

# **Towards the “Other America”**

ANTI-RACIST RESOURCES FOR WHITE PEOPLE  
TAKING ACTION FOR BLACK LIVES MATTER

**Chris Crass**



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## **Towards the "Other America": Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter**

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Christopher L. Walton/UUA. Die-in civil disobedience June 27th, 2015, during the Unitarian Universalist (UU) General Assembly in Portland Oregon. From left to right: UU minister Elizabeth Nguyen, Rev. Osagyefo Sekou of Fellowship of Reconciliation, UU young adult leader Amanda Weatherspoon, and Chris Crass.

National Archives & Records Administration, Photograph of Civil Rights March on Washington, 1963.

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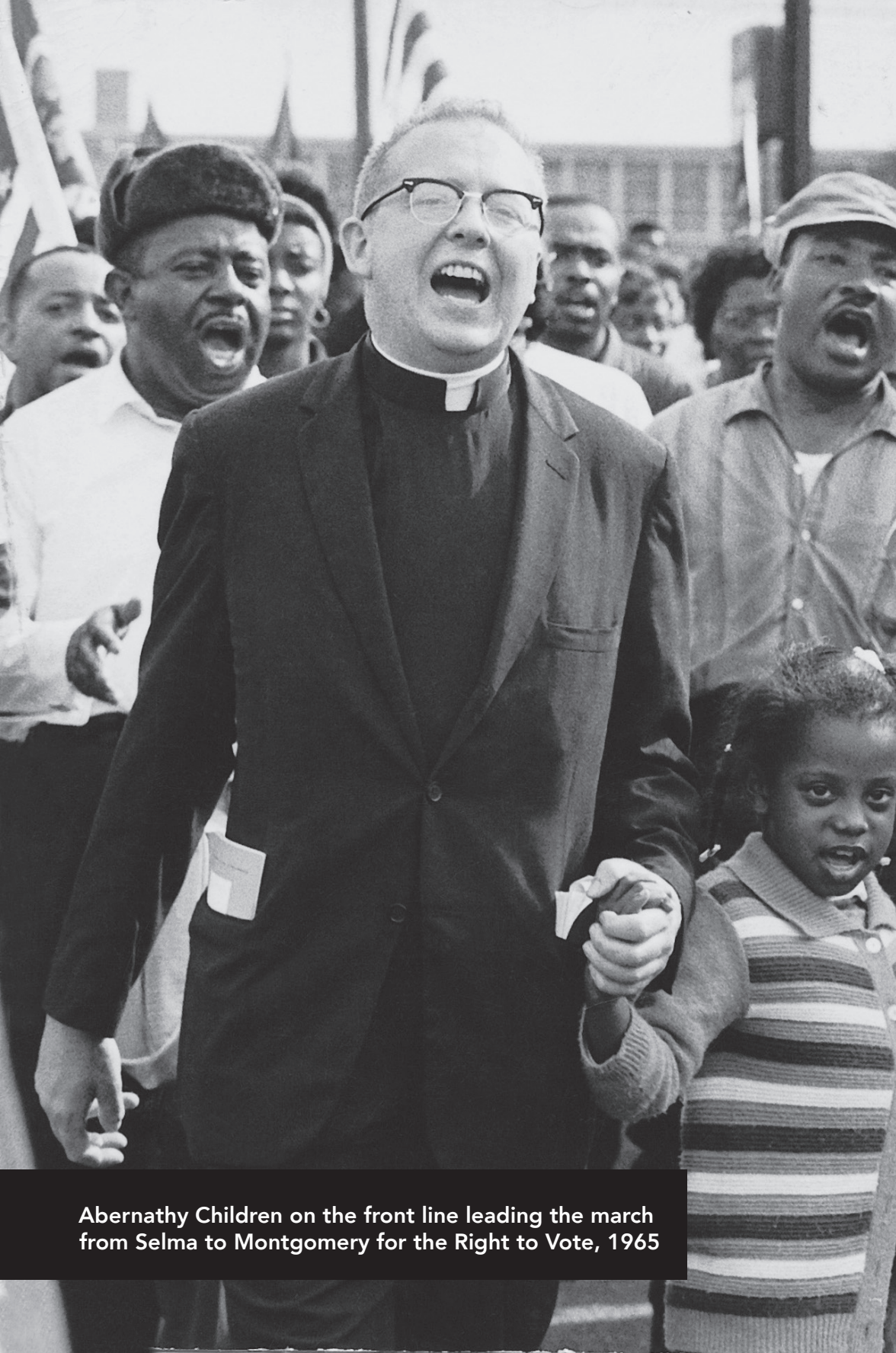
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For Ella Baker and Anne Braden, and the organizing tradition they passed on to us.

