

Allyship in a Time of Polarization: Tensions Encountered and Lessons Learned

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From Conversation to Action

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Keynote Description: Many people offer clearly defined expectations and directives when talking about social justice, equity, and inclusion. Meeting the requirements, though, involves navigating challenging terrain. How to show up for racial justice accountably? How to hold yourself up when feeling torn down? Where to focus your energy? What to do when feeling confused, conflicted, and pulled in two directions simultaneously? This address offers lessons learned by one white woman attempting to navigate what it means to show up in allyship for racial justice. The hope is that sharing these lessons will help us confront the threats we face today, particularly the rise of overt hate.

Outline

Thanks to Vincent Flewellyn, the YWCA-Metro St. Louis, and Amy Hunter.

My influences:

AWARE-LA - a 16-year-old grassroots, all volunteer anti-racist organization of white people, the umbrella organization that supports three main projects:

- Saturday Dialogues, the longest-running program where white people gather monthly for consciousness-raising.
- Unmasking Whiteness, a 4-day summer institute where white people from across the nation work on developing our anti-racism practice.
- White People 4 Black Lives, our SURJ-affiliated activist arm, which is currently involved in a major campaign to reform LA jails.

SURJ, a national organization made up of many chapters of white people Showing Up for Racial Justice who, when well developed, work in partnership with folks of color on political, educational, and racial justice campaigns.

Encouraged to deliver this message because the threats we face require us all to speak up and speak courageously.

My goals for this address:

- To help develop strong white anti-racists who are resilient in the face of racism, ready to confront the threats we face.
- Share four lessons I've learned since writing *Witnessing Whiteness*, and what I think it means for how we show up as allies for one another.

Each lesson is in the form of a tension, and adopting “both/and” thinking has been key to navigating each one.

- The both/and approach rests on the idea that two things that appear contradictory or oppositional can both be true at the same time.
- The both/and creates space for more possibilities to exist when things feel hardened and stuck.

Lesson #1: Accountability

How does anti-racist organizing approach accountability?

- I'm a strong advocate of accountability guidelines.
- Simply having a set of principles or guidelines is not enough. This is because there is a fundamental tension that lies at the heart of popular messaging around accountability.

Messages received:

- On one hand, white people could not be trusted to do things on their own. (*This was not the caution against white people organizing on behalf of people of color without people of color's partnership. That is a significant problem.*)
 - This was a message that people of color needed to be the leaders, or at least oversee any effort, even when it involved white people trying to do their own personal consciousness-raising.
- On the other hand, a different message was that white people should not depend on people of color for their learning process because it places a burden on people of color.

How to reconcile what I was hearing?

- Attendance at WPC workshops
- AWARE-LA attempts to create organization accountability board with POC.

- POC push us to see things differently, named problems with one-sided accountability.
- Recognition of internalized messages of low value of white people (or their voices) in the movement for racial justice.
- National trend included white people having POC monitor them whenever presenting workshops on race, even for white consciousness raising.
- Told by our colleagues of color that we were trusted to do this work without oversight.
- Study launched to document via interviews the negative outcomes of one-sided accountability models.
- Result was a book chapter in Accountability and White Anti-racist Organizing titled, [*Powerful Partnerships: Transformative Alliance Building*](#).

Conclusions named in chapter: Four unhelpful patterns tend to co-exist with one-sided accountability.

- 1) Inauthentic communication
- 2) Unhealthy white anti-racist people
- 3) Inherent inequality
- 4) Ineffective collaborative practices

Proposed solution: Everyone involved in justice efforts should be responsible for engaging in their own self-consciousness and healing work. After all, every one of us, regardless of racial background, has been affected by living in this culture built on white supremacy, and every one of us has healing to do if we want to create ways of being that break out of destructive cultural patterns.

Reflections on learnings: There are two sets of truths.

One set of truths is that:

- White people need to accept and follow the leadership of people of color.
- White people also need have enough humility to realize that it takes a huge investment of time and attention to develop a useful, nuanced perspective.
- It is also true that too many white people expect people of color to teach them, and that expectation is a burden. It is, therefore, essential that white people seek learning tools that are already available.

Another set of truths are attainable with advanced skills, though. They include:

- White people who have done a lot of internal work understand the white psyche intimately and have valuable insight to share.

- White people capable of influencing and guiding others toward anti-racism should display leadership within their communities.
- White people with a well-honed analysis about anti-racism are able to stand strong in the face of critics of any racial background who discount the need for action.

We need to hold the tension that white people BOTH need to take leadership from people of color AND we need to develop our own leadership skills that can bring more white people into anti-racism.

