**Can We Think Our Way Out of White Supremacy?**

When I read Elizabeth’s adumbration of extensive violence (Minnich, 2017) I thought immediately of the cultural genocide enacted by white supremacy. Elizabeth defines extensive violence as “massively violative harms” (p. 96) that “must be done by many people in a sustained fashion, which is also to say, the doers must be reliable, not out of control, possessed, irrational, filled with murderous hatred or frightened for their own lives” (p. 97). It seems to me that notions of extensive violence and dominant ideologies are interconnected. What facilitates a systemic exclusion and marginalization of a whole group of people based solely on skin color or phenotype is a general understanding that this group is somehow less than: less than normally intelligent, less than self-controlled, less than human. In classic critical theory the way that a fundamentally insane system based on deep structural inequalities and inflicting cultural and physical violence is maintained is through the dissemination of dominant ideology. Get people to think in a certain way without ever realizing that their worldview has been constructed to serve the interests of a minority and you have the perfect system of social control. There is no need for paramilitary forces to inflict this violence since the ‘people’ will take care of this themselves.

It seems to me that the ideology of white supremacy is an enactment of extensive evil in that “it is enabled by the turning of whole systems until it is ordinary to do terrible things, to benefit, or to go on living as if “We didn’t know” (Minnich, 2017, p. 89). White supremacy is certainly enacted explicitly in murderous church bombings, mowing down anti-racist protestors, and the unarmed police shootings of young black men. But it is equally present in the daily micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010) that ‘good white people’ (Sullivan, 2014) enact, all the while believing themselves to be acting in good conscience towards their fellow men and women. These micro-aggressions are widespread and frequent, and so common as to seem normal and acceptable. I myself am a reliable worker who commits these acts in two ways. First is my active behavior; the jokes I make in class, those meeting colleague with whom I make the most and the least eye contact, the students whose names I remember and who I unconsciously turn to for questions and contributions. Second is the way I acquiesce with a system that I know is killing people physically and psychically. I tell myself that I’m working to subvert from within, acting as an advocate or ally, or being strategically shrewd by wrapping challenging reforms in institutionally acceptable language. But I stop short of deliberately crashing the system. I march, give speeches, push for changes to curriculum and policy; but I don’t go online and dish the dirt on the institutional secrets I know. Elizabeth points out that when reliable workers know they are doing bad things they “must take regular care of themselves in ways that genuinely keep them going as they continue to do such work in the world” (p. 97). I do this by telling myself I’ve become better as recognizing my own learned racist instincts and working purposefully to challenge white supremacy. But I still accept the salary and health care my employer provides.

**The Nature of White Supremacy**

So what is the nature of the ideology that creates and legitimizes the enactment of extensive evil? As an ideology white supremacy holds that Whites should be in charge of making decisions for the collective because of their superior intelligence and capacity for logical thinking. Whites can be entrusted with decision-making power because they are objective, unswayed by emotion and able to reason clearly. These characteristics are all placed I opposition to people of color who are deemed to be less intelligent, emotional, animalistic and unable to think coolly and calmly. The ideology of patriarchy creates a similar dualism between compassionate, caring and emotional women and logically reasoning men who can make objective decisions based on evidence not personal feeling. This is why the biggest ideological double whammy in this country is when white supremacy and patriarchy connect to stereotype women of color as the members of society least qualified to assume positions of authority. A widespread and unchallenged acceptance of the

Joe Feagin (2013) has written instructively about the white racial frame that shapes how people view the world. Whiteness is the imaginal norm for leadership and authority and white forms of knowledge production that privilege European enlightenment rationality is the standard for what counts as legitimate truth. A controlled experiment following the classical hypothetico-deductive method (Popper, 1959) is trusted far more than the powerful narrative or personal stories proposed by critical race theorists (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) – the immediate desire to shut down discussions of race because of the discomfort these induce – is similarly instinctive. The psyche perceives danger approaching at the same moment a question about race is raised. If any thought occurs here it is in nano seconds, so quick that no deliberation is involved.

