

# **Whiteness is a War Measure**

**Race and racism in the transition from Obama to Trump to Biden, in historical perspective**

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*The political changes that have occurred in the US over the last decade and a half not only give us an incisive opportunity to understand whiteness, they demand that we do so. What is its role in upholding oppressive systems and how has it changed from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup>?*

## ***Whiteness from Left to Right***

The Obama administration was a crucible for expressions of white supremacy across the spectrum. For the stalwarts of a reactionary whiteness, it was a wake-up call, a sign that the institutions of whiteness would not necessarily defend the longtime symbols of whiteness, that the highest levels of privilege and power would be opened up to racialized people. People on the right were either too obtuse or too arrogant to notice that only racialized people who effectively reproduced the codes of the white supremacist system were allowed to climb so high; to them, it was enough of an insult that the symbolic value of a white face had lost its exclusive currency. So, for them, it was the moment to declare a patriotic crisis. For the promoters of progressive whiteness, it was a Golden Age. The symbolic inclusion of a Black person at the highest level of government meant they could believe in America again. Obama's election represented an easy rebuttal (albeit a false one) to Afro-pessimism and abolitionism. It was a vindication of the sordid American dream. Centrists could once again update their claims that the problems of racism were solved, and progressives could dare to embark again on racial reforms without fearing that the string they tugged at would unravel the entire tapestry.

When the democratic pendulum swung back to the Right, the reactionaries had their moment, they came out of the shadows, they began to speak honestly about what patriotism has always meant to them. And the progressives belittled them, feeling even more superior than under the previous administration. They dredged up the figure of "white trash" to show how *superbly* educated and non-bigoted they are, even though statistically the average Trump supporter out-earns them. The media, ever conciliatory, enshrined that lie by building a bigger one on top of it, and excused the irrationality of the MAGAs by claiming they're poor whites—ex-middle class—just hurting from job loss, the supposed flight of *their* economic privileges to Mexico. Everything went as choreographed.

But then something happened. The same people who fought the police in the streets of Ferguson and Oakland and a dozen other cities, people spreading ideas the media would never repeat, about a direct continuity from enslavement and colonization to police killings, came back into the streets. And now there were more of them.

Finally, stories that had been ignored for too long could be told again, and we could finally dispute the official truths about who we are and where we come from.

When the reactionaries spilled their blood, unrepentant, in the broad light of day, in defense of a Confederate statue that was supposed to represent, merely, history, half the country stopped. They hadn't yet been fully indoctrinated to accept that extreme racists and extreme anti-racists are equally bad. They put down the script a moment. Maybe that statue of the past casts a shadow over the present. Maybe it was put up by people interested in celebrating a particular past and imposing a particular future. Maybe a society based on slavery and genocide has merely updated its oppressions rather than banishing them. Maybe those Nazis aren't the only expressions of racism around here.

Finally, stories that had been ignored for too long could be told again, and we could finally dispute the official truths about who we are and where we come from.

This was an existential threat for whiteness, from margins to center. Whiteness shrivels under the searing light of history, when it is held by those who fight against obliteration, who fight for a dignified survival, who begin to believe they have a right to claim the history.

The Right was split against itself by this existential threat. They wished for a *coup to restore democracy*, a contradictory desire, a shameful ideation. This is because they cherish democracy—historically, democracy has been the political system of slave owners *par excellence*—but only because they understand democracy is a mechanism designed to deliver them certain results. And because they were having such a hard time distinguishing between the symbols and the substance of whiteness, and saw how the old symbols were being swept away, they were terrified, truly terrified, that their cherished democracy was no longer safeguarding their existential whiteness. Hence the transparent lie, that even they weren't stupid enough to actually believe, that the 2020 election had been stolen.

And hence the wish, and not the plan, for a coup. John Bolton was correct when he said, from experience, that January 6 was no coup, because a real coup takes a lot of work. No such work had gone into the invasion of the Capitol. It was wishful ideation, better analyzed in some updated Freudian framework than from a politico-military standpoint.

The progressive wing of whiteness also suffered a major existential divide around the same time. Seeing, under Obama, how robust a foundation whiteness truly is, and reading the writing on the wall, that the political calculus of Clintonian democracy—flagrantly neoliberal, openly anti-poor—could no longer hope to win elections, many of them became emboldened to make even more reforms capable of strengthening the government's position both domestically and internationally. They were the ones with the most lucid view that Amerikkka was decadent, the American Empire already in a near irreparable decline. But they overestimated the strategic intelligence and decency of their fellow politicians, they overestimated how compelling their obviously correct strategies were, and they underestimated how easily a large *minority* with the support of capitalist media can keep winning in a democracy.

The progressives wanted to clean house to make the house—the *big house*, a plantation house—stronger. Predictably, the Right and Center thought they were traitors. Just as predictably, the Democratic Party used the greater evil of Trump to clamp down on progressive inroads. They turned back to the center, rallying around a long time white supremacist and establishment figure, but one able to distance himself from the rancid neoliberal brand of the Clintons: Joe Biden.

## ***Whiteness is for Mercenaries***

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, biologists tried to claim that race was a natural, objective category. Today, numerous white scientists are trying to undo the historical deconstruction of race with Trojan horse claims that race, although an imperfect category, is useful for making certain genetic predictions. Yet the categories of race precede their scientific alibis. The primordial racial categories of white and black actually stem from a pre-colonial moral dichotomy central to European Christianity. White and black were systematically used to refer to good and evil long before they were systematically used to refer to skin color. (In fact, this is probably a part of Christianity's Zoroastrian legacy, and has nothing to do with physical colors at all.) Early European invaders

of other continents did not immediately begin categorizing those they met by skin color; rather, their initial descriptions tended to focus on their religion or how they behaved. In fact, the early invaders sometimes used the same adjectives to describe the physical appearance of their own lower classes—the peasants and the urban poor—and the free peoples they encountered in Africa and the Americas (“swarthy,” “motley,” “shameless,” “beast-like”).

In the face of insurrections that saw kidnapped Africans, poor Europeans, and besieged Indigenous people fighting together against their common enemy, the colonial powers passed laws and erected concentric layers of religious, cultural, economic, judicial, institutional, and biological barriers to break the solidarity of the oppressed.

In the centuries between Christopher Columbus and George Washington, and in laboratories as far flung as the plantations of Ireland and Brazil, in the mass deportations from Spain and in the mass enslavement in Africa, whiteness was created to categorize and control the subjects of a globalizing world order. In the face of insurrections that saw kidnapped Africans, poor Europeans, and besieged Indigenous people fighting together against their common enemy, the colonial powers passed laws and erected concentric layers of religious, cultural, economic, judicial, institutional, and biological barriers to break the solidarity of the oppressed.

To be accurate, we should be clear that poor whites were the least active member of that trifecta of rebellion. More research needs to be done to understand why, but I think we will find that the principal reasons are twofold: the trauma of repression; and Christianity. By the time they were getting kidnapped or recruited to participate in the project of colonizing other continents, the lower classes of Europe were already exhausted and traumatized from a series of major rebellions and merciless repressions spanning the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. They had been thoroughly terrorized, so they could be more effectively disciplined, or relied on to displace their pain on a new class of whipping boy. Secondly, Christianity was an elite religion when it sunk its claws into Europe. It took several bloody centuries to convert the lower classes, but by the 16<sup>th</sup> century that arc had reached its apex. Christianization was a state-building mission that served as a form of proto-colonization, forcing people out of territorial spiritualities and into a universalizing worldview attached to military and economic processes of exploitation. As such, it prevented lower class whites from making common cause with peoples on other continents unless those peoples accepted their universal truth.

As it developed, whiteness became the projection of European Enlightenment values, the new normal, and the peoples who were excluded from it were racialized and forced to occupy lower orders on the social hierarchy. Those who did not accept their place were disappeared, one way or another.

Early on, one of the major functions of whiteness was to recruit mercenaries for the imperial projects of the dominant European states. On ethnic and linguistic grounds, the English and the Scottish had little in common; in fact, the latter had been historically oppressed by the former. Nonetheless the English state—in both monarchic and republican variants—convinced a huge number of lowland Scots to join them in a civilizing mission against the Irish, resulting in the enrichment of the colonizers and genocide against the colonized. Given that the colonizers implanted themselves as a landowning, aristocratic gentry, intermixing with the natives was discouraged and proto-whiteness became a question of purity in addition to conquest.

In Castille, the Catholic chivalric orders mobilized knights and nobles to kill, enslave, or deport the entirety of the Muslim population that had lived on the Iberian peninsula for more than 700 years. As soon as this war ended, in 1492, the Catholic monarchs of Castille and Aragon decided to finance an exploratory mission to prepare for a subsequent invasion of the Indies. Similar to the English invasion of Ireland, they justified it as a civilizing mission, with their stated purpose and a good deal of their activity focused on the forceful conversion of the Indigenous to Catholicism. Of course, they also enriched themselves beyond their wildest dreams.