For my sons River and August and the Beloved Community we are building for all of our children.



*Ella Baker and Anne Braden leaving Civil Rights movement strategy meeting at the Highlander Center*



Abernathy Children on the front line leading the march from Selma to Montgomery for the Right to Vote, 1965

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# The “Other America”

**“I** call what I joined ‘the other America.’ This other America has always existed, even before the slave ships arrived. African Americans have always fought against their oppression, and many died rather than endure slavery. And at least some whites have joined these struggles – in the early resistance to slavery, the Abolitionist movement, the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, the upsurges of people’s movements in the 1930s, the civil rights activities of the 1950s and ’60s, and beyond to today in the 21st century.

*And this resistance actually has roots that stretch back to the beginning of the human race. In every age, no matter how cruel the oppression carried on by those in power, there have been those who struggled for a different world. I believe this is the genius of humankind, the thing that makes us half divine: the fact that some human beings can envision a world that has never existed. Perhaps no one living today will see a major change. But it will come. And living in that world that is working to make it happen lets us know that our lives are worthwhile.”*

**Anne Braden, longtime white Southern anti-racist organizer**



## **For White Anti-Racist Leadership and a World Where Black Lives Matter: The Purpose of This Book**

We are living in monumental times. This is a book for white people who want to rise up against racism and work for a world where Black lives matter. This is a book for white people who have recently come into consciousness about the devastating reality of racism and want to take action. It is also a book for white people who have a long history of working for justice and want to step up and be more effective in this time of large scale, grassroots, Black liberation movement. In short, this book is for white people who want to take courageous action for racial justice; it is for those who want to be part of truly life-affirming liberation movements, and build up the world based on our deepest values of the inherent worth and dignity of all people, the interconnection of all of life, and the sacredness of this world.

But first, why is this a book written by a white person, for white people, when this is about the Black Lives Matter movement? I was radicalized by the Rodney



*BLM direct action in Toronto, Canada. Photo: Jalani Morgan*

## *Towards the "Other America"*

King verdict in Los Angeles, in which four white police officers were acquitted for brutally beating a Black man, Rodney King. The largest uprising in the U.S., in a generation, erupted in Los Angeles following the verdict and my colorblind, post-racial framework was up in flames just like the city thirty minutes from my house. As I got more and more involved in multiracial racial justice work, protested against police brutality, marched for immigrant rights, and engaged in Ethnic Studies, the more I heard leaders of color talk about the importance of white people working in white communities to end racism. The call was to build up a base of support for racial justice in white communities, so that we could then form powerful multiracial coalitions.

“...this book is for white people who want to take courageous action for racial justice.”

I studied the Civil Rights movement and learned about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee of the 1960s. I learned that they called on white people to both support the Black-led Civil Rights movement and to return to white communities to free white people's minds from white supremacy. They developed anti-racist white efforts that could then unite, as equals, with Black organizations, rather than the traditional model of white people thinking their job was to tell Black Civil Rights workers what to do. Around this time, I found mentors like David Rojas, Sharon Martinas, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez, Paul Kivel, and Linda Burnham, who helped me understand the strategy of working against racism in the white community. I developed white anti-racist leadership with the goal of building powerful grassroots movements that could advance an overall agenda of economic, racial, gender, and social justice for all. I studied white anti-racist Civil Rights movement organizers like Anne and Carl Braden in Kentucky and Zilphia and Myles Horton in Tennessee, all of whom emphasized the importance of moving white people into action for racial justice.

In 2000, I joined with a crew of younger generation white activists in the global justice movement to form the Catalyst Project in the San Francisco Bay Area. With the support of older mentors from the Civil Rights, Black Power, Chicano Power, and Women's Liberation movements, we worked with thousands of white activists around the country to develop anti-racist leadership. We did this just as organizers of color had called for historically, as they encouraged us to do in our lives, to work against racism in the white community so that we could then bring large numbers of white

people into multiracial movements. We invited them into what we increasingly began calling collective liberation. Collective liberation is a concept I first heard from bell hooks who talks about the interconnection of systems of oppression in the form of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. For me, as a white person challenging racism and as a man working for feminism, I began to see myself in a vision of interconnected systems of liberation.

