

Towards A Radical White Identity

Written by Susan B. Goldberg & Cameron Levin (edited 11/4/9)

Our attempts to dismantle dominance and oppression must follow a path other than that of either vilifying or obliterating whiteness....Whites need to acknowledge and work through the negative historical implications of 'whiteness' and create for ourselves a transformed identity as White people committed to equality and social change. Our goal is neither to deify nor denigrate whiteness, but to diffuse its destructive power. To teach my White students and my own children that they are 'not White' is to do them a disservice. To teach them that there are different ways of being White, and that they have a choice as White people to become champions of justice and social healing, is to provide them a positive direction for growth and to grant them the dignity of their being.¹

With these words, Gary Howard captures the challenge for white² people who struggle to stand against racism. In this paper we endeavor to share the work we do to “teach different ways of being white,” by offering the idea of a Radical White Identity. This identity offers white people a racial and cultural identity that directly addresses white supremacist history in this country. We center our work in racial identity development and from this foundation we build a clear analysis and practice for creating radical white culture. Our aim is twofold: 1) To create an alternative to the dominant white culture through building a community of white anti-racist people who represent a sub-culture of whiteness; and 2) to offer a form of white identity that is explicitly anti-racist and allows white people to acknowledge and embrace our histories and cultures. Through this evolving cultural/racial identity we will create our anti-racist practice, our racial identity model, and our role in the process of creating radical social transformation.

In our work we hope to put forward an analysis that looks at the dynamics of race, power, privilege and the white supremacist system, the historical origins of whiteness, the diversity of experience of white people as it is impacted by class, geography, gender, sexual orientation, family of origin, and the historical and contemporary work of white anti-racist organizing and action. We offer this analysis in the hopes of fostering and nurturing a viable identity for white people: a radical white identity.

Introduction

We are continuously struck by the power and legacy of white supremacy and racism in every aspect of United States culture and history. It is a legacy that continues to fester and bleed because truths are not told, reparations are not made, and racism, rather than being eradicated, has been embraced as a vital tool shaping our nation's history and present day realities. The

¹ p. 17, Howard, Gary: [We Can't Teach What We Don't Know](#): White Teachers, Multicultural Schools

² For the purpose of this article we will use the term “white” to describe a socially constructed racial group made up of European Americans living in the United States.

historical examples of racism from many different peoples in this land are overwhelming and endless. We have come to see and believe that until the legacy of the white supremacist system is fully addressed, all people living in the United States will be unable to move forward with our humanity intact.

It is in the interest of facilitating change in white people, both those conscious and unconscious of racism, that we do the work we aim to summarize in this article. We address this community because it is our community. We have struggled with the painful realities of racism all around us and have searched for the most effective way to be involved in a movement for change. In our personal journey to come to terms with the realities of racism we have been told time and again by our friends of color that a critical piece of the work is to engage white communities to create change.

We were compelled to write this article as an attempt to coalesce the work against racism we have been fortunate to be immersed in for the past several years. As children, one of us was raised by radical parents with a long history of struggle; the other was awakened to injustice based on his early experience in the educational system. We began our initial formal exploration of whiteness with the National Conference of Christians and Jews (now the National Conference for Community and Justice), Brotherhood Sisterhood Camp and in Children of War, a group that worked with refugees from war-torn countries, in 1990. These groups offered us a series of unique and invaluable experiences in beginning to discover our identities. The programs emphasized that we had a racial identity as white people, we had absolute responsibility for actively addressing racism, and based on race we had privileges that gave us advantages over every other group of people.

We continued in different parts of the country to actively struggle against racism through community organizing and social justice campaigns and to help articulate and define an identity and process for white people to be effective allies in the struggle for racial justice. We have been very fortunate to learn from and work with mentors and teachers including the NCCJ Los Angeles community, Sharon Martinas and the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, The Peoples Institute, and many other individuals who have taught and continue to teach us about white identity and racism. The articulation and practice of radical white identity is our effort to contribute to and build upon the foundation on which we stand.