The riches won in the previous war, it bears noting, were unequally distributed. The upper aristocracy claimed the new lands stolen from al-Andalus and most of the spoils of war, in large part enslaved Muslims themselves. With the end of the genocidal war against the Muslims, the huge class of landless or relatively poor knights had few economic opportunities apart from embarking for the Americas to serve as mercenaries in a new series of genocidal wars. Many of the participants in these wars were in fact Muslims and Jews who had converted to Christianity in the last generations. Serving as mercenaries was the path they had available for turning into that kind of person who would eventually be called “white.” A little while later, this is also how the Irish would win their inclusion into the white race, serving as soldiers and then as police for the British and North American states.

In the new American colonies, as Indigenous populations were violently displaced and kidnapped Africans were imported to work in a new regime of slavery more brutal and totalitarian than anything that had come before it, the effervescence of social conflict increased dramatically. The old feudal system, in which commoners were exploited but at least they had an inalienable connection to the land and thus to their own subsistence, had rarely produced antagonisms so intense. Feudalism’s methods for social control, therefore, would not be sufficient for responding to the rebellious responses provoked by these new, brutal tactics of domination and enslavement.

With the creation of new lower classes—enslaved Indigenous peoples from Africa and the Americas—non-aristocratic Europeans willing to take on a role as mercenaries, overseers, torturers, and executioners had a chance to move up in the world. The upper aristocracy of England, France, Portugal, and Spain controlled the profits of their new colonies (along with an emerging bourgeoisie centered in northern Italy, Holland, and England, who made their riches trading in slaves, manufacturing boats and weapons, and selling insurance for sea voyages, among other nefarious enterprises). On the ground, it was the bottom rung of the nobility, often landless knights, who got their boots muddy overseeing the colonies, and they could only do this with the help of European commoners—frequently also sent to the colonies in order to be exploited as laborers—who decided to identify with their exploiters and not with others who were also being abused and dispossessed.

Though we have looked at two factors that encouraged this kind of mercenary betrayal, it was not inevitable nor universal. Many European commoners immediately identified with the communal, stateless living that was traditional among most American and West African peoples. The greater part of their subsistence back home still came from commoning, and it was the lords who assiduously enclosed the commons and forced the people into greater poverty. So, many ex-commoners from the European subcontinent ran off to join active commoners in the Americas at the first chance they got. And in the seaports on both sides of the Atlantic, some poor Europeans continued to fraternize and solidarize with Africans for centuries, standing with them against the colonial powers in a number of rebellions. There were even connections between the early Irish independence movement, Indigenous movements for the preservation of their commons (which

were being enclosed by colonial administrators who had previously done the same in Europe), and African movements against slavery.

As such, refusing whiteness was an ever present option during the centuries when it was being created.

In other words, those Europeans who became the prototype for the white race were the most despicable, boot-licking, power-hungry, easy-to-manipulate, sadistic specimens on the planet. The aristocracy had never had a need to identify with their subordinates (not with lower-rung nobles like the *hidalgos* nor with the commoners). In fact, they had spent centuries erecting barriers to reify the myth of their uniqueness, even half-killing themselves with inbreeding. Once the African slave trade took off and “white” and “black” became racial categories, the aristocracy were slow to use them. They continued emphasizing their noble bloodlines. It was the mercenary class, hoping to also access claims to superiority, that spoke most effusively about whiteness in these first centuries, though they often had to do so using other words, like *civilized*, *Christian*, or *criollo*.

If we give a central focus to power relations—recognizing that it is such relations and how they modulate knowledge that condition and produce material relations—we can see that mercenaries (including cops, non-drafted soldiers, overseers, and managers with hire-fire authority) constitute a separate class. Even though they may technically sell their labor, they have a privileged relationship with the centers of power production, they are active and willing agents of the reproduction and diffusion of that power, and they have never been on the side of the exploited and the oppressed. In the American colonies, the mercenary class was a prime vehicle for the creation of whiteness, and an instrument that allowed people (not only Europeans but also converted Arabs and people of mixed descent) to join the white race.

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In the colonies that would become the United States, with its chattel slavery regime and its aggressive wars against Indigenous neighbors, whiteness took on special importance as a paramilitary duty. By exercising such systematic brutality, colonial authorities created a polarization not even rivaled by the “War of Civilizations” that *Western* governments and jihadists have helped one another create in the last decades. In the colonies, Africans and First Nations peoples had to fight back with lethal force in order to have a chance at survival and freedom. Therefore, poor Europeans either had to run away to join them, or to take up arms against them. There was no middle ground, and this situation favored colonial interests immensely.

What’s more, colonizers controlled economic opportunities in the colonies to a degree they never had in Europe, where feudalism and the guilds traditionally guaranteed commoners access either to land or to stable and dignified employment. In the Americas, the colonizers burned everything that existed before in order to start with a blank slate, building the system that would come to be called capitalism, in which everything could be bought and sold. At the centers of the plantation economy, the best employment opportunity for unskilled European commoners was as overseers, policing, torturing, and raping enslaved Africans and Natives (and beginning a process of institutional learning that would eventually give rise to the managerial occupation). Once they had assumed this job, it was only normal that they heeded the call of duty and join the

patrols that hunted down African fugitives and that organized surveillance of the clandestine conspiracies that preceded escapes and rebellions (the institutional predecessors of modern day police).

For European commoners who wanted to remain free of the plantation system, the chief opportunity was to settle land on the frontiers. But given that capitalist norms and financial instruments already governed agriculture in the Americas, there could be no such thing as subsistence agriculture. New settlers either amassed enough money to buy slaves and start their own plantations, or they fell into debt, lost their farms to lenders within a few years, and had to go out to the frontiers again, clearing more forest and starting over. This put them directly in conflict with the Native peoples whose lands they were stealing and destroying. In other words, the quintessential American idea of freedom and independence is predicated on genocide, and the concentration of wealth is both the goal of this pioneer's freedom and the machine that forces it to be a colonial force.

As Native peoples had no choice but to fight back against encroachment, settlers—once they had decided to be settlers, rather than running away to join the free societies, as many Europeans did—had no choice but to engage in genocidal warfare against them, forming volunteer, paramilitary groups of “rangers” that specialized in irregular, total warfare, scouring the wilderness to ambush soft targets, namely towns of care takers, children, and elderly whose warriors were away hunting or fighting. These rangers were the institutional predecessors of the military special forces that have played important roles in neo-colonial wars from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

In other words, European commoners did not have the choice to be good whites or bad whites. They had a choice whether or not to be whites, whether to identify with Western civilization, or with their traditional practices of commoning and self-organization, which resonated with the commoning and self-organization present in most American and African societies. They had a choice whether to go along with the colonial enterprise or to resist it, either by resisting the enclosure of their lands, or if they already found themselves dispossessed and deported, by mutinying and joining other peoples in resistance, from whatever continent. True, many of those who resisted were killed, but they had the choice.

Once a European commoner decided to be white, short of going back on that choice, they had no option but to participate one way or another in slavery and genocide. Their choice was rewarded, usually not with material riches, so much as the psychological privilege of being considered human. And they were invited to form a new nation, and allowed to be members of that nation in a way that commoners back in Europe still had not been included.

And I think it is necessary to point this out not to elicit sympathy for whites who faced such a tough choice, but to show how anything short of the abolition of whiteness and all its institutions cannot get to the root of the problem.

A strictly economic focus makes it clear the economy in what would become the United States could not function without the coerced labor of enslaved Africans and the resources stolen from Indigenous nations. However, it seems both perverse and untrue to say that Africans and the Indigenous built the United States. The reason becomes clear when we look at the same history focusing on power relations, which also forces us to acknowledge that the United States is a myth far more than it is a material reality.

It was white people who built the United States. Not in the Norman Rockwell sense of hard work, industriousness, and ingenuity. Rather, it was the kind of hard work Frantz Fanon witnessed among the agents of French colonialism in Algeria, psychologically scarred by their en-



thusiastic use of torture and murder to repress the independence movement. The productive labor of the white people who built the United States was systematic plunder, exploitation, and murder. Without the vital paramilitary function they played, the colonies-turned-country never would have survived the blowback from all the violence, misery, and brutality they wreaked.

This historical process can be read about in more depth in Theodore Allen's *The Invention of the White Race* or Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*.

A certain patriotic pride, an unwritten, sacred contract ("kill for us and thrive," perhaps?), the soldier's satisfaction at answering the call of duty, became essential to the psychology of whiteness in North America. Even after the new country achieved an unprecedented level of stability, every generation of whites received its call of duty and the psychological and (increasingly) economic rewards that accompanied it. The Mexican-American War to fulfill a supposedly manifest destiny, the Civil War (on both sides, whether to "save the union" or to save "a way of life"), the KKK and the rest of the white backlash to Reconstruction, the Spanish-American War and the beginning of continuous military intervention in Latin America, World War I, the Red Scare, World War II, the Cold War.

Though the State does not actually maintain a monopoly on violent force, as a rule it aspires to. In a government ruling over a volatile society in which the gravest contradictions are internal (for example, having internal colonies rather than external colonies), those in power will not hesitate to mobilize a part of the population as paramilitaries. But as its institutions grow in strength and resolve the contradictions that previously threatened it, the State will tend to disarm the population, to turn lynching into a bureaucratic affair, and genocide into a dry policy question. Citizens will have fewer chances to participate in their democracy, and as cynical as it might seem to speak of murder and vigilantism as forms of civic duty, the history of democracy from Socrates to Birmingham bears this view out. Military service, which means killing enemies of the State, all euphemisms aside, has always been the foremost mark of the citizen.

