

## What Does it Feel like to be White?

Emotion, hegemony, and the creation of reliable white allies.<sup>1</sup>

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*"What does it feel like being white?"*

*"It doesn't feel like anything. "*

*"I'm not white."*

*"Being white doesn't feel like anything, I just feel like a person."*

*"When I think about race I get kind of numb."*

*"Mostly I feel guilty."*

*"I hate whiteness and I hate being white."*

I've been doing work on developing awareness among whites around racism for six years now. Some of that work has taken place in a staff development class I co-teach with two of my colleagues at De Anza College, Truly Hunter and Jean Miller. It started out as "White Awareness of Racism" a class intended for white faculty and staff. It evolved into "Whiteness and Racism," a class for both whites and people of color, for faculty and students. The goal of the class is to help people to have a deeper understanding of racism in order to become active in efforts to fight it.<sup>2</sup> Other work has involved retreats for women on campus, deigned to build ally relationships between white women and women of color.

We have found in our work that some people go through a major transformation, and

their practice on campus is significantly different after taking the class. But we have also had some spectacular failures. Quite a few people have remained relatively unchanged, and have gone on to act in ways that are profoundly racist.

In this paper I'd like to explore some of the emotional experiences that many whites go through in coming to an awareness of their place in the racial structure, and I explore some questions around what keeps white people committed to anti-racism, and what pulls them back toward ways of being that uphold white supremacy.<sup>3</sup>

There is a significant discussion in the literature on whiteness about how to understand the identities of whites who are committed to anti-racism. Many authors have developed schemas for understanding the cognitive stages whites go through in developing anti-racist consciousness<sup>4</sup> Others have called for being "race traitors" by which they mean betraying the white race and giving up on being white<sup>5</sup>. Still others have argued that the whole issue of identity is not important, rather, those socially positioned as whites, need to act in anti-racist ways, and give up on any navel gazing that might lead them to wonder about their own identities.<sup>6</sup>

This paper takes the position that self-exploration and personal emotional work are crucial parts of the development of lasting anti-racist consciousness, and that the development of an anti-racist consciousness is important for keeping a person oriented well to doing anti-racist activism. Whites who have not gone through a serious process of emotional transformation will often do anti-racist work from a place of guilt, or with a missionizing sense of superiority. I believe that the more a person has worked through the emotions discussed in this paper, the more likely it is that they will be able to weather some of the storms that inevitably arise doing anti-racist work. If a person is engaged in a form of anti-racist practice from a place of entitlement and superiority, people of color are likely to avoid contact with them, or to call them on their behavior. A white person who hasn't worked through some of the emotional steps

discussed in this paper is likely to be deeply hurt and to understand that hurt as arising from mistreatment. All of this will be likely to lead the white person away from activism, and back to a place of comfort. And fear of the possibilities of this type of hurt keeps many whites from even beginning to engage in anti-racist work.

Part of the emotional work required to open a person to a commitment to anti-racism involves finding one's way to a new sense of self. For a person's anti-racism to be sustained over the long term, dramatic changes in one's sense of self are important. People need to move from experiencing themselves unproblematically as white in the ways that function to uphold the dominant system to a sense of themselves as part of an alternative, anti-racist, system of meaning.<sup>7</sup>

White people who haven't really investigated anti-racism often minimize the realities of racism. If they do acknowledge those realities, they rarely are able to look at the ways that they themselves are implicated in racist structures without falling into guilt or denial. The race traitors avoid this psychological morass by attempting to sidestep it. By saying they have abandoned being white, they can leave the legacy of being oppressors behind. If this were possible, it might be the best alternative.

In an essay that has been influential in academic discussion of whiteness, "What Should White People Do?," Linda Martín Alcoff criticizes the race traitors, claiming that, "Whites cannot disavow whiteness. One's appearance of being white will still operate to confer privilege in numerous and significant ways, and to avow treason does not render whites ineligible for those privileges, even if they work hard to avoid them."<sup>8</sup>

As an alternative, drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois, she argues for the need to develop "white double consciousness." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes the phenomenon of double consciousness.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking

at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,-- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>9</sup>

