



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Swimming in a White Supreme-a-sea

Cassie Withey-Riley © 14 May 2017

Hello, I am honoured and terrified to be here. My name is Cassie and I benefit from White Supremacy. I have been given the honour of guiding us on this small step of a very uncomfortable journey.

I struggle to find myself as an authority on anything, much less on something I can never experience. No matter how much I read, how many classes I take, I will never be able to truly understand what it is like to experience racism. I am a big fan of believing historically marginalized people, as I can never be an authority on that lived experience. White Supremacy would be invisible to me, had I not looked for it, had it pointed out explicitly.

We are using “White Supremacy” specifically, as requested by the organizers of the White Supremacy Teach in. I know that this term can make some people uncomfortable, because it sounds maybe like we are aligning as white supremacists?

But it is important to name the issue at hand. No euphemisms, no beating around the bush, bringing it out into the light and calling it what it is: White Supremacy.

(To quote White UU minister, Rev. Krista Taves, “We have been trained to see White Supremacy as an overt expression of racism, replete with burning crosses, white hoods, confederate flags, lynchings and angry white people in black and white footage shouting racist epithets at black children trying to enter white schools. This allows White Supremacy liberal whites to distance themselves from racism and believe that we aren’t part of it”.)

White Supremacy is a set of institutional assumptions and practices, often operating unconsciously, that tend to benefit white people and exclude people of colour. (BLUU)

We all have gaps in our understanding. There is no shame in not knowing...and yet, sometimes we feel attacked personally by the concept of being complicit with White Supremacy. We might wonder “does our benefiting from White Supremacy mean we cannot be proud of our personal achievements?” we might say “but I have experienced hardship as well!”. The main issue with these questions is that it centres our feelings in a discussion of White Supremacy.

We can all look inside ourselves and remember that this isn’t about us as individuals...this is about systems. These criticisms aren't for us to take personally, although it is our responsibility as Unitarians to address these issues. Once we figure our place within the larger system, and understand how we can uphold or undermine the system, it is no longer about us, but about the System.

Many of us could have gone our whole lives having never seen White Supremacy. Just like how we wonder if fish are aware of the water all around them, White Supremacy is the water in which we swim. Here in Aotearoa NZ, colonization built this nation. Colonisation build

most of the western world. (no matter how dual-lingual the government websites are, no matter if they teach Te Reo in schools, no matter how many hakas precede a rugby game... the system of White Supremacy told a bunch of western nations that their potential for making money was more important than the lives of indigenous people. Over and over the needs of the first peoples were superseded by the fiscal desires of the white colonizers.

At the risk of mixing metaphor, colonisation has threaded its way into every aspect of our lives. It's a unique subset of White Supremacy, that lends itself well to systemic racism. The way the government prioritizes private company's access to natural resources, and remains sceptical of the needs of Māori. Not prioritizing Access to sacred spaces, kai food sources, and traditional ways of life.

I'm not here to argue the invalidity of western medicine, or that we should turn back time, and throw out antibiotics. I am sayin' that we must acknowledge that there are many ways of doing things, and just because the western colonisers "won" doesn't mean that their way "better". There is "different", but the idea of a hierarchy of validity, that there is some objective metric of "goodness", "rightness", or "naturalness" is just White Supremacy. It whispers in our ears that real science, western science, tells us the truth. That there is a One True God. That everyone else is less educated. Less civilised. Less valid. Less natural. That whisper is White Supremacy.

To quote *The Usual Suspects*: The greatest trick the devil ever played was convincing us that he didn't exist. Denying the reality of White Supremacy, refusing to acknowledge racism as a system is fast becoming the new face of Racism.

I was raised, like so many children of the 80s and 90s, to be Colour-blind. That's where one erases the complexities, nuance, and injustice by saying "aren't we all human?" as if that statement could absolve generations of violence at the hands of White Supremacy White Supremacy.

This phenomenon is related to what's called 'Benevolent Racism', what an oxymoron, right? Benevolent Racism not a slur or a physical attack, but it still upholds the system of White Supremacy. Colour-blindness and benevolent racism are what allow us to pass off comments based in racial stereotypes as compliments or non-racist statements. It's the tip of the iceberg, but the most socially acceptable part. We assume it's a compliment, because we intend it that way: "you're so articulate" acting surprised by someone's wealth, professional or academic credentials, ect are all based in a stereotype, assumption about people of a certain ethnic group, and how we expect them to be.

We must remember, as we work to unpack our white privileges, along this journey to understand our place in the system, that good intentions are not enough. The intent behind being "colour-blind" is not malicious, and yet it is harmful. The impact is often more important than the intent. We don't get to decide what is racist. We don't get to dictate what is offensive. But we can listen, learn, and do better.

The term "unpacking" when referring to racism is referring to a text, by Peggy McIntosh, called: *White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack*. This text is a great tool for understanding our Privilege.

Some people like to sit and reflect on what unpacking they can do, some prefer to do it on the run. As long as we are working to unpack our privilege and our roles within White Supremacy, I think we are on the right track.

