



TALK AMONGST YOURSELVES

ILL WILL

CITY INHOSPITABLE

TALK AMONGST YOURSELVES: FROM WHITE GUILT TO RACE TRAITORS

CITY INHOSPITABLE

First published August 2021
Ill Will Editions

Modern psychology is desert psychology: when we lose the faculty to judge—to suffer and condemn—we begin to think that there is something wrong with us if we cannot live under the conditions of desert life. Insofar as psychology tries to ‘help’ us, it helps us to ‘adjust’ to those conditions, taking away our only hope, namely that we, who are not of the desert though which we live in it, are able to transform it into a human world. Psychology turns everything topsy-turvy: precisely because we suffer under desert conditions we are still human and still intact; the danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it.

—Hannah Arendt

The Cop In My Head

In my youth, I attended a “magnet” public high school in Raleigh, NC, located in a Black neighborhood. Black students were districted there, and white kids from richer neighborhoods like my sister and me were bussed in. In theory, this was to support integration. In practice, it created a school-within-a-school, where the bussed-in white and AAPI students dominated the AP/IB programs and the Black and Latinx students remained in the “standard” courses. Despite the segregation, it was this environment that introduced me to the superior hip-hop station 102JAMZ operating out of Greensboro, ninety minutes away. In June 2007, when I was fourteen, the radio station hosted its annual concert, SuperJam. The lineup featured artists I was obsessed with: Omarion, DJ Unk, and Crime Mob. My sister and I and her friends, all of us white, piled into her Ford Taurus and drove to Greensboro for the show.

Race wasn’t on my mind at all. Nor my sister’s, then seventeen. We loved rap and the tickets were cheap. Upon arrival, we realized we were three of very few white attendees. In the parking lot a group of kids leaned out of the windows of a school bus and yelled ‘Are y’all going to SuperJam?’ incredulously. Upon my hollered confirmation, the conversation devolved into shrieks of delight. Maybe our presence was an oddity, but it wasn’t unwelcome. I saw the artists I’d wanted, and I screamed and danced and tried to catch the t-shirts shot from the stage.

At some point between then and now, though, something changed. Were I to attend SuperJam now, my whiteness would be at the forefront of my mind. I can’t pinpoint when, but liberal progressive whiteness taught me that I should hesitate before entering majority Black spaces. Not out of fear or disdain, though, but out of a strange self-policing sense of “respect.” No one Black taught me this. But the older I got, the more every interaction I had in Black spaces was dogged by self-observational questions: am I overstepping a boundary? Am I gentrifying? Am I invading? Am I unwelcome? Am I missing something?

The more I learned about whiteness, in college and after, the more I was convinced that I had endless, enormous blind spots regarding race and racism. To enter a majority Black space, I decided, was to be a voyeur, a tourist. It was better, more respectful, to stay out.

Liberal white “antiracism” teaches us that we are so removed from other peoples’ experience of living under white supremacy that we cannot begin to understand or sympathize with it. While there might be some truth in that, instead of galvanizing us to do what we can to destabilize white supremacy from within, it teaches us to doubt our ability to empathize. As a result, the reality of living under white supremacy becomes mythologized beyond all comprehension. In academic and social circles alike, white people walk out of discussions about racial dominance trapped in a cycle of self-hatred, worried that despite all our best efforts, we are still a reification of white supremacy. “White silence” appears as white indifference to racism, but in some cases is motivated by fear. Fear of saying the wrong thing. Fear of misunderstanding. Fear of “speaking over” someone. Fear of “making it worse” or increasing someone’s pain. So, rather than risk the possibility of engaging in one of these conversations, it’s easier to simply stay away. Can’t hurt someone if you’re never in an intimate enough relationship to do so! In this way, antiracist morality replicates familiar patterns of segregation, obscured behind a just mission. When we silo ourselves within white communities, we tell ourselves we’re being respectful. But how much of this silo-ing is rooted in the same fear that keeps us silent? Not fear of Blackness, but of our own discomfort around what our white skin means for our personal identities. As opposed to an understanding of white supremacy as structural oppression, this is antiracism as individual responsibility, a reflection of the “white fragility” that’s become such a hot buzz-phrase.

