

Whites Against Racism
P.O. Box 20621
Tompkins Square Station
New York, New York 10009

Wrote 29/9/89

Greetings-

The enclosed literature should give you a comprehensive understanding of who we are and what we do.

Whites Against Racism was formed about eight months ago in response to the escalating number of racist attacks against people of color in New York.

Our current activities include: furling and leafletting, conducting workshops on racism for various groups (such as teachers), sponsoring demonstrations, going door-to-door to work on racism in white neighborhoods, and holding a campaign to remove the NYC Medical Examiner, who is involved in systematic cover-ups after racially motivated attacks have occurred.

We would love to hear about what is going on around racism in Auckland and what groups are doing to eliminate it.

We would also love to hear comments you have on the group as well as suggestions and insights.

We hope to hear from you soon.

Respectfully,
Glen Shoemaker

AVAILABLE FROM WHITES

AGAINST RACISM:

- "White Identity Politics: A Framework for Anti-Racism Action and Education" by Matthew Nemiroff Lyons. (A twenty-page pamphlet -- \$1.50)
- "Building a Movement of Whites to Fight Racism" by John Goetz. (A short pamphlet -- \$1)
- "An Open Letter to the Organizers of the Socialist Scholar's Conference" by Mimi Rosenberg and John Goetz. (\$.50)
- "A Reading List on Racism." (A bibliography put out by Whites Against Racism -- \$1)
- "A Collection of Key Articles and Materials on Fighting Racism" (a photocopied collection of articles, statistics, and literature -- \$4)
- "Policy Statement of Whites Against Racism" (\$.50)
- Catalog of materials published and offered by the Anti-Racism Literature Project. (\$.50)

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A WELCOME TO WHITES AGAINST RACISM

Thank you for being interested in fighting racism. We encourage white people from all walks of life to work with us as we organize white communities to take action against racism.

WHO ARE WE?

Whites Against Racism is a group of white people from all walks of life who seek to empower whites to take action against racism and to become confidant allies of people of color. We are women and men, teachers, assembly workers, secretaries, trade unionists, young and old who are white and want to end racism. We encourage other whites to form their own groups dedicated to the elimination of racism.

GOALS

Our goal is to end all forms of discrimination, prejudice, oppression, slander and violence against people of color in all social, political and economic realms. We seek to build a national movement of white people to fight racism in all of its forms.

WHAT DOES WHITES AGAINST RACISM

DO?

We are engaged in many different kinds of organizing and we encourage people to work in the capacity where they feel most effective and comfortable:

- Write leaflets, pamphlets, articles and letters to respond to and lead public discussion around racism.
- Hold study groups on racism.
- Conduct workshops on racism: The Fighting and Eliminating Workshops examine how racism conditions white people and give practical information on unlearning racist conditioning. The workshops concentrate on institutional racism and focus on taking action against racism in the areas where we can be most effective.
- Sponsor demonstrations, marches, pickets and vigils around major institutional sources of racism.
- Conduct organizing campaigns in neighborhoods around racism in conjunction with local leaders who have expressed interest in fighting racism. This includes tabling, leafleting and going door to door to talk about racism with white people.
- Convene Leadership - Networking Meetings: The purpose of these meetings is for people working individually or with an organized group and taking action against racism to gather and discuss their work and to discuss strategy and tactics.

WHY A GROUP OF WHITE PEOPLE?

First, because we acknowledge that racism is first and foremost our problem. It is whites that rule and create apartheid in South Africa. It is whites who benefit politically and economically from racism in the United States. It is whites who destroyed Native American cultures, who enslaved millions of Africans, and who dropped nuclear weapons on the Pacific Islands and on Japan. We create the problem. What accompanies our responsibility is our vital position to influence other whites and white institutions. We can easily strike at the core of racism.

We believe that racism is not in the human interests of white people. In our struggle against oppression as workers, as young people, as women, as lesbian and gay people, as elders, as Jews, racism cuts us off from a large part of our group. Only with the elimination of racism will we be able to proclaim the unity so necessary in our liberation work.

BUILDING A MOVEMENT
OF
WHITES TO FIGHT RACISM

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BUILDING A MOVEMENT
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This is the transcript of a talk given at a panel/workshop given by Whites Against Racism on April 12, 1987 at the Socialist Scholar's Conference at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. This talk was given by John Goetz.

Whites Against Racism can be reached at (212) 969-0759 and at P.O. Box 20621, Tompkins Square Station, New York, New York 10009

I would like to talk today as a member of Whites Against Racism. Let me briefly say something about Whites Against Racism. We were formed in response to the recent wave of white attacks on people of color throughout the United States. I don't just mean Howard Beach, but the lynching in Central Park, the police killing of Bartlett, the racist attacks in Illinois, the Klan march in Georgia and so on. It is not like these attacks are anything new.

As Mimi Rosenberg has noted, the Howard Beach killing was the culmination of a series of racist attacks which included the death of Willie Turks, Elanor Bumpers and Michael Stewart. The members of the group, from many different backgrounds -- secretaries, school teachers, lawyers, assembly workers, have come together because we see it as our task, as a group of white people, to go out and do something about white racism. Our major focus in the near future will be going door to door in white neighborhoods in teams of ten and then go in pairs to homes to listen and talk to people about racism. We want to give the anti-racist majority out there the opportunity to express their anti-racism in a way that feels most safe for them. For some, that may mean organizing a white anti-racist group within their union or church. For others that may mean putting up a sign in their window that reads "anti-racist home." It may mean signing a petition

of a list of anti-racist demands, it may mean buying a button, or coming to a consciousness raising group that we've organized. Whatever feels most appropriate for the people that we talk to. If any of you are interested in going on one of our teams, you are welcome.