The more I worked in white communities against racism and for racial justice with a collective liberation vision, the more it became spiritual work. It was spiritual as I began to see and experience the devastation of white supremacy on white communities. I had seen it in my own family, in my Grandfather and in my uncles: the resentment and anger towards Black and Brown communities, anger and resentment that was toxic and ate away at their and other white people's humanity, their sense of justice, safety, and democracy in the world. Now, as a father with two young white boys, I understand anti-racist work as fighting against the monstrosity of white supremacy that steals the lives of Black and Brown children and devours the humanity of white children.



*Not My Ozarks anti-racist, anti-Klan campaign. Photo: Rachel Luster*

This book is a compilation of short essays and notes written to white activists on questions of anti-racist organizing since the uprising in Ferguson after the murder of Michael

**“ It is often in the unfamiliar histories and concepts that we can find hope and purpose.”**

Brown. It is also a compilation of interviews I conducted with white racial justice organizers around the country to help make anti-racist work tangible, concrete, and replicable. The focus of the interviews is on lessons for organizing white people in Black Lives Matter movement times. In addition to the writing, I also wanted to weave in images of white people taking action for racial justice and Black Lives Matter. These images are from around the country—images of everyday extraordinary people to inspire us all.

This book was made to help equip white people to join in the Black Lives Matter movement and to bring anti-racist leadership into white communities, institutions, organizations, congregations, and families. My goal is to help support white people to join with others to work against structural inequality, build up beloved community, and work for the abolition of anti-Black racism. This book is here to help white people be courageous for racial justice, which is key to getting us all free. Some of you reading this book will be familiar with the concepts used, and the social justice organizations referenced. Some of you won't be. I know that unfamiliar terms and references can be off-putting, like a gate meant to keep you out. I encourage you, if you stumble upon the unfamiliar, keep going. It is often in the unfamiliar histories and concepts that we can find hope and purpose.

There is a reason why many of us know obscure trivia about the rich and famous, yet know very little about people's movements for liberation. There is a reason why many of us are far more familiar with insecurity, self-doubt, and even self-hatred, than we are with the feelings of community, solidarity, self-love, and liberation. Those who have the power to rule, those who have the power to accumulate vast amounts of wealth from vast numbers of people's labor, do not want people knowing the history or the politics of liberation movements. Those who rule want those who are ruled to internalize the logic of supremacy so that the ruled not only stay in their place in the hierarchy of power, but blame the people below them for the misery generated by inequality rather than those at the top who profit from it. My hope with this book is that unfamiliar terms and references serve as keys to open doors, to help us come together and work more effectively for racial justice.

We live in historic times. From the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore, to the campaigns that demand justice for Sandra Bland and Tamir Rice. Millions of people are taking action against racism. With working class and poor people rising up in

the Black community and visionary Black women like Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi bringing not only new leadership, but new styles of leadership, we are living in a time of the Black liberation movement on the move. With campaigns like #SayHerName and #Black-TransLivesMatter, this is a feminist movement, a queer movement, and an intersectional movement.

Black women's lives matter.  
Black trans people's lives matter.  
Black disabled people's lives matter.  
Black poor people's lives matter.

**“You are  
needed to  
help bring  
this  
leadership.”**

This is a movement to remake the world with the values of everyday people's liberation made central rather than the heartless logic of supremacist systems, the logic of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

While these times are full of heartbreak and pain, they are also full of possibility and hope. For, it is not the racist murder of Black people that is new, it is that there is a Black Lives Matter movement uniting millions of people in saying “No More! Another world where Black lives matter is possible.” And white people all over the country are questioning the white supremacist lies, are opening their minds and hearts to new understandings of the world, and are horrified by racist violence. White anti-racist leadership is needed to help move those white people towards racial justice and away from the agenda of death and structural inequality.

Far too often the most vocal and passionate voices in white communities talking about race are racists. We have seen white anti-racists around the country protest “white silence = consent,” but, still, many white anti-racists are afraid or don't know how to end that silence by speaking courageously and passionately about racial justice and refusing to let white supremacy continue to devour the lives of children of color and deform the humanity of white children.