Just as corporations have adopted methods from the cooperative movement in order to create happier workers, governments sometimes let their citizens play at being cops and hangmen, if it makes them feel a little more invested in power. But the more power rationalizes, the harder it is to manage the participation of non-specialists who have not received the proper bureaucratic training, and for patriotic whites facing the Twilight of America and imagining themselves the heirs of the pioneers, ride-alongs with the local police fall a little short.

Perhaps the last real call of duty was the Vietnam War, and by the end of that war, even whites had rejected the call. The military became completely unreliable: that was the primary cause of defeat for the US. As whiteness was eroded thanks to the struggles of people of color and the fully interconnected anticapitalist struggles of the time, and as the State itself evolved towards greater technological and institutional totalitarianism, rulers came to rely less on the paramilitary force that had propped them up for five straight centuries. They issued no more calls to arms.

Whiteness was still paying its economic dividends, but more and more people felt uncertain about the future, and the future, progress, is an important property of whiteness: owning the future is its manifest destiny.

This is the nature of the present crisis of whiteness. This is the primary reason so many whites voted for Trump. It has nothing to do with the loss of factory jobs, as a tacitly racist media claimed, because unemployed Black, latine, and Asian factory workers did not flock to Trump; nor is it a

result of middle class whites facing greater economic hardship, given that during the eight years of the Obama administration, whites gained in relative wealth compared to Blacks, showing that white privilege was still paying its economic dividends. Contrary to racist liberal claims about white trash (originally, those whites who “didn’t act like white people”), it was the upper-middle class whites who voted for Trump in the highest proportions.

One of Trump’s strongest states was North Dakota, which was a boom state at the time with nothing in common, economically, with the rust belt. Mightn’t white sentiments there have anything to do with the First Nations peoples who had rallied all that year to defend their territory against a pipeline?

The pipeline itself is a perfect microcosm. The US Army (Corps of Engineers) enables the construction, they reroute it to protect the majority white town of Bismarck against the inevitable spills, in the process endangering the water supply of the Standing Rock Reservation, and a consortium of local and federal police, private mercenaries, and white citizens mobilize to repress the resistance. White people across the region identify with the pipeline and with the military operation against Indigenous water protectors, even though the vast majority of profits from the pipeline will be hoarded by a tiny number of corporate executives and investors. Regular whites will be sheltered from the worst consequences of the pipeline, but they will reap few of the benefits.

Whites supported Trump because they felt insecure about their whiteness, and he gave a rallying cry, a call of duty, stronger than any that had been made in decades. Whiteness was still paying its economic dividends, but more and more people felt uncertain about the future, and the future, progress, is an important property of whiteness: owning the future is its manifest destiny.

Electing Obama was a way of guaranteeing a future for white supremacy. He was a loyal agent of the racist order, deporting more immigrants than any other President, continuing neo-colonial wars in multiple countries, telling the residents of Flint, “let them drink lead,” and standing by the police as they were finally called to account for their daily murders. But the symbolic upset it represented in the minds of whites, combined with economic uncertainty about the future, erosion of global US hegemony, and the fact that whites had long been demobilized from their paramilitary function, was too much for the majority of white people.

White supremacy has always had a place for spokespeople of color, going back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. But a lot of people have trouble accepting that the President is just another spokesperson. Whiteness often juggles centralized and decentralized modes. The latter praises “frontier initiative,” the diffuse responsibility of all white people everywhere to “hold down the fort.” The former is validated by the Great Men view of history and elicits admiration for authoritarian leaders. A Black president interrupted that narrative in a way a Black police chief could not.

As an authoritarian figure, Trump has been more of a lightning rod than an organizer or a leader, but he has given whites the opportunity to re-baptize themselves in their whiteness. This is primarily visible in the mercenary function many whites are trying to play, organizing into militias to patrol the borders, attacking mosques, synagogues, Black churches, abortion clinics, or rallying alongside police in the recent uprising.

Currently, whites who are embracing their mercenary role have been unable or unwilling to distinguish between the progressive white supremacists who are trying to update whiteness to make it more resilient, and the underclass rebels who are calling, torch in hand, to burn down the American plantation.

## ***Whiteness is for Back-stabbers***

Between the 1400s and the 1600s, rebellious, heretical, and renegade commoners in Europe were suppressed, tortured, and massacred with extreme brutality and often with the same tactics as those used against Africans and Native Americans. Commoners who tried to stay neutral were frequently dispossessed, forced off their lands and into some kind of starvation-prone wage slavery or debt farming as European states consolidated their power. Commoners who volunteered as mercenaries spared themselves a nasty fate and won economic and social privileges. The more commoners who decided to debase themselves as mercenaries, the more whiteness could become a paradigmatic category with permanent privileges accruing to everyone fit into that box. European colonizers needed a justification for the horrible things they were doing, and such a rationale—first religious, then as a transitional civilizational discourse, and then scientific—had to be rational, and therefore categoric. They needed justifications for their behavior more noble than their own selfish interests; they needed to describe enslavement and genocide as a natural process. Therefore, whiteness would have to include everyone who fit certain characteristics, and not just the elite's allies in any given moment.

By creating fixed racial categories, European colonizers could also determine different regimes of discipline and punishment and different regimes of economic responsibility and exploitation for different sectors of their subject populations. This was necessary to enable more complex mechanisms of social control and exploitation. By the late 1600s, as talk of “rights” began to circulate, Europeans, regardless of whether they accepted their mercenary role, could expect some standard of systematic legal treatment, however unfair, even when they rebelled. This privileged treatment and the accompanying Enlightenment idea of natural rights convinced many people to accept their whiteness.

In other words, the way that rebellious whites began to speak about freedom constituted a crass betrayal of their erstwhile comrades in arms. When they spoke about the natural rights of man, they had invisibilized their mothers and sisters, stood by as they were burned at the stake, and they elaborated this new conceptualization of freedom while presuming they were the only ones fit to be considered fully human. Without remorse, they back-stabbed the very maroon and Indigenous peoples who had fought alongside them, and who had welcomed them into their societies when they ran away from servitude in the colonies.

It was this intercontinental solidarity that motivated colonizers to construct race through very specific laws governing different regimes of treatment, rights, and exploitations for different peoples. Fraternizing between the newly created races was expressly forbidden in order to break intercontinental solidarity, deprive racialized peoples of protection, and insulate those Europeans who had not volunteered to be mercenaries, so that the white mentality could eventually take hold despite their lack of patriotism. Also, a differentiated racial regime fit the needs of an expanding economy for more complex hierarchies and management structures.

That economy fueled another motor of white supremacy. The limitless greed of nascent capitalism, the psychotic infatuation with abstract value creating more abstract value, begged for the colonial overseers to pull out all stops in the quest for ever more and better exploitation. The needs of a plantation and mining economy for forced labor, the psychological numbing required for overseers to force people to work to death, and the inconvenience of feudal obligations or the temporary slavery inherent in the contracts of indentured servants led to the emergence of chattel slavery. The slaves of the Roman Empire—an empire admired by the up-and-coming

bourgeoisie—were also considered property without rights, unlike slaves or servants in most other hierarchical civilizations, but there was no precedent for the regime of chattel slavery that arose in the transatlantic cycle of capital accumulation, in which millions of people's lives were mercilessly subordinated to the production of commodities for a global market.

Aspects of this process can be better understood in Rediker and Linebaugh's *The Many-Headed Hydra* or Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*.

By accepting their whiteness, by accepting they had certain rights that kept anyone from cutting their hands off or owning them for life, even if they could be starved to death or have their children kidnapped and sold to ship captains or textile manufacturers, European commoners were tacitly condoning this treatment of the very people who had been their brothers and sisters in resistance against exploitation.

It was not only the need of elites to divide and conquer, but also this process of greed and accumulation, that led to the differentiation of races. Already under Columbus' rule of terror, the cutting off of hands of enslaved people—Caribbean or African—to punish them for insufficient productivity was becoming systematic, albeit in fits and starts. Torturers need some psychological rationale to protect themselves from the unimaginable damage they inflict on their victims, and for enslavers, the dehumanization of racism became that rationale.

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Simultaneous and by no means unrelated to the rise of transatlantic slavery, the bourgeoisie arose on the European subcontinent. These were commoners who took advantage of the struggles of peasants and urban laborers to dethrone the aristocracy and set themselves up as even crueler masters. Time and again, they betrayed other commoners, as in the Hussite Wars of 1419 to 1434, the German Peasants' Rebellion of 1524-1525, the Catalan revolt of 1640, the English Civil War of 1642-1651, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the so-called Glorious Revolution in Spain in 1868, and other political struggles that constituted the death knell for commoning and the triumph of liberalism.

This propensity for betrayal is an ingrained part of whiteness. Paramilitary organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, the American Legion, and the White Citizens' Council not only went after Black people, they also assaulted and murdered union organizers and others who were trying to better conditions for working people. The calls to duty associated with whiteness are frequently also calls to scab, calls to betray ongoing struggles for dignity and better living conditions by playing lackey to the bosses.

