualified to (and entitled to) define standards and the one right way as well as make decisions for and in the interests of those without power;

- those holding power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions, often labeling those for whom they are making decisions as unqualified intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, or physically;
- those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does;
- those without power are marginalized from decision-making processes and as a result have limited access to information about how decisions get made and who makes what decisions; at the same time they are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions on them;
- those without power may internalize the standards and definitions of those in power and act to defend them, assimilate into them, and/or collude with those in power to perpetuate them in the belief that this will help them to belong to and/or gain power; they may have to do this to survive.

Objectivity shows up as:

- the belief that there is such a thing as being objective or 'neutral';
- the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process;
- assigning value to the "rational" while invalidating and/or shaming the "emotional" when often if not always the "rational" is emotion wrapped up in fancy logic and language;
- requiring people to think in a linear (logical) fashion and ignoring or invalidating/shaming those who think in other ways;
- impatience with any thinking that does not appear 'logical' or 'rational' in ways that reinforce existing power structures; in other words, those in power can be illogical, angry, emotional without being disregarded while those without power must always present from a 'rational' position;
- refusal to acknowledge the ways in which 'logical' thinking and/or decision-making is often a cover for personal emotions and/or agendas often based in fear of losing power, face, or comfort;
- refusal to acknowledge the ways in which objectivity is used to protect power and the status quo.

Antidotes to one perfectionism, one right way, and paternalism include:

- develop a culture of appreciation; take time to make sure that everyone's work and efforts are appreciated;
- develop a learning community or organization, where the stated expectation is that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning;
- create a culture of support that recognizes how mistakes sometimes lead to positive results;
- create a culture of inquiry about what constitutes the "right way" and what defines a "mistake";
- build in an understanding that every approach yields unintended consequences and even the most strategically made decisions will have unanticipated consequences;

- separate the person from the mistake; when offering feedback, always speak to what went well before offering critical feedback; when a mistake is jointly or collectively acknowledged, ask for specific suggestions about what the person or group has learned and how we would do things differently moving forward;
- realize that being your own worst critic does not actually improve the work, often contributes to low morale among the group, and does not help you or the group realize the benefit of learning from mistakes; if you are constantly criticizing yourself in your relationships with others, you focus the attention on you, on support for you, rather than on the issue at hand;
- accept there are many ways to get to the same goal; once a group has made a decision about what to do, honor that decision and see what you and the community or organization learn from making that decision, even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen;
- work on developing the ability to notice when you become defensive and/or insistent about doing something your way and do everything you can to take a breath; allow yourself room to consider how a different path or paths might improve your approach and/or offer you something you really need;
- look for the tendency for a group or a person to keep pushing the same point over and over out of a belief that there is only one right way and then name it;
- when working with communities from a different culture than yours or your organization, be clear that you have some learning to do about the communities' ways of doing; assume that you or your organization can't possibly know what's best for a community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community;
- make sure that everyone knows and understands the decision-making hierarchy in the community and/or organization (transparency);
- make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization;
- avoid making decisions in the absence of those most affected by those decisions or, said more proactively, always include those most affected in the brainstorming and decision-making;
- support people at all levels of power to understand how power operates, their level of power, what holding power responsibly looks like, and how to collectively resist and heal from internalized tendencies to hoard and defend power.

Antidotes to objectivity include:

- realize that everybody has a world view and world view affects the way we understand the world;
- realize this is true for you too; you are not "objective," you are steeped in your own world view and if it is the dominant world view, realize how that world view includes the belief that it has the capacity to be objective;
- support yourself and your group to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you;
- support yourself and your group to sit with discomfort when people are sharing points of view or lived experiences that are not familiar to you;

- understand that emotional intelligence is real and valuable; work to become more emotionally intelligent;
- assume that everybody has a good reason for what they are feeling and your job is to understand that reason and how it connects to their position, particularly if you are the one with more formal or informal power;
- ask yourself and/or the group what a situation might look like from the point of view of those not present; better yet, develop authentic relationships with those whose world view and/or experience could and will inform your world view;
- engage in the simple act of using "I" statements, which leads us to claim our own experience rather than generalizing from our experience in ways that can exclude those who have a different experience or perspective (thank you Cristina Rivera Chapman);
- get curious about sources of information and stories, both to insure that those who are often overlooked as sources get lifted up and recognized and also to insure that those who claim credit are grounded in lived experience and social justice values (thank you Cristina Rivera Chapman).

Qualified

I have added the characteristic of qualified to the list of characteristics of white supremacy culture. This particular characteristic is internalized primarily by middle and owning class white people, formally educated, who are taught by the culture that they (in this case referring to people like me who live in these identities) are qualified and even duty bound to fix, save, and set straight the world (thank you Parker Palmer). Closely aligned with dominant mainstream Christian ideology that teaches a Christian duty to convert the "heathen," the "savage," the "impure," this characteristic is particularly violent both psychically and physically in its determination to ignore and/or erase the culture, wisdom, genius, joy of people and communities being "saved" while seizing their land, labor, architecture, music, food, and other material goods to commodify for profit.

I want to stress that while the intention to fix, save, and set straight is often overt, the deviousness of this characteristic is how strongly white middle and owning class educated people can internalize and assume their own inherent qualifications to "improve" whatever is in front of them that is "broken" without acknowledging or seeing their role in breaking it. This internalized assumption becomes an unnamed way of being, a conditioned impulse to "help" others out of a what feels like a benign sense that they know the right way, the best way with little or no understanding of how limited they really are.

Examples of this characteristic are all around us. Academia defines "the classics" as all things Roman and Greek and male, while the word "classic" means that which is judged over a period of time to be of the highest quality and outstanding. And so with the simple use of a word to describe a body of work, a whole category of knowledge assigns superiority to a very limited body of knowing and being, consigning other ways of knowing and being as "less than" while rarely recognizing other cultural and community-based ways of knowing at all. Examples include how

so many white people lead, make decisions, and define reality for BIPOC and poor communities, from Congress and its policymaking to funders and their assessment of who and what is deserving to whole fields that overtly or subtly assume they can and should make decisions that impact people and communities with whom they have no real relationship.