You are needed to help bring this leadership—in your community, place of worship, workplace, school, toddler story time at the library, unions, and the organizations and networks you are part of. It is my prayer that this book, the stories, and interviews within it help you become as powerful as you can be, to end white silence and speak

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up for and work for a world where Black lives matter, a world rooted in collective liberation—a world where we all get free, together.



*Wisconsin Pride. Photo: Bevo Buhr*



*Shutting Down Oakland, CA Police Department.  
Photo: Felicia Gustin*

## **We Must Awaken the Souls of White People to Resist White Supremacy**

For those of us who are white in the wake of the Charleston Massacre, an atrocity that sparked national outcry in the long history of the racist violence of the United States, it is not the time for us to call for racial tolerance, racial healing, racial dialogue, or racial understanding alone. When white people say these things, even with the best of intentions, the underlying message undermines Black rage. It erases Black pain and Black resistance and serves white people's guilt and grief with vague gestures that do more to confuse rather than clarify both the problem and the solution.



*Rabbis and Jewish activists march in Ferguson, MO. Photo: Margaret Ernst*

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We need white people leveraging whatever positions of influence they have to put forward—declarations, poems, letters, blog posts, and personal invitations for other white people to join in anti-racist resistance and struggle against the evil of institutional racism. We don’t need messages from white people yearning for reconciliation unless it is joined with a courageous call for white people to hear Black rage, follow Black-led resistance, and get active for racial justice.

For those of us who are white and have been engaged in anti-racist efforts, we need to support other white people to tap into their grief, pain, and sadness about Charleston and turn it into a commitment to the destruction and abolition of institutional racism. No calls for healing disconnected from militant resistance from white people against this brutal racist society. No messages meant to soothe white people’s souls, and ease them/us back to sleep. We need messages and leadership to help build the capacity of white people to stay in discomfort, to stay in the dis-ease to truly hear and listen to the voices and experiences of Black people, with the goal of putting raised consciousness into action against racism.



*Banner hang in Los Angeles, CA. Photo: Jason David*



Beloved community isn't born of white hand-wringing but white hands going to work for revolutionary racial justice change. We need white anti-racist agitation, leadership, vision, and strategy, and anger grounded in love for the Black Lives Matter movement and collective liberation. We can do this. I believe in us.

“Beloved community isn't born of white hand-wringing but white hands going to work for revolutionary racial justice change.”



*Rally Against the Aryan Brotherhood, St. Louis, MO. Photo: Janey Archey*

## **The Heart of Black Lives Matter and Why "All Lives Matter" Is Part of the Problem**

The Black Lives Matter movement isn't a contest over whose lives matter more. Throughout history, the right wing has made every attempt to portray Black-led struggles for freedom and equality as Black people trying to get "special rights" by taking something away from white people. From anti-slavery, anti-lynching, anti-discrimination, Civil Rights, and racial justice struggles, the right has mobilized the economic anxiety, fear, and anger of white people and blamed people of color for declining wages, rising costs, and the unraveling of public institutions (which is blamed on people of color and is actually because of massive defunding).

This is how anti-Black racism and white supremacy operate. They are not biologically based, natural reactions of inherently distrustful people and cultures. Anti-Black racism and white supremacy are divide-and-rule strategies developed out of the fear of the U.S. slave society's ruling class—who witnessed indentured Europeans and enslaved Africans unite and fight back, witnessed people of European and African descent marrying and building family together.

Anti-Black racism and white supremacy were developed through laws, policies, and brutal institutionalized violence to keep the vast majority of us fighting and hating each other, while the 1% and those with the power to rule consolidated wealth and power, extracting it from working class communities, with communities of color hardest hit.

The heart of Black Lives Matter is not a fight over whose lives matter more. It is a fight to end institutionalized premature death in the Black community. Premature death because of institutional racism in housing, healthcare, jobs, education, the criminal justice system, and so on. And premature death in acts of relentless and heartbreaking racist violence.

This racist violence does not require the shooter to hate Black people; rather, it only requires they react from the deeply internalized fear of Black bodies, and sense of ownership over Black bodies, on which this society is based: a society built on the slave system which demonized, exploited, and brutalized Black bodies, from the elderly to the babies.

