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The Work Is Not The Workshop: Talking and Doing, Visibility and Accountability in the White Anti- Racist Community

by Catherine Jones

Ok, white folks. I think it's time for us to focus. We know a whole lot, y'all, but I don't see us putting our knowledge to real use out there. I mean there's a whole big movement going on in this world!! Where are all the white folks? Where are we?

This is what I mean. Here's what happened in my community last week. When I say "my community" I'm not talking about the city I live in but the people I know.

1) Two hundred Palestinian-American residents of New Orleans found out that the lands their families have owned and farmed for generations, the lands many of their family members still live on, are about to be destroyed by the Apartheid Wall that Israel is building to imprison the Palestinian people.

2) My friend teaches at an all-African-American high school that lost a soccer game two nights ago to an all-white school. The (white) referee falsely called fouls on the all-black team and never made any calls against the white team. After the game, some of the players on the white school's team, together with their friends and parents (!), taunted the African-American players with racist slurs. Some of the African-American students fought back and are now facing

lawsuits, expulsion from school, and criminal charges. The white students are not being punished at all.

3) My friend's boyfriend got out of jail after having spent a year imprisoned under false charges of killing a cop. The only reason he got out of jail at all was because folks in the activist community were able to raise thousands of dollars so he could get a decent lawyer. Hundreds of thousands of low-income African Americans just like my friend are in jails across the country, imprisoned on outrageous or false charges, without basic rights to privacy, healthcare, or good counsel.

Last week, y'all! To folks I know! We gotta get our shit together!

I think it might be time for the white anti-racist community to take a critical look at ourselves. I think of myself as a part of this community and I'm saying what I'm saying out of a need I feel to hold myself accountable for the actions (and inaction) of my community. Everything I've written I've taken from my experience and direct observation of white anti-racist culture. I take responsibility for any incorrect representation of my community. I'm also writing out of love for the countless fierce and dedicated white anti-racists I know, and because I've been feeling this sense of urgency more and more lately. Maybe it's 'cause I moved back to the South, where the brutality of racism doesn't only stare you in the face every day; it picks you up while you're walking on the sidewalk, smashes your head against the concrete, and tosses you into oncoming traffic. Things are bad here. Maybe, though, it's also 'cause I know that we, white folks, have not only the obligation but the potential—we really do—to make a real-live, genuine, accountable contribution to the struggle for racial justice that is happening in our world, right now. But I don't see us out there. I want us to get started. White folks really are out there, fighting for justice. But sometimes I think that those of us who are fighting are not nearly as effective as we can be.

I'm beginning to think a large explanation for this situation lies in some fundamental aspects of white anti-racist culture. The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond says that any time white folks get together, we re-create the structures of racism whether we're conscious about it or not. Looking at white anti-racist culture, I believe it more and more. Even if we're getting together to strategize about fighting racism, I'm not sure that we're as aware as we need to be about how even our anti-racism can uphold the system of white supremacy. I'm speaking of three specific aspects of white anti-racist culture: our preoccupation with perfection, specifically as it relates to behavior; our focus on thinking about and analyzing, rather than actually doing, the work; and our skewed system of honor and recognition.

Before I used the term "white anti-racist activist" to describe myself, I spent a lot of time doing racial justice work without thinking about larger issues like imperialism, global economic injustice or even institutionalized racism. I knew racism was a bad thing, I did what I could to fight against it, and that was that. Once I began moving in more established (and, interestingly, more white) activist circles, I began drawing connections between, say, a seemingly isolated incident of racist violence and the global structures of oppression that allow such acts of violence to happen regularly in our society. And, because it was San Francisco and they were available, I went to a ton of workshops. I am boundlessly grateful for all I was able to gain from participating in so many anti-racist trainings. Interestingly, though, even though I had a more sophisticated analysis of racism and my role in the white supremacist system that we all live in, my work wasn't initially that much more effective because of all this knowledge I'd acquired. Ironically, because I was spending so much time first participating in and then giving workshops about racism, I had a lot less time to fight it.

