

## THE CULTURE OF WHITE SUPREMACY

### I. WHAT IS CULTURE?

#### A. A Definition

Culture is a way of life. (Definition by People's Institute of Survival and Beyond in New Orleans.)

Culture is passed on from generation to generation through institutions, groups, interpersonal and individual behavior.

#### B. Functions of Culture

For institutions: Culture provides the matrix out of which institutions grow, and the "glue" which binds institutions together in systems. Culture also provides the legitimacy and justification for the perpetuation of institutions from one generation to the next. (Material provided by Diana Dunn of People's Institute.)

For example, a local public school can survive as an individual institution because some parents choose to send their children to the school. The school exists within the system of public schools in a particular city because tax payers are willing to continue paying taxes to support that school. And the entire public school system in a country can exist from generation to generation only so long as sufficient adults in the population believe that sending their children to public school will be beneficial.

For groups and individuals: Culture provides a sense of identity — who you are—— and a sense of belonging ——who you are with. It provides a sense of purpose —— your reason for being in the world—— and an orientation ——your sense of where you are going in your life (broadly speaking).

#### C. Culture as a Process

Culture is a set of rules for behavior. You cannot 'see' culture because you cannot see the rules; you can only see...the behaviors the rules produce. ..Cultural rules influence people to behave similarly, in ways which help them to understand each other... For example, cultural rules shape food preferences. ..The essence of culture is not these behaviors themselves, but the rules that produce the behaviors.

Culture is characteristic of groups. The rules of a culture are shared by the group, not invented by the individual; the rules of the group which are passed on from one generation to the form the core of the culture...

Culture is learned... What each person learns depends upon the cultural rules of the people who raise them.. .Because culture is learned, it is a mistake to assume a

person's culture by the way s/he looks...Culture can be well learned by some people in the group and less well learned by others...

"Cultures borrow and share rules.. .Cultural rules change over time, and sometimes when two groups have extensive contact with one another, they influence each other in some areas... (Excerpts taken from CULTURE AS A PROCESS by Carol Brunson Phillips; February 27, 1991. Thanks to Intisar Shareef for calling my attention to this material.)

## II. WHAT IS WHITE CULTURE?

### A. An Historical Definition of "White"

The term white as applied to people was first used by slave—owning colonialists in 17th century Maryland and Virginia to describe poor indentured servants who came from Europe. Originally, these servants had been called "Englishmen," "Irishmen" or "Christians," but the colonial ruling class began to use the term "white" to distinguish European servants from African ones, who were often called "Negro," which means "black" in Spanish.

The Virginia legislature made the term "white" a legal distinction in 1791, after a series of joint rebellions by European and African servants, culminating in Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, nearly brought down the colonial ruling powers. (Information provided by People's Institute.) In the slave codes of 1705, especially in the "Act concerning servants and slaves," colonial rulers gave poor 'whites' certain legislated privileges, such as a small plot of land or "freedom dues" (wages) after completion of their term of servitude; the right to sue their masters in court; and exemption from public whipping for punishment! At the same time, the legislature wrote the laws which provided the institutionalized foundations for chattel slavery for Africans.

From that time on, throughout U.S. history, to be "white" has meant to have access to certain forms of preferential treatment, and exemption from racial oppression, solely on the basis of European ancestry and (allegedly) "white" skin. Thus, the concepts of "white people" and "white privilege" share the same historical and institutional roots. And both terms are artificial, historical constructions to serve political purposes: creating separations among oppressed peoples on the basis of skin color and ancestral origin so that they would not unite against a common oppressor.

(For more on the historical origins of the terms 'white' and 'white privilege:' (1) Theodore William Allen, *Class Struggle and the Origin of Racial Slavery: The Invention of the White Race*. 1975 pamphlet. (2) Theodore Allen, "Introduction," *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control*. Vol. 1. London: Verso Books, 1994. (3) A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In The Matter of Color: Race & the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period*. Oxford University Press, 1980, especially pages 53—57.. (4) Lerone Bennett, Jr. "The Road Not Taken," in *The Shaping of Black America*. Chicago, 1975.)