Of course "all lives matter." That is why we are fighting to end the structural premature death of Black people in a racist society. To assert that All Lives Matter

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in reaction and opposition to Black Lives Matter is just the logic of the slave society, dividing people who should be coming together for a world where all our babies can grow up loved, healthy, resourced, and protected.

All Lives Matter is the new “special rights” smear tactic utilized by the White Citizen’s Councils and Klan against the Civil Rights movement. Which side are you on? To those who argue “all lives matter,” remember, just as we look back on those who declared “Segregation Today, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever,” history will see you.



*Rally Against Police Brutality at the Texas State Capital. Photo: Hannah Williams*

## Building Power for Racial Justice in White Communities: From Awareness of White Privilege to Anti-Racist Organizing

an interview with Chris Crass by Katy Otto for Feministing

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Working class communities rally in Dardanelle, AR. Photo: Meredith Martin-Moates

**Katy Otto:** Tell us a little about yourself.

**Chris Crass:** I'm a dad, partner, son, author, activist, and social justice movement builder. I'm a white guy, economically in the precarious middle class. My politics come out of the working class anarchist movement of the late 1800s, the Black radical tradition from Harriet Tubman to Ida B. Wells to Angela Davis, the Southern anti-racist socialist tradition, the people's movements of the 1960s and '70s, women of color feminism, and my Unitarian Universalist faith tradition. I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, the interconnection of life, and that beloved community is nourished through the vast array of labor and love for justice. I'm committed to a vision and strategy of collective liberation, and I believe this work is sacred. I grew up in between the multiracial progressive city of Los Angeles and the suburbs of the right-wing bastion of Orange County, in Southern California. This was during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the right-wing backlash to the gains of people's movements—in the U.S. Backlash to the gains for civil rights, feminism, economic justice, queer liberation, racial justice, and people's anti-colonial movements for self-determination around the world.

“ I believe this work is sacred.”

I grew up with parents who raised me with feminist, social justice values. These values flourished in high school when I became best friends with Mike Rejniak, a working class anarchist punk rock activist. We recruited and joined with others to build up a vibrant counter-cultural youth movement rooted in anarchist/socialist/feminist values and commitments.

Those experiences helped shape the activism, writing, movement building, and, more recently, parenting I've engaged in over the past 25 years. I have three primary focuses in my life.

First, to build powerful working class-based, feminist, multiracial movements for collective liberation.

Second, to organize and write with a focus on moving large numbers of white people towards a multiracial democratic racial/economic justice agenda, large numbers of men towards a feminist/gender justice agenda, and people of various class backgrounds towards a socialist agenda rooted in working class organizing and movements.

Third, to help build and nurture my family with liberation values/culture as part of a larger beloved community that loves kids and honors the magic of childhood.



*SURJ Families Protest in Louisville, KY. Photo: Carla Wallace*

**Katy:** Where and when did you first hear the term “white privilege”? What were some of your initial thoughts about it?

**Chris:** I first read about it in the journal *Race Traitor* in the early '90s. *Race Traitor* was an awesome journal about the historical and social construction of whiteness as a ruling class strategy to unite people racialized as white to unite across class behind a ruling class worldview and agenda of structural inequality and violence. The term racialize or racialization highlights the fact that race isn't biologically based; rather, it is socially and politically developed in relationship to the economy. Therefore, *Race Traitor* argued that if white supremacy and whiteness were created, they could also be destroyed. What has been done, can be undone. I was reading this journal because our high school activist group was part of the Love and Rage Revolutionary

**“ I knew that my life could never be the same.”**

Anarchist Federation. Love and Rage was involved nationally in anti-racist work and published a lot of great writing about white supremacy and racial justice struggles.

Some of these essays were written by folks in Race Traitor, and this helped us locally, as a mostly white group of activists, to think about our work against police brutality and immigrant rights.

The real turning point that powerfully impacted my life, political work, and understanding of white privilege, though, was the Rodney King verdict in the spring of 1992 and the rebellion—civil unrest—in Los Angeles that followed. On the night of the verdict, with Los Angeles in flames and tens of thousands of people protesting in the streets, my friend Terence Priester, the one Black person in our group, opened his heart and shared stories of racism he'd experienced, with a gathering of us at my parents' house. Hearing his stories of what we would now call racial profiling was devastating and eye opening. He demolished the colorblind framework I had grown up with, and I knew that my life could never be the same.