If you think of white supremacy as an all-pervasive form of ideological conditioning that has planted its hooks into all of us, then there is no contradiction in Whites working as anti-racist leaders, activists, teachers or citizens and their being racist. This is because racism is *not* the process of individually demeaning or diminishing others, “a site of individual acts of meanness” (Yancy, 2018, p. 74); rather, it’s being “implicated in a complex web of racist power relationships … heteronomous webs of white practices to which you, as a white, are linked both as a beneficiary and as co-contributor to such practices” (p. 75). Since my Whiteness constantly benefits me, and since that benefit accrues to me because I’m defined in relation to the stigma of Blackness, I am a racist. I don’t go about hurling racial epithets but I am “embedded in a pre-existing social matrix of white power” (p. 76) that gives me advantages of which I have only an occasional awareness. To feel safe is my norm, to be “systemically *racially* marked for death” (Yancy, 2018, p. 102) is a black person’s.

Because I grew up intellectually as a critical theorist I agree that I am systemically formed. I don’t think I – Stephen Brookfield - constitute a monological, atomistic, discrete identity. I’m in history and culture and I’m fluid. Who I am is in large part a function of ideological manipulation. I’ve grown up surrounded with, and formed by, some very powerful ideologies. These include racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism and militarism. These belief systems, and the practices and systems in which they’re embedded, construct my normal. I’ve spent a lot of time teaching against racism but, as Yancy (2018) argues, that doesn’t mean I’m not a racist. I have internalized racist stereotypes at such a deeply visceral, pre-conscious level that I will never lose them.

**So Can We Think Our Way Out of Racism?**

In a brief aside in *The Evil of Banality* (Minnich, 2017) Elizabeth discusses the critique that thinking is “pale and wan” (p. 47) when compared to the force exerted by systems and structures to shape our daily behaviors. She points out that feelings “can be the result of inattentiveness; unthought-through they too can be banal – and deadly” (p. 47). White supremacy operates at this level of feeling, of unthought-through instinctual reaction. Raymond Williams (1971) talks about the way that ideology invades our structures of feeling. When white supremacy works best as ideological control it fuses perception and motion pretty seamlessly. Simple equations forge themselves into our unconscious; blackness equals danger, or blackness equals incompetence. One of the most striking paragraphs in Nelson Mandela’s (1994) autobiography is his instinctive questioning whether or not his plane will crash the moment he sees a Black pilot enter the cockpit. This was not a deliberative act of thinking but visceral anxiety. It shows how white supremacy is an all-pervasive process of ideological conditioning affecting everyone regardless of racial identity.

White supremacy operates not really a matter of thought, but of immediate instinct. It is visceral, not cognitive. Take my instinctive reaction to blackness, especially to black maleness. Blackness screams a complex and contradictory mess of signals to me. In my youth it was ‘coolness’, mostly because of music and cricket (I grew up in England). In my adulthood it’s been ‘danger’, something animalistic, uncontrollable and profoundly threatening. I feel an instinctive tightening of my body when I encounter a group of black men. This is beyond reason, deeply sedimented, learned and transmitted over several decades of media and cultural representations of blackness as violence. My physiology changes as I drive through a mostly Black area and I hear a panicked voice inside my head saying “whatever happens, please don’t let my car stall”. I find myself locking the doors, checking my surroundings and preparing for confrontation.

None of these reactions have any connection to my thinking process. I can tell myself “there’s your white supremacist conditioning kicking in again” and steel my cognitive archers to fire their arrows of reason into this oncoming tsunami of emotion. But reasoning doesn’t mean much in the face of white supremacist ideological conditioning. Just as with the clinical depression and anxiety that I suffer from, words, thoughts and admonitions to ‘snap out of it’ or ‘stop being so irrational’ are mostly powerless. With my depression and anxiety, the doctor can prescribe medication that makes a big difference and keeps me stable. If only someone trained in the pathology of racism at the Mayo clinic could write me a script to combat the white supremacist ideology embedded in my cultural DNA.

