## BARRIERS TO ORGANIZATION BETWEEN ANTI-RACIST WHITE PEOPLE

Presentation by Joanie Mayer

> Whites who are sincere should organize themselves and figure out some strategies to break down the prejudice that exists in white communities. This is where they can function more intelligently and more effectively, in the white community itself, and this has never been done before.
>
> -- Malcolm X (1964)

## INTRODUCTION

Hello, everyone. My name is Joanie Mayer and it is an honor to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you on the subject of anti-racist white political organizing. Through the various missteps of my own political and social consciousness development as a white anti-racist woman, I have gotten the very strong message from people of color that white people need to take responsibility to work against racism in our own communities. This message has come in many forms, through the speeches and writings of people of color, through my personal experiences in interracial relationships, through my participation in various learning environments and activist groups, and through the example of the civil rights and women's movements as well as other social change efforts.

While I have taken this message very seriously, I have found the task to be extremely difficult. In my life (and I am not alone), I have experienced a void of effective, creative, and visionary action against racism by a united group of white anti-racist people. Many white people develop a critical consciousness about race but never take action against racism. Others who do take action against racism work in isolation from one another. Why is this the case? What prevents white people from working together to fight racism--even those white folks who have a critical consciouness about race? I have devoted much time over the past five years examining this question. The material presented to you today is the result of some of that work.

Based on a life history study of anti-racist white women entitled, *A Missing Peace: Anti-racist White Women In Conflict and Collaboration.*, this presentation explores some of dynamics that hinder white people from more effectively organizing collaboratively against racism . I will begin with several stories which bring to life some of the issues at stake. Next I will summarize a series of barriers to anti-racist white political organizing identified by the participants in my study and experienced through the course of my own anti-racism work. Finally, I will offer some thoughts on why these barriers exist within the current paradigms of anti-racism organizing in the United States. In order to encourage more active involvement from the workshop participants, I have included some suggested activities which I hope will assist in exploring some of the material presented here.

## LET'S START WITH SOME STORIES.....

4. Joanie Mayer, "Barriers to Organization between Anti-Racist White People," from A Missing Piece: Anti-Racist White Women in Conflict and Collaboration. Unpublished MA Thesis, January, 1997.

I recently underwent a sixty hour training to become a rape crisis volunteer. The lead trainer was a woman named Chelsie. She is funny, intelligent, and good at what she does. Yet when Chelsie walked in the room that first day and I saw she was a white woman, my ever-present critical scrutiny intensified a notch. Without consciously realizing it, I found myself phrasing my questions in more challenging language, insistently making comments to insure race issues were not swept under the carpet, and promptly speaking up about points with which I disagreed. When I came home, I told my partner that I thought I threatened Chelsie and may have alienated her. After reflecting further, I realized that had Chelsie been a woman of color, my behavior in that training would have been very different -- not necessarily the content of my commentary but certainly the delivery. I was mildly appalled at myself. Here I was contradicting all of the behavioral recommendations I had been writing about in my research that very day! Chelsie was a out-spoken, skilled, and political white woman with whom I could potentially network and collaborate. Yet I was treating her with mistrust instead of affirmation. Rather than support her in coming forth with her most powerful anti-racist leadership, I was placing myself at a counterpoint and challenging her to prove herself to me.

This story is just one example in the repertoire of subtle ways anti-racist white people push away from one another. It would have been easy for me to never acknowledge my attitude towards Chelsie. She might not have liked my behavior towards her, but I doubt seriously she would have identified it in the terms I have. Uncovering the barriers to collaboration involves self-identification which in turn necessitates a high level of introspective honesty. Consider another example involving a more complex political framework:

Sierra Peterson is a senior at an all women's college. Last fall she helped organize a "Day of Action" to protest the lack of tenured faculty of color and child care on her campus. During the protest, which was intended to stop all campus operations for one day, an incident occurred in which three women of color drove off campus laughing and publicly refusing to join the protesters. As they were leaving, two white women protesters called out after them in anger, "Shame on you!!" Sierra did not witness this scene, nor did she know the identities of the white women in question.