Lesson #2: Onramps and Lanes

We need to navigate the tension between urgency and long-range action. Specifically, these two things are true:

- We have an urgent need to scale up our efforts and expand those committed to the movement for justice.

And

- We need to approach people who are slowly developing with the kind of empathy that will keep them investing further into anti-racism.

Story of overhearing an exchange between activists at a white anti-racist organizer's summit.

- Disagreement between groups arguing about differing approaches.
- Quick and intensive (could lose people) vs. ongoing, supportive (allows some to progress extremely slowly)
- Personal recognition about the need to meet people where they are, to allow some to grow slowly, if that is what keeps them engaged.
- Principles of not shaming, using guilt, or pressure to prompt action. Instead, AWARE offers support, and works to become a community that rejects the characteristics of white supremacy culture.
 - Attempt to create an anti-racist white culture, one dedicated to upholding everyone's humanity.
 - Prioritizing support, healing, and a sense of wholeness, a place where we all belong, no matter how we contribute and whether or not our growth takes a short or long time.
- Every orientation or activist-oriented meeting begins with a caution that, "It's okay to be where you are. No one is more 'down' than another. We all belong. We appreciate everyone who is here."

Useful analogy for white anti-racists called [On-ramps and Lanes on the Racial Justice Freeway](#).

- Various lanes each serving a different purpose.
- The dangerous role of ego, how it results in accidents and snarled traffic.
- The danger of harsh criticism that does not account for its impact on movement growth.

Core message: Every lane has value. We should be partners with the folks in the fast lane. So, when something isn't going well, yes, we need the critique. And we also hope that critique can be delivered constructively, with the understanding that we're all valuably working toward the same ultimate destination.

ESSENTIAL NOTE: I'm aware some might experience this as a call to go easy on white people with some sort of kumbaya approach. That's not what I'm saying.

What I am saying is that if we want to move more white people into anti-racism, and I think we do, then critical feedback needs to take into account that everyone striving to be an anti-racist deserves empathy and respect, even when they mess up.

Conclusion: We need to BOTH recognize the need for urgency AND allow that there are many ways to contribute to racial justice. Not all of them have the kinds of immediate effect we might want. They, may, however all be essential for long-term success.

Lesson #3: White Racial Identity

The third lesson is about how white people should view themselves in terms of racial identity.

- On one hand, some argue that because race is a social construct inextricably tied to oppressive power structures, a positive white identity is not possible. To identify as white simply reinforces the concept of race, and takes us in the wrong direction.
- On the other hand, some argue that a white racial identity development framework can help us understand the process we go through when coming to consciousness about race, and part of that includes us developing a healthy, anti-racist white identity that provides for a solid sense of self.

My relationship to this question:

- AWARE meetings - identifying patterns that got in the way of our efforts to move white people into anti-racism.
 - Becoming aggressive in arguments, getting exasperated and leaving conversations, self-silencing, and retreating from relationships with white people.
- Guilt, anger, lingering shame, fear, and a festering sense of betrayal were getting in the way.
- The value of the white racial identity development model introduced by Janet Helms, and expanded upon by Beverly Daniels Tatum.
- We had moved through Disintegration and Reintegration led toward anti-racism.
- Struggle to move through Pseudoindependence - sense of self marked more by self-righteous outrage, and a need for validation from people of color, than by a centered sense of self.
- Some reorienting their understanding of '*what it means to be white*' spoke using an Immersion frame.

Overall insight: If we don't love ourselves, we won't be able to love other white people. And if we don't love other white people, we won't be able to influence them to move into anti-racism.

Inspirational model: Amy Hunter, former Director of Racial Justice programs at the YWCA, told participants as she began her first Witnessing Whiteness cohort (paraphrasing) - "Nothing you say will make me not love you."

- This position requires a healthy racial identity, a kind of inner strength and assuredness from which flows a deep reservoir of empathy and a felt sense of purpose and belonging related to racial justice.

How do we achieve that?

- Important to note - the cognitive dissonance that comes with Disintegration is not comfortable, and therefore not sustainable, and its conflict-laden energy has to lead somewhere, to some type of Reintegration.
- The reintegration pathway we want to encourage involves white people reconstructing their worldview, learning more about structural inequality and the histories of oppression and the resistance to oppression.

- Continued development can lead white people to a revised and resolved understanding of themselves as white people dedicated to antiracism.

Challenge we face: Large numbers of white people entering Disintegration for the first time, went through Reintegration and landed at Pseudoindependence. This racial identity development status does not translate into an immediate attainment of advanced skill or the inner resolution of guilt and shame that happens during the Immersion status. This is akin to a whole bunch of newly invested white folks flooding onto the racial justice highway, brand new drivers, many lacking the skills necessary to avoid causing traffic jams and accidents.