Trump bemoaned the evils of NAFTA, a trade deal that hurts working people in Canada, the US, and Mexico, but his solution was to urge US workers to attack Mexican workers, or at least to stand by and let them be scapegoated and deported. And while we're talking about back-stabbing, we should mention the police, who spend their lives surveilling, torturing, killing, and locking up people from a roughly similar economic background (cops tend not to come from wealthier backgrounds, though they are paid much more than most real workers).

## *Whiteness is for Suckers*

The vast majority of the people who accepted their categorization as whites received important economic privileges in comparison to racialized people, yet still remained exploited and abused. Their wage was primarily psychological. They were allowed to identify with the wealthy and powerful, and to imagine themselves as belonging to the same community as all the famous inventors, philosophers, statesmen, and explorers. They were given permission to take partial credit for building Western civilization, which by then had brutally imposed itself across the planet. And in exchange, they accepted the economic opportunities available to them, which overwhelmingly meant factory work that would become ever more regimented, temporary slavery on the transoceanic vessels that moved capitalism's lifeblood, increasingly precarious agricultural work locked into a cycle of debt and dispossession, mid-level plantation work, and non-remunerated reproductive work. All of these jobs tended to be grueling, degrading, and dangerous. Fellow whites who exclusively made up the class of bosses and owners in those centuries laughed all the way to the bank, day after day. To put it lightly, the deal constituted by whiteness was a deal for suckers.

It remains so to this day. Even in the prosperity of the post-war United States, the ideal white life could only be achieved through total immersion in mortgage and college debts. Financiers, lenders, and bankers based their immense wealth on the willingness of whites to sacrifice their futures to debt payments, in order to achieve an employment and residential profile that would quickly prove to be culturally vapid and psychologically toxic. In plain English, the white, middle class ideal was not a happy life for most people, it was miserable. Nor was it an economically stable position. In every economic recession, large numbers of them were sacrificed, shunted back to the lower class. White suckers, in their millions, traded their future for a poison apple. And they did so in an attempt to emulate rich whites.

Reactionary white supremacists have long fabricated distractions from the self-evident fact that on any given day, the people who are fucking over the average white person most brutally are also white. Because most people know, albeit on a nonverbal level, that capitalism is responsible for many of the miseries they suffer, white supremacists have always needed a way to decry the economic evils suffered by the poor whites whom they need to turn into dupes and thugs, without actually critiquing capitalism. The Nazis were particularly effective in replacing critiques of capitalism with anti-Semitic scapegoating. Today, a large part of Trump's base in the alt-Right is resurrecting anti-Semitism, waving around the phantom of Jewish bankers and corrupt political allies so that people don't think about bankers in general, not to mention New York real estate developers.

From the Nazis to Trump, white supremacists have operated pyramid schemes that allow bankers, financiers, property owners, and industrialists to hoodwink the lower class white suckers whom they exploit on a daily basis. White supremacist movements get their funding and their media support from those bankers and industrialists, they essentially hire charismatic figures to peddle absurd concoctions and manufacture scapegoats, and they get idiotic thugs from among the working population to take the real risks and act as their hitmen and errand boys. Elites like Donald Trump take their potential workers, contributors, and tenants—in other words, the people they make their money off of—for a ride, telling them it's some other rich person they should be angry at, and working class whites go along with it because they think, by virtue of their shared whiteness, they might one day also become as rich and successful.

The scabbing and union-busting of the Red Scare and the Cold War damaged labor conditions for white workers, too, but the majority seemed proud to shoot themselves in the foot.

Sometimes, answering the call of duty mentioned in the first chapter wasn't accompanied by economic rewards, but by austerity. The scabbing and union-busting of the Red Scare and the Cold War damaged labor conditions for white workers, too, but the majority seemed proud to shoot themselves in the foot. Of course, rich people exploit people of color more mercilessly than they exploit white people. The fake anti-capitalism of white supremacists not only provides a punching bag to take the blame for the things all rich people do, it also provides a handy, racist explanation for why people of color are often poor. Yet many white people also suffer poverty. Those who accept racist ideas about why the world is the way it is are clearly suckers. Laziness and inferiority explain the poverty of their Black neighbors, while their own poverty is the fault of some conspiracy of Jewish bankers; they themselves are surely not lazy, since one day they could become as rich and successful as the landlord or the boss who currently submerges them in poverty.

One of the key examples of how the media—owned by the same corporations and individuals who own the entire economy—have benefited from and supported white supremacist conspiracy theories is their tolerance for the lie spouted not only by Trump but by many politicians and commentators blaming immigrants for job loss in the United States. Considering how the vast majority of Americans know when the Super Bowl is or when a major hurricane is inbound, it would be well within the power of the media to let every American know that close to 90% of the jobs that have disappeared in the last decade have been lost to automation and not because of outsourcing to other countries. But the wealthy would much rather that people blame foreigners rather than robots because automation has exponentially increased their profits, and not even a racist is stupid enough to get mad at a robot for the loss of their job. They would blame the company directors who introduced automation.

### ***Whiteness is for Liberals***

Martin Luther King, Jr. mentioned white liberals as a greater “stumbling block” than the Klan, due to their acceptance of the movement's objectives but their rejection of confrontational methods and urgent timelines. Nonetheless, the same moderates who rejected protesting then, and who today cling to nonviolence, have been unflagging in their support for more education (in white institutions, it goes without saying). They support scholarships, internships, Affirmative Action, and other initiatives to get racialized people into higher paying jobs and positions of symbolic importance, on an individualized, case-by-case basis. Why the unequal distribution of enthusiasm? Because liberals and progressives are advocates of white supremacy by other means.

Whites who wore their vote for Obama as a badge of anti-racist honor would never have supported him if it weren't for his white diction, his impeccable academic record at originally white educational institutions, and his minimal contact with Black communities. Liberal whites who donate to scholarship funds and have polite, college-educated Black friends are terrified of meeting Black people in the street. Their white supremacy operates not so much on the level of beliefs and not even necessarily as attitudes, but as a positioning with respect to society as a

whole. In the end, it is the same white supremacy as that of the Klan and American Renaissance, just better concealed.

To understand this, we need to understand how systems of oppression adapt and defend themselves.

Liberal narratives of progress tend to paint an unjustifiably pessimistic picture of the past and an unjustifiably optimistic picture of the present and future; don't cancel George Washington, because everyone back then thought slavery was normal; don't abolish the United States now, because things are a lot better, and with just a few more reforms we'll achieve justice. Obviously, most people were opposed to slavery in George Washington's time, but liberals invisibilize or silence those masses, and similarly egregious forms of abuse and oppression today are being normalized by progressives who say reforms will do the trick.

Nonetheless, it can be said that popular values do change over time, and that such values constitute a lever by which populations can limit their states or by which states can mobilize or pacify their populations. Social struggles tend to constantly undermine elite belief systems and spread liberatory values, whereas in reactionary periods elites acting inside and outside the State expend a great deal of resources resurrecting the elite values of earlier periods while also updating them for compatibility with current strategic needs and economic modes.

After the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, due in part to internal resistance, slavery became unacceptable in the eyes of local societies. It took Western elites a thousand years—not continuously but in fits and starts coalescing into sustained waves—to corrupt the original idea of feudalism as a balanced contract into some form of non-negotiable servitude, and to work out a convincing new justification for outright slavery. The slavery of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment referred back to the elite Roman custom and also tailored itself to the philosophies and sciences of the day.

Progress, if we jettison the absurd mythology of a straight line of improvement so useful to the guardians of the status quo, is a complex push and pull between opposed sectors of society and differing strategies for control. On an economic level, progress is when a privileged stratum takes advantage of the struggles of the most exploited in order to introduce a new mode that dethrones the paramount class, favors the upstarts, and continues the exploitation of the lowest strata in a new form. Thus, the rising class of artisans and merchants used the commoners' struggles against the aristocracy to end feudalism and accelerate the privatization of the commons. Northern bankers and industrialists lent their strength to final abolition of chattel slavery, but only to impose a more effective regime of wage slavery. On the level of discourse and practices, the governed innovate and spread values that favor resistance and freedom, and the governors produce a spectacle of debate that ranges from reactionary defense of elite values called into question to the hypocritical incorporation of symbolic elements of the new values into a modified version of the old oppressive structure.

As far as white supremacy is concerned, this spectacle involves endless reiterations of the two original elements, exclusion and conversion, both of which are oriented towards the same objective, domination.

The reactionaries favor exclusion, which can take the form of eviction, deportation, impoverishment, and dehumanization. The xenophobia of reactionaries is sheer hypocrisy. You can't exclude something that is not a part of your system. The exclusions of colonialism and white

supremacy are always preceded by a forcible annexation. People of color are kidnapped, their lands are invaded, or their countries are forced into economies of dependence. Only after this fact are they excluded, and in this sense exclusion means marginalization rather than total ejection. A system, by its nature, cannot operate outside itself, and the economies of colonizing states undergo a crucial activity at their margins, outside their national borders but within the global system they constitute. When white supremacists practice exclusion, say in the form of deportations, they are not protecting the purity of an ethno-community, which does not exist, but imposing a greater degree of vulnerability on the migrant populations that are forced into the white supremacists' economy.