## B. A Definition of White Supremacy

White supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of establishing, maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power and privilege. (Definition by Mickey Ellinger and Sharon Martinas)

## C. A Definition of White Culture

White culture is an artificial, historically constructed culture which expresses, justifies and binds together the United States white supremacy system. It is the cultural matrix and glue which binds together white—controlled institutions into systems; and white—controlled systems into the global white supremacy system. Since World War II, the white culture of the United States has been the center of the global white culture.

## D. White Culture is a Dominant Culture

White culture is not the only culture in the current territory of the United States. There are numerous others: many kinds of indigenous, African— American and African— Caribbean, Chicano and Latino with regional variations, a multiplicity of Asian cultures, indigenous Hawaiian, many Arabic cultures, and expressions of many European peoples.

But white culture is the dominant culture. What are some of the characteristics of this dominant culture? In thinking about these characteristics, please recall Dr. Wade Nobles' definition of power: "Power is the ability to define reality and to convince other people that it is their definition." (See "Definitions," Political Perspectives. Exer. Manual.)

1. It defines who you are, and who "others" are in relation to you. For example, a white culture term for 'people of color' is 'non—white,' i.e., non—people.
2. It shapes your attitudes, thinking, behavior and values. For example, a white woman shrinks in fear when passing an African American man on the street; yet the great danger to white women comes from white men in the home.
3. It consciously and unconsciously suppresses and oppresses other cultures. For example, slave owners consciously suppressed African spirituality and taught Africans Christianity to make them 'docile.' Or, employers fire workers for speaking Spanish in a restaurant, but promote workers who speak French.
4. It consciously and unconsciously appropriates aspects of oppressed cultures. For example: every form of African American music: gospel, blues, Jazz, rhythm and blues, and rap, has been copied by white musicians with no credit given to the

creative sources of the music. Or, white New Agers become instant healers, charging hefty fees, by appropriating ancient indigenous healing practices.

5. It is normative: the standard for judging values and behavior.
6. It is assumed, unquestioned, not on the agenda: the ways things are.
7. It is hidden -- not at all obvious to the dominating or oppressing practitioners, but often painfully, obvious to peoples whose cultures have been suppressed, oppressed or appropriated.

#### E. White Culture is a Deadly Brew

White culture in the United States is complex. Because white supremacy is fundamental to the existence of this country, white supremacist culture is intertwined with other major cultural manifestations that make up the fabric of the U.S: the greed, competition and individualism of capitalism; male supremacist fear and hatred of the power of women; historical Christianity's hatred and fear of sexuality, and its compulsion to divide humankind into the "saved" and the "damned;" and militarism's glorification of war and conquest as proofs of manhood and nationhood that has roots an European culture going back thousands of years.

White culture is a melting pot of greed, guys, guns and god. It is a deadly brew.

(For a comprehensive critique of European culture, see Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African—Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994.)

### III. SHININ' THE LITE ON WHITE

In this section, I will try to highlight some of the ways in which white culture manifests itself in our daily lives. As you read this, please remember that this is a very tentative beginning of a new effort by many white activists in the U.S. to explore the meanings of white culture. Most analysis on white culture has been done by activists and scholars of color. Their work has inspired me to begin to do my own homework.

#### A. The Culture of Racial Oppression: Cultural Racism

1. White culture perpetuates the ideology that people of color are morally and mentally inferior to white people. Throughout the history of the United States, white culture has characterized people of color as "savage, "ignorant," "depraved," "bestial," "lazy," "dirty," "illegal" and "criminal." This ideology continues unabated today. For example, white students and white workers assume that the only reason a person of color gets into college or into a good job is because of affirmative action: that is, the people of color could not have competed with the white person were the playing field "level." In these examples, the white people cannot imagine that the people of

color might be equally or more qualified than the whites for the positions they achieved.