Alcoff argues for adapting Du Bois' idea for whites. She calls for a white double consciousness which

requires an ever present acknowledgement of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community. The Michelangelos stand beside the Christopher Colombuses, and Noam Chomskys next to the Pat Buchanans. The legacy of European-based cultures is a complicated one. It is better approached through a two-sided analysis than an argument that obscures either its positive or its negative aspects. White representations within multiculturalism must then be similarly dialectical, retrieving from obscurity the history of white antiracism even while providing a detailed account of colonialism and its many cultural effects.<sup>10</sup>

One big difference between what Alcoff is proposing, and Du Bois' idea, though is that what Du Bois is describing is a painful but unavoidable situation. For a person of color in the US, the only alternative to Du Bois' double consciousness is a self-hatred that merely accepts the dominant identity. In contrast, white privilege allows those of us who are white to inhabit a dominant form of white consciousness that tells us that we are rational, moral, and insightful. What Alcoff doesn't explore in her essay is just why a white person would want to attain double consciousness. If most of the culture around us supports our membership in the club of

unconscious racists, and if we lose privilege and self-esteem by adopting white double consciousness, what would motivate a person to adopt it?

The idea that it is possible to motivate white people to become active participants in challenging racism flies in the face of many people's ideas about how power and privilege operate. If people are motivated by self-interest, and whites benefit from racism, then what would motivate a white person to challenge racism?

One way people have tried to make sense of white anti-racism from within the model of self-interest is to look at the ways that white folks are hurt by racism. Harry Haywood, a Black communist organizer wrote in 1948,

It is not accidental, then,, that where the Negroes are most oppressed, the position of whites is also most degraded.... “[K]eeping the Negro down” spells for the entire South the nation’s lowest wage and living standards....

Sharecropping has drawn into its orbit tens of thousands of poor white farmers.... Political controls which are aimed primarily at the disenfranchisement of the Negro have also resulted in depriving the mass of the poor whites of their right to the ballot.<sup>11</sup>

In her essay “The Souls of White Folk,” Mab Segrest focuses on the psychological damage done to whites by white supremacy. Arguing for forms of psychotherapy which include realistic assessments of systems of oppression, including racism, Segrest points out that an enormous amount of the psychic pain dealt with in therapy has its roots in systems of oppression. Discussing the costs of racism to whites she writes, “Racism costs us intimacy. Racism costs us our affective lives. Racism costs us authenticity. Racism costs us our sense of connection to other humans and the natural world. Racism costs us our spiritual selves.”<sup>12</sup> Being clear to not equate the pain of being an oppressor with the pain of oppression, she writes of the emotional pain caused by the dehumanization associated with white racism. “Our

acknowledging that emotional cost helps keep our white ethical/political solidarity from slipping over into a new form of paternalism.”<sup>13</sup>

While I think Segrest is right to focus on the psychic costs of racism to whites, her point and Haywood’s don’t completely answer the question of what could motivate a white person to engage in anti-racist struggle. No matter what the costs of whiteness are, there clearly are individual interests that are served by racism. Access to home mortgages, access to advancement in careers, a sense of prestige, pride and entitlement, along with an easy outlet for any negative feelings through scapegoating, all serve our “self-interest.”

Many kinds of interests are served by racism and many kinds of interest are harmed by it. And yet, people do not choose which side to stand on politically by making a careful calculation of the costs and benefits of each side, and then choosing the side with the most benefits. Rather, certain ways of being seem attractive in some contexts, and unappealing in others. Part of the work of sustaining people’s commitments to anti-racism is to find ways for them to settle into an anti-racist sense of self. The question becomes how to understand what pulls a person toward one kind of self and what keeps them tied to another.

Michel Foucault’s notion that power should be seen not just as pushing people down, but as also constructing us as who we are is somewhat helpful for understanding this phenomenon. Different networks of emotional and subjective meaning create different people with different emotional landscapes and different senses of self. New selves and new relations of power are created through practices that weave new networks of meaning. What Foucault has never been very helpful for, though, is understanding how these micro politics of power relate to macro operations. How is it that different senses of self are connected to operations of power like racism?

In their book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe attempt to answer this question drawing on both Foucault and Antonio Gramsci.<sup>14</sup> One of the goals of their book is to show the radical contingency of political positions that people take. They argue that the

Marxist tradition has generally rested on an assumption that people's real interests could be known through analysis, and the problem of politics then becomes one of trying to get people to see this underlying truth. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe argue that what is in people's interest is radically wrapped up in systems of meaning.