The task of thinking our way out of white supremacy is complicated by the fact that this ideology is felt and lived at a pre-conscious gut level. It is primal, almost instinctual, an immediate emotional reaction to situations that we experience without much thinking involved at all. But that does not absolve us from applying reasoning, analysis, criticality and reflection to trying to understand and counter our learned racism. As Elizabeth writes, “Thinking is how we make sense of what is happening, what is before our eyes, in our memories, in our hearts and bodies” (Minnich, p. 47.). Consequently, “we are as responsible for thinking about our feelings as about anything else” (ibid.). So the questions an educator like myself asks are; if the ideology of white supremacy is viscerally embedded what use is thinking? Can you really think your way through emotional responses and feelings that have been learned over a lifetime and now become habitual and unrecognized? In the rest of this chapter I want to respond to Elizabeth’s injunction that we need to think about feelings and explore the question of how we might try to do think our way out of white supremacy. My own white identity means I’ll be speaking particularly to whites but I also want to think through the dynamics of how we do this in multiracial settings.

**Starting with Experience**

A fundamental tenet of transformative learning theory is that adults only engage in a significant reappraisal of their paradigmatic assumptions and worldviews when they are faced with a disturbing situation that provokes strong emotional responses (Mezirow, 1991, Cranton, 2016, Taylor and Cranton, 2012). These are called disorienting dilemmas and typical examples often cited as those of being fired, learning of a terminal illness in oneself or others, experiencing hurtful personal betrayal, being conscripted into military service, and facing divorce. In all these situations people have been following what they imagined were the rules of successful living; work hard and your employer will take care of you, be faithful and your marriage will be strong, and so on. When the events of life crash out of the darkness into your daily light then the emotional shock prompts a fundamental questioning of some of the taken-for-granted assumptions and perspectives you have grown up with and have always believed to be ‘normal’ common sense.

So it makes sense that one popular route to prompt thinking about one’s assumptions about racial identity is through the use of some kind of experiential learning. In outward bound education and other forms of organizational training (Beard and Wilson, 2013) the use of experiential learning is premised on the notion that significant learning is prompted by participation in action rather than by intentional, deliberate thought. So, for example, instead of getting people to read about the importance of trust to team work, or having them view a power point presentation on working co-operatively, you teach the importance of trust and collaboration by taking people on ropes courses or asking them to fall backward into a colleague’s arms. Anti-racist workshops frequently use the *privilege walk* as an early experiential learning activity. People start off by standing at the same place in the room and then, based on their responses to a series of questions about their lives they take a step forward or a step backward. In a short time, responses of workshop members cause people to rearrange their places in the rooms with whites and cis men towards the front and people of color towards the back. The participants then think and talk about ideas of unearned privilege, everyday power and cultural capital.

Another activity is to ask a white person to lie on the ground in front of the classroom door for the duration of a workshop break, forcing others to step over them to get to coffee and restrooms. When the group reconvenes the participant concerned talks about how it felt to be so immobilized. The idea here is to give a brief visceral glance into how daily systemic marginalization feels. When I want to introduce the concept of repressive tolerance (Marcuse, 1965) to illustrate how institutions do a lot of superficial things to look like they’re addressing racism while ensuring that things remain exactly the same, I’ll get people to do the ‘hegemony jog’. This involves them running up and down on the same spot. We then talk about the ways people expend energy doing lots of things (changing the racial identity of people on publicity materials, creating a diversity task force, rewriting the strategic plan) whilst white supremacy stays in place.

The thinking that happens in experiential learning usually occurs after the event as people debrief what just happened in reflective journals or community conversations. This is a common dynamic in anti-racist training. For example, before getting a group to consider white cluelessness regarding the experience of sustained racism I’ll show a clip from the documentary *Color of Fear* (Wah, 1994) in which a black man (Victor) angrily responds to a white man (David) who says to him (and I paraphrase) ‘why can’t you stop thinking of yourself as black and just be American?’ In an eloquent and passionate response Victor’s raw emotion spills out as he condemns David’s naïveté in thinking that being American means anything other than subscribing to white supremacy. Reading the comments posted to *Youtube* on this post is an education in itself and sometimes I’ll use these in professional development. But the point is really that I ask white participants to immerse themselves in a sustained expression of anger and pain, to sit with its rawness on an emotional level, before ever thinking about what it means.