2. White culture stereotypes figures and behaviors of peoples of color. A common method is to take some cultural attribute forced on people of color by conquest and continuing racial oppression, and making that attribute into a symbol of the whole people. For example, the film *Ethnic Notions* by Marvin Riggs delineates a history of white stereotypes of African Americans in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Stereotypes such as the “minstrel,” the “mammy,” “coon” illustrate forms of assumed behavior that is carried into contemporary stereotypes of African Americans embodied in terms like “criminal,” “gang member” and “welfare mother.” Forms change; meanings stay on.
3. By defining reality as white, and convincing peoples of color that white reality is their reality, white culture actively promotes internalized racism and inter—racial tensions among peoples of color. Internalized racism disempowers a person and a people. Inter—racial hostility prevents different peoples of color from uniting for their common purposes and against their common oppressors. In this way, white culture expresses a successful white ruling class strategy of “divide and conquer.” Imprisoning a person’s mind is more thorough and long—lasting than imprisoning her body.
4. White culture labels the cultures of the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Arab world as inferior to cultures that have evolved in Europe. Furthermore, white culture actively promotes the historical lie that the culture that evolved in ancient Greece was the “fountainhead of western civilization.” In fact, most of the great Greek scholars and poets went to Kemet (the name for ancient Egypt), which was an African culture and civilization, to study for years before they returned to create their own forms of wisdom. And the “renaissance” of Europe did not begin in Italy, as our textbooks say, but in Spain and Portugal which, under the African and Arabic Moorish Empire of the 8th through the 15th centuries~ preserved and recreated the wisdom of the ancient world, and developed the technology which allowed the Spanish and Portuguese to embark on their voyages of exploration and conquest of lands outside Europe. Today, there is a white cultural war against African—centered research and scholarship. White academics call this scholarship ‘self serving.’ Yet few white culturalists would call traditional historical and anthropological research, “White Studies.”
5. White culture suppresses and oppresses the cultures of peoples of color as part of an ongoing system of conquest, colonialism and racial/national oppression. For example, the movement, now a law in many states, of “English Only” is a specific form of cultural conquest of peoples from Mexico, Central and South America and Puerto Rico, which has its historical origin in the U.S.’s 1848 war against Mexico; and the 1898 invasion of Puerto Rico. “English Only” is cultural colonialism: the peoples of colonized nations are forced to speak the language of the conqueror.

6. White culture appropriates elements of the cultures of people of color in order to mask the underlying power relationships of dominant to dominated cultures. For example: Rhythm and Blues is an African American musical creation, but one of its most famous exponents was Elvis Presley, a white working class man from the south. Many rhythm and blues artists die impoverished. Elvis is worshipped like a god.

## B. The Culture of White Privilege

White privilege is the other side of the coin of racial oppression. Therefore, it should not be surprising to see that the culture of white privilege is a mirror image of the culture of racial oppression.

1. White culture perpetuates the ideology that white people are morally and intellectually superior to people of color. For example, many suburban white women and men think they get into college because they are “more intelligent” than Chicanos, Native Americans or African Americans; when, in fact, they get into college because their high schools prepare them more effectively for college boards than do most high schools in urban areas.
2. White culture stereotypes figures and behavior of white people. A common method is to take some cultural attribute which is the result of hundreds of years of institutionalized white privilege in the United States, and projecting this attribute as solely the result of the person’s individual, heroic efforts. For example, the son or daughter of a European immigrant is portrayed as having risen to wealth and power from initial poverty solely as a result of moral fortitude and hard work. But, in fact, European immigrants historically have both worked hard and received privileges from the U.S. government that people of color (whether they were immigrants, indigenous or kidnapped) have been historically denied at different times. European immigrants (differentially for men and women) had the right to become citizens, the right to own land, the right to bring and to live with a family, the right to travel in search of work, the right to vote, the right to practice their own language and religion without interference, the right to organize mutual self—help societies and small businesses without being broken up by white mobs, the right to a public school education, the right to bring suit and testify in court, and the right to hold public office.
3. By defining reality as white, and convincing white people that it is their reality, the culture of white supremacy is portrayed as universal, applying to all humankind. For example, a “History of Western Civilization” begins with Greece, and then moves to Rome, then Europe, ending with the United States. But this is a course on Europe, (which is fine provided the course begins with the contributions of Kemet to Greece), but it is not a course on “western civilization.” Another example: ABC network tells its reporter covering the elections in South Africa to put an “Americans in South Africa” spin on the story, otherwise U.S. readers will not be interested in the story! Or, white feminists create brilliant analyses of patriarchy coming from