"Border control" has never intended or managed to stop the flow of immigration, only to terrorize and control immigrants so they can be exploited more effectively. The border wall that already existed between the US and Mexico during the 2016 presidential campaign is specifically designed to force immigrants to cross at the most dangerous points. Significantly, both Republicans and Democrats pretended there was no wall there during the 2016 campaign: Trump did so to justify building up the wall even more and to pretend that he was an outsider doing something new, rather than just another politician building on long-established policies; Hillary Clinton and other Democrats did so to hide the fact that a racist, violent border policy was also the order of the day under Obama and Bill.

Angela Merkel, hailed even by progressives as a savior of Syrian refugees, simply announced that the German state would accept the undocumented who arrived at its borders. She did not take the logistically simple step of establishing direct flights for refugees from Turkey or Lebanon, thus ensuring that migrants had to make a dangerous and arduous journey in which they faced police brutality, racist paramilitaries, bureaucratic humiliations, hunger, cold, drownings, homelessness, mountain crossings, razor wire fences, and smugglers, to the total cost of 4,000 euros and up, making sure that only the professional classes could arrive, and that they would arrive desperate, broken, and eager to work in conditions far inferior to the domestic labor force. There was nothing compassionate about the move, it was the cynical expropriation of an entire country's skilled labor, something the association of German business owners had already been lobbying for prior to Merkel's decision.

Conversion is the method most favored by the liberal and progressive white supremacists. Historically, there have been multiple methods for becoming white and standards for measuring whiteness, including religion and blood quanta. Going back to the beginning of colonialism, there have been figures like Bartolomé de las Casas, the progressive priest who documented the genocide against the Native Americans and made impassioned pleas for their humane treatment, even as he continued converting them to Christianity, taking advantage of the catastrophe created by his more brutal compatriots. Incidentally, de las Casas' advocacy won him great power within the white supremacist structures of colonization. He was appointed bishop of Chiapas and "Protector of the Indians." This system of rewards will be important to remember when we talk about liberal white supremacy nowadays.

Back in Europe, the new class of merchants, bankers, investors, slave-traders, land speculators, bosses, and factory owners were becoming the foremost proponents of whiteness. As mentioned, the aristocracy traditionally did not seek common ground with their subjects. Quite the contrary, they rarely used "humanity" as a category. But the new capitalist class, armed with Enlightenment ideology, undermined aristocratic privileges by proclaiming a common humanity and human rights, yet they simultaneously dehumanized their slaves, servants, wives, and



daughters (it must be mentioned that the wives of capitalists, whenever they were allowed to have a social voice, were also outspoken in the creation of whiteness). They constructed a human who was a faithful reproducer of Enlightenment values. Taking a page from the Christian obsession with conversion, they invited everyone to take part in this universal humanity and the rights and protections it bestowed. But to be considered human, people would have to become civilized, which meant emulating the patriarchal and elitist Western culture that the bourgeoisie championed.

In its simplest form, “schools not prisons” is the progressive recipe for white supremacy and genocide. Remember, genocide can be accomplished without shedding blood, although physical and cultural extermination tend to go hand in hand. Genocide is the destruction of a people, and it can also be accomplished through the break-up of families, forced adoptions, sterilization, the prohibition of languages and religions, all of which were carried out against people of West African and American origins. Residential schools, which used all the foregoing techniques against First Nations peoples, have been a primary tool of the genocide carried out by the Canadian state, which has long fashioned itself as more humanitarian than its cowboy southern neighbor. By posing as the good cop, progressives can claim to be protecting the interests of racialized people, intervening against the open brutality of their bad cop counterparts while also taking advantage of the vulnerability that brutality creates. The good cop then uses their position to force racialized people to adopt the worldviews, economic practices, and cultural norms of whiteness. Racialized people who have been “converted,” who reproduce Western civilization, will always be at a disadvantage, perpetual outsiders working against their communities of origin, even as they are invited into the institutions of power, which are the same institutions, or their direct descendants, that are responsible for colonization and enslavement (to name just a few, globally predominant governments like those of the US, Britain, France, and Spain, the older universities, scientific societies, stock exchanges, and banks in the world, and less directly, all the private companies and public agencies that are corollaries to the powerful central players just mentioned).

In *The Dragon and the Hydra*, Russell “Maroon” Shoatz gives a precise history of how converting insurgents fighting against slavery, pushing them to adopt authoritarian modes of organization and to form states if they won their independence, was crucial in keeping the white supremacist system intact.

Nowadays, the progressive defenders of white supremacy preach conversion through education, disarmament, and the “equal opportunity” recruitment of people of color into the institutions of white supremacy.

Nowadays, the progressive defenders of white supremacy preach conversion through education, disarmament, and the “equal opportunity” recruitment of people of color into the institutions of white supremacy. Mentioning this recruitment process is not an attempt to disrespect the choices of people of color who go to university, for example (though I would insist that anyone, regardless of skin color, who becomes a cop, a prison guard, a politician, or a banker is committing an outrage against their fellow human beings). Black and Indigenous people especially are disproportionately saddled with grim economic options, and university education, even though it does constitute an integration into oppressive institutions and worldviews and should be more extensively criticized, can also offer tools of liberation and self-realization, as well as better job

prospects. Rather, we need to analyze the design and historical purpose of these institutions so as to understand why, at a certain point, powerful whites also begin to advocate for racial integration.

Until the anti-police rebellions that began to increase in frequency in 2009, the predominant liberal practice regarding race was “colorblindness,” which meant an avoidance of historical critique or structural change, and a preference for rating and ranking people on the basis of racialized behaviors and curricula rather than directly on skin color. In other words, pretend not to notice if a person is Black, Indigenous, latine, Asian, but pay attention to their dialect, their educational records, their prison records, and their income level when deciding how to distribute opportunities. And refuse to dismantle the systemic inequalities that determine, across generations, how different people end up with different treatment by the institutions of policing, education, healthcare, housing, and employment.

This was also the model of white supremacy that an expanding tech sector needed to protect itself from growing inequalities while also recruiting a highly educated workforce on a global scale. In the eyes of a Silicon Valley employer, it should not matter if a prospective employee is Black, white, or Asian, from Oakland, Bogotá, Mumbai, or Iowa. What matters is whether they can speak or dress “properly,” whether they have won access to high quality education and familiarized themselves with cutting edge technologies, and whether they can follow the discipline of a certain kind of workplace. All of those qualifications are intimately modulated by experiences of race and legacies of racism. By practicing colorblindness, by not naming race, economic leaders create opportunities for individual advancement, thus defusing anti-racist rebellions, they avail themselves of broader populations of skilled workers from which to recruit, thus increasing their intellectual capital, and they make it crystal clear what kind of behaviors and culture racialized people need to adopt, simultaneously promoting and obscuring a fundamental injustice.

After 2009 and especially after the Ferguson uprising, a new model took precedence that we can refer to as the anti-racist workshop model. Based on guilt-mongering, reinforcing racial categories, disarming people of color and immobilizing solidaristic whites, privileging the college-educated and favoring modes of learning that are both academic and hierarchical, this model spreads itself through expensive workshops and self-absorbed books. These books frequently make bestseller lists because they don’t threaten the system, as their most common result is navel-gazing. People trained in this model sometimes take to the streets in the name of anti-racism, but what they actually end up doing is protecting capitalist property, protecting police from anything more than verbal resistance, disarming and silencing radical people of color, and shaming white people into passivity. In the guise of spreading an anti-racist consciousness, proponents of this model actually reinforce racial categories and obscure the strategic origins of whiteness, thus obviating possibilities for undermining it through committed cross-racial solidarity and shared rebellion against oppressive institutions.

In Oakland, in Ferguson, and across the country, those utilizing this model were not only guilt-ridden whites and their careerist white gurus, but also Black church leaders, Democratic politicians, racialized NGO spokespeople, and authoritarian or parasitic formations like the New Black Panther Party (not to be confused with the original BPP, as BPP veterans make abundantly clear), the Nation of Islam, or Black Lives Matter, Inc. And those targeted by their critiques or their censure during these rebellions were usually racialized people from the neighborhoods most immediately affected by police violence, together with those from inside or outside the neighbor-

hood with a radical anti-racist and anticapitalist analysis, including Black and Indigenous people, latines, and Asians as well as white people.

White supremacy has used spokespeople of color for centuries. The very construction of the Other, the orientalism so ingrained in Western thought, is also a way for whites to systematically receive outside confirmation of their self-image. Thus, a fundamental strategy of progressive white supremacists is to tokenize racialized people who promote critiques and methods of struggle that are the least threatening for the entire system, which also requires essentializing the experiences of racialized people, simplifying them and reducing them to one single voice that can be more easily represented: representation politics.