I mainly want to address the question on why we are an all white group, but first I would like to give you a sense of my perspective on racism in the United States. I would like to turn for a moment to how we look at Southern Africa. We look at Southern Africa, we see institutional racism -- apartheid. We have developed a healthy skepticism of whites in South Africa. So much so, that when I meet, and probably when many of us meet a white comrade from South Africa, we ask them what they are doing to fight racism there. It seems the natural question. If we heard about their work in Marxist literary theory at Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg, we may express interest in their work, but wonder, I suggest, isn't that somewhat incongruous with the current situation in Southern Africa? And if we heard about white leftist groups in Southern Africa criticizing black revolutionary groups for not being integrated, I think we would safely conclude that the white attitude comes from white supremacy. And if we read in a major white leftist newspaper in Southern Africa a critique of new leaders of the black movement as show-offs and liars, we would conclude, I think it is safe to say, that racism is so deep in Southern Africa, that these white leftists are entirely affected by it and don't realize their blunders.

I submit that we should view the white left in the United States in the same way that we would look at the white left in South Africa. That we maintain this perspective, at least as an exercise for now. I taught high school here in New York in a school system that has a drop out rate of 75% for Black and Latin students. I come from Minnesota, where the unemployment rate for Native American men is over 90%. I learn about my world from T.V. and radio

which are respectively 99% and 98% white owned. I live in a country that has sterilized 35% of Puerto Rican women living in Puerto Rico between the ages of 15 and 34. I live in North America, where for 363 of the last 485 years, people of color, mainly Africans, have been the property of white people. My school, Chelsea Vocational High School, 99% African-American and Latin, has one commode for 400 female students. Throughout the school building, ("plant" as they call it) and in my classroom lead paint chips fall from the ceiling on my students, causing for me, an unfortunate disruption. For my students, it causes them to inhale lead paint dust, which is proven to cause brain damage in infants. The gym of our school is two classrooms with the wall knocked out in between, our cross-country and track team practice in the hallways of the school. There are no showers and no lockers. Blocks away from Chelsea, there are white high schools with swimming pools and tuition of \$10,000, where the students read Plato and Goethe.

And then I read a number of articles, one I remember from In These Times, that criticize Alton Maddox and C. Vernon Mason as show-offs and liars. I'm not speaking of the campaign in the mainstream white media, like the Times, the Post, and the Daily News which have systematically attacked Mason and Maddox, but within the left. And then when Maddox and Mason decline to work with the white media, an article in the Voice calls them racists. It is here at this moment that I would like to ask us to remember our perspective on whites in South Africa and to keep that perspective when looking at the white left in the United States. With that perspective clear, I would like to look at why we are an all white group.

As in most questions of political strategy, we have to recognize that we have limited time and energy and would like to achieve the most results. As whites, we need to look where we will be most effective. We can be amazingly effective working within our own community. We know our community. We

understand the social rules. We know or at least we have a good sense of what arguments will work. We have access to white institutions and people in ways that people of color do not. We need to use this plus as much as we can. That's part of the strategy of Whites Against Racism.

Where should we put our organizing energies? It is pointless to organize around issues that we have no power to affect. The natural area of citizens of the United States to organize around is the policy of our government. It wouldn't make sense if U.S. citizens organized around the budget of New Zealand, in that we have very little power to affect the budget of New Zealand. Likewise, we whites need to take responsibility for racism. It is clear that in terms of responsibility, that racism is a white problem. It is white people that dropped the bomb on the Pacific Islands and Japan. It is whites who enslaved millions of Africans and killed some 50 million, if we accept W.E.B. DuBois's figure. It is whites who performed literal genocide on Native peoples throughout the Americas and continue to assassinate Native cultures. It is whites who rule Southern Africa. It is whites who support the South African government here in the United States. In this sense it is indeed our problem . . .

It is up to us to act against what is being done by our people. Malcolm X summarized this brilliantly:

If I were to go home and find some blood on the leg of one of my little girls, and my wife told me that a snake bit the child, I'd go looking for the snake. And if I found the snake, I wouldn't necessarily take time to see if it had blood on its jaws. As far as I'm concerned the snake is the snake. So if snakes don't want someone hunting snakes indiscriminately, I say that snakes should get together and clean out their snakey house. If snakes don't want people running around indiscriminately chopping off the heads of snakes, my advice to snakes would be to keep their house in order.

It is empowering for us to honestly look at the issue of white racism and to take responsibility for it.

We need to make the distinction between institutional racism and what I've heard Mimi Rosenberg call "private" racism. We can have the best line and the best analysis of how to fight institutional racism, yet still not worked on our own private racism. So we can develop this great line on what we, the people need to do for liberation. Then we go out to the world and talk about racism as a black/white issue, neglecting the racist oppression of Latins, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Arabs and Native Americans. We may forget that Native Americans are independent nations within the empire of the United States. We may starting talking about Asians as "orientals." We may hear an African-American say something and then conclude, "Well, I heard a black person say this, so all black people must think this way." These are all honest mistakes, and we really shouldn't be condemned the first time we make them. We are trying and deserve to be supported. But the burden of that support should not fall on people of color. We are able to support ourselves and educate ourselves on eliminating our private racism. My main point is that we should not expect people of color to be our educators. It is part of the set up of racism that we must have people of color educate us about racism. That is draining to their resources and they have not been asked if they want to educate whites.