their European cultural experience, and then try to generalize this analysis to the relationships between men and women whose ancestral cultures originate in Africa, the Americas, Asia or Arabic world. And, we call the white women's movement, "the women's movement."

4. White culture provides a normative standard of behavior for one living in a system of white privilege. These norms are usually manifested in the arrogance of white entitlement — an assumption of how a white person expects to be treated in the world. Some examples: Getting angry when we have to wait in a line too long; speaking with authority, as if we are sure of correctness; talking as long as we wish, often interrupting others; getting outraged when our First Amendment rights to peacefully gather and protest are violated by police (when police violate similar rights by people of color every night, just for gathering in a group). Note: white feminists often call these forms of behavior 'white male arrogance,' but I believe it's a feature of white culture which white women, now that we have more 'equality' with white men, practice often.
5. White culture creates white bonding, that is, the cross class allegiance and sense of commonality that non—ruling class oppressed white men and women have with the white ruling class, on the basis of "white skin" and European ancestry. White bonding covers up the class exploitation of poor, working and middle class whites by the ruling class, by deflecting the problems of oppressed whites from the ruling class to people of color. White bonding prevents white women from using the potential power of their vote as women because they usually support the interests of middle class and rich white men more than the interests of men and women of color. White bonding is at the core of the Christian right's 'family values' ideology. It evokes an image of a white nuclear family in a 1950's suburb: a suburb that practiced legal residential apartheid. White bonding is the cultural basis of racist jokes and language; it assumes of the white listener, "You know who I mean." White bonding is at the core of the attacks on multi—culturalism. It assumes that the only culture that should be taught in schools is white culture. White bonding calls the U.S. "America," a term which properly applies to all the nation-states on this continent. White bonding is one of the bases of the current anti—immigrant racism sweeping California. The bonding is a reaction to the terror that most white people feel at the prospect that the majority of California residents will soon be people of color. I doubt that anti-immigrant ideologists would be using the phrase, "drowning in a sea of immigrants" if the immigrants were coming from Canada. In my opinion, white bonding is the most significant cultural barrier preventing oppressed whites from challenging the interrelated systems of oppression in the U.S.

### C. The Culture of White Nationalisms

The culture of white nationalism is the expression of the historical fact that the "founding fathers" intended this nation to be one of, for and by white people; and that the struggle to make it a nation "of, for and the people" goes on to this day.