In my classrooms, I hear BIPOC faculty and students tell stories over and over again about how their white colleagues continually question their very presence, how these colleagues equate their race with "not qualified," and assume their inclusion is a "watering down" of standards. BIPOC faculty and students have to navigate overt and subtle accusations of being admitted simply to satisfy an affirmative action requirement. They have to navigate overt and subtle accusations of playing the race card or making everything about race if they decide to speak out. At the same time, white faculty and students can and do assume their qualifications, often giving the benefit of the doubt to others who are white, even and especially if they have little or no commitment to or experience living into a racial equity practice. We assume, those of us who are white and middle and upper class and educated, that we are "race neutral" when our very ignorance means that we are daily reproducing racism.

The **antidotes** to this characteristic include, first and foremost, knowing ourselves so that we become skilled at catching our internalized assumptions about our own qualified-ness. We must learn to question and get comfortable with the limits of our knowing. We must learn to prioritize relationships over being right (thank you Tami Forte Logan). We must learn to lean into the racial equity principles of collective action and accountability. We must learn to let go of the need to fix, save, and set straight in the acknowledgement that we are at our best when we are "with" others (and ourselves).

I use the word "must" with great deliberation here. The internalized assumption that I know best is, in my experience, one of the most harmful internalizations that I carry. The assumption that I know best leads me to become defensive when my "knowing" is challenged, fills my body with anxiety and dread at having to know what's best even as underneath the anxiety and dread I am aware that I don't and can't really know. The assumption that I know best brings a sense of despair when I am confronted with my own not knowing. The assumption I know best disconnects me from everyone, for no one wants to be in the company of a know it all, particularly when it is so clear to others what I don't know at all.

I remember how several years ago a friend told me that I wasn't a very good teacher. She shared this with me, I think, in an effort to "help" me (in her own assumptions about being qualified to make this judgment about my teaching). I am not sure if she knew (or even if I knew) how attached I was to my identity as more than just a good teacher but one of the very best teachers. By whose standards, I cannot say. I do know that when she told me, very matter-of-factly, that I wasn't doing a good job in a class that she was attending, I was devastated. I obsessed about her accusation, for that's what it felt like, for days and weeks after, thinking of all the ways she was definitely and absolutely wrong and fuming that she could be so heartless and rude. I kept thinking about it and thinking about it, my mind racing like a hamster on a wheel trying to get away from this idea that I was a bad teacher. Finally, in an attempt to alleviate my anxiety, I took

a long walk. I was visiting friends in Brooklyn at the time and I walked block after city block, my mind full of defensive thoughts and denials. Finally, stopping at a red light and waiting to cross, I decided to consider what might happen if I allowed myself to believe that what she said was true. And so I did. I decided to admit to myself I was a bad teacher. Once I allowed that thought, I took it further - I wasn't just a bad teacher, I was a terrible teacher, one of the worst precisely because I had been so convinced that I was one of the best. As I kept allowing the possibility of my own inadequacy, I started to notice that underneath the story of my own badness, deep in my gut, I could feel a tiny sense of relief. I brought my attention to the feeling because it was such a surprise. As I focused on it, the relief grew. As it expanded, I noticed, with a start, the relief was about no longer having to hold onto this idea that I was one of the best. I could finally let go of this story. I could just admit that sometimes I was a very good teacher and sometimes I wasn't and mostly I was just human, glory and warts and genius and faults and all. A sense of relief flooded my body and I felt free - free from the need to be the best, free from the need to be the worst. I became a teacher like any other teacher. And I can tell you that I became, as a result of that letting go, a much better teacher after that. I still prefer to do well rather than falter and that's ok too.

I am not saying that we shouldn't claim our wisdom. I also have the experience of giving away my "knowing" too easily, particularly when challenged by people who are skilled at insisting their way of knowing and their content knowledge is superior to mine. I want us to claim what we know and how we know, particularly if and when we are standing up for wisdom mined from the ways in which life offers learning from our lived experience in relationship with others, from our suffering, from our efforts to know ourselves as the racialized beings we are.

I am talking here about the ways those of us who are white internalize the sense that we know when we actually don't. This internalization that we are qualified, that we know best, that we can fix and save and set straight, is actually deeply harmful to those of us who hold it. We can never live up to knowing what is best all the time or even most of the time. Even when we think we know what's best, if we are honest, we will find ourselves surprised by the unintended consequences and unanticipated twists of this life. We know deep inside where authentic knowing resides that our own insistence about how right we are makes our bodies tense as we hide our fear of finding out we might not be, which makes us insist even more that we know what we couldn't possibly and on it goes.

Just saying.

Either/Or and the Binary*

This characteristic explores our cultural assumption that we can and should reduce the complexity of life and the nuances of our relationships with each other and all living things into either/or, yes or no, right or wrong in ways that reinforce toxic power.

Either/or and the binary shows up as:

- Positioning or presenting options or issues as either/or — good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us;
- Little or no sense of the possibilities of both/and;
- Trying to simplify complex things, for example believing that poverty is simply the result of lack of education;
- Closely linked to perfectionism because binary thinking makes it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict;
- Conflict and an increased sense of urgency, as people feel they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives, particularly those which may require more time or resources;
- A strategy used by those with a clear agenda or goal to push those who are still thinking or reflecting to make a choice between 'a' or 'b' without acknowledging a need for time and creativity to come up with more options;
- A strategy used to pit oppressions against each other rather than to recognize the ways in which racism and classism intersect, the ways in which both intersect with heterosexism and agism and other categories of oppression.