How people come to see their interests can never be known through some sort of objective analysis. Instead, they argue that people come to have a sense of what they want from life through the systems of meaning they inhabit. So for example, a white academic woman who sees herself as successful and important because of her education, is likely to be invested in maintaining a system of academic prestige which devalues the insights and knowledge bases of people without formal education. She will have a "self interest" in maintaining the value of her education. This same person may also have interests that are served by making an alliance with working class women who do not have a formal education. But, as long as the sub-culture of academic prestige is crucial for her sense of self, those other alliances are likely to seem unnatural to her. From Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe borrow the idea of hegemony, according to which the work of politics is to weave systems of meaning such that powerful political coalitions can be built.

They use the concepts of articulation to refer to the process whereby a person comes to understand themselves in a way that makes their sense of who they are accord with a different system of meaning. People become articulated to, or attached to, new ways of seeing themselves through a combination of personal change in how one sees oneself, and the political work of creating hegemonic blocks/. These hegemonic blocks are built by the creation of systems of meaning through which people come to see their interests as shared. A significant part of the work of political activists is to weave together new systems of meaning, such that people see themselves as the kinds of people who are interested in a shared set of goals. Part of this work is cultural and political, and part of it is personal and emotional.

Applying that to our context, a significant part of anti-racist training needs to be the creation

of systems of meaning whereby whites can see themselves as part of a culture of anti-racism that is attractive to them for some reason. It doesn't need to flatter them or make them comfortable. Indeed, being tied to flattery and comfort are some of the hallmarks of dominant forms of whiteness. But it does need to be a place they want to live for some reason. Following the Gramscian tradition, I call this new identity a "counter-hegemonic self," meaning it is a self that is woven into a system of meaning and desire that sees its self-interests as served by anti-racist practices. The new identity serves a hegemony that is "counter" to the dominant one.

In our class we have found that the emotional and intellectual process our students go through is often powerful for ungluing the old system of articulation. Many students have their sense of reality radically shaken, and find the process profoundly disturbing.

When I think about the differences between those for whom this process has lasting impact, and those for whom it wears off quickly, the main difference is that for those who make a lasting change, the class is associated with a shift in how they position themselves in their social networks. They make real connections with other white allies, go on to study anti-oppression issues, and get involved with anti-racist activism on campus. Those who have remained relatively unchanged have generally moved in the same social circles they began in. Of course it's hard to know the causality here, but I think that it is very difficult to maintain a transformed consciousness in a non-transformed environment.

Racial meanings don't just float outside of any social context. Rather they are constructed by our lived social realities. Different lived realities support different senses of self, and different senses of self support different views of what our interests are. Rearticulation into a new social network profoundly shifts the systems of meaning a person inhabits. For articulation into a new set of racial meanings to be long-lasting, it needs to be connected to a larger movement, or at least a larger community of people who share that alternative set of meanings.



The movement from articulation to one hegemony, to articulation to another is a complex process, laden with much emotional intensity. Shifting from being a white person who unconsciously upholds racist ideology to one who acts in the world in ways that challenge white supremacy is not merely a matter of political choice. Rather, the shift in perspective involves a significant transformation of how one feels, and not attending to these feelings can make the process much more likely to be derailed.

This section of the paper explores some of the emotional issues that are likely to arise in a white person going through a consciousness-raising process, and some of the ways that dealing with those emotional issues can be productive for developing a self that is interested in racial justice.

The first section- numbness is the longest, because that's the emotional state that whites typically inhabit the most profoundly. In our class we have often found that students who are able to get over their feelings of numbness are often then thrown into a roller coaster of much more dynamic feelings.

### **Section 1- Numbness.**

When my co-teachers and I ask students "What does it mean to be white?" or "What does it feel like being white?" the usual answer is something along the lines of "It feels like nothing." I interpret this as meaning three different but interrelated things. One is that it feels like nothing in particular. As a white person I have feelings like anyone does, and there are no special feelings associated with being white. Another interpretation is that being white means a certain lack of feeling. Being white means being emotionally shut down. And thirdly, it means that it feels like nothing. Being white means having an absence of feeling around race or having an a-historical sense of self that is cut off from an awareness of its own racial implicated ness.