1. The culture of white nationalism provides an identity, purpose, orientation and sense of belonging for people who immigrate to the United States from Europe. The term for this process is usually called assimilation. What it means is that a person of European descent agrees, consciously or unconsciously, to give up parts of her/his European ethnic heritage in exchange for becoming white, that is, accepting and expecting white privileges, and a sense of superiority over peoples of color, especially African Americans. This assimilation process began in the 17th century, when the European colonial elite in Virginia began to call European indentured servants “white,” instead of “Christian” or “Englishmen” or “Irishmen,” in order to give them a sense of distinction and separation from servants of African ancestry. Each subsequent generation of European immigrants has gained acceptance into the white mainstream when they have begun to act in accordance with white bonding, and the majority of their organized ethnic sector have consented, by silence or action, to the oppression of peoples of color. (For example, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Verso Press, London, 1991., Chap. 7 “Irish American Workers and White Racial Formation in the Antebellum United States.”)
2. White culture appropriates elements of European ethnic cultures in order to increase the ethnic grouping’s sense of assimilation. For example, pasta became “spaghetti” and is now available in your local super market.
3. The culture of white nationalism has transformed pride and love of country (patriotism) into a glorification of the military conquest of nations of color. Historically, this military conquest has always been justified by religion: Pilgrims took the land from the “heathens.” It was “manifest destiny” for the U.S. to conquer Mexico in 1848. It was “God’s will” to make the world “safe” for democracy. God was on the side of the “smart bombs” that obliterated a hundred thousand Iraqis.
4. Under the guise of the imperial we, white nationalism assumes that the United States can interfere in every nation of color in the world, and that somehow that intervention will be beneficial to the residents of that nation. The current justification for this national arrogance is “bringing democracy” or the “free enterprise system” (i.e. capitalism) to the invaded nation. (\* The term “white nationalism” is used by the noted African American historian John Henrik Clarke. I first heard it in an interview by Dr. Kwaku Person—Lynn taped in 1991, and aired during KPFA’s African Mental Liberation Weekend of May 17, 1992.)

#### D. The Culture of White History

U.S. “history” is based on a lie. Neither children’s nor adult textbooks tell us that the United States was created by invasion, conquest, land theft, genocide and slavery:



that, in its foundations, it is a white supremacy state. Instead, history writers fabricate an “America” as a land embodying the Declaration of Independence: a nation based on freedom, justice and equality for all its peoples. The historians also ignore, or trivialize, the continuous history of resistance by peoples of color against this unjust foundation. Young people learning about the African American freedom struggle of the 1960’s are taught that it all rested on Martin Luther King having a dream, and not the massive organization of millions of African American people and their allies. Without a thorough understanding of the U.S. past, there is no way we can adequately understand how white supremacy works today, or to plan strategies to challenge it. Our political vision gets framed in a thirty second sound bite.

#### E. Denial of Responsibility

Absence and falsification of a nation’s historical memory fosters a personal and collective denial of responsibility for racial injustice and oppression, past and present. White people say, “I didn’t own any slaves,” as if living in a system whose wealth was created by enslaved African labor did not directly benefit their ancestors. Liberal whites assert, “I don’t see color; I just see people;” a statement of unwillingness to look at reality. Whites of conscience justify their unwillingness to protest racial injustice by complaining that, “I have no power,” when any accurate reading of history indicates that organized protest creates the power to effectively challenge racial injustice. Denial of responsibility for racial injustice takes many forms.

Among the most common are:

- Blaming people of color, the targets of racial injustice, for the effects of that injustice;
- Promoting “equal responsibility” theories for addressing the effects of racial oppression;
- Hiding the centrality of institutional promotion and perpetuation of racial injustice (the ‘one bad apple’ mythology);
- Focusing “blame” on one individual’s behavior, rather than looking at the institutional and cultural context for that behavior;
- Tokenism: the effort to overturn racism in a white institution by hiring one person of color in a leadership position, while leaving the racist politics, practice and power intact;
- Judging racial oppression by the intent of the oppressor rather than effect on the oppressed;
- Speaking and writing with racially color—coded terms, such as “criminal,” “illegal alien,” “welfare mother,” “drug dealer,” “gang,” etc., instead of the racial epithets that were common before the end of legal apartheid in the 1960’s.

How can you tell when a white person is denying personal responsibility for racial injustice? Listen for the “but.” “I’m not a racist, but...” How can you tell when a white person is denying collective responsibility of white people and white institutions for racial injustice? Look for the passive or inactive voice in the verbs. Such as, “The indigenous people died of many diseases.” or “The young man was made homeless...”