Our framework is rooted in our belief in the importance of a racial identity model for white people. We recognize that racial identity is a social construct, and yet we cannot deny that racial identity is meaningful as it impacts and shapes every person's experience in this country. The progression and development of white identity has not moved along the same lines as identity development in oppressed communities. We recognize the emergence of a critique of politics based solely on identity. Many progressive people in oppressed groups are moving beyond an identity politics framework to an integrated analysis based on understanding the interlocking nature of oppressions. Contrary to an in-depth dialogue in progressive communities of color about the realities of racism and white supremacy, white progressives, as a large community, have not struggled with the contradictions of being white in a white supremacist system. While we fully appreciate the limitations of identity politics,

our intention is not to replicate the model other oppressed groups have created, but to develop a specific model in the context of whiteness.

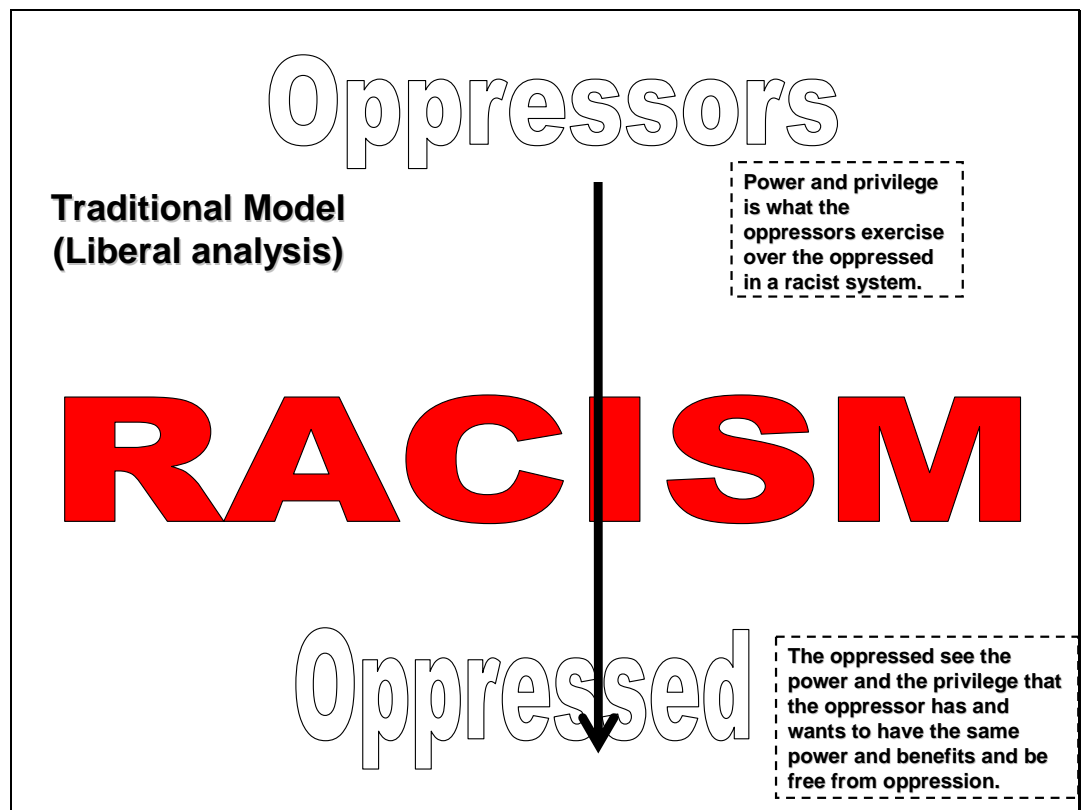
In our time spent working against racism, we have often come across overly simplistic analyses of racism, from liberal whites and from movements for change. Some of these analyses include:

1. Seeing racism as the problem in itself rather than a tool of a greater system
2. Seeing white people's experience as monolithic and creating a group identity solely based on racism
3. Seeing white people as having no real stake in changing the system
4. Failing to offer any alternative anti-racist white racial identity

We believe that too many anti-racist models for white people are constructed out of guilt. We recognize that feelings of guilt, as one begins to fully realize the extent of the realities of racism are an important part of a heartfelt process of conscious development. Guilt is a place to visit, not a place to live. When guilt becomes the operating force of a white person involved in anti-racist work, their work and relationships are negatively impacted. Some examples of this are placing people of color on an unrealistic pedestal, and a disassociation from whiteness and white people. Disassociation from whiteness can lead to cultural tourism, rejection and judgment of white people, and the inability to fully embrace all parts of oneself. White people driven by guilt (consciously or unconsciously) are limited in their ability to be effective allies in multi-racial movements and in building radical white communities of resistance.