Antidotes or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways include:

- Notice when you or others use 'either/or' language and make time to come up with more than two alternatives;
- Notice when you or others are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made;
- When urgency arises and binary thinking emerges, slow down and encourage people to take a pause, a breath, restate the goal, and dive deeper into alternatives;
- When you or others are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and offer some breathing room to think creatively and allow intuitive wisdom to arise;
- Avoid making decisions under extreme pressure and work to distinguish what is actual pressure and what is pressure that you or others are creating;
- Avoid trying to assign a single cause to a problem or a challenge; acknowledge the ways in which oppressions intersect and reinforce each other as well as the ways in which oppression can be operating at the interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels.

Progress is Bigger/More and Quantity over Quality*

These characteristics explore our cultural assumption that the goal is always to be/do/get more and be/do/get bigger. This leads to an emphasis on what we can "objectively" measure - how well we are doing at being/doing/getting more - as more valuable than the quality of our relationships to all living beings.

Progress is narrowly defined as bigger and more; it shows up as:

- how we define success (success is always bigger, more);

- an organization that assumes the goal is to grow - add staff, add projects, or serve more people regardless of how well they can serve them; raise more money, or gain more influence and power for its own sake - all without regard to the organization's mission or especially the people and/or living beings that the organization is in relationship with;
- gives no value, not even negative value, to its cost; for example, increased accountability to funders as the budget grows in ways that leave those served exploited, excluded, or underserved as we focus on how many we are serving instead of quality of service or values created by the ways in which we serve;
- little or no ability to consider the cost of growth in social, emotional, psychic, embodied, spiritual, and financial realms;
- a narrow focus on numbers (financial, people, geography, power) without an ability to value processes (relationships), including cost to the human and natural environment;
- valuing those who have "progressed" over those who "have not" - where progress is measured in degrees, grades, money, power, status, material belongings - in ways that erase lived experience and wisdom/knowledge that is invisibilized - tending, cleaning, feeding, nurturing, caring for, raising up, supporting (thank you Bevelyn Ukah);
- focus on getting bigger (in size, transactional power, numbers) leading to little or no ability to consider the cost of getting big in social, emotional, psychic, embodied, spiritual, and financial realms (thank you Bevelyn Ukah).

Quantity over quality shows up as:

- most or all resources directed toward producing quantitatively measurable goals;
- things that can be counted are more highly valued than things that cannot, for example numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money raised and spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict, morale and mutual support;
- little or no value attached to process in the internalized belief that if it can't be measured, it has no value;
- discomfort with emotion and feelings;
- little or no understanding that when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), process will prevail (for example, you may get through the agenda, but if you haven't paid attention to people's need to be heard, the decisions made at the meeting are undermined and/or disregarded);
- connected to perfectionism, one right way, I'm the only one, and right to comfort because of the ways in which process, which cannot be numerically measured, requires emotional presence and intelligence whereas product, when it can be numerically measured, feels "safe" and controllable;
- short-term thinking, urgency thinking, either/or thinking in the consuming effort to meet often unrealistic quantitative goals (numbers).

Antidotes include:

- honoring the ancient Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) philosophy that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future;

- insure that any cost/benefit analysis includes all the costs, not just the financial ones, for example the cost in morale, the cost in credibility, the cost in relationship to living beings, the cost in the use of resources;
- include process goals in your planning, for example make sure that your goals speak to how you want to do your work, not just what you want to do;
- ask those you work with and for to establish goals and evaluate performance holistically; for one example, set both content and process goals (what you do and how you do it) aligned with the values of the organization and/or community;
- make sure you and/or your community or organization has a values statement that expresses the ways in which you want to do your work; create this as a living document that people use in their day to day work;
- look for ways to measure process goals (for example if you have a goal of mutually respectful relationships, think about ways you can measure how you are living into that goal);
- learn to recognize those times when you need to go off the planned agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns with the knowledge that doing so will result in a more solid product in the long term;
- distinguish between growth, which is necessary and organic, and the conditioned desire for "more" - more stuff, more transactional power, more people, more ... for its own sake;
- consider adding measures that keep you grounded in what's important - how many times did we laugh together today? how many times did we express gratitude? how many times did we allow silence? how many times did we allow dissent?

Worship of the Written Word

This characteristic explores our cultural habit of honoring only what is written and only what is written to a narrow standard, even when what is written is full of misinformation and lies. Worship of the written word includes erasure of the wide range of ways we communicate with each other and all living things.

I want to acknowledge that this characteristic is one that angers many people who believe that I am saying that worship of the written word is the same as the ability to write well. They claim I am implying that BIPOC people and communities cannot achieve a high standard of written expression (whatever standard of "high" might be in the reader's mind). They believe I am suggesting that if worshipping the written word is a white supremacy culture value, then only white people are capable of writing well. This is not what I mean. This characteristic has to do with how white supremacy culture requires things to be written down, on its own terms, in order to preserve power.

For example: The U.S. invaded Mexico in 1846 to start what would become known as the Mexican-American War; the War ended with the Treaty of Guadelupe Hidalgo two years later. The treaty transferred over 55% of Mexican land to the U.S. (present-day Arizona, California, New Mexico, Texas, and parts of Colorado, Nevada, and Utah). The treaty promised to protect

the lands, language and culture of the Mexican people and communities living in the ceded territory, but Congress substituted a "Protocol," which required people of Mexican heritage to prove "legitimate" title to their lands in court. Unable to provide proof in a culture that did not record land transactions, the "Protocol" became the legal basis for white settlers to claim rights to and seize land from Mexicans in these territories. Our history is replete with the theft of land, of bodies, of culture, of skin and blood and ancestry through manipulation of the written word.