It was out of these experiences that I started learning about white privilege, and it made sense, and began to see it all around me. I started thinking about white privilege in my own life and, years later, through continued activist experience and study, began to see how it was negatively impacting my social justice efforts. I began seeing how white privilege was keeping me away from multiracial racial justice efforts. This was because a white privileged worldview prevented me from being able to see, experience, connect with, learn from, and build with leadership and organizing in communities of color. Furthermore, white privilege reinforced a narrative of white people having all the right answers, and best ways of protesting and being an activist.

**Katy: How and when do you use the phrase in your own life and activism?**

**Chris:** I think the concept of white privilege as part of a larger understanding of historical and structural white supremacy is crucial, but I think there are lots of ways to talk about it without using the phrase itself. Here's how I think about that.

Our key objective is to bring people together across divisions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship, and age so that we can see and affirm one another's

humanity. From that place of connection, we can more powerfully work for an agenda of collective liberation—an agenda that seeks economic, racial, gender, disability, environmental, and social justice for all. This is a vision we won't fully realize, but a vision to help us fight against the nightmare of current injustice and help bring these dreams more and more into existence.

We want to bring people together to work for this vision, and members of the ruling classes know that such unity could lead to their downfall, so those in ruling class power have done all they can to undermine and destroy such unity. One of the first people to start talking about what we now call white privilege was W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois is one of the great American intellectuals of the 1900s who studied racism and what he called the “color line” that divides people. He wrote in his book *Black Reconstruction* that one of the ways racism operates is that it rewards white working class and white poor people with the “psychological wages of whiteness” in exchange for siding with the ruling class. In doing this, white working class and white poor people routinely fight against and suppress the power, dignity, and humanity of other working class and poor people who are of color.

Essentially, Du Bois argues that working class and poor white people exchange the possibility of a multiracial democratic society, a society in which resources and power are shared in far more just and equitable ways, for the “white right” to feel superior. Over time, as white working people have fought for greater inclusion and economic justice, the ruling class has granted an expansion of white privileges economically, politically, and socially—once again, in exchange for suppressing the power of working class communities of color. A great synopsis of Du Bois's thinking can be found in Joel Olson's book *Abolition Democracy*.

My work focuses on political education, leadership development, and organizational support for white social justice effort and my work incorporates this understanding of white supremacy, white privilege, and racial oppression. This is done, not so we can just be less racist or more aware, but so we can be more effective building the kind of grassroots movements we need to bring down white supremacy and structural inequality.

Far too often, conversations about white privilege just talk about racism that communities of color experience, and then white privilege that white communities experience, and then give white people the impression that what is needed is for more and more white people to be aware of privilege and act against racism. These are good things, and they can be helpful places to start, but it leaves out power, and by that I mean ruling class power and structural power/injustice.

## Towards the "Other America"

When you leave out challenging the structures of power, then our work against racism and white privilege can very quickly become focused on individual behavior. Without a power analysis, then it can become just about raising awareness, without the larger goal of making structural change. Structural change requires building move-



Dardanelle, AR population 4600. Photo: Meredith Martin-Moates

ments of millions of people. And for me, the process of working against injustice and for liberation is where the seeds of the new society begin to flourish. Social **change** movements nurture and give rise to cultures of solidarity, cultures fused with liberation values. Cultures and values of liberation put into practice through grassroots people's movements is where we see profound changes in our lives, families, communities, and institutions.

To put it another way, we can't think our way out of the problem of white privilege by being really aware white people. We need to be aware white people on our own personal growth journey, who want to bring large numbers of other white people into movements to bring down white supremacy and build up multiracial democracy and a socialist economy. So we need to talk about white privilege with that orienta-



tion—which means sometimes not using the term white privilege directly at all, but conveying the ideas behind it through language that will resonate with people.

**Katy:** Have you experienced pushback on the phrase from other white people? How do you respond? What are some common ways the phrase is called into question, and how do you address those?