**Bohmian Dialogue**

A discussion based method I like to use is Bohmian dialogue. Based on David Bohm’s *On Dialogue* (1996) this is a process for getting groups to talk and think together more deeply and coherently that builds on Bohm’s attempt to create an open forum to explore intractable problems. The purpose is to build an organic conversation in which participants collectively create meaning by recognizing connections and commonalities and by building on each other’s ideas as freely as possible. The activity is designed for large groups of around forty people, but I have also used it with groups of fifteen, twenty or twenty-five. Bohm recommends up to two hours in this dialogue but it can also be used for 45-minute periods.

The first stage in a *Bohmian Dialogue* is for people to study some common resource. When an academic class is engaged in the process you can ask students to read or view some pertinent material beforehand. Because I use this activity mostly in organizational or community settings where I don’t know who will show up I usually begin the process with everybody together viewing some relevant video. One of my favorites is the *New York Times* ‘Op Doc’ *A Conversation with My Black Son* (Gandbhir and Foster, 2015) in which black parents recount how they prepare their sons to be pulled over and racially profiled by the police and the different ways they advise them to respond to this event. Another is the ‘Just be American’ from *Color of Fear* excerpt mentioned earlier.

After the videos are over, the group forms the chairs into one large circle and I explain how the process will work. I begin by stating what the conversation is for. I say that there are two primary reasons we’re doing this. First, we want to understand the different experiences of race and racism that are in the room so we can try to identify and develop possible points of common connection. Second, I say we want to build on the intersections we discover to explore steps we can take to combat racism. We are trying to develop some collective thinking about how we can best make common cause against white supremacy.

I remind people that these are both incredibly difficult projects so if we are to have any hope of success we need to listen carefully and intently to each other and spend a lot of time processing the meaning others’ contributions have for us. I predict that there’ll be necessarily long periods of silence in the room as people digest and mull over what others have just said. I urge participants to try and be comfortable with the room being quiet and insist that this is an essential part of the process.

Then it’s time to explain the specific ground rules that structure *Bohmian Dialogue*.

* There are no winners or losers here so don’t try to overpower or diminish contributions you dislike or take issue with.
* This is not a debate so try to refrain from creating binary opposites (“he’s racist but she’s anti-racist”, “that’s moral but this is oppressive”).
* Don’t try to convince or persuade; the point is to understand and connect where we can.
* Only one person speaks at a time.
* Speak only when you have something to say or you have a response that’s prompted by another person’s remarks.
* Be comfortable with long silences.
* If it helps you focus, feel free to close your eyes or look at the floor.
* Expect radically different opinions and perspectives but express them in just that way, as different ‘takes’ on an issue.
* Focus on identifying common ground and how to building on this

I also need to clarify my own role in the dialogue. I let people know that I’ll be both contributor and umpire. If people start to get into a debate, try to convince or rebut each other, or declare another contribution to be wrong, my job is to step in and remind people of the point of the exercise. We are trying to understand the alterity of racial experience and to find points of common connection that can prompt action.

A quick side note here. There are many times in organizational efforts when I am highly confrontational and judgmental. I have been known to insult chairs and committees publicly and to accuse them of racist manipulation. I welcome conflict, getting issues in the open and trying to show up the idiocy of my enemies. But I do these in the context of organizing, not in the context of education. As Myles Horton (1990, 2003) helped clarify for me, there’s a difference between organizing and educating. In the former you want to out-maneuver those in power and mobilize people for collective action using propaganda and slogans. It often helps to dichotomize issues by framing them in terms of good guys and bad guys, oppressors and oppressed, moral versus immoral conduct. And, frequently you have to move quickly as events dictate your actions. But in an educational process you want to complexify not simplify, to show diversity rather than privileging only one reality. That’s what *Bohmian Dialogue* is all about; helping people understand the multiple layers and complexities of race as a precursor to developing authentic common cause.