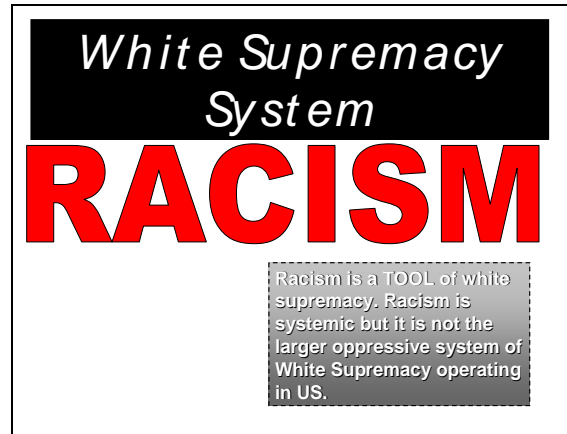
(These following sections will use the accompanying slides from a power point presentation about the Radical White Identity Model)

Systemic Analysis
In a traditional liberal analysis, racism is seen as the source of racial oppression. This means that in the liberal model there are two roles: oppressor and oppressed. This model tells white people that they are only in the role of oppressor and have no common bonds with people



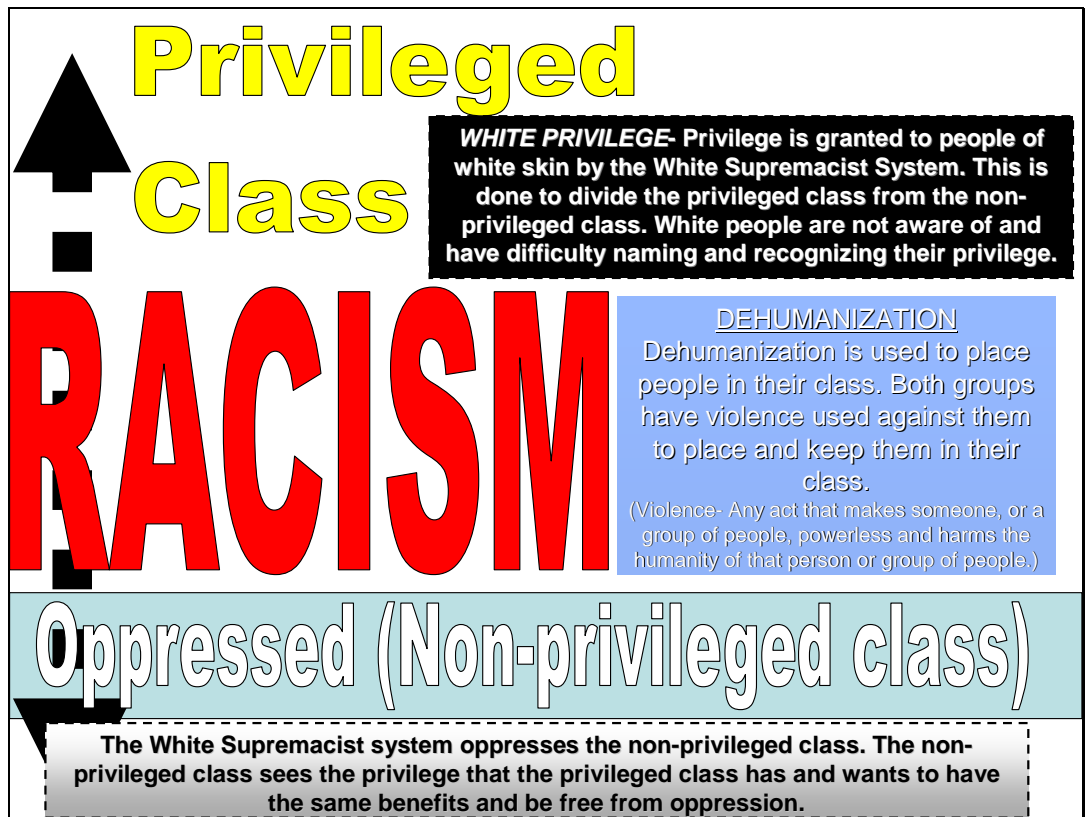
of color and no stake in changing a racist system.