Conclusion: The white anti-racist community needs to cultivate more driver's ed instructors who can, with empathetic understanding, help new folks navigate the rules of the road, leading them toward a lane they can enter safely.

How do we do this?

- More white people need to attend to our healing and growth process
- Inspiration and support from Adrienne Marie Brown, author of *Emergent Strategies and Pleasure Activism*:
 - *"In organizing work, center pleasure as an organizing principle. This means feeding people great healthy local food that nourishes them when they come to a meeting and working together to meet the needs of the people in the space. Take the time to affirm the people and affirm the learning that sometimes masquerades as failure. Be unconditional in your commitment to movement, be transformational in every area of your life and work, and center pleasure and joy as resistance: Laughter, dance, taking time for the relationships. When people find movements that meet their needs, welcome them whole, affirm them, commit to their transformation, and actually feel good, they stay, and movement grows."* (p. 432)

Both/And connection:

- Race is a social construction, inextricably tied to power and oppression.

And

- White people are more effective in recruiting other white people into antiracism when we create healthy, white antiracist identities for ourselves.

Lesson #4: White Supremacy

Two competing orientations:

- We all participate in white supremacy culture somehow and in some way. We each need to look at ourselves to unearth how we are complicit and how our own unconscious bias affects our beliefs, speech, and actions.

AND

- There are people with an explicit, conscious white supremacist agenda and we need to point them out and counter them.

Challenge: Conversations among anti-racist people appears to be rather one-sided, focused on the unconscious, white supremacy culture aspect and much less on the avowed, consciously white supremacists or white nationalists.

- Recognition of why this dynamic exists.
- White people focus on pulling a generally well-meaning group of people dedicated to colorblindness toward race consciousness and anti-racism.
- Method is via self-reflection on how racism or internalized white supremacy marks our thinking and behaviors, with fingers pointing at ourselves.

Question: Is it possible that an exclusive focus on ourselves, how we are part of the white supremacy culture and the system it maintains, means that we don't take sufficient time to investigate and highlight other dangers?

- Experience at a conference where a keynote speaker spoke to a predominantly white crowd, saying white, moderate liberals are more dangerous to racial justice than the alt-right.
- Point taken! - Assimilationist-oriented whites have regularly undermined efforts to disrupt white supremacy systems. And, well-meaning white people injure people of color every day with microaggressions, bad decisions, and ill-conceived actions. Whereas, white supremacists and white nationalists are not in the face of most people of color on a daily basis.
- Concern: The majority of white folks may take it literally that there should not be a focus on the alt-right, because a person of color told them not to.

Primer on White Nationalism and the Threat We Face

See [Swastikas in the Bathroom: Connecting the Dots between White Supremacy, White Nationalism, The Alt-Right and the Light-Right](#) for live links and an annotated bibliography. Included is the core features of white nationalists' ideology, their groups, their online recruitment tactics, and their manipulation of teens.

- White nationalists believe:
 - Jewish people are using multiculturalism and a liberal agenda to increase immigration and miscegenation to lower the white birth rate
 - This underlies their belief that there is a white genocide currently underway
 - White people are under attack and need to fight for their preservation.
 - They consider Jewish people their primary enemy, with Black and LGBTQ folks not far behind.
 - Their goal is to create a white ethno-state.
 - Their actions intend to disrupt democratic functioning, create social strife and incite a “race war”.
 - They have had a decades-long campaign to undermine our collective investment in democratic institutions, question the value of civil rights, and re-examine historical truths about the holocaust, slavery, and the validity of the idea of equality, in general.

- Categories of concern: “boots” and the “suits.”
 - Boots: prepare for violence, striving to accelerate the race war.
 - Suits: more intellectual approach, try to appear upstanding by using reasoned arguments that play well with mainstream audiences.

- Current Tactics:
 - Public facing messaging argues that they have no hatred for any other group.
 - Argue they simply believe all groups would be better off if they were separated
 - Propaganda focuses on preserving Western culture.
 - Websites and videos offer pseudo-academic ‘race realism’ arguments that couch racism in the language of science.

Danger: A [2017 study](#) indicated that about 70% of adolescents had come into contact with extremist related content online.

- Pathway for recruitment:
 - White nationalists target people who are already accessing alt-light content.