## F. Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is a term used to describe a world view which puts European thinking, values, civilization, history, geography, art and people at the center of its perspective. The lives and cultures of peoples from Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Arab world are put on the margins, or else ignored entirely. "Eurocentric culture," which in the United States is a core part of white culture, needs to be distinguished from "European cultures," that is, the particular cultural expressions of different peoples and nations which reside on the European continent.

Defensive white culturalists often call criticisms of Eurocentrism, "Europe bashing." That is nonsense. Critics are not saying, "Don't listen to Mozart." What they are saying is, "Mozart is to European classical music what John Coltrane is to African/American classical music: both are giants in their fields, and should be studied and valued as such. Most aspects of Eurocentrism were brought to this continent by the European invaders and their biographers. It has been reinforced through the centuries and still dominates educational, scientific and media institutions today. In my opinion, some aspects of what is criticized as Eurocentric are wholly destructive; other aspects are destructive only when they are used to marginalize or ignore other forms of thinking and values. I will try to distinguish between the two:

Examples of wholly destructive ways of thinking;

- Power as domination over others, rather than power as creative capacity to act;
- Either/or logic; as distinguished from a both/and way of thinking;
- Destruction, rather than stewardship, of the earth, air and water;
- Ownership, rather than stewardship of the land; i.e., land as "private property;"
- Ownership of people as private property;
- "Despiritualization" of the universe;
- Separation of human from connectedness and responsibility in the world;
- Violence toward other beings as an expression of manhood;
- Belief that one's religion must be brought to others; "it's god's will;"
- View of time as linear, including belief in inevitable "progress;"
- Belief that there is only one truth, and if you don't see it, you're damned.
- The continent of Europe, or North America, is at the center of the world.

Examples of views that are destructive only when they marginalize other views:

- Knowledge can be gained from reasoning, analysis, measurement and counting;
- The knower and known are separable;
- Sex is an expression of love;
- A purpose of families is to create and nurture the next generation of human beings;

- European and European American men have created beautiful literature and art.

( For a comprehensive critique of Eurocentrism, see Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African— Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. N.J: Africa World Press, 1994)

#### G. Homogeneity: “White Bread” Culture\*

Eurocentrism, especially when it gets mixed with the rest of white culture, and sold as a capitalist commodity, promotes a mix of culture that is homogenous, lacking and fearful of diversity. It stifles people’s minds, puts them in a box. It is extremely boring. And, like ‘white bread,’ it comes in a pretty package but has no nutritional value.

(\* Inspired by "The Wonder-breeding of our Country," a chapter in the pamphlet, *The Subjective Side of Politics* by Margo Adair and Sharon Howell. Available from Tools for Change; P.O. Box 14141; San Francisco, Ca. 94114. Phone 415—861—6838.)

#### H. Socially Sanctioned Violence

Some African centered scholars say that European cultures developed a belief in the value of violence thousands of years ago, when the earliest peoples on the European continent were struggling to survive in a hostile climate, with few sources of food and shelter. Men in these early tribes had to kill to survive and feed their families.

If there were no immediate sources of food available in the forest, they would raid another tribe’s food, often killing tribal members in the process. Norse and Viking mythology which glorifies the bloody warrior, testifies to the accuracy of this analysis. (See especially the theory of the Two Cradles of Civilization as articulated by Cheikh Anta Diop in *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1978.)

Europe at the time of the invasion of the Americas and Africa was rife with violence. The English tortured, starved and killed thousands of Irish. Feudal landlords threw hapless peasants off their lands, sending them to the cities to beg and starve. The Catholic Church ordered the burning of thousands of women at the stake as witches in Northern Europe; and expelled the Jews and Moors from Spain during the Inquisition.

Virtually every method of brutality that the Europeans would practice on the indigenous and African peoples had already been tried out and perfected on other Europeans.

See Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*. Volume One: *Racial Oppression and Social Control*. New York: Verso Press, 1994; Karl Marx, excerpts from “The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism,” in Edwards, Reich and Weisskopf, eds., *The Capitalist System*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972; the film “The Burning Times;” and Jan Carew, “The end of the Moorish enlightenment and the

beginning of the Columbian Era," in *Race and Class: The Curse of Columbus*. Vol. 33, January—March 1992, #3.).

In the United States, white rulers never hesitated to inflict violence on oppressed whites. The Pilgrim fathers burnt young women at the stake in Salem. Mine owners hired armies to gun down working class families during bitter strikes in mining towns. Landlords regularly evict tenants who fall behind in their rent. And today's multi-national capitalists cheerfully throw millions of workers out of work while they rake in billions in profits. But the most sustained, wide spread, and socially acceptable forms of violence have been, and still are, waged against peoples of color.

The United States as a nation state was founded with violence: mass murder of millions of indigenous people, the nefarious Middle Passage during which millions of Africans died; the system of chattel slavery which lasted 300 years; and the brutal war against Mexico in which thousands of Mexican people were slaughtered by U.S. troops. The United States still invades nations of color, murdering and starving thousands. "Socially sanctioned violence" means just that — violence that is accepted, tacitly or actively, by the majority of a society. In the U.S., only the forms of violence against people of color have changed over the centuries, not the content or result. For example, lynching was an acceptable form of white violence against African Americans and Chicanos until a few decades ago.

Now that same role is provided by police in communities of color each night. The form is now hidden from white view; the content and result are the same. Another example: in the 19th century, white squatters stole Indian land with the consent of Congress. Today, corporations buy and pollute that land, still with the consent of Congress. Both forms of violence kill people; they just employ different forms of laws.

### I. The Culture of Racialized Emotions

White culture creates and recreates carefully manipulated racialized emotions in peoples of color and in white people. For people of color, internalized racism may produce feelings of "low self esteem" and a distrust of other peoples of color. The effects of pervasive, systemic racism produce emotions of suppressed and explosive rage. Most often the rage is taken out on other peoples of color. Periodically it emerges in a communal explosion, such as in the Los Angeles uprising. On a daily basis, suppressed rage can be deadly to one's mental and physical health, producing symptoms similar to those called post traumatic stress syndrome which is common to those who have lived their lives in a war zone.

For white people, the most common emotions are a complex of guilt and sense of powerlessness; a combination of fear, hatred, contempt and fascination especially for African Americans; and an obsession with racialized sex. (The following comments make no attempt to explain these emotional phenomena from a psychological view, but merely to comment on them.) As a political organizer, I believe that guilt is closely related to a sense of powerlessness.

On the positive side, emotions of guilt demonstrate that a human being has not lost all his/her humanity: she still feels vaguely responsible for social injustice. But when she chooses not to act, maintaining that she is powerless, her guilt then emotionally paralyzes her, to the point that she cannot or will not act. (For a satirical expression of this, see Jan Adams and Rebecca Cordon's "The Wackos at the Anti—Racism Conference" in the Exercise Manual.)

I do not believe that feelings of guilt and powerlessness can be resolved by talking. You have to break the cycle and act. In an individual, "Power is the creative capacity to act." I believe that fear of Black men is the most important racially manipulated emotion that has held white people captive to the white supremacy system since the colonial era. Some of this fear has its historical origins in white ruling class terror of slave revolts. This fear is in some senses justified, since organized rebellions of African Americans have, since the colonial period, have been the most significant threats to the white supremacy system.

Other whites fear that African Americans would treat them as they have treated African Americans, if African Americans had the opportunity. They fear any organized action of Black people, whether a small group of men walking down the street, or an independent African American organization. There is no historical justification for this fear. It is racially manipulated. Some of this fear is sexually based, again with its origins in the period of slavery. White males routinely raped women of African descent. After the defeat of Reconstruction, white men and women joined in lynching and castrating African American men, justifying their barbarity with the myth that Black men were raping white women.