## Section 1a: Numbness about having a race

*"Being white doesn't feel like anything special."*

Whiteness is the unmarked norm against which other people's experience is measured. Whiteness, like maleness spent much of its recent history being relatively unexplored, especially by white people. Asking us to look at how it feels to be white is like asking a fish how it feels to be in water. Exploring unmarked hegemonic categories is crucial for challenging their hegemonic status, but it is always very difficult. Like exploring the ways that maleness has dominated philosophy: it is both everywhere and nowhere, and attempts to describe it often feel vacuous and over-generalized.

One of the exercises we do in class is to ask students to list some of the characteristics of white culture in order to help them catch some glimpses of it. They usually list things like hotdogs, television, Western classical music, bluegrass, restrained interpersonal styles, arrogance, processed food. Much of what they come up with is also what they think of as American, and much time is spent talking about the relationship between "American" and "white" which are so often taken as synonyms. This perception is sometimes voiced by Asian immigrants when they refer, for example, to a white girl as "that American girl."

When someone says that there is no special feeling associated with being white, part of what they are saying is that white ways are the normal, regular, vanilla ways; that they are so ordinary as to go unnoticed, and to not be worthy of notice. As long as a white person maintains a blindness to their own racialization, they have no choice but to act in ways that support the dominant racial system. When the self is created as the normative ideal, there is an automatic marginalizing of those positioned outside that ideal. Whiteness as an unmarked norm works as a standard against which others are measured and found wanting.

Being able to perceive one's self as having a particular way is an important early step in anti-racist consciousness. Once a person begins to decenter their consciousness and see their way as one

among many, it is possible for them to see the need to move over and make room for others.

Without being very conscious of the process, many white people close their eyes to the ways that they are implicated in systems of racism. We are encouraged by dominant cultural systems to experience ourselves as without race and as generic people. Pulling away from that form of consciousness involves loss of acceptance by those still articulated into dominant ways of being. If we accept an anti-racist consciousness, we will put ourselves into a situation where we will find it hard to hold onto some of the unearned privileges we have been given. We are less likely to feel the inflated self-confidence that comes with white privilege; we open ourselves to having our worldviews relativized, with all of the insecurities and uncertainties that that entails; and we are less likely to make political choices that support white supremacy. Our ability to maintain our privilege is greatly helped by our unawareness of its existence, and numbness to one's own racialization facilitates that unawareness.

### **Section 1b: Numbness as a lack of emotionality**

While water has no texture to a fish, it does have texture. And those not living in water can feel it when they touch it. Whiteness isn't just absence, it is a reality that has its own emotional ways. One of the dominant ways that students in our class feel their whiteness, once they begin to see that there is something to be felt, is as numbness.

The second reading I want to give of the statement being white doesn't feel like anything is that whites, like males, are not supposed to feel very much. Western epistemology is built upon dualisms of reason versus emotion, mind over body, male over female, and white over black.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Mask* offers a powerful analysis of how these dualisms operate with respect to race. He describes the ways that whites construct themselves as rational and intellectual while constructing Blacks as passionate, sexual and wildly emotional. One of my favorite parts of that book is when Fanon describes how white attraction to Black culture is often

about the need for a sense of liveliness to save us from the deadness of our own culture. When we need to feel alive and sensual we go to blacks and get those feelings vicariously.<sup>15</sup>

When whites first begin to feel their whiteness, once they begin to see the water they are surrounded by, they often want to reject it. They romanticize what it means to be a person of color; often, appropriating speech patterns or styles of dress from people of color. When we've worked with young people, we often find that some try to escape from the ugliness they see in whiteness by trying to identify with a subculture, such as punk or hippie. Like the race traitors, some of our students try to find a form of whiteness that is outside the nexus of white supremacy. Because we believe that white supremacy is ubiquitous, we encourage students to explore the ways that white supremacy and racism manifest themselves within these supposedly oppositional sub-cultures, and instead try to encourage an identification with those active in anti-racist struggles, whether from the mainstream or from sub-cultures. Some students who had been seamlessly articulated into the dominant discourse of white supremacy come to experience that hegemony as problematic. They come to see some of the water they are swimming in, and they usually don't like it. A crucial step in the rearticulation from articulation into the dominant hegemony to articulation in a counter-hegemonic one is detachment from the first.

### **Section 1c: numbness as disconnection**

The third variation on *"Being white doesn't feel like anything"* is the idea that part of being white is being cut off, being locked into an a-historical and a-social sense of self. Some of the numbness associated with being white comes from the process of becoming white and losing our connections to our ethnic cultural pasts and not being able to see our connections to our history as white subjects either.