The idea of a white group also rejects the separation of eliminating our private racism and working on eliminating institutional racism. We are in a good position, as a white group, to both educate each other about racism and at the same time take effective action to eliminate institutional racism.

As white anti-racists, we also need to address how we can avoid the heavy racist paternalism of fighting

racism "for people of color." It is in our interests to end racism. We have a direct stake, as whites, in eliminating racism. As Matthew Nemiroff Lyons writes in "White Identity Politics," "For us, racism has a confusing double-edge quality that is seldom addressed: we benefit from it, but we are also hurt by it." Hurt by racism? Whites? Although white people are not oppressed by racism, we are hurt by it. Racism cuts us off from most of humanity. In placing us in the role of oppressor, the majority of the world remains inaccessible to us. Racism makes it very difficult for whites to develop close personal relationships with people of color. This is done in a variety of ways; some logistical as in segregation and others psychological as in the fear that we as white people learn of people of color. Until we eliminate racism, a large part of human is often effectively cut off from us.

We are also seriously confused by racism. On one hand, we experience people of color from our own experience as completely human. On the other hand, we are told by our most trusted sources, often our parents, siblings and teachers, that people of color are somehow not fully human. As young people, we need to believe and trust our parents in some way in order to survive, yet we also know that they are wrong. This leaves us distrusting other white people, often especially our most trusted sources. We have heard incredible lies from other white people -- why should we trust other whites at all?

In distrusting other whites, we are lead to accept the false notion that there are "those bad whites in Howard Beach and Down South and us good whites." All white people participate in racism simply through our position in the society as a privileged group. Guilt about this causes us to attack other whites and in essence hate ourselves because of our position. Our distrust of other whites, our hate of 'certain' whites and our guilt all a part of racism and all perpetuate racism.

Moreover, the horrific sanctions of racism have forced most of our peoples to assimilate into the norms of Protestant Anglo U.S. American culture. Few of us have retained our languages and cultures from our homes countries. U.S. racism has mean that our uniqueness and specialness in coming from vastly diverse cultures has been lost.

And racism hurts our struggles for liberation. In our struggle against oppression as workers, as young people, as women, as gay and lesbian people, as elders and as Jews, racism cuts us off from a large part of our group. Only with the elimination of racism will we be able to proclaim the unity so necessary in our liberation work.

My main point is that we as whites have a direct and important stake in eliminating racism.

Lastly, it is not only today that the African-American movement is calling on whites to organize our own communities. Malcolm X, way back in 1964, made the point very clearly:

Whites who are sincere don't accomplish anything by joining Negro organizations and making them integrated. Whites who are sincere should organize among themselves and figure out some strategy to break down the prejudice that exists in the white communities. This is where they can function more intelligently and more effectively, in the white community itself, and this has never been done.

This was the call of the Panthers, and of Carmichael in SNCC. And this continues to be the call of the radical African-American liberation movement today with little conspicuous effect or response other than the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee, which deserves to be commended.

As whites we are in a good position to do anti-racism work. We can be quite effective at the work. It is time to take action.

**WHITE IDENTITY POLITICS:
A FRAMEWORK FOR ANTI-RACIST
ACTION AND EDUCATION**

**by
Matthew Nemiroff Lyons**

a publication of:
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...a device is a device, but... it also has consequences: once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now, in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Moslem or a Christian -- or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black-- is suffering the utter reality of the device. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't exist -- merely because it is a lie!

Lorraine Hansberry,
Les Blancs¹

I do not know many Negroes in this country who are eager to be "accepted" by white people, still less to be loved by them; they, the blacks, simply don't wish to be beaten over the head by the whites every instant of our brief passage on this planet. White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this -- which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never -- the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.

James Baldwin,
The Fire Next Time²

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When students at Cornell University initiated a campaign of anti-apartheid sit-ins in April 1985, we declared that "We as students demand divestment because we are committed to a free South Africa." Although I co-authored this statement, it did not occur to me then to point out that "we" were mostly white students, and that this fact might affect our relationship to apartheid, to the university, and to political protest. If anything, our whiteness seemed only a political embarrassment which it was better not to discuss. When I saw black students taking part in the sit-ins, I felt vaguely relieved. Somehow, their presence seemed to "legitimize" my work -- it quieted my anxiety and confusion about speaking out as a white person against racism. When many of the blacks and other people of color began to drift away from the protests, my anxiety returned.

In the course of that Spring of political activity, and many later events, I realized that being white was not, in fact, my central problem in doing anti-racism work. On the contrary: the problem was the impulse to ignore my whiteness, my desire to disconnect myself from its shameful legacy, my fear about how racism might have affected me. Among other things, these feelings were making it very difficult for me to think honestly about my relationships with people of color, or about how their motivations might differ from mine. And in discussions with other white activists, I found that these were not my problems alone.

White people in the US have a vital stake in ending racism, and we are in a position to do excellent anti-racist work. But we can do so only from a willingness to look at who we are and how racism affects us. That it is often difficult for us to face this--to personalize racism and our struggle against it -- itself reflects painfully the hold that racism can exert over us as whites. And I am speaking now of those whites who believe that racism is wrong.