Several days later the three women of color who had left the protest posted an open letter through-out campus which read, "To the two white women who shamed us on the Day of Action, how dare you !!!..." The letter went on to challenge the white women's behavior, angrily demanding how dare they define what resistance was and assume that by not participating the women of color were not resisting. The letter went on to outline five other points all relating to the presumptive white privilege lacing the white women's behavior. Sierra came across the letter while walking to class with a friend named Margaret whose opinions and politics Sierra respected. After pausing to read the letter, Sierra commented that its content seemed right on. Margaret, however, became visibly upset and proceeded to confide in Sierra that she was one of the white women to whom the letter was directed.

In the midst of this interaction, one of the women of color who authored the letter, Carlie (also a friend of Sierra's), walked by and shot Sierra a disapproving look. For Sierra, the emotional impact of this moment was intense. "I felt like I was cavorting with the enemy." She was afraid that Carlie would no longer want to be friends with her for associating with Margaret. Or worse, Sierra was worried she would lose her acceptance among the women of color on campus if she did not distance herself from Margaret. What should Sierra do? What would be the most effective anti-racist action? Margaret was a political woman whom Sierra

knew to be outspoken about racism among other political issues. Now Margaret faced public condemnation for her action.

In many ways Margaret's position represented Sierra's worst fears about what could happen to herself should she make a mistake in the tense racial climate on campus. Sierra felt pulled to differentiate herself from Margaret in order to protect her own position among people of color even while she believed the most transformative anti-racist strategy involved staying close to her white friend. The story ends without Sierra resolving the internal conflict she felt. Sierra had to run to class without being able to have an extensive conversation with Margaret. Although she tried to talk to Margaret again later, Margaret seemed to have shut down and did not want to discuss the incident further.

*Activities for Workshop Participants:*
White folks....
    1) What would you do in Sierra's position?
    2) Have you ever been confronted about your own racism by another white person? What happened? What was the impact on you?
    3) Think of a time you intervened in the racism of another white person? What was your intervention strategy? What was the impact of your intervention?

Folks of color...
    1) What would you want Sierra to do?
    2) Think of a time you witnessed a white-on-white anti-racist intervention? Was it effective? Why or why not?

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BARRIERS BETWEEN ANTI-RACIST WHITE PEOPLE?

The stories above touch on some of the dynamics that arise between white people when contending with issues of racism--dynamics that I term "barriers to collaboration." Webster's Dictionary offers two definitions of collaboration: the first being, "to work together," and the second, "to cooperate treasonably." Within the seeming contradiction of these definitions lies the challenge of anti-racist white collaboration. Organized white groups bear a legacy of treason, be it the murderous racism of the KKK, the refusal of liberal white feminist groups to address the issues of women of color, or the failure of radical white activists to maintain the agenda of people of color when organizing white communities during the 1960s (Martinas, 1991). The challenge we must face, then, is how anti-racist white people can collaborate creatively, effectively, and responsibly without reliving this legacy. Anti-racist white organizing is not an end in and of itself. Rather it is one part--an important part--of a much larger effort to end racism, an effort that requires both working across and within racial boundaries. Keeping this larger vision in mind I ask the question, what barriers get in the way of implementing the tool of anti-racist white collaboration?

For example, on Sierra Peterson's campus as well as in many other US settings, the anti-racist community is stuck within a dualist racial paradigm where identity politics dominate. In such settings, white people become divided into "good" and "bad" categories, a precarious distinction which separates the hip, anti-racist, on-top-of-their-stuff white people from the generally unaware racist white masses. "Good" white people respect the leadership of people of color who are, in this framework, the acknowledged "experts" about racism. Therefore, if

Sierra does not join the women of color in their publicly condemnation of Margaret, she must not be behaving like a "good" white person. Hence, she must be a "bad" white person. Within this dualistic framework, guilt by association, "cavorting with the enemy," and collusion are powerful concerns which impose distance between white people.

Below I have summarized a series of barriers to anti-racist white organizing. I have named each barrier, offered a brief description, and described the impact the barrier has on anti-racist white collaboration. This list is incomplete and I welcome you to add to it. (Keep in mind that these dynamics pertain to the interaction between white people.)