- misogyny, transphobia, and anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-LGBTQ, anti-feminist, and all-around anti-equity messaging.
- Content undermines the belief that sensitivity, caring for others, and multiculturalism are values we should uphold.
- They capitalize on the natural tendency of adolescents to want to push against cultural norms, to be transgressive and edgy.
- Frame diversity and inclusion programming as liberal indoctrination pushed by adults who won't allow students to think for themselves.
- Target young people who are already accessing this alt-light content, explicitly going after people who start sentences with, "I'm not racist, but..."
- Approach young people in online games through direct chats or in [support forums for people with depression or autism](#).
- Don't let their racism show until they've built a relationship based on some other shared sense of victimization, until they've made the person feel valued, part of a community.

Why are they so dangerous?

- They are attacking the very fabric of our understanding of civil rights, influencing a lot of young people through videos, memes, and chats, prompting them to question the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion before they even enter high school.

The Both/And: We are waging a battle on two fronts.

- We need to fight against white supremacy culture
- AND
- We need to fight against actual white supremacists.

This is not a call to stop any of the work currently being done. If anything, it's a call to double down on our efforts, with a clearer recognition of how the opposing side is organized and working against us.

Conclusion

In terms of accountability

- The spread of white nationalists' rhetoric results in dangerous conditions for people of color. Whether it involves a mass shooting, hate-filled graffiti in a neighborhood, or aggressive rhetoric on school campuses, disrupting the

spread of white nationalist ideology is a part of creating safe and inclusive environments for people of color.

- More white people need to get involved and take up leadership while working in solidarity with people of color and Jewish folks, those most impacted by white nationalist violence.

In terms of the racial justice freeway analogy

- More people paying attention to the rise of white nationalism should not take away from important efforts currently underway. Instead, we need to make racial justice more accessible to more people, encouraging a wider diversity of contributions.
- We need to offer allyship to one another, encouraging the range of people who offer a range of skills, so everyone can feel invited into this movement and find a sense of belonging.

In terms of white racial identity

- White people entering Disintegration have two options for resolution, heading toward anti-racism or retreating into white dominant norms.
- Access to people who can guide them into an understanding of systemic racism, while also recognizing that how we perceive ourselves actually matters, makes it more likely white people will land on the side of anti-racism during Reintegration.
- White people encountering messaging that is 100% deflating and discounts their concerns, are more likely to retreat into white norms.

In terms of making a distinction between white supremacy culture and white supremacists

- It is important because white supremacists are weaponizing our language and using it against us.
- Consider what the following statements would sound like to you if you were a white adolescent trying to form your sense of self. You don't feel particularly embraced by, or invested in, U.S. culture as it exists right now, and you don't know the history of racial oppression in the U.S. because your parents and teachers aren't making sure you know it. You also don't understand whiteness as a system of dominance. To you, whiteness is just a description of what you happen to be.

This is what you hear from the anti-racist side:

1. There is no “us vs. them” with “us” being decent, non-racist white people and “them” being bad racist people. We’re all racists, enacting racism all the time.
2. We need to stop worrying about whether or not we are “good” people. No matter what we do, the idea of being a “good” white person is a lost cause.
3. We should be working to dismantle whiteness, undo whiteness, disrupt whiteness. Pick your verb. But the message is that whiteness is bad, it needs to be eliminated, and we should focus on being less white.

White nationalists recognize the shame embedded in this messaging and are using it to leverage their recruitment with their own claim that anti-racism is anti-white. And white kids are susceptible to the messages that simply say, “it’s okay to be white.”

To a white person outside the fold of anti-racism, the messaging sounds bad. It isn’t welcoming or inviting and it doesn’t sound like there’s room for a white kid to build a sense of positive esteem.

Those who bypass inner, healing work more likely to speak and act in ways that betray this unresolved guilt and shame, which leads to conveying these messages.

On the other hand, healthy, white anti-racist people can both tell the truth about our racism and uplift people at the same time. This is messaging that is more likely to pull people in, rather than push them away. Listen to the difference:

1. We can be good people and conditioned by racism at the same time. It’s a both/and kind of thing.
2. We’ve inherited a society that has had white supremacy baked into its systems and cultural norms for so long that none of us is immune. It isn’t our fault personally. What we are responsible for is choosing to take action to change things.
3. Whiteness is a system of dominance. Whiteness is not white people. The effort to undo whiteness is about recognizing how racism has conditioned our psyches, relationships, institutions, systems, and culture for a very, very long time, and then trying to unravel it. White people can choose how we relate to dominant cultural norms and systems. We can work collectively to change society.

In the face of all of this, showing up as allies today means that white people need to work to articulate more strongly and publicly a narrative that offers a compelling, healthy, anti-racist white identity that connects us to movements of collective liberation.