We see racism as a *tool* of the larger white supremacist system. The white ruling elite has power and class interests in keeping white people and people of color divided. For example, one of the very early formations of racism in law and custom in our country was motivated by the desire to break any potential bonds between poor European indentured servants and enslaved Africans. When the system is hidden, it obscures the role of the white ruling elite, the complexity of difference amongst white people, and the power of white people and people of color uniting to create a road to fundamental change. With an understanding of the white supremacist system a white person can also see that ending the system's control allows for the fullness of their humanity, because in denying the humanity of another we also deny our own.



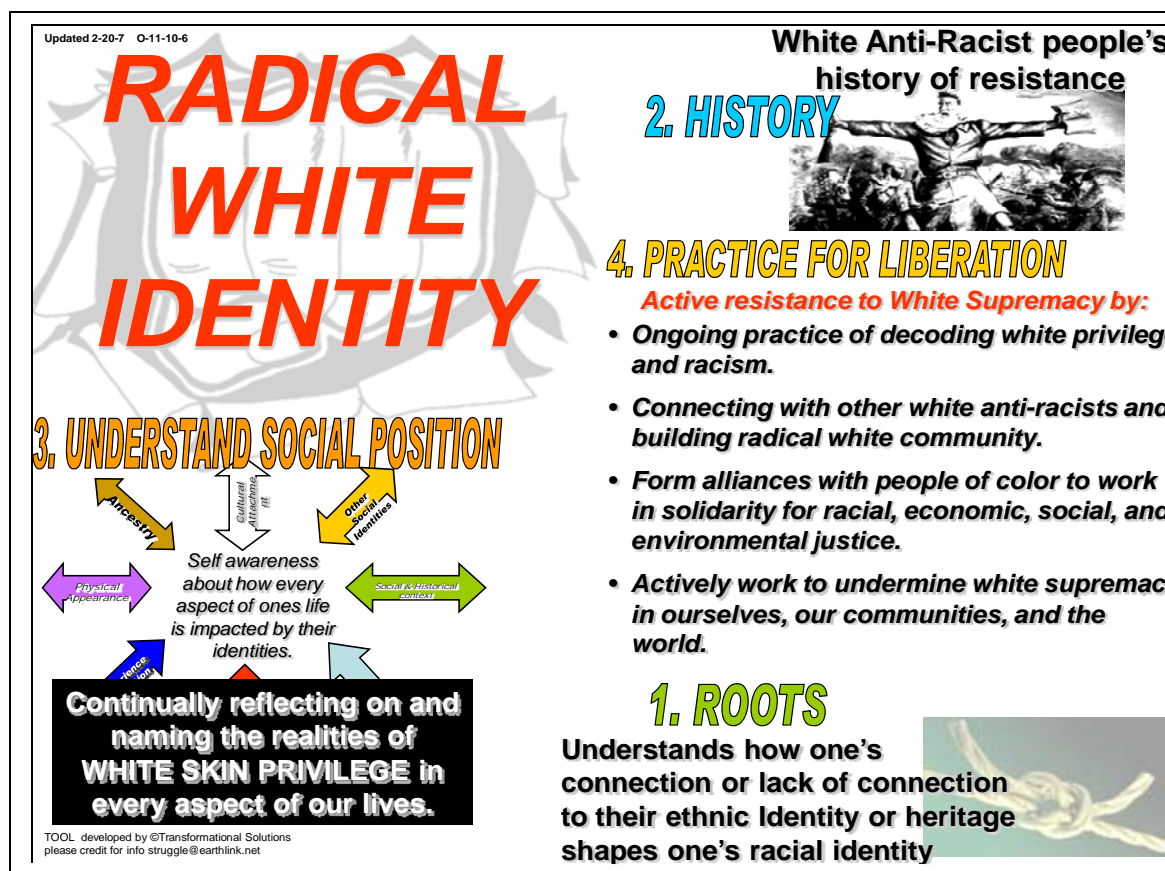
Forging a Radical White Identity

With this analysis as our foundation we can begin to create an alternative identity for white people. All human beings must develop and sustain a healthy self-identity in order to thrive. This is particularly important for people who commit to a life struggling against the injustices of the White supremacist system. Often we have witnessed conscious white people