**Chris:** How I respond really depends on who the person is and where they are politically. For example, as a young person I would go head to head with right-wing people in my family and it was exhausting. Then I realized that if my goal was to get my rightwing Grandpa to become an anti-racist, feminist, socialist, then I was setting myself up or failure and I wasn't going to be spending my time and energy wisely. So with my Grandpa, my goal became, how to make him a less effective racist, sexist, homophobe, and so on. Which meant rather than debate him at Thanksgiving and give him a platform that he commanded, I tried to use humor to disarm him and then put out ideas about white privilege and racism—not to convince him—but to engage other people in my family who routinely remained silent in those conversations. I asked people in my family who I knew had different, more progressive values, to share what they thought. I tried to open space for other voices, and understood that debates with my Grandpa were for me to develop my own thinking rather than change his.

But often times people come to me and want to know how they can convince someone in their family who they love, but who they doggedly oppose politically. My response is this is that we need to spend less time trying to move people who aren't moveable and focus our energies on people around us who, in moments like the uprising in Ferguson, are actually moveable. People around us who are asking questions, who



*Dardanelle, AR. Photo Meredith Martin-Moates*

## *Towards the "Other America"*

are open to learning more, who might want to do a demonstration but have never done anything like that before. Often we focus a lot of energy on jackasses and trolls; [meanwhile,] the people who are closer to us politically, but don't know how to get involved, are ignored. That said, in public debates or classroom conversations, it is important to challenge such voices, but, again, from the perspective that the people you're really trying to move are the folks listening, not the jackass who denies that race is a factor in Ferguson.

We need to get really good at seeing opportunities for white people to get involved in and/or support racial justice efforts and ask people, directly, to step into those

opportunities. When people are in motion working for social justice, they go to meetings, a rally, a cultural event, or join an organization. They learn and grow at a much quicker pace than when they are just engaged in discussion or study. Going back to the term white privilege...When white people participate in multiracial social justice activities and hear people of color talk about racism and their experiences, significant shifts will take place. It becomes less of an academic conversation and becomes rooted in people's lives and experiences.

That said, we still need to have a lot of conversations with white people. In my talks and writing about racism directed towards white people, I regularly speak from my own experience of coming to consciousness about racism, white privilege, and how devastating and painful it was. I do this because white people often feel defensive in conversations about race. The focus becomes "proving I'm not a racist" rather than trying to understand what racism is and how we can end it. I know that, because I have so often felt that defensiveness. So often when white people become conscious about racism and their own white privilege, they hate themselves and project that hate onto hating other white people. I remember a mentor of mine, an organizer of color, who said, "I understand why you would have animosity towards other white people, but you need to learn how to organize them." Later, I read a great quote from legendary white anti-racist organizer Anne Braden, who said "You can't organize people you

**“ We need to be aware white people on our own personal growth journey, who want to bring large numbers of other white people into movements to bring down white supremacy...”**

hate.” So, you need to work through a lot of the emotions that come up as we become aware and get active. This comes in time, through experience. But the main thing is that we need to have our eyes on the prize of why we’re having these conversations, what we’re trying to accomplish, and work to be able to speak to other people who have the same privileges as us, from a place of love and from a place of “we need movements of millions playing many different roles, to bring down these systems of oppression that pit us against each other and maintain unthinkable violence.”

**Katy: Why do you feel it’s a vital phrase to use?**

**Chris:** I think it communicates a lot about the way white people individually and collectively fit into the structures of white supremacy. And at this point, conversations about white privilege are happening all over the place, in ways that it’s hard to believe looking back 25 years ago. This is a good thing. And again, we need to use the concept to help us all get free. And this comes back to this concept of collective liberation and, for me, one of my goals is to help white people find their self-interest in dismantling white supremacy, and for men to understand how their lives can be profoundly improved through challenging patriarchy—not to stop there, but to include this part about how systems of oppression also negatively impact the people who are privileged. Going back to Du Bois, he was clear that white working class and poor people had far more to gain by joining with working class and poor people of color to fight for a better world. My friend Terence explained it to me this way. He told me that one of the ways that racism hurt me (jarring to hear a Black person tell me that I was hurt by racism) was by teaching me that I have nothing to learn from the histories, cultures, social justice movements, visions, and lives of communities of color. As a social justice activist, I was being denied the powerful insights and inspirations from people of color-led movements which have been at the heart of social justice efforts in this country.