For another example: In order for any of us to access resources, and particularly for those who are poor or working class, we are required to fill out endless forms that we did not design and did not have any say in designing. These forms do not reflect the complexity and richness of who we are. Yet we are constantly told that if we do not provide information on the forms, then we will not be able to access the resources that may or may not be available to us. Whoever and whatever we might actually want to share about ourselves does not matter (or even exist). The wealthier and whiter and more cisgender male we are, the less we have to account for ourselves on other peoples' terms, in writing (or at all). The wealthier and whiter and more cisgender male we are, the more we can count on legally written words to protect our interests, in large part because we have more power to determine what the legally written words will be.

A final example: I am often asked to cite the sources that I used to write the article on which this website is based. The request often comes from people with less power who are trying to use the article to generate conversation and action towards a racial equity commitment in their organizations or communities. They want to know if I can provide citations or sources so the article will have more legitimacy to those in power. I get this request so often that I have created a one-pager to send in response (see website). The underlying assumption is that if a written piece reflects some level of wisdom, lived experience, or "other" world view that is not "properly" vetted, then that piece has little or no value to those who consider themselves the gatekeepers of legitimate knowledge. There are so many ways of knowing; writing them down according to a single grammatical standard with a singular set of rules about what makes that knowledge "legitimate" is one of many ways to erase and control information, culture, wisdom, knowing, insight, intuition.

Worship of the written word has nothing to do with the ability to write well and writing well comes in a wide range of approaches, styles, languages. Those who engage in repeated code switching understand this very well.

Worship of the written word shows up as:

- if it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist;
- if it's not grammatically "correct," it has no value;
- if it's not properly cited according to academic rules that many people don't know or have access to, it's not legitimate;
- an inability or refusal to acknowledge information that is shared through stories, embodied knowing, intuition and the wide range of ways that we individually and collectively learn and know;

- continued frustration that people and communities don't respond to written communication; blaming people and communities for their failure to respond;
- those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission;
- collectively and generationally informed in a context where systemic racism privileges the writing and wisdom of people in the white group;
- academic standards require "original" work when our knowledge and knowing almost always builds on the knowledge and knowing of others, of each other;
- claiming "ownership" of (written) knowledge to meet ego needs rather than understanding the importance of offering what you write and know to grow and expand the community's knowing.

Antidotes to worship of the written word include:

- take the time to analyze how people inside and outside the organization get and share information;
- figure out what actually needs to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening; encourage creative ways of documenting or recording or reflecting what you are learning and what you feel you know;
- work to recognize the contributions and skills that every person brings to the organization (for example, the ability to build relationships with those who are important to the organization's mission);
- make sure anything written can be clearly understood (avoid academic language, 'buzz' words, acronyms, etc.);
- develop your skills individually and collectively to gather information through different ways of knowing;
- identify when circumstances require documentation on others' terms and bring transparency to how you respond (legal documents, funder applications, government forms, etc.);
- dedicate time to practicing and honoring other ways of knowing and expression: oral storytelling, embodied learning, visual and movement art, silence, meditation, singing, dancing (thank you Cristina Rivera Chapman);
- practice listening; because our culture doesn't value oral traditions or storytelling wisdom, we are out of listening practice or remembering how to hold a spoken word with weight (without having to write it down) (thank you Cristina Rivera Chapman);
- acknowledge and honor diverse and interconnected sources of wisdom;
- honor the value of collaborative and collective knowledge;
- appreciate when others learn from and expand on your knowledge and writing; see yourself and position yourself as one person in a stream of knowing and learning.

Individualism* and I'm the Only One

These characteristics look at our cultural assumption that individualism is our cultural story - that we make it on our own (or should), without help, while pulling ourselves up by our own

bootstraps. Our cultural attachment to individualism leads to a toxic denial of our essential interdependence and the reality that we are all in this, literally, together.

Individualism shows up as:

- for white people: seeing yourselves and/or demanding to be seen as an individual and not as part of the white group;
- failure to acknowledge any of the ways dominant identities - gender, class, sexuality, religion, able-bodiedness, age, education to name a few - are informed by belonging to a dominant group that shapes cultural norms and behavior;
- for BIPOC people: individualism forces the classic double bind when BIPOC people are accused of not being "team players" - in other words, punishment or repercussions for acting as an individual if and when doing so "threatens" the team;
- for white people: a culturally supported focus on determining whether an individual is racist or not while ignoring cultural, institutional, and systemic racism; the strongly felt need by many if not most white people to claim they are "not racist" while their conditioning into racism is relentless and unavoidable;
- for white people: a belief that you are responsible for and are qualified to solve problems on your own;
- for BIPOC people: being blamed and shamed for acting to solve problems without checking in and asking for permission from white people;
- little experience or comfort working as part of a team, which includes both failure to acknowledge the genius or creativity of others on the team and a willingness to sacrifice democratic and collaborative process in favor of efficiency; see double bind for BIPOC people above;
- desire for individual recognition and credit; failure to acknowledge how what we know is informed by so many others;
- isolation and loneliness;
- valuing competition more highly than cooperation; where collaboration is valued, little time or resources are devoted to developing skills in how to collaborate and cooperate;
- accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve;
- a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance, unless and until doing things on "our" own threatens power;
- very connected to "one right way," "perfectionism," "qualified," and "defensiveness and denial."

I'm the only one shows up as:

- an aspect of individualism, the belief that if something is going to get done "right," 'I' have to do it;
- connected to the characteristic of "one right way," the belief that "I" can determine the right way, am entitled and/or qualified to do so, in isolation from and without accountability to those most impacted by how I define the right way;
- little or no ability to delegate work to others, micro-management;

- based in deep fear of loss of control, which requires an illusion of control;
- putting charismatic leaders on pedestals (or positioning yourself as a charismatic leader on a pedestal);
- romanticizing a leader (or yourself) as the center of a movement, idea, issue, campaign
- hiding or covering up the flaws of a leader (or your flaws) in fear that the organization, movement, effort cannot survive;
- defining leadership as those most in front and most vocal (thank you Cristina Rivera Chapman for these last four bullets).