Some questions suited to this activity are

* *What would it take for us to trust each other?*

This question is suited to multiracial groups that include Whites whom you feel are too quick to declare themselves allies and assume that, having made this declaration, they will be welcomed and trusted by people of color.

* *What stops us realizing our common potential*?

This question works well with groups that are getting frustrated with their inability to progress as fast as they’d like in some kind of anti-racist work. In groups like this it’s easy for people to slip into race-based blaming and commit all kinds of unwitting micro-aggressions.

* *What do we most miss or misunderstand about how racism works*?

Here you’re trying to challenge a group to go deeper into analyzing the workings of racism. I use this question if I feel the group is slipping into an easy certainty of assuming that just by citing the clear existence of racism and the injuries it inflicts, people will be convinced to give up racist ideas and practices. My hope is that the deeper, visceral and emotionally sedimented nature of white supremacy will be revealed.

* *How do we build common cause*?

This question is project-focused and one that appeals to many people. It is hopeful and oriented to the future. Of course once people start responding to it the complexities of how people define common cause, let alone how this is realized, quickly come to the fore.

Thinking about race needs to be a collective process.

**Autobiographical Modeling**

A couple of years ago I was having dinner with a good woman friend who had spent a career of 40 years engaged in literacy work in New York’s Harlem and Washington Heights. She is white and worked almost entirely with people of color who loved her for her humor, spirit and warmth, but mostly for her tireless advocacy on their behalf. She wouldn’t put up with any bullshit and woe betide any Gotham administrator who created a bureaucratic obstacle to block her students trying to realize their potential.

Over dinner she told me she had been to a workshop on racism and that the first thing the workshop facilitators did was to ask every white person in the room to stand up and take turns saying “I am a racist”. As she recounted this event her voice shook with anger. She couldn’t believe that her four decades of anti-racist endeavors had been discounted by these facilitator-strangers who didn’t know anything about her. My friend was so profoundly insulted that she left the workshop immediately.

I can make an educated guess what the facilitators were trying to do. They were probably trying to ask the white participants to recognize how they are caught within a racist system that they benefit from and to recognize how they have learned deeply racist instincts and impulses. They wanted to show the ways that many whites “take regular care of themselves in ways that genuinely keep them going” (Minnich, 2017, p. 97) by believing themselves to be decent, compassionate people righteously committed to behaving in anti-racist ways was beside the point. I’m assuming that the workshop facilitators’ view was that nobody escapes the unearned privilege they enjoy because the racist institutions of civil society work to advantage whites. To that extent, to be white is to be racist.

What I believe was missing from the workshop my friend participated in was any extended modeling by the facilitators of their own struggles in recognizing and confronting their own racism. The underlying assumption was that by teaching self-reflection the facilitators could help people learn to work in ways free of racist undertones. The workshop was something *done* to the participants by experts who had cracked the code of cultural misunderstandings so could now teach others how to think and work in non-racist ways. Yet one of the most common themes in educating about race and racism (Brookfield, 2018) is the crucial importance of teachers and leaders kicking off the process with a narrative modeling of their own continuing struggles with this process.

As an example I’ll typically begin any anti-racist event in which I occupy a leadership role by talking about how I’ve noticed my own learned racism framing my perception of a current event, or how I caught myself in a micro-aggression earlier that day. There is such shame in the word ‘racist’, such power to humiliate, that I’m wary of beginning a conversation by asking that white friends and colleagues declare themselves racist. Instead I need to ‘normalize’ racism, to show that because most Whites are constantly immersed in racist conditioning, it would be strange if they *didn’t* have learned racist impulses, instincts and perspectives lurking within them. So I need to show first how racism is embedded in my worldview and how I enact racism. I need to earn the right to ask them to consider their own racist identity by first exploring mine.

Does this approach pay too much respect to white fragility, to the alarm and subsequent retreat from confrontation that stops so many of us from looking squarely at our own racism? I go back and forth on this question. My teacher voice says, “you have to start where people are. Starting with your own agenda without having built a connection to their world is self-indulgent. Get over making yourself feel righteous and take the time to know them”. My activist voice replies, “here you go again, copping out and backing off from necessary danger. Don’t be so cowardly – tell it like it is”.