## Distancing

DESCRIPTION:    The purposeful separation of oneself from another white person so that one's shared skin color will in no way be associated with shared beliefs, particularly in the wake of a racist incident.

IMPACT:    Leads to forceful, silencing intervention tactics, the impulse being to strike-out in order to establish one's own anti-racism in the face of another's racism.

## Guilt by Association

DESCRIPTION:    Aversion to interacting too closely with other white people for fear of being perceived as complicit in their mistakes, colluding with their racism, or "cavorting with the enemy."

IMPACT:    Leads to distancing between white folks and limits the transformative potential that investing in close relationships with one another can have. On the other hand, consequences of perceived complicity are real. E.g. hurtful gossip, scarred reputation, exclusion from specific anti-racist circles.

## Judging the Person

DESCRIPTION:    In ability to differentiate one's own negative judgments about a racist action or statement from ones' negative judgments about the offending person as a whole.

IMPACT:    Leads to silencing and ineffective interventions strategies. Communication shut-down. Breakdown in relationship.

## Dilemma of Self-Righteousness

DESCRIPTION:    Dismissal of one white person by another white person as being self righteous, judgmental, or proselytizing in the course of making an anti-racist intervention. The perpetual challenge for anti-racist white people of how to convey strong opinions based on a complexly constructed sense of justice in a way that others can hear.

IMPACT:    Failed interventions. Inability to create anti-racist transformation. Extreme frustration!!! Breakdown in communication between white people.

## Lens of Mistrust

DESCRIPTION:    Mistrust between white people over their respective level of racial awareness. The scrutiny of white people's words and actions for signs of racism by other white people.

IMPACT:    Creates an barrier to building relationships between anti-racist white people.

## The "White Community"

DESCRIPTION:    A term devoid of meaning to many white people. The feeling of lack of pride, camaraderie, or affinity between anti-racist white people.

IMPACT:    Community sought in multi-cultural settings or on the basis of other identity affiliations (political beliefs, sexuality, gender, religion....). Aversion of anti-racist white people to creating community on the basis of their whiteness.

## "This Place is Too White!"

DESCRIPTION: The mentality dictating that if you are not one of few white people in a room, you are in an atmosphere that is "too white." The avoidance of spaces with majority white people by white people themselves.

IMPACT: Discourages anti-racist white people from building relationships and working with other white people. Efforts to create inclusive spaces which bring anti-racist white people together may meet with failure unless white people's desire to be in those spaces is simultaneously cultivated.

## Ignoring Our Differences

DESCRIPTION: Assumption in white groups that because everyone is white, the group is somehow monolithic or devoid of serious potentially rifting differences.

IMPACT: Class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and other differences can hinder collaboration if not addressed. Yet, concentration on dynamics within a white group or community has resulted in bypassing the intended goal of fighting racism in the past.

## "Good" and "Bad" White People

DESCRIPTION: The division of white people into "good" and "bad" categories, a dichotomous distinction which separates white people who "get it" from the generally unaware racist white masses.

IMPACT: Feeds into a dualistic conceptualization of race; establishes a barrier to building relationships and community between white people; and creates a finite limit to the scope of a potential anti-racist movement.

## Exceptional Other

DESCRIPTION: A truly phenomenal "good" white person, the outstanding anti-racist white exception to the racist white norm, or the one white face accepted in a community of color.

IMPACT: Insidious divider among anti-racist white people. Fosters sense of competition and defeats the ultimate purpose of anti-racist work. Establishes a hierarchy among anti-racist white people which limits the locus of collaboration possible.

## Honorary People of Color

DESCRIPTION: Pertains to white people who do not "act white" or do not own their whiteness, and therefore have claimed a person of color identity. Perpetuated by both people of color and white people.

IMPACT: Rejection of other white people who reflect own self-hate or threaten acceptance in community of color. Accentuates hierarchy between white people. Exceptionalizes select group and impedes collaboration with other white folks.