Antidotes to individualism and I'm the only one include:

- seek to understand all the ways we are informed by our dominant identities and how our membership in dominant identity groups informs us both overtly and covertly (while realizing too that these identities do not have to define us); understand how membership in a dominant group (the white group, the male group, the hetero group, the wealthy group) extends psychic, spiritual, and emotional benefits as well as material benefits;
- seek to understand how these benefits are, in reality, toxic, because our complicity with being positioned as both "better" and "normal" requires that we dehumanize all those designated as "less than" and "abnormal;"
- acknowledge that all white people have internalized racist conditioning and that an anti-racist commitment is not about being "good" or "bad," it's about figuring out what we are going to do about our conditioning;
- do our personal work while also bringing focus to cultural, institutional, and systemic manifestations of white supremacy and racism;
- name teamwork and collaboration as an important personal and group value; acknowledge that teamwork and collaboration take more time, particularly at the front end and yield a better result with higher buy-in and higher ability to take shared risks;
- make sure the group or organization is working towards shared goals that have been collaboratively developed and named;
- reward people for collaborating;
- evaluate the ability to work in a team as well as the ability to get things done;
- honor process as much as product (honor how you do things as much as what you do or produce);
- make sure that credit is given to all who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person; make sure that when you are given credit, you distribute it to all those who helped you with whatever was accomplished;
- create collective accountability (rather than individual accountability);
- create a culture where people feel they can bring problems to the group; use meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities;
- hold ourselves accountable to the principle of collective thinking and action;
- develop the ability to collaborate and delegate to others;
- in workspaces or movement efforts, evaluate performance based on an ability to work as part of a team to accomplish shared goals;
- hold ourselves and each other accountable to a shared definition of leadership that assumes a collaborative and collective approach;

- hold ourselves and leaders accountable for mistakes without assuming that we need to be perfect to lead; develop collaborative and collective strategies for how to respond to mistakes that encourage learning from the mistakes, appropriate boundary setting, and restorative approaches;
- realize that leadership is dynamic and does not rest in one individual; we are called upon to lead at different times in different circumstances and called upon to follow or take a back seat when we are learning or making room for new leadership to emerge.

Defensiveness and Denial

Defensiveness and denial reflect our cultural dis-ease with truth telling, particularly when we are speaking truth to power. White supremacy culture encourages a habit of denying and defending any speaking to or about it. White supremacy culture encourages a habit of silence about things that matter and, as the collective of artists fighting the AIDS epidemic so wisely and succinctly said, silence = death.

Defensiveness shows up as:

- The organizational structure is set up and much energy spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power rather than to facilitate the capacities of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it.
- Because of either/or and binary thinking, those in power view and/or experience criticism as threatening and inappropriate (or rude).
- People respond to new or challenging ideas with objections or criticism, making it very difficult to raise these ideas.
- People in the organization, particularly those with power, spend a lot of energy trying to make sure that their feelings aren't getting hurt, forcing others to work around their defensiveness rather than addressing them head-on. At its worst, they have convinced others to do this work for them.
- White people spend energy defending against charges of racism instead of examining how racism might actually be happening.
- White people claim that participation in anti-racist activity means they cannot be racist or be engaged in racism; closely linked to individualism.
- White people targeted by other oppressions express resentment because they experience the naming of racism as erasing their experience; closely linked to either/or/binary thinking.
- An oppressive culture where people are afraid to speak their truth.

Antidotes or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways include:

- Understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse.
- Understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege).
- Work on your own defensiveness; ask yourself what you are defending against and why
- Develop a culture of naming defensiveness as a problem when it is one.

- Set up brainstorming and other sessions designed to consider ideas ahead of time by naming defensiveness as a behavior or attitude the group wants to name and avoid.
- Give people credit for being able to handle more than you think; in other words, avoid deciding what someone can or cannot hear, particularly if you don't have evidence.
- When someone responds defensively, ask them to talk through what they are defending (or defending against); you might find some rich information that way.
- Discuss the ways in which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission. Use your own experience with your own defensiveness and resistance as an example. Brainstorm options for what the group can and will do when defensiveness and resistance show up.
- Consider the power differences at play; when someone with a lot of power is defensive and resistant, the options are very different than when someone with less or little power is defensive and resistant. Be clear about the power dynamics in the situation and respond thoughtfully. The person with power has greater responsibility to name and move through their own defensiveness and resistance, although the collective is best served when everyone has those skills.
- Know that resentment is a form of defensiveness and signals that the person feeling the resentment feels unseen and unheard. Or afraid of losing power. See the bullet point above.

Denial shows up as:

- just what it sounds like – denying what another person is saying about the ways in which white supremacy and/or racism are showing up in an interaction or space.
- A pattern that often has a white person with different levels of power denying what a Black, Indigenous or Person of Color or a whole community is saying about their experience of racism.
- Claiming the right to define what is and what is not racism.
- Insisting that white supremacy and racism require intent. Attempting to separate intent from impact in order to claim that if racism is not intended, then it is not happening.
- Refusing to consider or acknowledge the historical legacy of white supremacy and racism and the structural nature of racial disparities. Rewriting, reframing, or omitting histories to erase or downplay racism.
- The refusal or inability to feel the emotional cost of racism. At worst suggesting that acts of violence and rage targeting BIPOC communities and people are deserved and/or necessary and at best ignoring or downplaying acts of violence and rage directed at BIPOC.
- Insisting that individually or collectively, a person or group is free from racialized conditioning, leading to statements like “I don’t see color,” and “we’re all the same.”
- Refusing to acknowledge the benefits of belonging to the white group while generalizing about BIPOC people and communities. Connected to individualism.
- Seeing and/or understanding the actions of white people as individual while generalizing to whole BIPOC groups. Refusing, for example, to acknowledge the accelerating pattern of white boys and men committing acts of gun violence while attributing “danger” to

whole Communities of Color to excuse police or other violence directed at Black and Brown people.
- Erasing intersectionality - generalizing about a whole group without recognizing the ways in which class, gender, sexuality, religion, age, dis/ability, and other identities inform our individual and collective experiences.