In an article published in 1965 entitled "White Man's Guilt" James Baldwin writes:

The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, therefore, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating; one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.<sup>16</sup>

When I think of my own racial trajectory, I understand Baldwin as talking about the costs associated with becoming white, and the ways that once I become white I become incorporated into the racial formation of society in a particular way. My whiteness works as privilege and that privilege comes from my connection to the historical acts of whites before me. No matter how short a time my people have been in the country, once I become white my present consciousness and social position are inextricably linked to the realities of slavery, manifest destiny, Chinese exclusion, genocide, Jim Crow, etc.

The terror which Baldwin speaks of is a terror of seeing ourselves in our historicity. Denial of this historicity leaves us trapped in an empty present. Trapped because the walls of our consciousness are necessarily small when we are not able to look at our context which is fundamentally historical and connected to atrocities.

When I was born, my parents were in the process of giving up their ethnicities. My mother comes from an Irish and Portuguese Catholic family. My father's parents were East European Jews. Some of their desire to leave behind their ethnicities came from the conflict generated in their families because of their mixed marriage. But also, my father was embarrassed about being a Jew.

My father and my uncles loved telling jokes at the expense of Jews, and their Jewishness came out much more strongly in their homes than it did in public. My mother hated being working class and Catholic in the rich Protestant town where she grew up. She also hated the dysfunction and pain that was still attached to the immigrant experiences of her parents. So they packed my brother and me up at an early age and moved our nuclear family from the northeast to southern California where we became thoroughly white and middle class. We became people without a particular history or ethnicity. We became suburban Americans: true and unambiguous white folks.

And within my own nuclear family what I mostly heard about ethnicity was an embarrassed silence. I was connected enough to my extended family to have another experience, but the dominant experience of my growing up was as another unmarked a-historical white person. The dominant emotional quality of my family was tightness and denial: everything was supposed to be fine all the time. Feelings ended up flat. In my family I see this repression as related to the process through which we lost our complex ethnic and histories and became, at least for a while, thoroughly white. White people who are strongly connected to their ethnic pasts tend to have less of this numbness. Jews and Italians often barely identify as white. The cultures that we came from all have their own pleasures and emotional ways of experiencing the world. The numbness I am describing is related to the a historical whiteness that Baldwin describes.

One of the conclusions I've drawn from the struggles I and others have gone through over trying to develop historical consciousness is that we must identify with and explore our ethnic pasts and the ways that ethnicity has been transformed into whiteness. This identification can help ground us in our histories and help us get in touch with what we lose when we become white.

And yet, it is important that we not take this as a way of avoiding looking at the ways that we are socially constructed as white. Many whites want to use their ethnicity as an escape hatch from racial responsibility. One might say "I'm not white because we're Italian immigrants" or "I'm not white; I'm Jewish." White double consciousness would call for seeing one's connections to the

horrors of white supremacy, while at the same time seeing oneself as a different kind of white person.

When I see myself realistically in the context of my historical trajectory, I am both constructed as white and incorporated into the systems of whiteness and I am an ex-ethnic who can reconnect with the suppressed realities of my ethnicities. This ethnic identification is possible for all whites, even those whose families originated in England. All of us come from historical trajectories of people who had complex cultures that are worth identifying with, which are different from the dominant cultural expressions of whiteness.

This sense of our own historical situatedness is a crucial part of the building of a counter-hegemonic form of white identity. Being aware of how we are implicated in racist constructions of normal and good ways of being allows us to see the ways that racism is built deeply into the fabric of our society, and the fabric of each one of us. An anti-racist consciousness must be able to integrate into itself the cruel realities of our history

Du Bois talks about the “dogged strength” it takes to keep from being “torn asunder” by the two sides of Black double-consciousness.<sup>17</sup> A white person trying to maintain white double consciousness might also feel somewhat torn apart if they haven’t processed their tendency to feel guilt and shame.

## **Section 2- Guilt and Shame**

Students who are able to come out of the immobilized place of a historical white numbness, usually end up spending some time mired in the swamps of white guilt. Once I begin to see my connections to the context of white supremacy that forms the background against which my identity is formed, my bank account filled, and my sense of self anchored, if I am a fair-minded person where can I go but to guilt? And there is a good side to guilt: when a person feels guilty it means that they are looking at negative histories and are seeing their connections to them. They

feel implicated and connected and they are feeling grief at that connection.