## Competition and Scarcity

DESCRIPTION: Commodification of social justice training and education. Hoarding of best materials, techniques, and skills to sell as "The Key" to building multi-cultural organizations. Locations in which there is limited room for white folks, and therefore the competetion to be one of those white people is intense.

IMPACT: Competition (the culture of capitalism) breeds poor anti-racism strategies. Effective training techniques are not shared widely. The problem is not that there are spaces in which only few white people are welcome, but rather that the energy of white people who want to get involved is neither utilized nor channeled into appropriate arenas.

## Credentialing

DESCRIPTION: The process of listing one's connections to communities of color in an obvious way to legitimize oneself to people of color or differentiate one's perspective from other white people.

IMPACT:          Creates distance between white people. Fosters competition and precludes alliance building.

## Brokering
DESCRIPTION:    Occurs when white activists consciously limit the access of other white folks to their political contacts and relationships with organizations of color. Fueled by the desire to maintain exceptional status.

IMPACT:          Prays upon the lack of trust fostered by racism which makes people of color less likely to collaborate with white people they do not know. Limits size and potency of movement.

*Questions for Workshop Participants:*

Folks of color....

1) Have you witnessed in any of the barriers outlined above? Do you have others to add?

2) Have you ever witnessed an anti-racist white collaborative effort? If so, was the effort useful, effective, accountable? If not, do you think such as effort is possible?

White folks....

1) Have any of the barriers listed above impacted you? How? Do you have others to add?

2) Have you ever been part of an anti-racist white organizing effort? If so, what were the strengths of the effort? What problems did you encounter? If not, why not?

## WHY DO THESE BARRIERS EXIST?

I posit that many of the barriers to organization between anti-racist white people discussed above are a product of what I call "dualistic anti-racism." Although many of us may not be dualistic thinkers, per say, the dominant anti-racist discourse in United States society remains heavily influenced by dualistic tendencies: Powerful societal forces such as mainstream media, politicians, religious organizations, and even educational institutions encourage dichotomous thinking. It should therefore be no surprise that the anti-racist culture within such a society might reflects this dualism. In addition, dualism is a natural developmental stage in the human cognitive growth process (Knefelkamp, 1996). Housed within all of us, naive dualism resonates in the part of ourselves that longs for absolute truth and hungers for simple answers to the complexities of life. It follows then that in early stages ~~of stages~~ of anti-racist consciousness development, white people would tend towards dualistic patterns.

In order to understand what I mean by dualistic anti-racism, it may be helpful to first discuss some general properties of dualistic thinking as outlined by cognitive developmental theorist Lee Knefelkamp in her 1996 speech at the Psychology of Bigotry conference:

### Characteristics of Dualistic Thinking

1) *Dualistic thinking is dichotomous.* The dualistic thinker has "two suitcases in life" consisting of either and or, black and white, yes and no, good and bad, me and you.

2) *Knowledge is related to absolute truth and is handed down from external sources.* This received authority and external knowledge are what dualistic thinkers use to understand themselves and the society around them.

3) *Dualistic thinkers mold themselves to knowledge that is given as opposed to using knowledge to think.* It is the responsibility of the dualistic thinker to take in knowledge without questioning it.

4) *Within a dualistic framework, there is an enormous community pressure to "get it."* As a result, self-worth is directly related to getting the received knowledge correctly. To the degree one is a disciple, one is a better person.

Now consider the parallel ways anti-racism operates when applied to a dualistic framework. Keep in mind that I am specifically speaking about the impact of dualistic anti-racism on white people.

## Characteristics of Dualistic Anti-Racism

1) *Dualistic anti-racism is dichotomous.* Society is divided by racial identity (people of color/white people) not political perspective. White people are divided by "good" and "bad" classifications as well as other binary categories which separate the hip, anti-racist, on-top-of-their-stuff, white people from the generally unaware racist white masses.

2) *People of color are the "experts about racism."* Knowledge about racism (i.e. identifying what is or is not racist) is received by white people from people of color. White people can learn to contradict their own racism by adhering to specific guidelines (e.g. "Speak out against racism in order to lift the burden from people of color;" or "Don't talk too much, leave room for voices of color;" or "Educate yourself, don't ask people of color to explain;" or "Don't assume you understand what a person of color thinks/feels;" etc.) These guidelines (at times contradictory) constitute received knowledge about the how to behave to become a good white person. White people who try to make anti-racist interventions have very little clout because they are not people of color.