Searching honestly for the learned racism and privilege at the heart of white identity is hard given that bearing witness to experiences of racism typically prompts Whites to show solidarity with people of color. We want to protest that not all Whites are their enemy and that they can count on some of us for support. Speaking for myself, I know that part of me desperately wants the approval of people of color. I want to be told I’m one of the good guys who’s exempted from blanket condemnations of white racism. I want to be told I’m an exception and to feel a flush of self-aggrandizing, self-congratulatory pleasure when saying to myself “you know what, my mother was right, I *am* a good person.”.

One of the hardest lessons I have learned as a white person, and therefore as a representative (in the eyes of people of color) of white supremacy, is that I must expect to be mistrusted. I must also anticipate white colleagues accusing me of politically correct reverse racism. When this happens, I need to remember that this is *not* a sign that somehow I’m failing; it happens to every white person in this work. So I tell colleagues getting involved in anti-racist teaching or other activism for the first time that for different reasons they should be prepared to be called a racist both by people of color and by Whites. It comes with the territory.

I remember in the early 1990’s teaching a class in which the only student of color declared “I will never trust a White person”. I responded by saying, “that’s completely understandable, I don’t see why you would”. But the white majority in the group were shocked and demoralized by his comment and spent a lot of time and energy trying to convince him that they were humane, enlightened and worthy of his trust. It has always seemed to be that completely valid suspicion, skepticism and hostility will inevitably accompany any white person’s attempt to work alongside people of color in an anti-racist effort. This is no comment on you personally. It’s a comment on how the history of white supremacy has conditioned people of color to expect whites always to pursue their own self-interest and bolster their own power.

The internal seduction of telling myself I’m the militantly moral white exception who has escaped racism and works on the side of light and good is hard to resist. I’ve failed dismally in this regard. Colleagues of color detect my need for reassuring approval and tell me not to get so hung up on how *I’m* feeling because, after all, it’s not really about me, is it? I take deeply to heart Yancy’s (2018) admonition that “whatever you do, please don’t seek recognition for how sorry you feel” (p. 118). There is no place for white heroes in anti-racist work, although white humility is welcomed.

The judgment of whether or not you are an ally to people of color is completely in their hands. You should never expect to be told that you are one, and shouldn’t get hung up on gauging your anti-racist virtue by whether or not you receive that designation. Of course, if you *do* hear that term applied to you by people of color you should take it as a sincere recognition that you’re doing something important and worthwhile. And, for a moment, it’s fine to be proud of yourself. We all need moments of recognition and affirmation to keep our energy up for the tough stuff.

But repeat after me; *never declare yourself an ally*. No matter how strongly you are committed to that identity, keep it private. A White person saying “I’m your ally” comes across as condescending and inauthentic. You don’t become an ally by saying that you are. You become one by consistently showing up in support of people of color. You become one by losing something. Instead of worrying about getting approval for being heroically anti-racist, you should be putting yourself on the line. You should be risking institutional condemnation by doing and saying the things that people of color will suffer even more harshly for doing and saying. Your job is to lose friends, colleagues, money, employment, perks and prestige by calling out white supremacy in yourself and other Whites, and then not to have anyone notice or thank you for it.

**Conclusion**

The economic notion that people are motivated by rational self-interest has been challenged in recent years by best sellers like *What’s the Matter with Kansas*? (Frank, 2004) that argue for the importance of emotional responses in shaping behavior. If this is true then the scapegoating, stereotyping and fearmongering that frames the backdrop for the commission of extensive evil are not just manifestations of white supremacy but also highly effective, self-fulfilling prophecies that explain its enduring power. If we are going to think our way out of white supremacy, then we need first to model what this might look like and confront radically different testimonies regarding how racial identity frames one’s journey in the world. Facilitators need to ensure that people sit with, and then start to unravel, the discomfort that these things induce. Communication across difference can’t happen until fundamental difference is experienced and contemplated. This is where learning and education are the necessary precursor to political action. Then begins the long haul of developing alliances, creating networks, political organization, persuasion and building a broad social movement.

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