But this guilt is like a black hole that exists in the interstices between being fully articulated into the dominant discourse of whiteness and a leap to a whiteness that can see the ways that racism operates in our daily lives. The down side of guilt is that it can be immobilizing and self-serving. It becomes a trap when people are so stuck in feeling bad about themselves that they are not able to work positively. It is difficult to look at our embeddedness and not feel bad about ourselves. And if looking at the realities of racism and how we are implicated in them makes us feel bad about ourselves, we are likely to simply avoid the subject. Guilt is often such a charged feeling that it ends up short-circuiting our ability to discuss racism, never mind to act against it. The subject raises for us things we can't look at, so we often assume that these feelings are caused by another person attempting to shame us.

According to psychoanalyst Andrew Morrison, shame is "a manifestation of painful and incomplete autonomy and identity, reflected in a vulnerability to hostile and rejecting significant (internal and external) objects."<sup>18</sup> What I like about Morrison's perspective is the notion that shame is about a lack of differentiation, an inability to have a realistic sense of the relationship between some negative situation and myself. If I do not have a realistic understanding of my relationship to the social structures and historical trajectories that construct my world, then contact with them get short-circuited into being a statement about the core of my being. I am bad, because I am connected to these ugly forces.

Only when I have a realistic sense of just how I am connected to these forces can I see myself as both related to and different from them. I can see that yes they construct my world and my relation to it, but that doesn't mean that I am therefore an evil person. This differentiation takes a while and it requires the person developing an anti-racist consciousness to keep looking at the horrors and to work hard at developing a productive relationship with them.

Aversion to guilt and the feelings of shame it raises is like a bomb that must be diffused in



anti-racist training work. One way of diffusing it is to ask students to be gentle with themselves. The other is to make a clear distinction between guilt and responsibility: we are trying to move students to a place of taking responsibility for challenging racism. We are not trying to make them feel bad about themselves.

Here is another place where awareness of anti-racist white histories becomes important. Identifying an alternative system of meaning – being white has meant for some a commitment to dismantling white supremacy -- allows whites in transition to know that they aren't damned to inhabit the ugly realities of racist white consciousness or self-loathing

### **Section 3-Embarrassment**

As whites begin to develop a realistic historical consciousness, they often find themselves deeply embarrassed about the way they were before they had these new realizations. One of the pillars of white consciousness is a sense of having one's worldview be the center of the universe. *My way of thinking and of being are the normal natural and right ways of being.* Once this security is shaken it is a troubling shift to begin to see one's own worldview as one among many, to have one's consciousness relativized.

Even worse is the feeling that when it comes to consciousness of race and the ways that white people act as seen from the outside, other people actually know more about us than we know about ourselves. This can lead to a powerful sense of insecurity.

From a sense of self, buttressed by the powers and privileges of white supremacy, we move to a self that is vulnerable, raw, and exposed. An anti-racist consciousness needs to include a strong dose of humility. A person who is dedicated to never making mistakes or seeming ignorant is not one who can inhabit an anti-racist consciousness for long. A tolerance of embarrassment is a good first step. I have found that for myself, as I became less invested in having everything already figured everything out all the time, I came to experience moments of being made aware of my

blind-spots less as embarrassing, and more as interesting. I stopped being embarrassed when I stopped believing that I shouldn't make mistakes.

#### **Section 4 Anger:**

I see anger manifesting in two different ways in anti-racist consciousness-raising: One is anger at oneself for ignorance. The other is anger at the dominant social order for having presented such a mystified picture of the world that we were able to go around being ignorant for so long, and for the system of racist injustices that mistreat people we are now able to feel some empathy for and connection with.

Anger at the self can be debilitating because it can lead to self-absorption and can take one back to the traps associated with guilt. But anger at the world usually seems like a helpful place to be. I think it can only be a trap when it leads to a righteousness and intolerance of people who are in the process of trying to figure out how racism works.

I know for myself that it is a mixture of anger and sadness at the injustices of racism that keeps me motivated to do antiracist work, and these emotions seem productive.

The anger helps put power behind the emotional links to the counter-hegemonic self.