Antidotes include:
- Assume that any naming of racism is on target. Instead of asking is it or isn't it racism, ask how is it racism?
- Understand deep in our bones that naming racism is the first step toward repair. Learn to acknowledge any fear that naming brings up – the feeling is not wrong or right – so that you can move through the feeling and address what has been raised.
- For white people: Avoid taking accusations of racism or collusion in racism personally. Avoid defending yourself. Learn to say "tell me more." Understand your racism (or your collusion in racism) as conditioning, not as who you essentially are. Understand that awareness of your conditioning is necessary if you are going to change and grow.
- Call yourself and others in, not out. We will not grow the movement through shame and blame, even though shame and blame are necessary elements of our own individual and personal development. We will grow the movement by holding each other accountable from a position of care, kindness, and love. Sometimes we will have to employ tough love and always the goal is to avoid throwing ourselves or anyone else away. Thanks to our beloved Cynthia Brown for this instruction.
- Know our history. Learn our history. Understand how racist patterns repeat over and over again. Take the time to learn where you live and work and love and the Indigenous history of the peoples who lived and worked and loved there before you (or live there now). Take the time to learn your own indigenity (thank you Justin Robinson and Vivette Jeffries-Logan). Take the time to know both the history of white supremacy patterns and the stories of resistance and resilience. Plant yourself in the river of resistance and resilience.
- Learn about the history of the recurring structural power, privilege, and benefits bestowed on the white group at the expense of BIPOC people and communities. Understand the price paid.
- Learn to admit when you are wrong. Understand that vulnerability can be a strength, particularly if you are sitting in a position of power and privilege. Understand that not everyone can afford to be vulnerable in the same way.
- Develop self-awareness and emotional intelligence so you can take responsibility for yourself and your emotions in collective and collaborative work. This is an essential part of self-care and the link between taking care of ourselves and our ability to show up in community with integrity.
- Take the time to understand yourself as both an individual and part of a racialized group. Take the time to understand that you are deeply informed by your racial group (or groups if you are mixed roots). Understand that you are not defined by your racial group(s). Learn to discern and respect the difference for yourself and for others.

- Acknowledge the power of intersectionality. Being a white cisgender owning class male is a different experience than being a white gender-non-conforming working class person. While the construct of whiteness and racial grouping means that we are being invited into the same construct, the invitation looks different and will be a different lived experience. Acknowledge and respect the overlaps and the differences.

Right to Comfort, Fear of Open Conflict, and Power Hoarding

These characteristics focus on our cultural assumption that I or we (or the ones in formal and informal power) have a right to comfort, which means we cannot tolerate conflict, particularly open conflict. This assumption supports the tendency to blame the person or group causing discomfort or conflict rather than addressing the issues being named.

Right to comfort shows up as:

- the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing 'logic' over emotion);
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort, for example, targeting and isolating those who name racism rather than addressing the actual racism that is being named;
- demanding, requiring, expecting apologies or other forms of "I didn't mean it" when faced with accusations of colluding with racism;
- feeling entitled to name what is and isn't racism;
- white people (or those with dominant identities) equating individual acts of unfairness with systemic racism (or other forms of oppression).

Antidotes or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways:

- understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning;
- welcome discomfort and learn to sit with discomfort before responding or acting;
- deepen your political analysis of racism and oppression so you have a strong understanding of how your personal experience and feelings fit into a larger picture;
- avoid taking take everything personally;
- welcome honest and hard feedback as the gift it is, knowing that people could so easily choose to stay silent and talk about you behind your back rather than gift you with their truth about how your attitudes and/or behavior are causing a problem;
- when you have a different point of view, seek to understand what you're being told and assume there is a good reason for what is being said; seek to find and understand that good reason (without labeling the other person);
- remember that feedback and criticism may be skillful or unskillful and either way, it will not kill you;
- remember that critical feedback can help you see your conditioning as you learn to separate your conditioning from who you actually are; you need to know your conditioning if you are going to be free; while your conditioning is hazardous, you are not.

Fear of (open) conflict shows up as:

- people in power are scared of expressed conflict and try to ignore it or run from it;
- when someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person for raising the issue rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem;
- emphasis or insistence on being polite; setting the rules for how ideas or information or differences of opinion need to be shared in order to be heard (in other words, requiring that people "calm down" if they are angry when anger often contains deep wisdom about where the underlying hurt and harm lies);
- equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line; punishing people either overtly or subtly for speaking out about their truth and/or experience;
- labeling emotion as "irrational" or anti-intellectual or inferior, which means failing to recognize the importance of emotional intelligence;
- pretending or insisting that our point of view is grounded in the "rational" or the intellectual when we are in fact masking our emotions with what appear to be rational or intellectual arguments.

Antidotes or suggestions for how to show up in more connecting and healing ways:

- role play or discuss or plan for ways to handle conflict before conflict happens;
- distinguish between being polite and raising hard issues;
- don't require those who raise hard issues to raise them in 'acceptable' ways, especially if you are using the ways in which issues are raised as an excuse not to address them;
- develop your emotional intelligence so you can tell when you are hiding your emotions with the excuse that you are being "rational;"
- be transparent about power, so that everyone understands who makes the final decision and/or how the final decision is made before you dive into the conflict;
- invite a third or "neutral" party to support exploration of the conflict;
- assume that everyone has a very good reason for their position and seek to lift those up to the light of day;
- once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it and see how it might have been handled differently.

Power hoarding shows up as:

- little, if any, value around sharing power;
- power seen as limited, only so much to go around;
- those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization, often feeling suggestions for change are a reflection on their leadership;
- those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened;
- those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are ill-informed (stupid), emotional, inexperienced; blaming the messenger rather than focusing on the message;
- clinging and other emotional constriction that clouds our field of vision and catapults us back into our small self with its insatiable sense of anxiety and threat.