There is a good reason that we have trouble doing this. When we do think about our own relationship to racism, our thoughts are often heavily loaded with guilt feelings about our privileged status. Anti-racist work then becomes a kind of penance -- a way to expiate the wrong of being the oppressor. Within our culture, which structures our whole ethical vocabulary around blame and "correctness," this attitude is completely understandable. In the short run, guilt feelings can sometimes help alert us to the need for change, even spur us to do something. But in the long run, guilt is a disastrous basis for political action or organization. Our guilt tells us that white people are bad, that our political motives are suspect, that we cannot trust ourselves to act correctly. It is profoundly disempowering. In this way guilt operates as a key ideological tool which encourages whites to accept racism and thus helps to perpetuate it.

Whites can and should take responsibility for our dominant status without blaming racism on ourselves. We did not choose the privileged status that all whites share in varying degrees; we did not choose the racist indoctrination imposed on us almost from birth. Thus we need to challenge both the complacent notion that

whites can somehow be "outside" the racist system, and the guilt feelings that keep us from overthrowing it.

White Identity Politics

These ideas are central to what I call "white identity politics": a political approach that has been developed by a number of white anti-racists, leftists and feminists over the past two decades. There is no quick formula with which to explain white identity politics, but I will briefly outline some of the points that I see as central:

- * Racism is fundamentally a white problem. White society created it, white people benefit from it, and whites hold primary responsibility for ending it. Anti-racist work is particularly crucial in white communities and white-controlled institutions.

- * White people need to fight racism for ourselves. Racism is wrong not only because it oppresses people of color, but also because it is directly hurtful to us, as members of the dominant group. Understanding this hurt is vital for developing an understanding of our own stake in ending racism.

- * In anti-racist work, "personal" and "political" approaches are closely interlinked, and both are necessary. We need to confront racist institutions and cultural attitudes around us; we also need to identify and challenge our own forms of racist thought and action, by confronting the feelings that hold them in place.

- * Whites are in a strong position to fight racism. Often we are the ones best equipped to challenge racism in ourselves and other whites. Our privilege often gives us special access to education, skills and channels of power that we can turn against racist institutions. Taking pride in ourselves as anti-racist whites is an important way to cut through the strictures that racism imposes on us.

- * Whites and people of color need to work from our differences -- rather than ignore them -- in our common struggle against racism. Both multi-racial coalitions and separate anti-racist work by both people of color and whites are important, and the two forms can help to strengthen each other.

Privilege and Liberation Work

In a broader context, white identity politics addresses the question: what political role do (or can) members of socially privileged groups have in liberation work? What does it mean for middle class or wealthy people to take an active, consistent role against economic oppression? For men to work against sexism? For straight people to oppose heterosexism and homophobia? There are strong parallels between the approach I outline here concerning racism, and the ways I would address these other questions.

My involvement in the anti-sexist "men's movement" over the past four years has in fact strongly shaped my conception of white anti-racist work. The men's movement has important limitations and contradictions, but it is important because it addresses anti-oppression work specifically from the dominant group perspective--

and it is one of very few efforts in the US to do so. At their best, anti-sexist men's groups focus both on the privilege men hold in a sexist society, and the dehumanization that sexist gender roles impose on us. And while some of the groups have a strong fear of being labeled "gay" organizations, others define themselves explicitly as coalitions of straight, bisexual and gay men, where heterosexism is treated as a central issue for ongoing discussion and work. Men's organizations address these issues through a combination of personal-change work (support groups, educational workshops, and in some cases counseling services for men) and public actions (demonstrations, vigils, and other public events), both as efforts to strengthen positive connections among men, and as acts of solidarity with feminist initiatives (such as Take Back the Night marches). Taking part in these efforts, as straight man, has challenged my feelings of confusion, fear, resentment, and self-distrust in response to both the women's movement and gay liberation. Knowing that I can act against oppression from my positions of privilege is a tremendous relief, and does a lot to strengthen me as a political activist.¹

Background -- The 1960s

The recent origins of white identity politics in the US are closely tied to the black-led anti-racist struggles of the 1950s and 60s. James Baldwin, for example, wrote incisively about white people's stake in ending racism in essays such as "Stranger in the Village" (1953) and "Down at the Cross" (1962). Malcolm X, too, pointed in this direction during the last few months of his life (1964-65). This was after he broke with the Nation of Islam and rejected his earlier belief that white people are inherently oppressors. While he considered interracial coalitions premature in the US, Malcolm emphasized that whites had an important, autonomous role to play in the struggle:

Whites who are sincere don't accomplish anything by joining Negro organizations and making them integrated. Whites who are sincere should organize among themselves and figure out some strategy to break down the prejudice that exists in white communities. This is where they can function more intelligently and more effectively, in the white community itself, and this has never been done.²

Here, Malcolm X challenged the widespread assumption that racism was essentially a black problem, and that Southern black communities were the place to fight it. He was much too sweeping in his dismissal of civil rights integrationism, but he accurately pointed out some of its key weaknesses. "Black and white together," a basic organizing principle in civil rights groups of the early sixties, often served as a powerful challenge to racist segregationism. But too many activists, particularly whites, treated integration as if it were a solution to racist oppression, ignoring the deeper issues of racial power and privilege both in society and

within the movement.