While the psychologizing lingo of ‘fragility’ and privilege is attractive to liberals looking for an indemnifying moral purification, happily it doesn’t cover the full picture of whiteness. The nationwide uprising around the murder of George Floyd revealed that there’s a whole swath of white people out there who are motivated by a desire not to uphold whiteness but to *exit* it. What do you do when you want to leave, but you don’t know where to go?

If Being White is So Good, Why Do I Feel So Bad?

Let’s say we have a white potential revolutionary. She can see something is deeply wrong with the course of the world. She knows, cognitively, that

she benefits from white privilege, but she doesn't *feel* like she does. She feels crushed, hurt, alone. Maybe she's queer, or poor, or disabled, and suffers under capitalism in ways that feel like they outweigh the benefits of whiteness, and yet her racial privilege still overshadows other aspects of her identity. Her whiteness is a static, inescapable trait, and her skin color has placed her unwillingly within the ranks of a system she finds reprehensible. If "whiteness" is an inescapable monolith, where does that leave her? She feels like she has nowhere she fits: within her white community she's unable to ignore the undercurrent of white supremacy, but she struggles to address it; she sees the damage whiteness has wreaked on the world and she feels implicated in it. She feels complacent, but doesn't know how to *not* be complacent. If she feels like whiteness is an obstacle to global liberation, she can't really be a card-carrying White, right? But what else is there?

Our white potential revolutionary feels powerless in the face of whiteness. She sees intellectual attacks on "white people" (shorthand for white supremacy/institutions of whiteness) as personal attacks because she sees no way to unbecome white. She lashes out and she becomes the noisy annoying white leftist who cannot get past her own desire to be validated as "one of the good ones" by non-white comrades. Maybe she leans into uplifting her own marginalized identities, either her gender presentation or queer sexuality, as factors of identity that mitigate her whiteness. These deviances, especially in white women, become a sort of shorthand designed to quickly signal that one isn't like "other" white people—that she "gets it," because *she's oppressed, too*. What this coping mechanism reveals is that despite these irritating missteps, white potential revolutionaries are hungry for solidarity and desperate to be comrades in struggle.

As her understanding of her own role as a white leftist develops, she listens to middle class and liberal organizers who tell her to "stay in her lane" and "step back" and donate and vote and listen. She has the sense that what she's doing is not enough. But she figures she must have a blind spot—she's missing something. If she tries to do too much, she's overstepping or centering her own voice. She bites her tongue, and if she does speak, it is only in order to self-flagellate.

For many whites, this is where the "social justice" train stops. To question whiteness further would mean risking frightening changes that could

destabilize one's very life and position. However, there will always be some for whom the sense of "wrongness" and inadequacy persists. Chasing after that sense of "not enough" can lead to dot-connection moments. Outside of reading theory and fighting with relatives at Thanksgiving, there are transformative moments where one is struck, like a physical blow, with the brutal simplicity of the interconnectedness of white supremacy, the state, and capitalism. Liberal antiracists will do everything in their power to obfuscate such moments. We were reminded of this fact recently when, in an interview with the New York Times, *White Fragility* author Robin DiAngelo baldly asserted that, "Capitalism is so bound up with racism. I avoid critiquing capitalism—I don't need to give people reasons to dismiss me." White liberals believe that anticapitalism is an impossible and therefore dismissable dream, rather than the only solution to the enduring harm of white supremacy. What white people need, liberals of all races insist, are books, trainings, seminars, study groups, classes, documentaries—anything to overcomplicate the reality, and distract from the realization that whiteness is not a monolith that controls us, and capitalism is not an inevitability.

The George Floyd uprising was a glimpse of power and possibility. Amidst the catharsis of shared rage, there was also a felt desire for real, immediate, demolitionist change. Through looting, destruction of property, and mutual aid, white people rejected whiteness and capitalism simultaneously, and discovered the simplicity of their connectivity. The intrinsic entanglement between whiteness and capitalism was no longer a theoretical postulate, but a tangible truth. The uprising revealed the sheer number of white people willing to stand alongside the Black precariat and proletariat, to put their bodies and lives on the line in service of a revolution that could save all of us, themselves included. As *Endnotes* observed in "Onward Barbarians," the race treason displayed "was not a strategic betrayal [of whiteness] with working class power as its aim, but rather a spontaneous betrayal of neoliberal subjects, fueled by rage and disgust, who refuse to be what they are, and briefly taste, in the confusion of the struggle, what they could be." The spontaneity of this solidarity nevertheless shows that the fragile unanimity of whiteness is breaking down.