In undergrad I took an entire class on the theories on how to analyse literature. (I was going to make a joke here about the useful applications of such a skill set, but as I am about to show you, maybe the humanities are worth saving after all?)

There is a concept called Binary Opposition that is seen throughout western literature, for so long, we don't actually know where it came from. It can still be seen today, in movies, out of the mouth of politicians, and in White Supremacy. It's a kind of duality; two things in opposition to one another. (This theme has been around so long, we started to believe that it was based in reality, rather than realizing that we created our reality around binary opposition). The symbolism of light and dark, white and black, good and evil, might sound familiar... If whiteness, for a thousand years was associated with goodness, naturalness, purity, and the opposite of that was dark, dirty, unnatural, tainted,...does that sound familiar?

This tendency to over-simplify things, to reduce complex concepts to right/wrong, is a popular tactic of White Supremacy culture.

White Supremacy is quite literal: the desires of the white folks are considered superior to the lives of the people of colour. Whiteness is presented as normal, the default, the natural... in media, in history, in art, in spirituality (white Jesus?).

I sometimes feel like I have an advantage in that I really like this stuff: I like to read about inequities, work to understand systems of oppression, study it in school. But racism, colonialism, colourism, casteism, aren't just academic subjects... although many of us discuss them in academic ways.

The idea that academia, a white western institution, is somehow an objective authority is a mechanism of White Supremacy: putting full faith in an institution with its history, its inaccessibility, and inequity is a mechanism of White Supremacy.

This tendency to rely on the academic lens of analysis for White Supremacy is one of the reasons I am so excited to have these conversations in houses of faith, and places of worship. The pursuit of Understanding and the pursuit of Justice are foundational to my faith and perhaps it is foundational to your faith as well. Learning about White Supremacy theories isn't just for academics, just like fighting systems isn't just for activists...

Unpacking how I benefit from White Supremacy is a journey rather than a destination. I will never be able to get a degree or certification to absolve me of my position or prove that I am a Good White Person. I will always be learning, having hard conversations with myself and others, and coming to realizations that I messed up again. And I have come to terms with that. I have steeled myself for the moment that I am doing what I think is right, and then I get told that I messed up. I am preparing myself to breathe through the knee jerk reactions and the defensiveness and the lifetime of social training that I am right, and stand there corrected, humbled, and ready to apologize. (and a "I'm sorry I messed up, I will do better next time", not one of these "I am sorry that your feelings were hurt" non-pologies.)

I like to unpack as I go, hopefully before the words leave my mouth, but I don't have a 100% success rate with that. If I find myself having said something that might be based in a racist stereotype, I don't just hope that no one notices or says anything. I will say "was that racist? I think that was racist" and talk it out. This can make some white folks very uncomfortable, but its accountability and transparency in one! Weird side effect of the constantly questioning things...I am starting to see that everything is racist. And that's part of the process.

Now that we've discussed the huge icky mess that is White Supremacy, let's do something on how to start the journey:

Below are three graphics for self-assessment.

Where do you see yourself in this process? What is new? What is familiar?

THE LADDER

Community of Love and Resistance
Collective Action
Taking Responsibility / Self-Righteousness white can do right / especially me
Open Up / Acknowledgement Houston, we've got a problem
Guilt and Shame white is not right / I'm bad
Denial and Defensiveness I am not the problem
Be Like Me we're all the same, you're the problem
What Are You? first contact
I'm Normal

We recommend the full explanation of the ladder at
http://www.cswsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/White_Identity/4_Life_Long_Journey.PDF
It is well-worth the read.

You might also like to do a self-assessment at
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1U1QOhhCjMz0rI844S3C6fjekmXu1cU_-VVxICcjJNyw/edit

**OVERT
WHITE SUPREMACY
(Socially Unacceptable)**



**COVERT
WHITE SUPREMACY
(Socially Acceptable)**



The 8 White Identities

By Barnor Hesse

There is a regime of whiteness, and there are action-oriented white identities. People who identify with whiteness are one of these. It's about time we build an ethnography of whiteness, since white people have been the ones writing about and governing Others.

1. White Supremacist

Clearly marked white society that preserves, names, and values white superiority

2. White Voyeurism

Wouldn't challenge a white supremacist; desires non-whiteness because it's interesting, pleasurable; seeks to control the consumption and appropriation of non-whiteness; fascination with culture (ex: consuming Black culture without the burden of Blackness)

3. White Privilege

May critique supremacy, but a deep investment in questions of fairness/equality under the normalization of whiteness and the white rule; sworn goal of 'diversity'

4. White Benefit

Sympathetic to a set of issues but only privately; won't speak/act in solidarity publicly because benefitting through whiteness in public (some POC are in this category as well)

5. White Confessional

Some exposure of whiteness takes place, but as a way of being accountable to POC after; seek validation from POC

6. White Critical

Take on board critiques of whiteness and invest in exposing/marking the white regime; refuses to be complicit with the regime; whiteness speaking back to whiteness

7. White Traitor

Actively refuses complicity; names what's going on; intention is to subvert white authority and tell the truth at whatever cost; need them to dismantle institutions

8. White Abolitionist

Changing institutions, dismantling whiteness, and not allowing whiteness to reassert itself