As Debbie Louis, a former leader of the Congress on Racial Inequality (CORE) described it:

...to them the very idea of making racial considerations on any level of movement activity sacrificed the supreme principle on which the movement was based (accounting in large part for the complete lack of dialogue prior to its becoming an explosive issue). It was a matter of principle that the movement itself practice what it hoped to achieve; that this practice might have either a positive or negative effect on what it was able to achieve (race as an essential factor in tactical approach) was a secondary consideration, if one at all.³

In civil rights groups such as CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), racial tensions and resentments simmered below the surface for years, compounded by issues of class, gender and regional background, and fueled by the extraordinary pressures under which many civil rights workers functioned. In 1965-66 these tensions exploded: SNCC and CORE abandoned integrationism and the commitment to nonviolence in favor of the slogan Black Power. Most whites left the organizations under pressure.⁴

Black Power was never a unified, clear-cut political ideology, but rather a loosely-defined, militant emphasis on black pride and political autonomy. Some advocates of Black Power set conditions on coalition work with whites; others rejected it altogether. But by criticizing integrationism, and by placing cultural identity at the center of attention, Black Power forced white activists to reassess their approach to anti-racist work.⁵

Many whites found this a difficult, confusing task. Some of them perceived Black Power simply as a despairing retreat from earlier ideals, a capitulation to racial divisions. Other whites treated it as an occasion for self-flagellation, as evidence that it was hopeless to expect white society to change, and tried to copy black cultural forms as an "escape." But some began to look more critically at the question of white identity, and to focus more on the need to challenge white racism in their own communities.

At Stanford, for example, one group of white students undertook an anti-racist "work-study" project in 1967 that drew them to treat racism as a serious problem for white people. "At the very least," they argued, "the racism in white society is as psychologically damaging to whites as to blacks." Their conception of their own role also shifted. At the beginning, they wrote:

Though we verbalized a rejection of 'white paternalism'-- going to the black community to help poor blacks -- most of us probably felt we were working on behalf of the black movement.... As the year progressed, we became more and more involved in talking to white groups and in trying to change white institutions.⁶

At the end of the 1960s a national, white-led group called People Against Racism (PAR) argued similarly that racism was fundamentally a white problem, and that we (whites) must focus on challenging white institutions and attitudes to uproot it. Robert Terry, who was either a member of PAR or closely associated with it, outlined a form of white identity politics that he called "new white consciousness," in his 1970 book For Whites Only.⁷

The Feminist Movement

In the 1970s and 80s, much of the most innovative white anti-racist work has taken place within the feminist movement, again largely in response to the work of blacks and other women of color. It was black feminists in the Combahee River Collective who introduced the concept of identity politics in the feminist movement, in 1977. As they wrote in "A Black Feminist Statement":

We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.⁸

The concept of identity politics has provided a framework for many women of color -- black, Asian American, Latina, Native American -- to voice pride in their cultures and in the value of cultural difference among women, to analyze the complexities of their (multiple) oppressions, and to act against them. Other groups -- including lesbians, Jewish women, and older women -- have applied a similar approach to their own experiences.⁹

As in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, whites in the feminist movement have had varied responses to the issue of racism and to the identity politics voiced by women of color. As some feminists, such as Elly Bulkin, have pointed out, it is important to expand the discussion of identities from a focus on one's oppression to examine also one's privilege:

How much easier it is for someone to say simply that she is oppressed --as a woman, a Black, a lesbian, a low-income woman, a Native American, a Jew, an older woman, an Arab-American, a Latina -- and not to examine the various forms of privilege which so often co-exist with an individual's oppression. Essential as it is for women to explore our particular oppression, I feel keenly the limitations of stopping there, of not filling in the less comfortable contours of a

more complete picture in which we might exist as oppressor, as well as oppressed.¹⁰

Bulkin, and a growing number of other feminists, have not stopped there. Her words here are quoted from Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism, which Bulkin co-authored with Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith. Bulkin's essay in this book (and even more so, Minnie Bruce Pratt's essay "Identity: Skin Blood Heart") deal directly with the personal and political implications of white identity, and what it means to engage in anti-racist work from the dominant group position.

What is Racism?

Racism is a network of power that subordinates people of color to whites throughout society. Much more than just a matter of prejudice, or even inequality, racism is a system of violence in which, as Barbara Smith has emphasized, "the bottom line is death." Its tools include poverty; disease; illiteracy; discrimination in jobs, housing, health care, education; work-place and environmental toxins and other hazards; the police, prisons and the courts; culture repression and exploitation; crime; religion; and war. A sampling of contemporary statistics point to racist violence in the following ways:

* "Murder is now the leading cause of death among urban minority males ages 16-24."¹¹

* "The Indian suicide rate is twice the national average. On some reservations, it is five or six times the national average, with rates tending to be highest among young people."¹²

* "By the time a Black male is 55, the odds are one in two that he has been arrested for a serious felony. (The odds for a white male are one in seven.)"¹³

* "Native American women between the ages of 15-34 have rates of cirrhosis of the liver 36 times the white female rate."¹⁴

* Over 35% of women in Puerto Rico between the ages of 20-49 had been sterilized by 1968. The sterilization program, administered through a coordinated government network, has mainly been focused on poor and working-class women under 30. (Pharmaceutical companies also tested birth control pills on Puerto Rican women for 15 years before they were approved for sale in the US, without regard for the resulting cancer and blood clot deaths.)¹⁵

* "Black men are over 6 times more likely to be homicide victims as whites."¹⁶

* "Of Indian people who have lived beyond infancy, 43% die before age 55, as compared to just over 16% of the total population."¹⁷

Racism within the US, my primary focus in this article, is only a subset of the racist violence that the white US power structure carries out and supports around the world, whether it be in colonial possessions such as Puerto Rico, areas of corporate

exploitation such as southern Africa, or targets of military attack such as Indochina and Central America.