I get the sense that many white people *feel* this way, but don't have the language or tools to name what that feeling is. I suspect there are many

others in whom the same deep-seated revolutionary instincts on display last summer are germinating, but who have yet to experience a transformative moment that dispels the smokescreen. Whiteness gives us a lot of blind spots, but we are not blind to the stagnation and racialized exploitation inherent to capitalism, and the force with which the state pushed back against that mass realization last summer only offers further proof that we see clearly.

“The Unsteady Nature of Whiteness”

My transformative moment occurred during the uprising. The revolt taught me that when white people actively resist the state, the state rescinds the white privilege it grants. Initially, this was jarring and scary. I had white skin, so I was supposed to always be protected by my whiteness, even when I thought I didn’t want to be. When the shock wore off, I realized whiteness did not have the static hold on me I thought it did.

In 1995, Joel Olson wrote in *Race Traitor* about this realization, calling it the “unsteady nature” of whiteness. After Minneapolis police murdered Steven Cole, a 23-year-old white man, Olson was part of a crowd of mostly Black and Latinx witnesses. In the crowd, Olson writes, “the respect that whites like myself received depended on the extent to which we did not act as ‘white’—that is, like a cop, a slimy reporter, or a scared moron. Cole, with his back on the grass, did not act white that night. He was in a primarily Black and Chicano neighborhood, he stood up to the cops, and he died for it. To be on the barrel end of a police revolver is to *not* be white in America. Therefore, people stood up for him.”

Whiteness is not primarily about skin color, it’s about behavior. The fact of having white skin defaults us into the club of white supremacy, but through our behavior we can, for brief, dangerous, sometimes euphoric moments, also step outside it. When we let go of white guilt and work instead towards race treason, we make ourselves responsible not for things out of our control (skin color) but for those things we can control (behavior). But, as Olson notes, stepping out of whiteness is ephemeral. Race treason is not a settled state of being, as it is impossible to do constantly. However, the *idea* of race treason as a lighthouse can change the way we navigate the seas, spurring us to take imperfect action in our communities,

rather than seeking perfect atonement for privilege.

White race treason doesn't require white people to know everything or have all the answers. It does require humility. When we recognize that our mistakes are not a reflection of our essential personhood, then investigating actions or choices we have previously made that have upheld white supremacy becomes less painful. When we learn to reflect on behavior as socialization, then we can create strategies to change. We can use these strategies to reveal the unsteadiness of whiteness, using our behavior as a spotlight pointed at its rotten foundations. In *Race Traitor*, Noel Ignatiev wrote that "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity." In my experience, treason to whiteness is also trust and investment in the self. A white identity defined by a disloyalty to white supremacy is more resilient, creative, and empowered than one defined by guilt.

White people must develop the knowledge and resilience necessary to choose active race treason when the next uprising calls for it. If we hope to build a base of potential white race traitors, identifying others who display an intuitive desire to exit whiteness becomes an important task during the lull periods in struggle.

Liberal Pacification, Or Revolutionary Instincts

When we talk about mitigating white privilege, our tendency is to frame it negatively: we're "giving up" privilege; we are those who are willing to lose "our place on the ladder." This paranoid framing makes it easy to explain the shitty behaviors of white leftists as unconscious tactics to uphold white supremacy. By contrast, when we stop mitigating and start to imagine treason, we contribute to expand the imaginations of potential revolutionaries. When we give white people the emotional and intellectual tools to dig into their shitty behaviors, in order to understand their socialization without self-flagellation, we clear a path toward lasting change.

As Adrian Wohlleben wrote earlier this year, "*demolitionism* aims to materially flatten the organs of state power, to make it logistically and socially impossible for the police and courts to assert their claim to rule." Instead of mitigating our privilege, we need to *demolish* whiteness by showing that white people need not be beholden to its rules. Whiteness trains us to see our racial identity as static; it demands a flattening of ex-

perience. Whiteness tells us that justice can be found through the existing systems, if only we throw money at the right organizations, or attend the right permitted protests. When we are spread thin by work, family care, debt, and an unending pandemic, it's easy to look to someone else to tell us what the "right" thing to do is. After all, whiteness can come to seem inescapable and too big to change—it's intimidating and overwhelming to begin the process of experiencing it through the lens of demolitionism instead of mitigation.