Antidotes to power hoarding include:

- include power sharing as an explicit organizational or community value;
- discuss and define what good leadership looks like and include how a good leader develops the power and skills of others;
- if you are a leader and/or hold power, understand that change is inevitable and challenges to your leadership are often healthy and productive; adopt the "tell me more" approach to challenges;
- if you are a leader and/or hold power, avoid taking challenges personally and return to the principle of collective thinking and action; ask for help with your leadership, particularly when feeling highly defensive;
- if you are a leader and/or hold power, realize your ability and responsibility to support others to hold power well and responsibly, to support others to be successful and to shine, to mentor and support others; realize your ability to support and help others grow reflects well on you (as opposed to attitudes and behaviors that stem from fear, desire to control and/or micro-manage);
- allow yourself to feel the joy in helping others grow, thrive, succeed, and even exceed (you);
- make sure the organization is focused on the vision, mission, and values rather than staying "in business" for the sake of staying in business;
- lean in to the racial equity principle of "know yourself" and develop strategies for making friends with your ego so that you are leading and/or acting from a place of integrity rather than fear or anxiety about your importance.

Urgency

A constant sense of urgency reflects our cultural habit of applying a sense of urgency to our every-day lives in ways that perpetuate power imbalance while disconnecting us from our need to breathe and pause and reflect. The irony is that this imposed sense of urgency serves to erase the actual urgency of tackling racial and social injustice.

A **constant sense of urgency**:

- makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think and act long-term, and/or to consider consequences of whatever action we take;
- frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of BIPOC people and communities in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community);
- reinforces existing power hierarchies that use the sense of urgency to control decision-making in the name of expediency;
- is reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little;
- privileges those who process information quickly (or think they do);

- sacrifices and erases the potential of other modes of knowing and wisdom that require more time (embodied, intuitive, spiritual);
- encourages shame, guilt, and self-righteousness to manipulate decision-making;
- reinforces the idea that we are ruled by time, deadlines, and needing to do things in a "timely" way often based on arbitrary schedules that have little to do with the actual realities of how long things take, particularly when those "things" are relationships with others;
- connected to objectivity in the sense that we think that our sense of time and/or meeting deadlines is objective because we see or frame time as objective;
- reproduces either/or thinking because of the stated need to reach decisions quickly;
- makes it harder for us to distinguish what is really urgent from what feels urgent; after a while everything takes on the same sense of urgency, leading to mental, physical, intellectual, and spiritual burnout and exhaustion;
- involves unrealistic expectations about how much can get done in any period of time; linked to perfectionism in the urgency that perfectionism creates as we try to make sure something is done perfectly according to our standards.

This characteristic of white supremacy is challenging because we understand that racial justice and equity is urgent. White supremacy and racism threaten, target, and violate BIPOC people and communities every day. White supremacy and racism invite and condition us into toxic thinking and behavior every day. We are called on, with this characteristic, to hold the volatile and tender contradiction of an underlying urgency about our immediate need for justice which is with us always with the day to day sense of urgency that too often defines our organizational and community cultures, leading to the consequences listed above. White supremacy culture is not urgent about racial justice; white supremacy culture is urgent in the name of short-term power and profit. And white supremacy culture likes to engender a culture of urgency in those of us who are working to dismantle it because it knows that living with a constant sense that everything is urgent is a recipe for the abuse of power and burnout.

Antidotes to a sense of urgency include:

- realistic workplans based on the lived experience of the people and organization involved;
- leadership who understands that everything takes longer than anyone expects;
- a commitment to equity, including a commitment to discuss and plan for what it means to embed equity practices into the workplan;
- a commitment to learn from past experience how long things take;
- collaborative development of realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames;
- clarity ahead of time about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency (including clarity about what constitutes a "good" decision);
- an understanding that rushing decisions takes more time in the long run because inevitably people who didn't get a chance to voice their thoughts and feelings will at best resent and at worst undermine a decision where they were left unheard;
- developing a personal and collective practice of noticing when urgency arises and taking a pause to deliberate with thoughtfulness and intention about the nature of the urgency and the range of options available to you.

Racial Equity Principles

In addition to the antidotes listed under each of the characteristics, you will find a list of 10 racial equity principles that might prove useful in thinking about how to build the culture and institutions and people we want and deserve to be. The Dismantling Racism Works collaborative developed these 10 racial equity principles after a decade of experience working with and for community based leaders and organizations living into their racial justice commitment. Over our years of working together, members of the collaborative added to the principles based on our evolving understanding of what we need in order to support racial justice work. We have found these principles to ground us powerfully in the wisdom they offer as we navigate the challenges, constraints, and violations of white supremacy culture. As we build the world we want and deserve. As we become free.

You can find these principles on the www.whitesupremacyculture.info website.

Please Do Not Weaponize This Tool

I want to offer a cautionary plea here about weaponizing this list.

The website, the article, the information offered here is a tool, an analytical tool designed to help us better understand white supremacy culture. The intention is to help us understand the water in which we are all swimming so that we can collaboratively work together to build and sustain cultures that help us thrive as communities and individuals. Cultures that are *not* based on abuse of power and accumulation of profit. Cultures that *are* based on interdependence, justice, and respect for each other and the earth and wind and sun and stars. Cultures that embody the belief that we all do better when we all do better.

I remember how, in my early years of working with Kenneth Jones to offer dismantling racism training, people would take the analysis and framework we offered and use it to beat each other up - "My analysis is better than your analysis," "I am/we are more righteous than you." Similarly, some people report that this list gets used as a weapon to accuse, shame, and blame in ways that perpetuate disconnection.