#### **Conclusion**

If we want to help whites become committed activists in the fight against racism, we need to support their transformation from an identification with dominant forms of whiteness to an identification with anti-racist ways of being white. My experience tells me that such transformation is not only possible, but that it happens quite frequently. We aren't simply autonomous individuals motivated by an interest in privilege. Rather, subjects are created and articulated into systems of meaning. Political realities can shift the field of possible locations for individuals, making it more possible and desirable to become a part of the process of dismantling racism, than to remain an

active or passive part of the dominant hegemonies. We can move into a different system of meaning. As we do so, we begin the process of creating a new self.

There are of course, powerful pulls to maintain our connection with dominant forms of white racial identity. There is comfort and ease in going with the dominant program, and not much in the everyday lives of white people that makes us have to look at the painful realities associated with racism. There are feelings of pain, awkwardness, and shame that a white person is likely to have to deal with to get to an anti-racist sense of self.

And yet, as a result of the many forms of anti-racist action going on in the broader society, the field of racial realities is shifting, and there is much that is to be desired in switching sides and working to dismantle the privileges we've been given. Our experience of our own being in the world can be much less flat and numb, we are more likely to be able to form authentic relationships, as we are able to have a richer and more realistic sense of ourselves, and we can feel ourselves to be part of a powerful and inspiring movement for social justice. At least some of the interests of the white self are satisfied by being anti-racist.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Jean Miller and Truly Hunter for the inspiration and insights that grew out of the work we do together; Jean Miller, David Kim, Kai Lundgren Williams and Sharon Martinas for comments on this paper; and David Kim for the push to write it in the first place.

<sup>2</sup> Our class draws heavily on the model developed by Judith Katz in her book, *White Awareness*. In that book, Katz argued for the importance of a whites only class in order to keep whites from relying too much on people of color to teach them, and give them "authentic" experiences. If the goal is for whites to understand their own place in the racial structure, then it's important for the class to not just focus on the experiences of people of color. After the first three years of teaching or course, we opened it to a mixed group of whites and people of color. Actually, Truly Hunter, who now is one of the teachers of the class "broke the race barrier" and integrated the class by signing up for it. After the change, we found that there was an incredible need among people of color on our campus for a deeper understanding of the nature of racism, and have found that as long as we interrupt some of the dynamics Katz warned against, it has been incredibly fruitful to our work on campus to have people of color in the class. Judith Katz, *White Awareness: Handbook for Anti-racism Training*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma

Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> The term “white supremacy” may seem surprising to some readers. I use it to refer to a system that privileges those socially positioned as white, or which make whites “supreme.” Most of the actions which support white supremacy are carried out by people who have no idea that they are acting to uphold a racist system, and many would feel bad if they knew they were doing so. Still, the results of the actions of average people acting in mundane ways is a system which is deeply racist, and “white supremacist.”

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Mark M. Leach, John T. Behrens, and N. Kenneth LaFleur, “White Racial Identity and White Racial Consciousness: Similarities, Differences, and Recommendations,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling & Development*, (2002), 30: 2, pp. 66-71; and Janet E. Helms, *Black and White Racial Identity* (New York: Greenwood, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Ignatiev, Noel, and John Garvey, *Race Traitor* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See for example, Paul Taylor, “Silence and Sympathy: Dewey’s Whiteness,” in *What White Looks Like: African American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question*, ed. George Yancey (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Audrey Thompson, “Tiffany, friend of People of Color: White Investments on Antiracism,” *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 2003, 16-1, 7-29.

<sup>7</sup> While there are an infinite number of ways of being white, many of which support the dominant racial system and many of which don’t, I use this simple binary of racist, and anti-racist white consciousness. I do this in part because I believe that while there are many ways of feeling oneself as white that are consistent with anti-racism, there is a hegemonic block created by the anti-racist projects which often see themselves as related to one another, and which therefore pull anti-racist whites into some sort of commonality.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” *Hypatia*, (1998), 13:3, 6-26, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Signet, 1969), p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> Alcoff, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Harry Haywood, “Shadow of the Plantation” in *Black on White, Black writers on What it means to be White*, ed. David Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), p. 126-8.

<sup>12</sup> Mab Segrest, “The Souls of White Folks,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Segrest p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York: Verso, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt" in *Black on White: Black Writers on What it Means to be Whit*, ed. David Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), p. 321.

<sup>17</sup> Du Bois p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 30.