It is in the interests of capitalists to capture nascent antiracist energy and channel it into profitable means that do nothing to change the existing system. Corporations and politicians benefit by appearing antiracist and "woke," while white liberals are given an easy balm to soothe their anger and despair. Such performative allyship strangles class solidarity: instead of seeing the ways our lives are crushed similarly by the capitalist elite, we're fixated on mitigating our own guilt in pointless, hand-wringing ways. In this way "justice" becomes equated with "antiracism," but not "anticapitalism."

Let's face it: no lasting change will come from antiracist but pro-capitalist action, as all it does is cast a veneer of diversity and inclusion over a system that continues to grind the proletariat and precariat into the ground. It doesn't feel any different to be beaten by a Black cop, a gay cop or a female cop.

When the connection between whiteness and capitalism is brushed aside, capitalism is framed as unbreakable—a permanent fixture of modern life. But it's not. Comrades live and build outside capitalist structures every day, in mutual aid networks, in free food distribution and markets, through squatting, in medical solidarity organizations, etc. This obfuscation muzzles the revolutionary instincts of white people by claiming that there's no point in breaking down the state, or capitalism, because it's impossible; you can't change capitalism anymore than you can change the color of your own skin. Corporations sell us antiracist delusions of progress to keep us at arm's length from the real solution, the *dangerous* solution.

Given their intertwined natures, we must work toward demolishing whiteness and capitalism simultaneously. If we focus only on whiteness, white supremacy persists in our capitalist structures; if we focus only on

capitalism, white supremacy persists in our socialization and culture. Accepting their interconnectedness allows us to think and act with a more nuanced understanding. Instead of being mired in guilt, we can understand the ways white privilege has drastically eased our lives, as well as the way whiteness has numbed our emotions and strangled our thought. Holding both of these realities in view allows resistance to come from a place not of guilt and reactivity but of reparative imagination, and an understanding that a world without whiteness and capitalism is a better world for us all--white people included.

Downtime

What now? Wohlleben focuses on the power of the demolitionist gesture as an expression of self-trust, a recovery of experience, and a break from the social justice apparatus that attempts to quell revolutionary energy. But without the practical community and immediate physicality of an uprising, how can white people shift from defanged “allies” to race traitors, defectors, deserters, revolutionaries? How can we prepare ourselves and our white comrades to take on such roles when the next uprising inevitably occurs?

First, we need to make a mental shift away from white guilt, which is a useless emotion that does nothing to better one’s own life nor the lives of those oppressed by white supremacy. On an individual level, I advocate that we critique our own experiences of whiteness *reparatively*. In 1995, Eve Sedgwick proposed “reparative reading” as an alternative to “paranoid reading” in queer theory specifically, but her ideas can be applied to theories of race as well. When deploying a paranoid hermeneutic, one seeks above all things to eliminate bad surprises, and to reduce pain by anticipating the unavoidable surprises. For the paranoid, safety is developed through constant appraisal of threats. In the context of antiracist action, the liberal paranoid seeks to avoid being *perceived* as racist—either as motivation for their antiracist action, or as a simultaneous desire alongside antiracist action. With this framework, the trait of “antiracist” is something bestowed upon you by an external validating force, and it is always in danger of being replaced by the label of “racist.” This insecurity creates guilt and prevents radical action, as the fear of misstepping and losing the

coveted “antiracist” label can outweigh the benefits, often unknown, of committing to collective action. To approach whiteness through a *reparative* framework would mean to stop seeing our skin as an insurmountable barrier to understanding and action. A reparative hermeneutic does not demand perfection in the same way that a paranoid hypervigilance does, but encourages us to look forward: it frees us up to make mistakes without risking our selfhood, allowing us to incorporate a form of treason to our race into our identities without self-flagellating.