who are aware of and understand racism but deny that they are white because of the guilt and shame associated with what it means to be white in the United States. As we discussed above, the problem with this denial is that white people *are* white, and when this is denied it creates an often confusing internal conflict which affects both one's work against racism and one's relationships. It is important for white people who challenge and fight the injustices of racism to have an honest sense of self without hiding, dismissing or subjugating any of their realities. It has been our experience that white people who have developed this holistic radical white identity have the ability to sustain the struggle against racism, to challenge, connect, and bring more white people into the struggle and to create and maintain honest relationships with people of color.

The liberation movements of the 1960's are examples of the power of radical racial identities to transform communities. During this movement era many communities of color developed radical racial identities such as the Black Power, Asian American and Chicano identities.



These identities challenged the dominant socially constructed oppressive identities that had been forced on them by a white supremacist system. These racial identities stressed reconnecting with one's stolen cultural roots, resisting the white supremacist system through political and social struggle, and creating an identity based on self-expression and creation of culture. These identities offered people of color a way to resist the white supremacist system, take control of their communities and claim their own culture.

The creation of a radical white identity offers white people a way to resist the white supremacist system by having a positive racial identity. This radical racial identity can lead to the creation of an alternative white culture. Culture is an integral part of racial identity. It is our culture(s) that allow us to define who we are, our values, and what makes us distinct and unique from one another. Some elements of an alternative white culture include redefining

social relationships, the creation of art that embraces a new vision of whiteness, and the participation in rituals of celebration and community.

Components of Radical White Identity Model

The development of the radical white identity is an ongoing process that is based on the following core pieces – understanding white privilege, ethnic/cultural roots, multiple identities, history of multiracial struggle and white anti-racist resistance, and white anti-racist practice.

Privilege - All white people raised in this society are granted fundamental privilege in all institutions and aspects of U.S. culture. This white skin privilege is granted differently based on one's socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, and age. The white privilege we receive shapes our whole lives and how we experience our racial selves. White culture and racial identity are made invisible to white people. We are like fish that do not know what water is -- it is everywhere and yet we do not know how to see it or name it. It is difficult to understand how our actions, and behaviors, which are *not* intentionally racist, in many cases, can be oppressive to people of color. Through uncovering these "cultural norms" of white privilege, we can begin to change and modify them so we are not acting out our ignorant racism, cultural racism, or institutional white supremacy. It is important to be continuously engaged in a process of uncovering how white skin privilege shapes who we are and how we relate to the world around us. We also need to explore how we can use privilege to undermine the larger white supremacist system. In our work we have found that for many white people the process of uncovering our privilege is a challenging and transformative process. For many, this is the beginning of a journey to awareness and fundamental change.

Ethnic/Religious/Cultural Roots - As white people we have tremendous privilege, but it has not been without a price. When we came to this country we were not "white." We were Irish, Jewish, Russian, Italian, etc. Our ethnic identity was our primary identity, and it linked us to our community and culture. The dominant white racial identity was created through the process of assimilation. This meant people from European countries would be allowed access in this country as long as they would leave their customs, traditions, cultural practices, and social norms behind and assimilate to become (white) "Americans."

When European immigrants came to the United States there was immediate pressure to change their cultural practices and act "American." There were many "educational" services offered by churches and charity organizations that "taught" these immigrants how to assimilate into being white. More blatant measures were expressed in news stories in papers like the *New York Times*, *Harpers*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and many other publications. In 1877 the

New York Tribune identified the Irish as “a race with more wholesome and probably unreasonable terror of law than any other...Is there no other way [besides violence] to civilize them? This editorialist wanted to know.”³

In her book *Learning to Be White*, Thandeka writes that in the 1870's the *Chicago Times* “characterized the city's Slavic inhabitants as descendants of Scythians, “eaters of raw animal food, fond of drinking blood of their enemies... Let us whip these Slavic wolves back to the European dens from which they issue, or in some way exterminate them.”⁴ One of the primary ways of becoming “American” and erasing one's ethnic culture was to become a consumer. European immigrants were told to act “American” by becoming consumers of “basic necessities.” Immigrants were actively discouraged from their own cultural practices such as making clothes or home remedies -- these were to be replaced with consumable goods and services. The market, butcher, or tailor, were all offered to replace our ability to provide the needs that we once knew how to provide for ourselves.