3) *White people often feel the responsibility to accept the knowledge received from people of color unquestioningly.* Because white people do not experience racism they cannot completely understand what racial oppression is like and therefore must privilege the voices of people of color. Self-monitoring, holding back, mistrust of other white people, and fear of critiquing the perspectives of people of color are common effects.

4) *There is pressure for white people to "get it" with respect to racism.* To the extent that white people "get it", they can become "good" and possibly even exceptional white people. Those who do not "get it" are often discounted by other white people. Dynamics such as guilt-by-association and distancing come into play.

It is important to realize that there are many benefits to dualistic anti-racism. In the context of identity politics, dualistic anti-racism has worked well in many ways. Based on the level of racial unconsciousness displayed by white women during the second wave feminist movement, the assumption that white people were unaware of their privilege and relatively unsophisticated in their

ability to respond to racism was usually valid. Still today, many white people need to pass through a dualistic stage before functioning well in a more contextual settings.

## Benefits of Dualistic Anti-Racism

1) *Dualistic anti-racism is functional.* Because the majority of the white people in this country are not complex thinkers about racism, dualistic anti-racism provides a basic framework for mobilization.

2) *Dualistic anti-racism simplifies a complex problem into a more manageable, graspable issue.* It offers a clear list of behavioral guidelines for white people who feel overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of racism and their complicity in it. One-shot diversity trainings, which have proliferated in the past ten years, often introduce anti-racism to white participants in the form of helpful--but nonetheless dualistic--guidelines about how to act as an ally to people of color.

3) *Dualistic anti-racism offers temporary respite to people of color from the daily exhaustion of trying to be heard and fighting for validation.* It provides simple justification for people of color to create community with each other without having to deal with white people, as well as a structure in which people of color are listened to and their experiences automatically validated by white allies.

At the same time, dualistic anti-racism is costly.

## Costs of Dualistic Anti-Racism

1) *Dualistic anti-racism constitutes a restrictive and self-defeating approach to anti-racist change.* By establishing a division between "good" and "bad" white people, dualistic anti-racism hinders white people from working together which, in turn, ultimately hurts the chances for large scale anti-racist change. We need as many white people as possible, not just a select few, fighting to end racism.

2) *Dualistic anti-racism leads to poor intervention strategies.* The tendency to silence and shut down white offenders even in instances transformation might be possible is much greater within a dualistic framework. White-on-white intervention strategies are bound to be flawed as long as white people base their actions on how they are going to be perceived by people of color instead of thinking about the most effective ways to change the racist behaviors of other white people.

3) *In the long run, dualistic anti-racism places a greater burden on people of color.* Dualistic anti-racism makes people of color the only real authorities, hence the only reliable sources of power capable of making anti-racist change.

At counterpoint to dualistic anti-racism, is the emerging voice of what I call "contextual anti-racism." Contextual anti-racism differs from dualistic anti-racism in that it permits a more complex understanding the ways people construct knowledge, form opinions, and make decisions about

action. General qualities of contextual thinkers (not specific to an anti-racist context) are as follows (Belenky, et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Knefelkamp, 1979; Taylor and Moore, 1987):

## Characteristics of Contextual Thinking

1) *Contextual thinkers are able to see issues with complexity and from a variety of perspectives.* They assume the need for criteria and understand that criteria both changes over time and varies according to frame of reference.

2) *Knowledge is constructed.* Both "authorities" and self contribute to the formation of opinions. Truth is determined by context and frame of reference. Validity is sought through question posing, dialogue, and a combination of intuitive and rational processes.

3) *Contextual thinkers can make distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate options on the basis of criteria and constructed knowledge.* They understand that more than one legitimate option may exit, and that choices must be made as it is not possible to do them all.

4) *Contextual thinkers are able to commit to action after the legitimate alternatives are explored.* Action is taken after experiencing and contending with doubt. With action, comes the acknowledgment that commitment constitutes a statement about self.