We need to talk to other white people about the damages whiteness does within our personal lives and emotional landscapes. This serves a dual purpose of awakening white people to the reality that whiteness is not static, nor is white supremacy an exclusively beneficial force in their individual lives. Within conversations with other white people we can speak openly about the ways whiteness has hurt us, deadened our emotional experiences, and kept us siloed away from the full range of human experience—the ways it has starved us of what makes life meaningful. Inviting white people to acknowledge this pain opens the door to discussing what can be *affirmatively* gained in struggle, as opposed to focusing on “privileges” lost through our defection. Instead of asking white people to fight to right existing wrongs, we can push people to fight because liberation from white supremacy and capitalism is beneficial for *all* of us. In this way, we can act as “dot connectors” for others who have that feeling of “not enough,” that sense of internal wrongness or inadequacy of tactics.

Race traitors are not solely made by the transformative power of an uprising. We *do* have a responsibility to investigate our own behavior with a critical eye, to see the places where we have benefited from white supremacy or unknowingly upheld its existence, to identify the various ways we self-silo and self-police. However, the advice we often get is simply to “make more friends of color.” But it’s not exactly a very human interaction to stroll up to a stranger and say, “hey, I gotta fill a quota in my social circle. Can we be friends?” Instead, we should start by diversifying our day-to-day spaces. If our workplace is entirely white, find out why. Change it or leave. If your hobbies are white-only, find new hobbies. If your neighborhood is entirely white, well, examine that too. Would I have attended SuperJam a few years ago, given the opportunity? Probably not—out of my paranoid fear of stepping over some unseen line. The legacy of white supremacy

means, as Olson notes, that people of color may not trust white people who show up in majority nonwhite spaces. Such lack of trust should not be confused with rejection. If our behavior isn't atrociously white—the cop, the slimy journalist, the scared moron, the entitled 'Karen,' the 'woke' influencer appropriating language, the noisy attention hog—then we can build bonds of mutual respect and shared humanity. Of course there will be missteps. We have a lot of white socialization to identify and unlearn. But since it's behavior, not a static identity, we can identify our mistakes and adjust. And if our mistakes lead to rejection, accept that and improve.

Deploying a reparative hermeneutic of whiteness does not mean denying, dismissing, or ignoring systemic oppression. It acknowledges the damage racial capitalism has and continues to do, but instead of relying on simply exposing oneself and others to the knowledge of that damage, it invites queer possibility—or unsteadiness—into the discussion of what the future could be. In what ways has racial capitalism damaged our lives and our communities? What pleasures can be gained from a betrayal of the roles to which we've been assigned? What does a life not controlled by racial capitalism look like? Developing a theoretical framework of possibility builds the foundation for action.

We have to develop the requisite networks and resiliency to support the Black and brown precariat and proletariat in the next inevitable uprising. Change will not be handed down to us by white supremacist oligarchs, nor will it come from liberal seminars and weak legislation. It will be earned in the streets through tactics of demolition, the same ones that made many white people antsy the first time around. We need to find our "almost there" peers and get them all the way there, by acknowledging their pain, giving them space and tools to examine their whiteness, and inviting them into empowerment and solidarity via treason. White guilt starts externally, and then creeps into our interiority. Race treason starts as an internal reframing of white identity designed to redirect our transformative energy outward.

Although it is true that destruction serves as a creative force, a complete elimination of oppressive systems must create spaces in which to elaborate new forms of joyful sharing, work, and living together. It is in this sense that I see race treason and demolitionism as reparative, action-oriented frameworks: both invite us to stop waiting for the state to acknowledge

our “demands,” and begin building resiliency, care, mutual aid, and reciprocal support *right now* in our communities.

In the downtime, we white people also need to talk amongst ourselves. The path of least resistance is to slip back into patterns of self-siloing and liberal box-ticking and the powerlessness of life under white supremacist capitalism. We don’t have time to wait for all the other white people to figure things out—we have to push each other, to create space to speak and ask questions, and to help each other see that although we are oppressed unevenly, capitalism oppresses us all in the end. If we do this work now, when the next uprising occurs the state will be able to rely on far fewer white people to pacify the revolt and divert energy into liberal hand-wringing about property damage. The multi-racial makeup and solidarity within the George Floyd uprisings was not a coincidence. If we understand the revolutionary instincts behind it, we can guide our white comrades there, in service of the better world we all can build.

Instead of mitigating our privilege, we need
to demolish whiteness by showing that white
people need not be beholden to its rules.