Today most white people think of themselves as having no real culture. We look at communities of color and see culture lacking in our own lives. These feelings leave a void in white people that cause us to develop oppressive solutions for filling this void. Sometimes white people appropriate the cultures of people of color. For example, white people embrace Native American spiritual practice without reflection or consideration, or we deny any sense of racial identity, focusing on everyone being a colorless human or part of an indistinct colorful rainbow.

It is up to each individual to decide how we want to connect to our ethnic roots. But all white people need to understand the history of assimilation into the dominant white race. It is important to understand that the primary way to assimilate people is to sever them from their ethnic/cultural roots and that this process has a profound impact on the humanity of a community.

Multiple Identities - Our whiteness always exists in relationship to other aspects of our identity. It is tempting to oversimplify for the sake of clarity when exploring our white identity. However, when we do this we are not telling the whole story. While we must strive to understand our whiteness, we have to be aware of all the different identities that make up who we are. Whether it is one's class, gender, sexual orientation, or age, they all interact with racial identity and white privilege. We need to better understand how our identities are interconnected. When we see our overlapping identities we can recognize the interlocking nature of oppressions and privilege. A poor white lesbian living in the South is very different from a CEO who runs a Fortune 500 company. Both of these people are white and share racial privilege, yet society treats them very differently because of the realities of their other identities. Ultimately all systems of oppression are constructed around supremacy of one group exercising power over another. We must challenge and understand the interlocking nature of how these identities interact and shape one another.

³ P. 49, Jacobson, Matthew Frye, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1998.

⁴ P. 67 Thandeka, *Learning To Be White*, New York: Continuum Publishing Group; 2001.

History of Multi-racial Struggle & Radical White Anti-racists - For any culture to exist it must have a history. Radical white people have a history of resistance to white supremacy from the founding of this country. Millions of white people have stood against racism and white supremacy throughout the 400-year history of the U.S. supremacist system has been covered over and lost.

What's missing from US social justice history?

The original Rainbow Coalition

Ann Braden- White Anti Racist organizer

The first group of people attacked by the KKK

Poor whites who were allying themselves with slaves

The creation of white racial identity through the legal system in the US

The history of multiracial struggles and white people resisting and working to end racism and white supremacy in the US.