Anti-racist analysts like Jacquelyn Dowd Hall ("The Mind that Burns in Each Body," in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, edited by Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins; Belmont: Wadsworth Press, 1992, pp. 397—412) see this sexual barbarism as linked to projections of white male actions onto Black males.

This sexual obsession continues unabated today. Many whites fear that Blacks will wipe out the "white race." Dr. Frances Cress Welsing asserts in her "Cress Theory of Color Confrontation and Racism/White Supremacy," (*The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1991) that whites fear the genetic annihilation of the white race. The majority of whites fear losing any form of political, economic or cultural power or privileges. The expression of these fears has been historically lethal for people of color. Enraged whites time and again have acted violently toward peoples of color. In fact, white mob violence has been a staple of white culture throughout U.S. history.

#### J. Expressions of White Privilege in Progressive Culture

White progressive activists are not immune to any of the cultural expressions of white supremacy predominant in the rest of white society. But there are two forms which

seem to be particularly deep—rooted in our history: false universals and false analogies.

**False universals:** A false universal is a statement which purports to speak for all people, but in reality, speaks only for some (those who are white).

The classic example is: “All men are created equal,” the famous statement from the Declaration of Independence. While the statement: has inspired generations of peoples’ struggles for equality, justice and democracy; it is also an expression of the fundamental contradiction of U.S. democratic ‘ideals. The writers of the Declaration of Independence did not intend “all men” to include men of African or Native American descent.

The term may not have even included all white men, but only those who owned some property. And it certainly was not meant to include any women, regardless of national origins or class background. The use of the false universal plagues white progressive discourse to this day. We talk of the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the anti—war movement. But what we mean is the white women’s, the white environmental, and the white anti—war movement.

Our false universalism allows us to ignore or trivialize the leadership role that activists of color play in the movements for women’s liberation, environmental justice, and peace and justice, at home and abroad.

**False analogies:** A false analogy is a comparison between two sets of experiences which emphasizes their similarities and blots out their differences. The use of false analogies, like the use of false universals, originated in the period when white colonists were fighting for independence from Britain.

Protesting Britain’s Sugar Act of 1764, John Dickinson of Pennsylvania said, “Those who are taxed without their own consent expressed by themselves or their representatives... are slaves. We are taxed without our consent expressed by ourselves or our representatives. We are therefore...slaves7 (quoted in A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process: The Colonial Period. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. p. 375)

Ironically, the tax against which the indignant colonists were protesting was a tax on the profits from their slave trade. Thus, it is not surprising that these same rebellious colonists did not think of freeing their enslaved Africans when they freed themselves from the “slavery” of English domination.

Throughout U.S. history, white progressive activists have compared our oppression to that of slavery, or to racism against African Americans, in order to win support for our own struggles. White male workers, brutally exploited by 19th century capitalists, called themselves wage slaves. White women’s rights activists of the same period analogized their oppression to slavery. The contemporary white women’s movement, born out of

the African American freedom struggles of the 1960's, compared the oppression they experienced from sexism to the experience of being oppressed by racism. And in 1993, white gays and lesbians, struggling to end the homophobic ban on their open participation in the military, have often compared their struggle to that of African Americans who demanded an end to segregation in the same institution.

When we use these analogies, we wipe out the distinct history of white supremacy's impact on peoples of color, especially African Americans. We do not need to use false analogies to demonstrate that non—ruling class white people suffer oppression. Our history is our legacy. Understanding our own oppressions requires us to respect the differences between our histories and the histories of the diverse peoples of color in the United States.

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This lengthy piece on THE CULTURE OF WHITE SUPREMACY was written in September, 1994 by Sharon Martinas and the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop. Please consider this a draft. Your comments, criticisms and suggestions would be gratefully appreciated. Contact the CWS Workshop.