Tema Okun says that perfectionism is one of the hallmarks of white supremacy culture. I think one of the unfortunate ways in which white anti-racist culture mimics white supremacy culture is our tireless dedication to “figuring out” how to be the perfect anti-racist. While we are congratulating ourselves ’cause we’re getting closer to understanding what accountability really means; while we debate whether it’s more effective to say X or Y thing at the people-of-color-led meeting, the world is broiling outside! People are dying out there, y’all! I guess if I have one overarching thing to say to white anti-racist activists it’s this: Think less. Do more. How we do stuff is important. It really is. But it’s not so important that we need to figure out all the intricacies of how to do the work before we dig in and start rolling up our sleeves.

And why is it, anyway, that we spend so much time talking about things like What To Say At The Meeting, or When To Go To The Meeting, or Taking Up Too Much Space? I do think it’s useful and important for white anti-racists to be conscious of our behavior in multiracial settings so that people of color don’t have to deal with our shit. But at the point when discussing behavior in an anti-racist setting stops being about useful political strategy and begins to be about how not to get embarrassed ’cause you said the wrong thing at the meeting, we got issues.

Like I said, I really do think it’s supremely important to have consciousness about what we do as activists and organizers, especially when it comes to standing in solidarity with people of color. I just think it’s more ok for us to make mistakes than we may have trained ourselves into thinking. And while I think that certain aspects of anti-racist etiquette are integral to establishing good relationships (e.g., Don’t Talk Too Much At The Meeting), I think that if we spend too much time focusing on these things it can end up guiding the white anti-racist movement into the direction it’s in danger of heading right now: equating anti-racism with interpersonal behavior instead of with true radical change, which takes on the entire system of white supremacy. And white supremacy will only go away if we organize, not ’cause some white guy finally held his tongue at a meeting.

But the organizing part- hopefully the real reason white folks are taking the time to learn so much about anti-racism in the first place-can often be a point of paralysis in white anti-racist culture. Because we spend so much time discussing why, for example, it’s not always appropriate to go to meetings or join groups that are primarily for people of color (and this is true and important), it can often be hard for a white person to figure out exactly, then, where it is ok to go. Sometimes I think white folks can get really hung up on the What Is My Role question. This is a big question, and it’s worth figuring out. But I wonder sometimes if our workshop-heavy culture has obscured it more than necessary. Look around, is what I finally realized. There are as many, if not more, ways for white anti-racists to plug into the struggle for racial justice as there are white anti-racists.

After I started going to lots of anti-racist workshops, I spent a lot of time pondering where exactly it was that I fit into the whole anti-racist picture. At the same time a whole bunch of low-income women of color weren’t even able to get to their meeting a few blocks away ’cause no one was around to watch their kids. A few friends and I decided to start a group that provides childcare for meetings and events held by people-of-color-led organizations in our city. We showed up consistently and we took considerable direction from the moms around the tone, goals and rules of the childcare. At the same time, we also spent a lot of time as a group developing our own principles- around childcare, our group structure, strategies for leadership development, and standards around which groups we would support and why. I learned a lot from that experience about taking leadership from people of color, and developing my own anti-racist principles and sticking to them, and about the variety of ways in which white

folks can be in legitimate solidarity with people of color who are fighting for liberation.

Interestingly, when I was working with the childcare collective, one of the biggest challenges we faced as an organization was around getting a group of high profile mostly male white anti-racists to take childcare seriously. Even though in larger anti-racist circles childcare had come to be recognized as legitimate political work, we ran into consistent issues with people who had committed to do childcare regularly but who were “too busy” when we actually called them. One person even told me he thought he had moved “beyond” doing childcare; that childcare was a good introductory activity for people getting to know more about anti-racism, but that he had surpassed that level. This opened up a whole lot of questions to me about where the priorities lie in the white anti-racist community.

Lots of white anti-racists talk about how doing anti-racist work means often taking on the tasks that are “not sexy.” Yet our same community, which advises doing the unsexy work, continues to reward the work that is more high-profile and glamorous. We probably know at least a little bit about the work of folks who put on workshops and travel around the country speaking about racism. This is important work. But what do we hear about the tons of people who even now are driving the family members of a prisoner to visit their incarcerated relative, or making phone calls to housing project residents to let them know when the next community meeting is, or providing translation at an organizing meeting so that recent immigrants can participate in a cross-race struggle for workers’ rights?