Existing critiques of ally politics, like “Accomplices Not Allies,” “A Critique of Ally Politics,” and “Another Word for White Ally Is Coward” draw attention to this and other dynamics. Disciplining white people as allies supporting some monolithic Other reinforces their privileged identity. Rather than encouraging rebellion against the category and history of whiteness, ally politics demands white people continuously exercise their privileges, ostensibly at the service of those they identify as the leaders of racialized movements and communities. But no community is homogeneous. White allies choose whom to follow and whom to invisibilize, always in accordance with their own political criteria of what is legitimate, which is fully conditioned by their whiteness. In other words, they play a role that casts them as passive supporters with no agency, excusing themselves of any responsibility in the struggle as long as they participate in periodic rituals of mutual guilting. This activism comes with far fewer risks and no agency, but it still allows white people, passively, to exercise great power in controlling anti-racist struggles. They dedicate their considerable resources to those who already have the bullhorn (and who were frequently handed that bullhorn by structures even more obviously connected to white supremacy, like the Democratic Party or NGOs).

As an example of the effect white allies have in movements against white supremacy and colonialism, we can consider how they typically act when faced with a multiracial crowd that is exceeding the bounds of “acceptable” protest, whether that means fighting back against police, engaging in wealth redistribution through looting, or even something as simple as standing in the street or expressing themselves loudly. In this case, in cities across the US, good white allies have shamed, assaulted, or even aided in the arrest of white people in the crowd, with the immediate effect of reinforcing racial separations and pacifying the mood of the crowd as a whole. In this way, they also silence and delegitimize the racialized people in the crowd, showing an ingrained belief that such people do not have their own agency and are not intelligent enough to choose their own methods of struggle. What’s more, there are frequent cases, some documented in “A Critique of Ally Politics,” in which they will also attack racialized people in the crowd for supposedly privileged behavior. In 2020, there was at least one case of an anti-racist white ally getting a Black person locked up in prison: convinced that a person engaging in property destruction during a protest against the police was an agent provocateur, she spread his image and got him identified. When it turned out he was no provocateur but someone with very legitimate reasons to be fighting back, she didn’t lift a finger to help him with legal expenses or to get him support in prison.

This shows how deeply ingrained their essentialized view of race is: they have determined that a certain form of protest is essentially privileged and white, and therefore anyone engaged in unacceptable forms of protest are either whites who have not gone to all the workshops they have, ignorant and misled racialized people, or outside agitators. It’s important to recognize that

both the outside agitator and the ignorant racialized person whipped into a frenzy are both racist tropes originating with slave owners and southern media.

In other words, in the face of a multiracial crowd fighting and sharing risks together, the good white ally seeks to disarm, segregate, and isolate. This is true in specific situations of street protest, and also true at a more metaphorical level in day-to-day organizing: the organizations white allies will support are those that are legible to their white supremacist ideas of what constitutes organization and struggle; those that are most visible and therefore most able to give them cookies; those that are the least risky, and thus not the ones that have been illegalized by a white supremacist state; and preferably, those with official non-profit status so they can get tax write-offs while “fighting the good fight.” Needless to say, this mode is nothing like the mutinies and constant border-crossing that marks the greatest eras of rebellion against the white supremacist regime.

White allies and workshop whites continue to act as gatekeepers rather than helping storm the gates. They often do not ask themselves how they might help destroy the forms of extraction that create their privileges and resources in the first place. In other words, they continue to occupy the point of distribution, the gate, as it were, and then pretend they have no active self-interest in distributing the resources they control only to those who want to pass through the gate to the promised land of equality and integration on the other side, and never, ever, to those who want to destroy the wall for good, to destroy whiteness, to destroy policing and prisons, to destroy capitalism.

We can't struggle alongside other people, take care of them and have their backs, if we are not aware of our differences, including privileges. That said, I think it is enormously important that people fighting to abolish whiteness not view privileges as a good thing we should feel guilty about. Having privileges is good only when compared to not having them in a system ruled by the forms of power that create those privileges. This is the difference between a line of struggle that seeks to create universal access to the structures of oppression, and one that seeks to abolish those structures and make a healthier world. Universities, hospitals, supermarkets with global supply chains, a police force not out to get you, a mortgaged house, a high-paying job: all of these are horrible things that deserve a great deal of critique. Some of them need to be fundamentally transformed (e.g. hospitals) while others need to be abolished entirely. However, in every case, having access to them is better than not having access to them while we live in this society. Everyone should have free access to education, healthcare, healthy food, creative activity, and housing, and together we should be able to define and ensure our collective safety. Abolishing whiteness means rethinking how we want to fulfill those needs, which starts with acknowledging that privilege is poisonous.

One small indication of that is the terrible mental health indicators at the heart of the American Dream, in white suburban households. Everyone who is included in whiteness needs to find their own reasons to fight against it, but we do have to fight. Attempting to extend the privileges of whiteness (and, unavoidably, the codes and culture along with it) to everybody is not destroying white supremacy; it is spreading it.

Privilege cannot be shared until it eventually dwindles away. Sharing it reproduces it. Society is not a pool of money to which people have unequal access. It is a network of production and control that only produces resources through processes that are exploitive and oppressive. Take the privilege of living in a “good” neighborhood. Certainly, no one deserves to live in a polluted neighborhood with poor services and high interpersonal violence. Sharing privilege in this

case means allowing underprivileged people more access to the good neighborhoods, and that means supporting the real estate industry, the visions of community or conviviality that tend to infuse middle class neighborhoods, and the economic activity people engage in in order to afford housing in the first place. In effect this means displacing the effects of privilege to another marginalized group that is kept out of view. More racialized people moving into a middle class neighborhood turns it into a lower class neighborhood, because capitalism is racial and it is not the sum of individual consumer choices; it comes with ingrained mechanisms that continually reproduce hierarchy. Meanwhile, the white residents of that declining middle class neighborhood will have deeper access to the resources that would allow them to move to the next “nice neighborhood.” White flight is structurally reinforced, and cannot be overcome by individuals sharing privilege.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century version is more complex, but merely represents an updated version of white supremacy. In any city where the tech industry is a major presence, a significant proportion of the high-income people moving into and gentrifying what had been a proletarian neighborhood are likely to be racialized. Nonetheless, well paid tech workers reproduce whiteness (to a greater or lesser extent) regardless of their skin color. Even if the newly gentrified neighborhood might appear racially diverse, it is fully white in its organization. The new forms of conviviality are based around alienation—meeting up for drinks at an overpriced tapas bar—rather than the mutual aid, community, and opacity that have been supplanted in what previously might have been a poor but lively Black or latino neighborhood. (There is also the question of the global production of race and resources; on that score, the tech industry, which may present a diverse face in San Francisco, has severely exacerbated global inequalities.)

Significantly, the social relations in a poor white neighborhood, the kind usually belittled by progressives as “white trash,” often have more in common with sociality in racialized neighborhoods. Capitalism and race constantly refer back to each other and reproduce each other. More than this, our origins are always present, history is always right around the corner: just as whiteness did not originally refer to all light-skinned people but was a mercenary status that had to be earned, there are white people who do not do enough to continue to earn that status, to fit into the alienated, mechanized forms of whiteness, and they are also threatened with partial exclusions, with a greater level of control by the prison system and culture industry.

It is not, as vulgar materialists might assert, a mere function of income or economic role. Anyone from a white, working class, but, say, Calvinist family background knows that their grandparents and ancestors were never referred to as white trash. They sometimes didn’t have two pennies to rub together, but they always paid homage to the codes of whiteness, and the door for class advancement was always left open for them.

Another good example is university education. Allowing a greater proportion of racialized people access to higher education is certainly better than doing nothing, but it still maintains an economy in which a large number of people have to compete for a small number of decent jobs and everyone else is fucked, and it also keeps us believing that historically white supremacist universities are central to education, self-betterment, and economic usefulness.

In both cases, the only sincere answer is revolution, a total transformation that, rather than exalting the suburban neighborhood, the good job, the hip bar, or the university, destroys them too, at least as they exist in their current forms. The real answer is to build community completely outside the false conviviality of suburban or chic-urban whiteness (with its reliance on policing and ecocide, its high rates of substance abuse and domestic violence, its superficial, anti-

solidaristic, atomistic sense of community) and to build education outside the commercialized education of the university system (with its complicity with the worst and most profitable sectors of the economy and its fundamentally white supremacist curriculum, occasionally mitigated with a small Black Studies program).

## ***We Can Find Our History to Choose Our Battles***

What would a line of struggle based on the rejection and subversion of whiteness look like? Understanding that race is a violent imposition that has always served the interests of colonialism precludes simply turning our backs on it. For most people, it wasn't chosen, so it can't be unchosen. You can't walk away from race. Historically, people had to break their chains and run away, to liberated territories that they created themselves, taking up arms to defend them. But nowadays, the chains are rarely physical, and there is no more unmapped space to run off to.

Being aware of this history, though, is crucial for finding effective ways to fight against racial capitalism today. Because this history is full of examples of false solutions, loyal opposition, we quickly understand that capitalism has always offered paths of individual advancement that serve as a release valve to keep more people from supporting revolution; the State has always sponsored agents within resistance movements; whiteness has always sold antidotes to its own toxicity.

Therefore, in order to find effective paths of struggle, we need to spread strategic awareness of the forms of recuperation that protect white supremacy while appearing to confront it, erase it, or blunt its edges. By now, over fifty years after the supposed victory of the Civil Rights movement, nearly everyone knows that the progressive proposal of a culturally sensitive, tolerant, conscious whiteness is no solution, only a deferment of the problem.