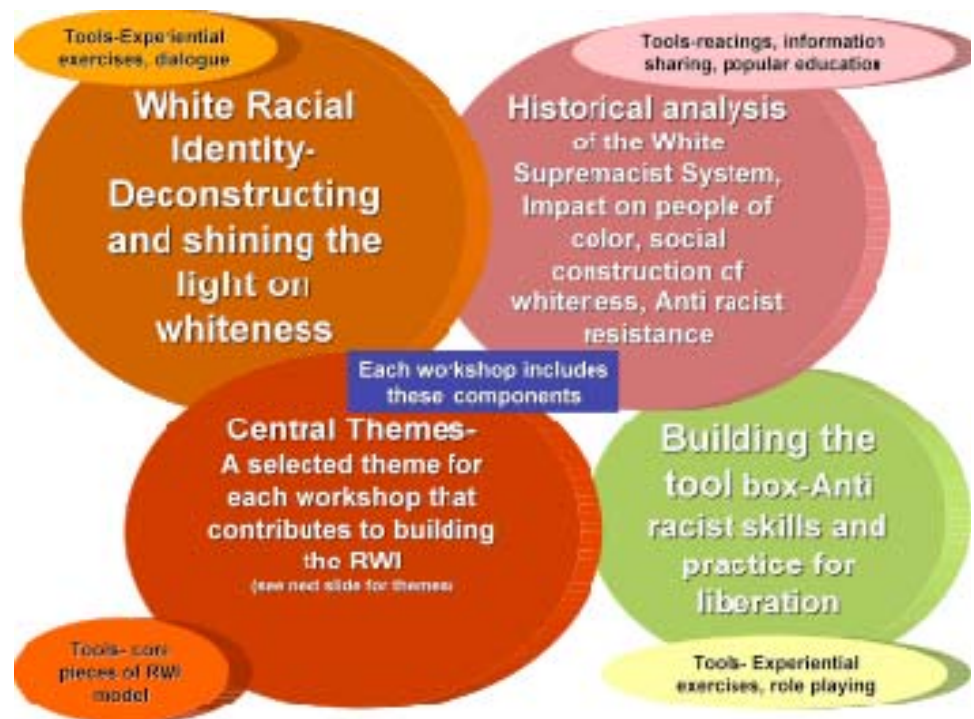
Maroon Societies of resistance

We never read in a standard high school history text about how white people imposed a white supremacist system on people of color. We also do not learn the history of how some white people have actively resisted racism or about multiracial efforts to come together to fight white supremacy. These individuals and groups serve as role models for white people and shining examples of resistance. The history of resistance in this country also includes countless examples of effective multiracial coalitions. Whole multiracial societies such as the Maroon societies, consisting of escaped slaves, poor white indentured servants, and indigenous peoples existed throughout the Americas. Learning our history gives us the ability to imagine and create new possibilities.

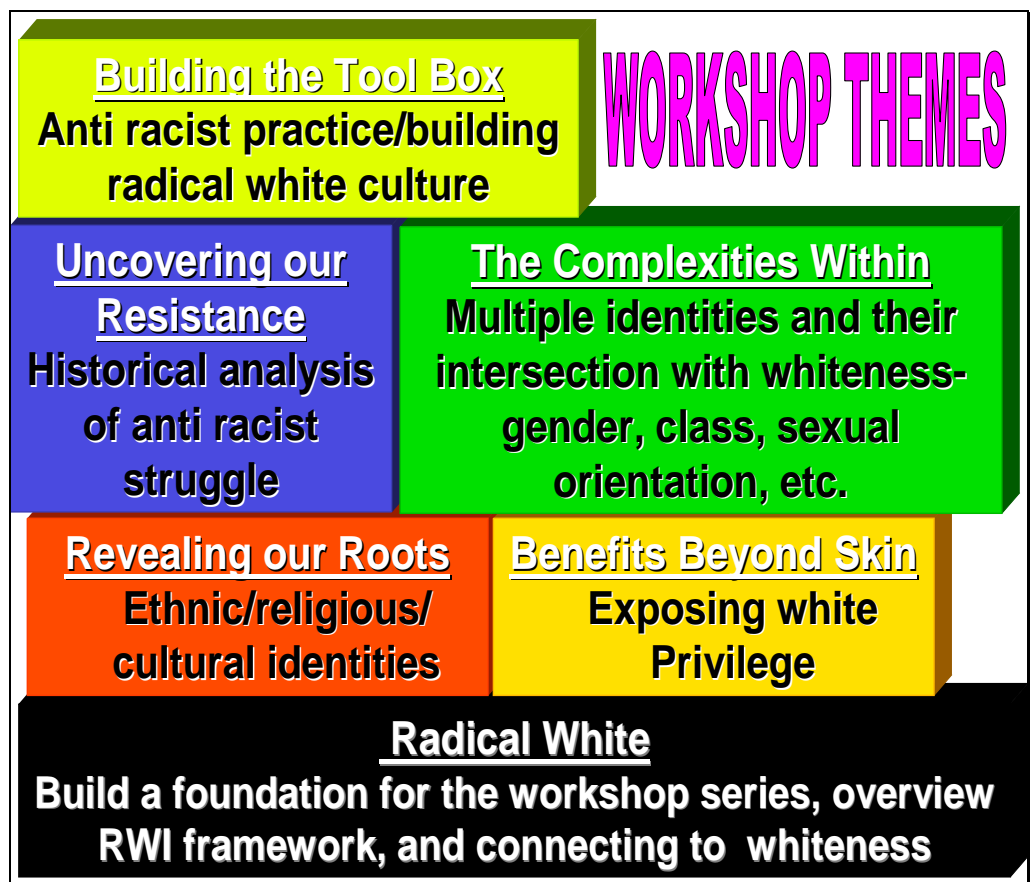
Anti-Racist Practice - At the core of our model is a white anti-racist practice which grows from a holistic foundation. As white people we need to develop a conscious practice that provides meaningful tools to stand against systemic racism and that teaches how to participate in a multi-racial society in ways that do not perpetuate oppression. An anti-racist practice involves becoming active white people who work to build alliances with other white people against racism in our homes, schools, workplaces and communities. We need to continuously practice the skills and tools for challenging personal and interpersonal racism and engaging in cross-cultural communication. In addition we need to work collectively with people of color and white allies to think critically and work collectively towards a radical systemic change that addresses the root systems of supremacy.