That white anti-racist culture places such strong rewards on high-visibility work, like conducting workshops or speaking and writing about racism, while it ignores other aspects of anti-racist work, is dangerous for a variety of reasons. Most obviously, this dynamic contributes to an overall sentiment that if we talk about or think about being anti-racist we are in fact being anti-racist. This idea, in turn, can help to create an anti-racist culture that puts more importance on talking and learning about the work than on actually doing it. An overwhelming critique from organizers of color who work alongside white folks in struggle is that white folks talk too much and do too little.

If we are to be truly accountable to revolutionaries of color we need to create a culture that prizes the doing, as much as we prize our abilities to educate each other. Both are crucial if we want to build an effective movement.

Even more disturbing to me, though, is that our workshop culture may have gotten to the point where it is more committed to supporting workshops than supporting the actual work. I can’t count the number of times I’ve talked to anti-racist white folks with incredible energy and commitment who take an anti-racist workshop and then think the only way for them to do real-live anti-racist work is to become an anti-racist trainer. This is not to say that being an anti-racist trainer isn’t an important way to do anti-racist work, but it is by no means the only one. It is, however, the most visible, and this is the part that’s problematic. The What Is My Role question, already a source of at least temporary paralysis for a good number of emerging white anti-racists, becomes even more obscured if newer anti-racist white folks don’t have any role models to look toward except the people putting on the workshops. The problem, of course, is not that these other role models don’t exist but that we, as an anti-racist community, don’t celebrate them as much as they deserve.

Finally, if the white anti-racist community is saying that white folks should do the less sexy, less visible work while at the same time we devote our energy to raising up the very work in our own community that is the most sexy, most visible work, we are sending mixed messages to everyone our community affects.

Perhaps most importantly, we're sending the message to organizers of color that white folks don't practice what we preach. Again, if our movement is to be truly accountable to communities of color and to our goals of racial justice, we need to actually act on our principles.

In addition, this dual message can have a confusing effect on other white folks. In essence the white anti-racist movement is saying "it's not ok for white folks in general to do this, but it is ok for this white person to do this." This dynamic can create distinctions among white folks that will not help our movement. If I've learned anything from my experiences doing anti-racist work in the Bay Area and now, struggling to be effective here in the South, it's that the white supremacist strategy of divide-and-conquer doesn't only succeed famously in keeping oppressed folks apart, it also works like a charm by creating these false distinctions in the white anti-racist movement.

If we're serious about creating an anti-racist praxis that legitimately challenges the visibility white folks have enjoyed at the expense of legacies of hard, uncelebrated work of people of color, we need to be able to look critically at where the visibility lies in our own community. What does it mean, in a movement whose very mantra is Don't Talk Too Much, that our own celebrities are folks who do a lot of talking? Does it mean that these folks are so special that they don't need to abide by the standards we as a movement have set for ourselves? Does it mean that maybe one day, if I'm special too, I can kinda bend our principles in the name of doing the work? I am not at all saying that anti-racist trainers are bending the principles of anti-racism by doing the incredible and necessary work they do. I am saying that this has the potential to be dangerous territory, and that all of us need to be aware and responsible with the positions we hold.

I should take the time to stress here that I am specifically not aiming my criticism toward white anti-racist trainers themselves. I, like many white anti-racists, owe a huge amount of my political development to incredible anti-racist trainers like Sharon Martinas, Clare Bayard, Chris Crass, and others. Instead, I am offering feedback to the larger white anti-racist community, of which I consider myself a part. More than the acts of any anti-racist trainers, who, again, are doing good work in our community, it's the culture of our community, which prizes things like perfectionism, talking instead of doing, and the creation of Famous Anti Racists, that is actually hindering our progress toward achieving true racial justice.

This being said, however, I would like to point out that white anti-racist trainers, because of the amount of visibility they do have, are in a unique position to guide our movement toward greater accountability and effectiveness. I think one of the useful ways for trainers to begin to do this is to challenge their own visibility by giving props to the many white anti-racists working behind the scenes in communities across the country. Take the time to find out who these folks are. Mention them by name in trainings, essays and speaking engagements. Talk about the work they're doing. Emerging white anti-racists need a variety of role models, and the white anti-racist spending most of her free time Xeroxing, phonebanking, or taking care of a revolutionary mother's kids can probably use the support of her fellow white anti-racists, in addition to the reassurance that her work really is important and necessary.