The kinds of discourses and power relations involved in current, ongoing strategies of pacification and recuperation that we looked at in the previous section are more complex, though. In order to be able to trace them and shine a light on them, we can benefit greatly from the concept of intersectionality, developed by Black thinkers like Kimberlé Crenshaw and the Combahee River Collective<sup>1</sup> and expanded by others like Jasbir Puar. It is no coincidence that the pacifiers and workshop whites have corrupted intersectionality into a reductionist parody of the original concept. Intersectionality is not a checklist of *different* oppressions that people need to pay lip service to. This approach encourages people to believe that there is a homogeneity or sameness of experiences within each box, and it encourages people to emphasize their oppressed identities and hide their privileged identities in order to be able to speak from a place of legitimacy.

This is linked to the systematic practice of politicians and professional activists speaking on behalf of everyone they share an oppressed category with, like all gay people or all Black people. Considering that these discourses rarely mention class, and that the people and movements who use them speak less and less about capitalism, it should be no surprise that lower class racialized people, who are much less likely to be university-educated and much more likely to go to prison, have been repeatedly thrown under the bus in the aftermath of anti-racist rebellions, when consciousness about racism in our society is supposedly flourishing.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the Combahee River Collective did not initially use the term intersectionality, they certainly described the concept, and from a more revolutionary perspective than Crenshaw. It also makes sense to link them to this concept, since it is probably too late to rescue the much degraded idea of identity politics.

The State has always wanted conquered peoples to have spokespeople or representatives, and those representatives have always gotten benefits or privileges. What is happening now is no different.

What the concept of intersectionality actually tells us is that every axis of power intersects every person simultaneously. Race and gender are not separate categories. So a Black man, for example, is not oppressed for being Black and privileged for being a man (as though power kept a simple scorecard for every person, granting them some points for this privilege, taking away some points for that oppression). On the contrary, he is oppressed and governed as a Black man, with the construction of his race and his gender and a thousand other forms of power-identity always operating simultaneously.

This concept is so radical, because it calls into question the very idea of representatives, the idea that one person can ever represent another; and yet, it challenges homogeneity without atomizing people into isolated individuals.

This concept is so radical, because it calls into question the very idea of representatives, the idea that one person can ever represent another; and yet, it challenges homogeneity without atomizing people into isolated individuals. An awareness of intersectionality shows us that everyone is connected in a web of power that penetrates all of society, and it is up to everyone to identify for themselves what they share with others and what they do not. It is also up to them to analyze how their relationship with power changes from one situation to another. This rejection of the notion of stable identities has also been aided immensely by the most radical currents in queer and trans theorizing.

When combined with a strategic awareness of social war and a commitment to fight alongside everyone else who refuses to live under this oppressive system, intersectionality becomes even more potent because it helps point the way towards solidarity and communication without unity, homogeneity, or centralization.

Another historical concept that could lend us a strategic awareness about how to fight this system is decoloniality. Whereas intersectionality was corrupted on social media and in superficial activist spaces, decolonial thinking was dragged into a morass of ignorance within the university, where it has become a code for discursive somersaults that rarely go beyond verbose lip-service, political correctness, and grants for more academic studies. Nowadays, even airlines and police departments can be decolonial.

For this reason, some people prefer to speak of anti-colonialism. Anti-colonialism is not a handbook of catchphrases and rules of politically correct behavior for the college-educated. It is a critical awareness of colonization from its very beginnings to the present. Although some dynamic of colonization has been a real danger in any statist society throughout history, the colonial system we are dealing with today emerged as a revival of the regime of private property and slavery in Western Europe that was violently imposed on the entire world. Nowadays, we can see colonialism in the preservation of Western conquests, institutions, and worldviews by any means necessary, from police murder to university scholarships. Therefore, because anti-colonialism understands that colonialism is a global war that continues to this day, it must be strategic. Its primary question is not to seek comfort, or balance, or reform, or even reparations. Its primary question is how to reverse the defeats of the past 500 years or more, how to win the war and abolish the world that makes that war unavoidable: the world of racial capitalism.

Around the world, nearly everywhere we hear of a movement to reform institutions like states or corporations that have a colonial origin, beneath the surface there are also struggles that cede no loyalty to the dominant structures. Sometimes, these struggles burst to the surface.

In North America, this happened during the anti-racist, anti-police rebellions and uprisings of 2009, 2014, and 2020, when a growing number of people began expressing the completely unpragmatic goal of abolishing the police. Getting rid of the police, as a colonial institution, is in fact the only realistic response to questions of racism, social harm, and justice, but it is nearly impossible to realize that truth unless we situate ourselves in an anti-colonial history.

Situating ourselves in that history also means situating ourselves in the struggle, and choosing the battles in which we can learn and grow the most. An uncompromising stance against the police—connecting police to the long history of conquest, slavery, and oppression—led to anti-racist movements in the US growing immeasurably in strength and intelligence.

Black and Indigenous radicals in particular established strong bonds and spread their critiques and visions in the course of that and several interrelated struggles like the movements against the pipelines.

As for white people, I truly believe it was useful for us to go out and fight the police, not only because it led to a profound growth in our revolutionary consciousness, but also because the State, faced with a multiracial rebellion, was much more reserved in its use of police and military force than it had been in earlier anti-racist rebellions, and there was a great deal more legal support in the aftermath. On the contrary, those white people who went into the streets under the assumption that it was irresponsible or somehow privileged for white people to join the riots were instrumental in enabling the Democratic Party and related NGOs to pacify the rebellion. As we already discussed, in numerous cities they literally became a part of the prison system when they began policing or snitching out rioters.

Many things become clear in moments of combat when you can see who has your back and who is just talk. And as we saw earlier, the social war is a very real and useful concept. Nonetheless, it is important to avoid using war as a metaphor that supports combative practices in an excessive or reductionist way. There are many, many moments of struggle besides the riot and the attack. There are kinds of healing and kinds of rebuilding that do not make sense while a war is still going on, but absolutely, a revolutionary movement, a movement of life, that is locked into a long-term war that it never chose, needs to think about healing, and needs to think about building, and needs to think about food and love and family and community and all the aspects of life.

If our focus on combative moments keeps us from understanding how transformation could happen, we have a weak practice. And that flaw, I think, is typical of a nihilism that constitutes one of the weaknesses of whiteness. Because it is less common for white people to have to think about survival, especially survival in a communal sense, once we decide to betray our whiteness and fight against the system that privileges us, we often go in with a burn-all-the-bridges, fire-both-barrels approach. We are often not used to having to imagine other ways of living as an act of survival.

Sometimes, this blunt approach often reaffirms the sort of recuperative leftist activism that we rightly criticize. For example, imagine a city government that wants to dedicate major funds to building a new jail. By now we have caught on that all prisons are bad and we want to abolish them. But if we don't have family members in prison or haven't spent a long time in prison ourselves, we might not be thinking that lots of people besides cynical NGO pacifiers have legitimate



reasons to want a new jail when the old one is toxic, crowded, and falling apart. They're pretty sure there's going to be police and a jail for some time to come, and that they or their loved ones are likely to have to inhabit it, so they'd prefer a new facility. If white radicals refuse to recognize the legitimacy of their needs and experiences (and not recognizing the legitimacy of other people's needs and experiences is a key feature of whiteness), then their primary possible allies are the very NGOs that make a living from offering perpetual bandages and no real solutions.

This strays into a different topic: the need to end centralization in movements at an ideological level as well; but for a moment we can imagine the benefits of a campaign in which people who are fighting primarily for the abolition of prisons and the State are mixed in with those who are fighting primarily for more survivable conditions right now. Given good practices of solidarity and healthy communication and debate, as long as people accept that they do not have to agree about everything, this is a mix in which: 1. criticisms of both NGOs and the State can flourish; 2. a highly oppressed group of people—prisoners and their families—can get more meaningful support; and 3. the local government and business interests trying to expand the prison system are facing a larger and more dangerous threat, and are more likely to make significant concessions, for example a more hygienic but smaller jail together with a commitment to decrease criminalization, pre-trial detention, or something similar.

...thinking about transformative horizons and immediate realities together is always more radical and effective than either an abstract commitment to revolutionary ideals or a supposedly pragmatic commitment to short-term changes.

Why are these better outcomes possible? Because thinking about transformative horizons and immediate realities together is always more radical and effective than either an abstract commitment to revolutionary ideals or a supposedly pragmatic commitment to short-term changes. In fact, the tendency to associate radicalness with *the right ideas* more than a broad, engaging *map of effective practices* is another aspect of whiteness: the alienation of ideas from the bodies that need those ideas. Thus, when we blend transformative horizons with lived necessities:

1. People will see that criticisms of the State and NGOs make sense and are useful, because direct action and mutual aid nearly always result in much better experiences for people who use them to meet their own needs. Criticisms of NGOs and state bureaucracies will be directly linked to practices that get the job done, rather than being the domain of intellectuals waiting for a better tomorrow and refusing to get their hands dirty.

2. Once NGOs and politicians aren't calling the shots, people in the movement will be defining their own needs. The dehumanizing, pacifying practices by which social services and NGOs divide *the needy* (as though not everyone has needs) into the deserving and undeserving, and make people jump through hoops to prove that they are deserving, will go out the window. (Dean Spade's book *Mutual Aid* goes into more detail on how humiliating and disempowering official charity models are, and how effective the practice of mutual aid can be.)