Racism is not just a "black/white" issue. People of color include not only blacks, but also Arabs and other Middle-Eastern peoples, Asians, Latinas and Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. One way that racism operates in the US is to hide the oppression that these groups face, or to rank them as less "serious" or important. While the specifics of these oppressions differ, all of them are fundamentally interconnected.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the different forms of racism and the different histories of oppression that these groups have faced. Immigration bans on most Chinese from the 1860s to the 1940s, nuclear "testing" at the expense of Pacific Islanders in the 1950s; mass imprisonment of Japanese-Americans during World War II; use of black troops against the Lakotas in the 1870s, Filipinos in the 1890s, and Vietnamese in the 1960s; mass sterilizations of Native American and Puerto Rican women in recent decades; forced removal of the Hopi and the Dine (Navajos) at Big Mountain today -- each of these events has left a different scar.

Many forms of racism are trivialized or ignored. Mainstream newspapers, for example, have routinely carried political cartoons that depict Arabs and Iranians in the most vicious, stereotypical terms -- to a degree that would probably not be so casually accepted if directed against blacks. Racism against Asian-Americans has been largely masked by the relative economic success that many of them have achieved. Like Jews,¹⁸ Chinese and Japanese-Americans have found that a degree of privilege can actually feed one's oppression. Asian-Americans face resentment and hostility, expressed in the fear that they are "taking over." Increasingly, they have also faced physical attacks, including murder, as convenient scapegoats for economic crisis.¹⁹

This kind of information is often withheld from whites, and is often difficult or frightening for us to comprehend. But it is an important part of the reality that we need to learn about in order to understand our own position in the world.

Why "White" Identity?

In focusing on white identity, I am not fetishizing race as white supremacists do. Whiteness, like race in general, is a historical category born of social oppression -- not a fixed biological given. People have, of course, long recognized physical differences among human beings. But only with the African slave trade and the beginnings of world colonization did Europeans begin to freeze this continuum into categories such as "white" and "black," where "white" stood for "superior," and "black" -- or "brown" or "red" or "yellow" -- for "inferior." Color lines, furthermore, differ with time and place. Italians and Greeks, for example, are generally considered "white" in the US. But in West Germany, where "definitions" of race have placed more emphasis on hair color and facial features, these groups have a far more questionable status. These variations underscore how arbitrary racial categories

actually are.

And yet, as the character in Lorraine Hansberry's play Les Blancs comments, it is pointless to pretend that race doesn't exist, simply because it is a lie. When whites protest that we "don't see color," we are simply speaking from the insularity that dominance allows us -- we have the "privilege" of being oblivious to reality. Millions of people in the US do not have such "privilege."

Such denial is very common, and in large part well-meant. Many whites think that the opposite of racial prejudice is "color-blindness"; that all people should be judged on their individual merits; that to emphasize cultural difference is in itself racist. While some of the intentions behind such statements may be good, this attitude misses the point, and frequently has a racist impact on people of color. In a society dominated by white culture, "not seeing color" is either self-delusion or means treating everyone as white, thus invalidating other people's cultures and experiences.

But it is not only people of color who are hurt by this. "Color-blindness" also confuses white people about our own identity:

Because United States culture is centered around White norms, White people rarely have to come to terms with that part of their identity. Ask a White person his or her race, and you may get the response "Italian," "Jewish," "Irish," "English," and so on. White people do not see themselves as White.²⁰

Not only does this help us to avoid responsibility for our own role in racism, but it also makes it hard for us to recognize the positive connections that we have with other white people. It is one of the ways that racism hurts whites by isolating us from each other.

Racism -- How it Affects Whites

White people in the US are a widely varied collection of groups and individuals. Differences of age, economic class, cultural and regional background, education, gender, physical dis/ability, sexual orientation, and other factors radically affect our lives, our struggles, and our roles in the racist system. While recognizing our points of common experience, we also need to honor these differences, and to define our anti-racist work as fundamentally interwoven with struggles against all forms of oppression.

At the same time, racism defines all whites as members of a privileged group. All white people are part of the racist system-- regardless of our intentions, beliefs, or actions. As the dominant group within the system, we receive privilege (and often institutional power) at the expense of people of color. This status is not something we can choose or reject, and we should disabuse ourselves of any notions that "downward mobility" is a viable form of anti-oppression work. We cannot "give up" our white privilege: we can only overthrow it. We can, however, choose whether to hide from the privilege that being white gives us, or to

acknowledge our position and take responsibility to use it for anti-racist work.²¹

But privilege is not a one-dimensional issue. All of us, both whites and people of color, have many different social identities, and most of us have some mixture of dominant and oppressed group membership. These other factors influence the nature and degree of white privilege for each white person: a Protestant male corporate executive, for example, clearly has far more privilege and institutional power than a working-class Jewish woman. Often, our status and privilege also varies with the specific context or social interaction.

Despite our privilege, white people have a direct stake in abolishing racism. For us, racism has a confusing double-edged quality that is seldom addressed: we benefit from it, but we are also hurt by it. Colluding with oppression (passively or actively) desensitizes us to violence, and isolates us from major sections of humanity. Racist ideology burdens us with lies, distortions and ignorance about ourselves and people of color. Psychological training for our privileged role traps us in feelings such as fear, shame, defensiveness, hatred, apathy or helplessness. And by alienating us from important political allies, and fostering the illusion that we are in control of this society, racism bolsters other forms of oppression that often target us directly.

