

What is the role for white people working for racial justice in this current period?

A Joint Statement from the Organization for Black Struggle and the Anti-Racist Collective

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Recently both cable news and twitter feeds got active after a group of white supremacists marched through the University of Virginia, Charlottesville campus under the banner “Unite the Right.” The horrific murder of Heather Heyer and injury of many others occurred when a white nationalist plowed his car into a crowd of non-violent counter-protesters. Many of us are anxious, wondering if the white supremacists (freshly emboldened by Trump) will be coming to our town next. And, like many moments when the violence of racism becomes clearer to white people in the US, many of us find ourselves asking, what can I do? What should I do?

Black people have been unfaltering in the struggle against white supremacy and racism since they were brought to these shores. They have little choice—their lives and livelihood depend upon their ability to wage an effective struggle for civil and human rights. However, in the last few years, there has been a growing fatigue and frustration towards white people about avoiding their responsibility to take the lead in ending racism in the U.S.

For the last 400 plus years since Europeans began kidnapping and enslaving Africans, Africans, and their children and their children’s children, have been leading the resistance to the dehumanization and extermination of Black people. The sanctity of Black life is more than a hashtag. The movement to make Black lives matter is embodied in an anti-racism agenda across the U.S. The leaders of this movement and past movements for racial equity have been people of African descent. The time has come for white people to step up and shoulder the leadership against the systemic racism. It’s past time to recognize that our white privilege is key to the maintenance of white supremacy.

According to the white supremacists in Charlottesville, their show of force was to defend a statue of a Confederate insurrectionist. These statues have been the target of much anti-racism work over the last several months. It is important to remove these symbols of white supremacy from our public spaces. They are daily reminders of the system that we have in place. Their presence reminds us that our culture still exalts white supremacists and that we have a lot to change in our society. The fight against racism cannot be just a symbolic fight nor is it merely a fight to eliminate symbols. That’s really the easiest part.

It’s important to remember that these are symbols and not the actual tools of white supremacy. Institutions which perpetuate racism are responsible for the historic and continued oppression and exploitation of Black people. No statue has refused a loan to a Black person or manipulated a Black person into a sub-prime mortgage. No statue has shot an unarmed Black person. No statue has manipulated the school districts and state laws to ensure that the poorest Black people have the least access to quality education. No statue is responsible for the over-incarceration of African Americans. There is real work that needs to be done in this country to end the system of white supremacy that is destructive to the entire human race.

1 build relationships – As white people, we need to be building stronger and closer relationships with both white people and with people of color. Regardless of whether you feel like you can be friends or share common political analysis, we need more relationships where we trust each other. Being raised in a white culture conditions us into a superiority/inferiority mentality rather than a collective value mentality. This internal behavior makes it hard to build principled and accountable relationships with other people regardless of race. Without these strong and positive relationships, we won't succeed when we try to...

2 join organizations/ build coalitions – Another thing that our superiority/inferiority issues affect is our joining organizations or coalitions that are already working on these issues and strategically taking on anti-black racism. It's easy to find excuses why we can't submit ourselves to a collective process or help to build something bigger than ourselves. When we join organizations, we need to deeply listen to what other people say first, then share our thinking. We become more powerful and capable together, not separate as individuals. Too often people join an organization, get frustrated with some internal dynamic or external strategy, and then quit without making a genuine effort to build something positive. White folks need to recognize it's a cop-out to quit something if it's not perfect rather than hanging in to make it function better. Conflicts are inevitable and must be worked through. If we are building relationships, we should be able to persevere and handle the conflict and grow together because of it. As our organizations get larger and stronger, we can form coalitions with other organizations and together will be able to...

3 take actions against systemic racism – Acting anywhere in our society against racism and for justice is a good thing. However, we need bolder action that is directed at the sources of power that maintain white supremacist culture—policing, jailing, housing, education, money system, transportation, etc. These actions work best if they are a part of an overall strategy. Our protest and actions must be part of an achievable goal so we can measure our progress, i.e. raise the minimum wage, reduce segregation in housing and schools, close the prisons etc. When we have clear goals, we can determine who are our allies and who are our enemies. We can be strategic in identifying targets that will definitively shift power. Sometimes we won't be successful so we need to...

4 be accountable – because we are going to make mistakes. As white folks, we have been looking to leaders of color to tell us what to do to end racism. There is no step-by-step guide or else we would have figured this out by now. We expect clear direction and assured forgiveness when we mess up. Accountability is about taking responsibility for your thoughts, words and actions when they undermine the process or a strategy. It means being open to constructive criticism so that you can grow and influence the development of others. As white folks, we need to start taking more bolder and more creative actions to end

white supremacy and the structures that prop it up. We can't do this effectively without building those relationships and friendships that are organized around shared vision and values. Accountability is also about showing up when needed—not just when it's convenient for us or when we get shamed into action. The relationships don't mean much if when asked to be there we are too busy or too scared to do the real work.

The challenge by white people of white people is to be bodacious in dismantling of white supremacy and humble in their interactions with people of color. This doesn't mean you must be a doormat or that you can't criticize the harmful actions of Black or Brown people. They key is being secure in those relationships where any divisive or negative behaviors can be addressed in an open and principled manner.

Black and Brown people are being crushed by this racist system. Their cynicism about our commitment to confront white supremacy and all its manifestations is justified. It's time to show up and hang tight even when it's uncomfortable. If white people matched the determination that Black people have, we could experience a sea change in the power that has been used to control, oppress and exploit. Our Black and Brown allies must see us re-channeling our energies that are used to preserve white privilege towards making genuine, transformative change in this country.

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