Additionally, I would like to ask white anti-racist trainers to be respectful and responsible with their position and with the language they use. These two examples may seem picky, but I think resolving them can contribute toward making our movement more accountable to our goals of true racial justice.

First of all, on more than a few occasions, I have heard white anti-racist trainers refer to the work they do as "organizing." While the work of white anti-racist trainers is valuable, it is not organizing in the historic sense of the word.

Equating the two obscures the vibrant legacy of grassroots organizing in communities of color, which allowed oppressed people to come together, gain a sense of their collective power, and build strategies that allowed them to win important victories in struggles for liberation.

Secondly, because a significant amount of anti-racist training is devoted (necessarily) to anti-racist behavior, I would argue that it's crucial for anti-racist trainers to make the distinction between anti-racist work and anti-racist group dynamics. The white guy who's not dominating the meeting is definitely behaving nicely, but simply by holding his tongue he is not doing anti-racist work. Thinking about doing the work, and behaving well within the scope of the work, are not the same thing as actually doing the work.

Maybe more than anything else, white anti-racist trainers can make a concerted effort to guide their training participants toward specific, accountable, and necessary anti-racist work in their own communities. San Francisco's challenging white supremacy workshop now requires its participants to spend 6-8 hours a week working with a racial justice organization during the 15 weeks of its training program. While such a requirement may be logistically impossible for many anti-racist training programs, especially those that don't have long-term relationships with their participants, there may be ways for training programs to work with participants on developing tools to identify and plug into specific racial justice struggles in their own communities. It's been my experience that short-term anti-racist workshops for white folks include a lot of material on how to act once you start doing the work, but not a whole lot on how to actually start doing the work. How do anti-racists find out about racial justice struggles occurring in their communities? How do they figure out appropriate roles for white folks once they know what's going on? What are some specific steps that primarily white social justice organizations can take once they decide to take on an anti-racist agenda and build relationships with organizations of color? These questions, and the many hopefully concrete answers that can come from them, may be a good starting place for white anti-racist trainers who want to guide their work toward supporting more pragmatic anti-racist practices.

Finally, I would like to suggest that white anti-racist trainers are not exempt from doing behind-the-scenes practical anti-racist work in their own communities. In fact, because these folks are in many ways the mouthpieces of the white anti-racist movement, I would think that white anti-racist trainers have more of an obligation to be connected and accountable to the struggles that are happening in their local communities. What does it mean if an anti-racist trainer is "too busy" giving trainings to get involved in even a little bit of on-the-ground work in her own community? Again, training white folks around anti-racism is vital to our work. Many white anti-racists speak about their participation in anti-racism workshops as experiences that changed their lives and deepened their commitments to work for racial justice. This is amazing! But I do think that anti-racist training programs, especially now that we live in a time where there are so many of them, have a responsibility to be knowledgeable about and accountable to the liberation struggles happening among people of color in their own communities. This is vital if anti-racist workshops want to achieve their goal of supporting white folks on their way to becoming active fighters for racial justice.

Like I said, there's a whole big movement out there that needs us. And there are also a whole lot of dedicated anti-racist white folks trying to figure out legitimate ways to participate in the struggle. I would like to challenge all of us in the white anti-racist community to spend a bit of time looking outward, instead of inward. To find out about the specific places that really do exist in the struggle where we can put our fierce and beautiful energy to use, even if it means we're a little less sure of ourselves, even if it means we may make more mistakes, even if it means challenging our abilities to be comfortable in this work. To challenge fame and visibility in our community, whether it's our own

or that which we help create. And, finally, to raise each other up for the really unsexy, unrewarded work so many among us take on, out of nothing less than their fierce commitment to build a better world.

I'm saying what I'm saying because I believe in us. And because, for me, the white anti-racist community has not only been a source of sharp political analysis, but also a source of strength, courage, and astounding inspiration.

And because I am in awe, not only of the work that we need to do, but of the incredible potential we have to do it. And because at this point I can't think of any greater act of love that I can give to this community, other than to hold us accountable to the principles we have an obligation to live by.

Revolutionary love is not only about standing together and supporting each other through even the darkest parts of our political process. It's also about challenging each other, compassionately, to be the most fierce, committed, kick-ass fighters for justice we can be. Because our movement requires nothing less.

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