Racism also disempowers us through self-invalidation. As we come to recognize the unfairness of our privilege, we often feel ashamed to be white. Awareness of racist attitudes and behavior often leads us to distrust ourselves and other white people. Even when we want to oppose racism, we may often believe that white people are not really capable of doing so: that we are trapped by our own privilege. This falsehood has done a lot to limit our anti-racist work, or to discourage us from taking any action at all.

Every white person in the US, to some degree or another, learns to think and act in racist ways. We may learn this from our parents or other relatives, from our friends, teachers, employers and co-workers, from books, the media, social and political organizations, etc. Sometimes this indoctrination takes explicit forms, but often it is subtle, implicit and unintentional. For example, I come from a leftist family and alternative schools, where my parents and teachers encouraged me to learn about the culture and struggles of blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans and Vietnamese. But during most periods of my life I have had relatively little personal contact with people of color. This, combined with other messages in the culture around me, taught me to think of people of color as admirable but distant; as people to side with but also, on some level, as people to fear.

It is important to distinguish between racist privilege on the one hand, and racist attitudes and behavior on the other. While we cannot give up our privilege, we can change our racist attitudes and behavior. This is a long-term, continual process, and it can be

a painful one, because it often challenges our conception of ourselves and the world on very deep levels.

Near the beginning of this article I referred to guilt as an ideological tool of oppression for keeping dominant-group members in line. In freeing ourselves from this trap of white privilege, some anti-racists have argued, whites need to look below the surface of guilt at the feelings underneath it. As Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua have written about white feminists:

Guilt is not a feeling. It is an intellectual mask to a feeling. Fear is a feeling -- fear of losing one's power, fear of being accused, fear of a loss of status, control, knowledge. Fear is real. Possibly this is the emotional, non-theoretical place from which serious anti-racist work among white feminists can begin.²²

One of the most courageous writers in addressing this issue directly has been Minnie Bruce Pratt -- white, Christian-raised Southerner, and co-author of Yours in Struggle. She writes about the fear underneath the guilt, and the role it has played in herself and in her culture:

I have learned that my fear is kin to a terror that has been in my birth culture for years, for centuries: the terror of a people who have set themselves apart and above, who have wronged others, and feel they are about to be found out and punished. It is the terror that in my culture has been expressed in lies about dirty Jews who kill for blood, sly Arab hordes who murder, brutal Indians who massacre, animal Blacks who rise in rebellion in the middle of the night and slaughter. It is the terror that has caused the slaughter of all those peoples. It is the terror that was my father, with his stack of John Birch newspapers, his belief in a Communist-Jewish-Black conspiracy. It is the desperate terror, the knowledge that something is wrong, and tries to end fear by attack.²³

Pratt writes, too, of refusing to be imprisoned by this terror, of trying to live "at the edge between my fear and outside, on the edge at my skin, listening, asking, what new thing will I hear, will I see, will I let myself feel, beyond the fear."²⁴ She is striving for connection with other people across (and from) human differences, out of the need to break through her own "privileged" isolation.

Personal Politics

Some people object to white identity politics on the grounds that it focuses too much on feelings. There are activists who attach little or no importance to personal politics -- the politics of everyday feelings, attitudes, experiences. They regard these issues as separate from, or subordinate to, politics in its institutional and intellectual forms. Focusing on personal anti-racist work, they may

argue, is a liberal response which does not get at the root of the problem, and which distracts us from the urgent task of attacking racist institutions. How can whites spend time talking about our feelings while blacks or Native Americans are being murdered?

This dualistic attitude is counterproductive. It may be that personal anti-oppression work has often been used by groups not directly committed to working for institutional change, and often used without a broader political analysis. But to dismiss it on these grounds is like dismissing democratic decision-making procedures on the grounds that they have often been employed by liberal, individualist groups. A movement where feelings are not discussed -- like one in which most people just take orders -- may seem easier or more "efficient" to some activists, but I question how radical -- and how effective in changing society -- such movements are.

We need to look at the political significance of an intellectual approach which denies or belittles the importance of feelings and personal experience. Feminists have long pointed out the sexist implications of this approach, and have criticized men for imposing it on women. But a one-sided intellectualism has racist implications as well. Many white people in this society have better access to schooling than people of color, and receive favored treatment within the educational system, which emphasizes intellectual knowledge at the expense of other forms of expression and learning. In addition, it is often difficult -- and frightening -- for white activists to deal with our own connection to racism, and to look at our feelings and experiences. Thinking of racism in abstract, theoretical terms allows us to distance ourselves from the issue.

At the same time, whites may expect people of color to tell us about their experience with oppression: to provide the "raw material" for our theory. There are two major problems with this. First, it denies white people's ability to gain insight into racism through exploring our own feelings and experiences. Second, it is exploitive and patronizing to expect people of color to educate us about racism, although they may choose to do so in certain circumstances.

Identifying Racist Attitudes

As white anti-racists, we need to avoid the illusion that our analysis, good will or activity insulates us from racist attitudes or behavior. While it is valuable to take stock of our strengths, it is also important not to think of ourselves as "exceptional" whites, an attitude that tends to isolate us from other whites and distort our perspective on their capacity to change.

The trick is to keep ourselves open to criticism, without flagellating ourselves for our own oppressiveness. Remember: the enemy is racism, not ourselves or our white co-workers. Our racist attitudes and behavior do not make us bad people; they stem above all from fear and ignorance -- not malice. Given time and effort, we have the power to change them.