I believe we are all deeply harmed by white supremacy culture. I am asking us to sit with the devastating impacts of white supremacy culture on all of us even though that impact is very different based on our race, our class, our gender, our sexuality, our lived experiences. One friend reports crying after reading the list as he came to grips with the devastating impacts of white supremacy culture on his white working class family of origin as he was creating a middle class family himself.

Another, a skilled facilitator, reports that "I could not possibly tally the number of hours I have spent over the last three years dislodging people from the reductive stance they construct based

on the tool. In its current [1999] form, just to name one area, it tilts people towards a behavioral and ahistorical frame. And because it couches things in a way that can be read as absolutist, it can generate almost ridiculous orthodoxies of exclusion. I worked in one situation where the communications function had come to a grinding halt because a segment of the staff had decided that editing was white supremacist and, while yes, there are elitist and racist frames around proper language, the organization was locked in an either/or frame that was incredibly unhealthy and unproductive."

An activist talks about how the list has been used to scold white people, to tell white people we are inherently problematic and that our work, those of us who are white, is to never trust ourselves. A BIPOC person shares that the list is traumatizing and triggering.

Working with each other across lines of difference is really hard. We cause harm, we operate out of our conditioning, we are rightfully enraged, deeply hurt, exhausted. I am not suggesting that living a racial equity commitment is clean or easy. Or that this list is in any way a final word on how white supremacy culture operates.

One of the challenges we face as we work together is that building justice is complex and nuanced while white supremacy culture likes to pretend we can reduce everything to a simple either/or. So we are called to navigate the complexity of our conditioning without losing sight of the inherent humanity in each of us.

The movement is currently engaged in important conversations about calling in and calling out. I lean on the words of the late and fabulous and fierce and funny Cynthia Brown, a social justice warrior and beloved friend, who told us with her last breaths that we should never throw anyone away. This does not mean we can't hold each other accountable (another word for supporting each other to be our best selves), set boundaries when people have not learned yet to take responsibility for themselves, apologize and take responsibility ourselves when we cause harm, and continue to grow and learn how to be with each other even when we are getting on each other's last nerve.

I will say that white supremacy wants us to attack each other as the problem. As we fight with and among each other, we fail to identify the actual problem. An instruction we might hold to is to attack the problem, not the people, not each other (thank you Calvin Allen). Of course, sometimes our behavior is a problem, our conditioning is a problem, and then we can, when we are able, help each other through. And if we cannot, we look to others who have the capacity to help or be in relationship as they look to us when they are out of capacity and we are able to show up.

I'm not pretending to have easy answers. My point is simply that I hope we can use this list to help us name the ways in which our conditioning might be getting in our own and each other's way rather than as an instrument of shame, blame, or accusation of not being good enough. The dominant culture already gives us plenty of messaging about how deficient and wrong we are;

perhaps we can learn to show up to each other with more compassion (and give ourselves and each other a break when we can't).

Both/and, my lovelies, both/and.

End Note from original article

One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations that unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be anti-racist and multicultural, really only allow "others" to belong if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a step towards racial equity.

Sources

This section includes the source notes from the original article.

I wrote the White Supremacy Characteristics article in 1999 (see introductory paragraphs above).

On the night I wrote the first draft, I arrived back to my apartment in a frustrated lather about a meeting I had just attended, a meeting where many of the characteristics named in the article kept showing up. I sat at my computer in a quiet rage. The words poured out. This is the one and only time I can claim to understand the idea of something "writing itself." I operated mostly as a vessel and the words came through me rather than from me.

I then began to share what I had written with some of my mentors and colleagues; their names are credited at the beginning of the article.

This article was not the result of research. This article came through me as the result of my years of work as an anti-racism teacher and trainer, my collaboration with brilliant and wise colleagues, the serendipity of being in the right place at the right time, and whatever forces moved me to put the words on the page. If you need a highly researched article to believe what you are reading, I will simply suggest there are now literally hundreds if not thousands of researched sources that support the truth of the toxicity of white supremacy culture. I will also say that the article has proven its value in its wide and prevalent use (nothing to do with me, everything to do with our collective desire to understand this culture we are all trying to navigate and transgress).

I will also add that many, many people have taken the article, adapted it, revised it, added to it, made a zine out of it, applied it specifically to their field or community, and made it their own. I am absolutely thrilled about this and some of those adaptations, revisions, and creative manifestations of the original work are offered on the AND ... page of the website.

There are many ways to know. Research is not the only source of wisdom. I am not claiming to be wise so much as I am claiming that we benefit when we open ourselves to the idea that our wisdom can come from many sources and in many ways. May you find the article of benefit.

Sources cited in the original article:

The original piece on white supremacy culture written in 1999 built on the work of many people, including (but not limited to) Andrea Ayvazian, Bree Carlson, Beverly Daniel Tatum, Eli Dueker, Nancy Emond, Kenneth Jones, Jonn Lunsford, Sharon Martinas, Joan Olsson, David Rogers, James Williams, Sally Yee, as well as the work of Grassroots Leadership, Equity Institute Inc, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, the Challenging White Supremacy workshop, the Lillie Allen Institute, the Western States Center, and the contributions of hundreds of participants in the DR process. Their influence and wisdom lives on in this updated version.

* Sections marked with an * are based on the work of Daniel Buford, a lead trainer with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond who has done extensive research on white supremacy culture.

Notes from People's Institute for Survival and Beyond Workshop, Oakland, CA, spring 1999. *Notes from Challenging White Supremacy Workshop*, San Francisco, CA, spring 1999. Beverly Daniel Tatum, **Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?** NY: HarperCollins, 1997. Derrick Jensen, **A Language Older Than Words.** NY: Context Books, 2000. Paul Kivel, **Uprooting Racism**. PA: New Society Publishers, 1996. Anne Wilson Schaef, **Living in Process**. NY: Ballantine, 1998. For complete bibliography, see complete notebook for dRwork's Dismantling Racism process.