3. A large group of people, brought together with bonds of solidarity that cut across various categories of oppression, criticizing a fundamental aspect of state power like the prison system poses a much greater threat to a city government than a movement led by NGOs or political parties, even if that movement can claim to have a larger number of participants or more media exposure. Therefore, the government is likelier to allow a greater improvement in immediate conditions to avoid facing an insurrectionary situation.

It is true that there is a major debate about whether incremental change can realistically lead to a true social transformation or revolution, and that most anarchists disagree with this proposition. But it is still a legitimate debate to entertain, and many people who might support revolutionary struggles currently believe in incremental change. After all, it is the more common-sense view, and you generally have to delve into certain theories of change in complex systems in order to see the flaws in the idea of incremental change.

NGOs sell the lie of incremental change as a poisoned promise in order to instrumentalize people's faith, but there is a major difference between the discourse that infuses a structure of power and reasonable beliefs that other governed and oppressed people entertain. We need to combat one and engage with the other. This is not an argument in favor of coalitions across the board. Organizing in a coalition or other situation that advantages NGOs and political parties is a bad idea, because these are not structures that can be radicalized. They exist to coopt potential radicals and to pacify movements. However, we can and must organize with regular people who often see no options other than to follow the lead of such structures.

The reason these kinds of organizing questions are topical is that whiteness trains us to not distinguish between similar ideas in widely different contexts or bodies; we are meant to judge everyone as either an infidel or one of the faithful.

## *Moving from Here*

Participating in open rebellion and the long haul of organizing for survival gives us the opportunity to make new friends and comrades, to break down social segregation, though only if we take the opportunity and do the work. Forming real relationships of solidarity does not happen effortlessly. And for white people whose other life experiences haven't put them in the line of fire, rebelling against the current order reveals the naked face of power and lays bare the war that has been going on for centuries. I would argue that unless you have felt that war and know its existence in your bones, you cannot do much at all to subvert whiteness. The epistemology of whiteness, the way it presents knowledge and learning, is based on a firm separation between intellectual and visceral knowledge: this is a technique lent to white supremacy by European patriarchy. Everything that a white person knows, as a white person, is intellectual knowledge, alienated from their being. This separation is the only way that proto-whites, graduating from their role as mercenaries, could take on the function of the managers, bureaucrats, engineers, and scholars of a white supremacist system. They needed access to knowledge, and the ugliness of white supremacy has never been fully hidden, but they also needed to be able to divorce themselves from that knowledge, or turn it on its head, at any given moment, in order to be able to function as good little robots.

Reuniting what we know in our minds and what we know in our bodies is fundamental to destroying whiteness. The two kinds of knowledge are meant to exist as part of a circle. Our minds help explain what our bodies are going through and why, what the causes are, and our bodies help keep our minds grounded, focused on our own interests, our own experiences, our own realities. In effect, this white supremacist civilization has appropriated all of our minds, harnessing all our thinking power to work for its benefit and not for our own, while selling us anything we might need to numb our protesting bodies.

An exploration of the intersections between knowledge, health, healing, alienation, colonialism, and ecology can be found in Rupa Marya and Raj Patel's work, *Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*.

What do we do with awareness, once it is both intellectual and visceral? And once we no longer identify with our privileges or our whiteness, how do we identify? This is a question with a lot of history, though unfortunately that history is more like a minefield than a display of useful examples. In the past, when whiteness was more exclusively a religious phenomenon, those who abandoned it were described as "renegades" because they had reneged on their religious covenant. In those days, race was still understood as a choice, an explicit alliance, which is part of the reason why renegades were tortured and executed in horrible ways when they were caught. "Maroons" were runaway communities from multiple ethnic backgrounds, Wolof to Irish. Fifty years ago, white anti-capitalist hippies made a valiant but deeply flawed attempt to form a "tribe." They helped show us how racism can be present in white attempts to subvert it, how easily identities can become subcultures, and how subcultures can be commercialized and recuperated. For that reason, many radicals denounce any attempt to identify ourselves, though all the theories that have been effective at communicating a rejection of identities have themselves been tagged by new identities. Not such a surprising subversion, given that language is the act of naming.

We might start calling ourselves maroons and renegades, but we would face the awkwardness of appropriation across the multiple, smirking centuries in between. As far as maroons go, the culture is still very much alive around the Caribbean and South America, with tens of thousands of descendants of the original maroons still living in some degree of autonomy. There are some, but not many, people in North America who can make an honest claim to that tradition.

The anticapitalist fable *The Witch's Child* tells one story of whiteness and colonization, and offers the following names: the rootless ones and the uprooted ones. In this nomenclature, no one is pure, no one is unaffected by colonialism, but we can imagine the uprooted ones freshly yanked from the ground, their roots still intact. These are the people who remember their roots, who remember their colonization. If they could be placed back in the earth, they would be able to continue growing: colonization would only be a violent but temporary interruption.

The rootless ones are those who were colonized so long ago or so completely that they have lost the memory of their colonization and their past lives. They no longer think of themselves as living beings with their roots in the earth, so they take on the names, labels, histories, and functions assigned to them by those who ripped them out. Many of them have become so alienated that they have wholeheartedly participated in subsequent generations of uprooting, as colonialism spread around the world. Nonetheless, their story begins as colonized subjects, when the Roman Empire, the most successful of a string of empires, violently colonized most of Europe, turning free peoples into state subjects and imposing power-worship, Christianity, private property, slavery, and ecocide (in some cases, the imposition was an acceleration of pre-existing dynamics, as most of the people the Romans colonized were not free of all oppressive hierarchies). The second chapter is the Renaissance, the Rebirth of Leviathan, with feudal elites explicitly reviving the Roman dream, Roman philosophy, and Roman legal codes as they began expanding the empire in a new way.

This process is effectively described in Fredy Perlman's *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*.

...the framework doesn't require us to identify with the categories that elites have imposed on us, but reformulates the situation to foreground our own needs: the recovery of our roots and healthy soil to plant them in.

The framework of uprooted ones and rootless ones is global without being homogenizing. We don't have to pretend that white people and people of color come from different planets, we accept that we are all affected and molded by the same mechanisms, but in vastly different ways, without being able to claim a tacitly white supremacist *sameness*, such as the monolith of the "working class" that many Marxists long used to minimize other analyses of power. Furthermore, the framework doesn't require us to identify with the categories that elites have imposed on us, but reformulates the situation to foreground our own needs: the recovery of our roots and healthy soil to plant them in.

In the sciences of the State, ethnicity has historically been an essential characteristic, biological, when in practice it has actually been a choice. But not in the liberal sense, such as the choice exercised by a consumer in the marketplace. Ethnicity, belonging to a human community, is a collective choice that unites identification and acceptance. How can we fight the right of society to choose our categories for us without treating identity as another individualist act of consumption?

Perhaps the key can be found in the collectivity of that choice. Unless we have real communities—and most people categorized as white emphatically do not—we have nothing to identify with, and no way to put our roots into the soil, given that survival is a collective affair. A community, more than anything else, is a group whose survival is interdependent. It is not a demographic, not a professional profile, not a real estate zone, and it certainly isn't an affinity group in which everyone falls in the same age range.

The Catalan text, "Organization, Continuity, Community," goes more into the distinctions of what constitutes a real community.

As a mode of survival, communities require a specific relationship with the land, either with a specific territory or a way of moving through the land. There is no way for rootless people in North America to establish communities without engaging in intensive solidarity with Indigenous struggles; otherwise they would become the new *kibbutzim* and found settlements that reproduce colonization.

Indigenous struggles, however, aren't waiting around to rubber stamp permission slips for white people to live on colonized land. The question of creating communities has to be left unresolved, or at least incomplete, because we do not have the answers. I suspect the answers will arise over the course of multiple generations amidst the experiences of committed anti-colonial struggle. Only after decolonization is completed and the American plantation is destroyed (along with all the other colonizing states, colonies, and settler states) can whiteness be fully abolished and people who had been classified as white create real communities and new identities, together with all the people who are healing from centuries of racialization.

The question, then, brings us back to the necessity of struggle. It was in the rebellions of enslaved peoples, the mutinies of unwilling soldiers and sailors, the insurgencies in the Empire's slums, the wars on the borderlands fought for survival, that the colonizers tried to create the separations of race, and those they tried to order and rule melted down those separations, preserved their own unique histories and customs, and wove the bonds of solidarity that would enable them to fight back on increasingly global levels.

Today, the destruction of whiteness and colonization can take place in anti-police rebellions, border actions in the desert and in the airports, pipeline blockades on Indigenous land, prison abolition struggles, school walkouts, takedowns of Confederate statues, self-organized clinics in the inner city or the rural hinterland, the creation of shared means of communal and anti-authoritarian survival, and on countless other fronts. To destroy whiteness, destroying whiteness cannot be our principal, narcissistic aim. We will begin to subvert whiteness when our struggles flow from a hatred of the white supremacist system in all its guises, and when these struggles are supported by networks of solidarity based on love for everyone else who is fighting. There are a thousand forms of mutiny, but all of them require a determination to fight that which destroys us.

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