In this section I will list some of the forms of racist thought and action which may be common among White leftists.²⁵ These attitudes play a role in many political groups, including anti-racist groups:

- * treating racism as less important than other issues;
- * using language which is offensive to people of color (e.g. "Oriental" instead of Asian);
- * claiming to speak for everyone: treating our white perspective as universal;
- * seeing racism as a "black/white" issue: belittling the culture, experience or oppression of other people of color;
- * treating racism as far away (e.g., condemning apartheid while devoting little attention to racism in the US);
- * paternalism: treating anti-racist work as something we do "for" people of color;
- * using people of color to teach us about racism;
- * assuming that one person of color or a few people of color can speak for or are speaking for all people of color;
- * depending on people of color for approval, expecting credit for being anti-racist;
- * expecting people of color to tell white people when we do something racist;
- * not taking responsibility for our own racism.

Along with these attitudes and acts, the character of a group's organization may perpetuate racism in various ways. The group's focus of concern may discount the priorities of people of color. The location of meetings and events may be geared to white people's convenience or comfort; publicity may predominantly reach White People. White people may automatically gravitate to leadership positions or tend to dominate discussions. Meetings characterized mainly by intellectual discussion, without respect for other forms of learning or expression, may be alienating and uninteresting for people of color. Organizational structures may reinforce white privilege within the group. On the other hand, a loosely-organized, "informal" style of work, perhaps intended as a reaction against bureaucratic forms, may actually help to exclude people of color if it means that unspoken power dynamics go unchecked.

In racially mixed groups, as well as in groups of white people only, it is particularly important for whites to take the initiative to interrupt racist comments or dynamics, rather than wait for people of color to do this. Sometimes this may require a confrontational approach; sometimes it can be done gently, e.g., by supplying missing information. Taking the initiative in this way can help to develop trust and cooperation across groups; it can also help us to develop trust in ourselves and other whites.

Coalitions and Homes

"Coalition work is not work done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is

some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition. You don't get a lot of food in a coalition. You don't get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You go to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more."

-- Bernice Johnson Reagon,
"Coalition Politics: Turning the Century"²⁶

A political organization or movement which brings together people from different backgrounds or social groups is a coalition. As many activists have long recognized, coalitions are vital to social change: bridging the divisions which oppression imposes on us can be a major source of political strength.

To be effective and genuine, coalition politics must acknowledge and respect our differences. Too often, political "coalitions" have exploited certain groups by refusing to honor their needs. Too often, calls for "unity" have been used to suppress or hide differences or conflicts, with the result that the "unified" voice remains that of dominant groups claiming to speak for everyone.

As Bernice Johnson Reagon notes, honest coalition work can be extremely difficult and uncomfortable, and this discomfort is often a sign that honest coalition work is taking place. In order to retain the strength needed to continue this work, we often need supportive places or groups -- "homes" -- where we can return to be with members of our own social groups.

The coalition/home distinction is not clear-cut: since all of us have many different social identities, almost any group is likely to cut across at least some of these lines. Depending on the focus and context, some groups will probably feel "safer" than others, although tensions or conflicts may arise that reflect identity-differences.

In this connection, white anti-racist groups can be an important basis for or complement to coalition work. For the most part this kind of grouping takes place informally: we rarely recognize groups as "white people's" groups, even if they are all-white. Anti-racist groups which are all- or mostly-white may be sensitive to charges that they are excluding people of color. But if we acknowledge that it is important for us to come together as white people -- precisely in relation to anti-racist work -- this will enable us more clearly to understand and counter the ways in which we throw up barriers to people of color when we are trying to build coalitions.

An all-white context gives us an opportunity to look at our own experiences and feelings about racism, without hurting people of color or making ourselves feel defensive faced with their anger. It enables us to avoid the racist dynamic which exploits people of color by setting them up to educate white people about racism, and denies our own ability to teach and learn from each other. It challenges us to confront our distrust of ourselves and other white people about racism. It enables us to develop strategies for intervening against racism in other parts of our life, including how to recognize and interrupt racist dynamics in anti-racist and other political groups.

This work requires a certain kind of balance: On the one hand, we need to be direct and specific in challenging each other to change when necessary. On the other, we need to cultivate an atmosphere of trust, and to avoid judging each other as people for the racist indoctrination we have retained. Without an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, it is extremely difficult for us to move beyond superficial discussions about our own racism. If we are to change, we need to be honest with ourselves and each other, and speak as much as possible from our own feelings and experience. Clearly, intellectual discussion, too, has an important role, but we should be careful not to use abstract analysis as a way to avoid facing ourselves.

Conclusion

If we are to develop the kind of broad-based social movement necessary for systematic change, a self-affirming politics of white identity will help us much more than an anti-racist perspective burdened by self-blame and denial. First, it will help us to solidify our own long-term commitment to anti-racist work, and strengthen our confidence and ability to act right now. Second, it will help persuade other white people to join us. Part of the appeal of white supremacist groups, historically, has been that they filled a psychological void: they have been virtually the only ones that publicly "affirm" white people -- although in a drastically distorted way. We need to undercut this appeal -- particularly now, during a period of increasing racial tension -- by holding out a positive, anti-racist alternative to "disaffected" whites.

Third, white identity politics will help us work more effectively with people of color. People of color are more likely to trust us, and we are more likely to trust them as well as each other, if we commit ourselves confidently to the task of unlearning our own racist indoctrination. There is a lot that we can draw on in this effort. As white people we are experts on racism, if we can learn to trust what we already know.