Now consider how these qualities might play out in the realm of anti-racism for white people.

## Characteristics of Contextual Anti-racism

1) *Racism is viewed as a complex issue about which different perspectives reveal different angles.* Contextual anti-racism rejects dichotomous, biologically determinant categorizations. Alliances are based on criteria such as lived experience, political perspective, and demonstrated action—not identity politics.

2) *Knowledge about racism is constructed through dialogue between self and others.* Respect is held for the voices of people of color without giving in to simplistic privileging. Opinions are formed on the basis of historical understanding, interpersonal relationships, and political analysis. Validity is sought through dialogue with other anti-racist people as well as one's own critically formed opinion.

3) *Contextual anti-racism involves making decisions about how to respond to racism on the basis of the complex factors impacting a given situation.* Anti-racist actions are determined by context and frame of reference. Understanding that there may be a range of possible anti-racist actions for any one circumstance necessitates the rejection of prescriptive solutions to complex situations.

4) *Contextual anti-racism involves the commitment to take action.* Actions are based on assessing the range of possible appropriate choices, confronting the fear of making mistakes, and following through nonetheless. Commitment encompasses acceptance of responsibility for unforeseen consequences, the willingness to take risks, and the ability to adapt strategies to changing circumstances.

At the core of many of the barriers to anti-racist white organizing is the tension between dualistic and contextual anti-racism. It is important to realize that the same anti-racist opinion can be derived from both a dualistic and a contextual perspective. Given the dualistic tendencies of dominant US culture, the actions of contextual thinkers may be interpreted dualistically. Encouraging dualistic interpretations has proven an effective strategy of the right wing to pit political people against each other. Complexly derived opinions become confused with and dismissed as formula political correctness. Within the context of dualistic anti-racism, the anti-racist white person has to work very hard to find intervention strategies and means of collaboration which avoid feeding into the dualistic framework. "When people are under stress, fear, and threat," Knefelkamp explained, "they tend to behave more dualistically, more narrowly than openly and with more shortness of communication and self-righteousness of purpose (1996)." Racial issues are laden with stress, fear, and threat. Even when we mean to operate from a contextual premise, the tendency to fall into a dualistic framework is strong.

In 1998, there does exist a cadre of relatively unconnected anti-racist white people who have responded to the calls of people of color and taken seriously the task of confronting racism in themselves and around them. This places us in a turbulent historical moment with regards to anti-racism. Hindered by the limitations of dualistic anti-racism yet not completely prepared for contextual anti-racism. Breaking down the overly simplistic and dichotomous underpinnings of race involves giving voice to the huge diversity of culture, class, and experience among white people. It involves not only refusing to accept black/white conceptions of race, but good/bad conceptions of whiteness. It means overcoming the fear of guilt by association with white people who do not meet "exceptional" standards, and daring to build community and relationships with each other despite our fallibility, outward appearances, and potential criticism. It means rejecting identity based hierarchies that fuel the dichotomous fires of biological determinacy by linking political awareness to physiology. It means accepting that white people with the most outstanding awareness about racism are just as white as KKK members. These are not simple tasks. At the same time I strive to diminish the divisions among white people, I also openly adhere to them. I leave the reader with four questions which I hope you will join me in pondering ferociously.

### Challenges for Anti-Racist White People

1) Where do we draw the lines between white people with whom we are willing to collaborate, to white people we are willing to educate, to white people whom we outright condemn?

2) What is the criteria by which we as anti-racist white people establish with whom we will work?

3) How do we maintain the vehemence of our anti-racist politics and simultaneously open ourselves to collaboration with greater numbers of white people?

4) How do we maintain our exceptional standards but defy our exceptional status?

Under the dualistic anti-racist framework these questions cannot be answered to any degree of satisfaction. But using the rubric of contextual anti-racism, my hope is that the currently disparate yet growing cadre of anti-racist white people can find each other, build connections, and implement

anti-racism strategies in white communities. From this collective wisdom a new way of thinking, talking, and acting about race and anti-racism will emerge.


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