Workshop Model

In our work with white people we integrate the above core pieces into a model for developing a radical white community. Most training models that work with white people either focus primarily on giving a space for white people to talk about being white or on the practice of being anti-racist. We are interested in integrating both, the power of meaningful personal discovery and the importance of a viable active anti-racist practice. Again, we believe that a model in which positive radical identity is its core is essential to this integration.



The workshops we facilitate create a dynamic learning environment based on experiential learning models. We create exercises to facilitate a process of self-discovery and deep exploration of the realities of larger social systems and institutions in a safe and supportive environment. At the foundation of this work is a model of active dialogue. This model of dialogue allows for personal growth in a context of collective learning. In addition, we use tools from the world of theater and movement, popular education techniques, readings from radical writers, and visual



and written expression.

We believe strongly that this work is ongoing. We also understand that many people are not able to commit to an ongoing process of meetings so we offer a six-workshop series to introduce white people to this process. Within each workshop we explore white racial identity, historical analysis, and building practical anti-racist skills. Each workshop is organized around a specific theme that builds the development of the radical white identity. The workshops are created in such a way to be inclusive and meaningful, both for white people who are new to a racial consciousness and for those who are engaged and committed to anti-racist work.

In addition to the workshops there is a group of white people in Los Angeles meeting regularly to engage in the development and practice of the radical white identity model. This group is calling itself AWARE -- Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere. There are now several projects initiated by this group, including study groups to explore the literature and theoretical basis for the identity model and a history project to collect the history of white people working together, as individuals or with people of color, to end the racist system. In addition, this group has initiated a multi-racial dialogue that is beginning to look deeply at how we talk about race and racism and how to further the work of racial justice.

A Never Ending Journey

The work of struggling against racism is life-long. The work of deepening one's clarity of her/his role in the struggle is also life-long. In order to sustain this journey, conscious white people need to have a process of understanding, challenging, growing, and developing a healthy radical white identity. This is an identity that is not about arriving at a fixed destination but rather one that shifts and changes with time, knowledge, experience and history. This is an identity that claims the multiple truths of white people's experiences, the racial skin privileges, the history of resistance to white supremacy, and a role in the process of social transformation.

Radical white identity is about the practice of anti-racist work and the practice of building and sustaining authentic relationships. It is important that white people develop the skills to engage with people of color in truly respectful and accountable ways. It is also important that white people develop the skills to connect and build community with other white people, continuously growing the ranks of conscious white people, ready to work for racial justice. A racial identity based on the inherent valuable and complex humanity of each person involved will lay the foundation for this important work. "The work of dismantling systematic racism and building new institutions that are not based on white power and privilege needs to be infused with a deep love for and among all of us who are working together. Antiracism work can quickly become warped if it involves white people who fundamentally do not love themselves." ⁵ We hope that the model laid out in this article will help in some way to develop and sustain white people who are able to contribute fully to the incredible task of radical racial transformation.

⁵ Tobin Shearer, "White spaces:" *The Other Side Online*, (March-April 2002, Vol. 38, No. 2.)

We would like to thank everyone who contributed to the writing of this piece. We would like to make a special mention of the members of AWARE in Los Angeles. Thank you. If you would like to contact the author's please send email to struggle@earthlink.net. You may reprint this article without permission please credit authors.