I bring that perspective with me. I don’t have conversations with white people to make them feel guilty about having white privilege. I talk about white privilege as one of the ways that institutional racism is maintained, and that all of our hopes for a better world rest squarely on building powerful multiracial movements to solve the most pressing problems of our times. I press that white people have to make a choice between which side of history they want to be on: The history of slavery, genocide, and lynching, or the history of people coming together to create what Anne Braden called the “Other America”—the America of multiracial democracy and equality for all people, the America of the Abolitionists, the Freedom Riders, and the Dream

Defenders. I try to follow that up with how people can get involved.

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I'll share one other story about how we have to listen deeper rather than just use the right words. Words are important and they matter, but we also need to listen to people's hearts and souls. A white working class friend of mine was the first person to go to college in her family. She learned about the history of white supremacy and

**“Our goal is to move white people towards a collective liberation vision and strategy of solidarity and unity.”**

white privilege in a class and was enraged. One day, she came home from school and started a conversation about immigration with her mom. Her mom said, “It’s a shame about all those illegals being deported.” My friend jumped all over her mom for using the word illegal and only later realized her mom was expressing sympathy that could have then be explored and potentially developed into solidarity. Our goal is to move white

people towards a collective liberation vision and strategy of solidarity and unity. Maybe the person is ready to talk about white privilege, or maybe they first just need to understand that racism exists. Start with where people are at and move them where you can. Prioritize who you’re investing time and energy into. Helping get 15 white people to take a stand in your small town, rural area, or suburb and demonstrating in solidarity with the kids from Central America crossing the border, or showing solidarity with Ferguson, can have a bigger impact than arguing on Facebook or in person with reactionary family members and friends for hours. Get a demonstration like that together and invite folks to attend it who you’re not sure about as far as where they stand on an issue. One of our roles, as white anti-racists, is to give more and more white people opportunities to stand on the right side of history.

**Katy: Are there any resources or links you would recommend to a white person newly acquainting themselves with the idea of white privilege? Any other links on the subject for the world at large?**

**Chris:** I think taking a moment to think about the person you’re trying to reach and think about what they would be interested in, what would speak to them and appeal to them. So maybe it’s a book focused on structural inequality or the history of racism in the U.S. Or maybe it’s a novel by Toni Morrison or poems by June Jordan or essays by bell hooks or Audre Lorde. Or maybe it’s watching a movie like American History X or a documentary like Shakti Butler’s *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible*, and having a conversation afterwards.



Public School Teachers Organizing in North Carolina. Photo: Bryan Proffitt

For two pretty accessible beginning-to-think-about-these-issues books, I would recommend Paul Kivel’s *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* and Beverly Daniel Tatum’s “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Conversations About Race.

The one thing I’d say to keep in mind is to try as often as you can to let white people in your life know that there have been white anti-racists throughout history who have made important contributions and who they can learn about. It’s important to give people hope and suggestions for next steps to keep moving.

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**Katy Otto** is a writer, musician, and social justice activist, originally from the D.C. area, now living and working in Philadelphia. She plays drums in “Trophy Wife” and “Callowhill,” runs the independent label Exotic Fever Records, and writes for *Feministing*, *The Media*, *Role Reboot*, and other outlets. She is passionate about social justice—from reproductive health access to racial justice to animal rights.

## Anti-Black Racism, the Minstrel Show, and the Making of Whiteness



Mike Brown Silent Protest at the White House, Washington D.C. Photo: Elvert Barnes

For all of us who want to move white people into anti-racist consciousness and actions, we must remember the dual role that anti-Black racism plays in disciplining white people to capitalist exploitation. Anti-Black racism was most famously fused into popular culture and ideology through the Blackface minstrel shows. The minstrel show became the national art form by the mid-1800s, and

taught millions of Europeans, many of them recent immigrants, what it meant to be white. In fact, the term "Jim Crow," used to describe the segregated apartheid South after Reconstruction, comes from a highly popular character, in black face, in the early days of the minstrel show.

On the one hand, the minstrel shows were intended to discipline immigrant Europeans, from a wide range of agriculture-based cultures, into the White Protestant work ethic that barons of industry wanted infused in their workforce. Industrial capitalism wanted a workforce that internalized the values of a self-sacrificing work ethic and a culture of individualism. Industrial capitalism devastated European-American workers' sense of community, and sense of self as bosses looked for ever more ways to exploit workers' labor to make profits. This was a time of expanding slums, growing alcoholism, and, to fight back, workers beginning to form unions.

On the surface, the minstrel show is about Black culture. Black culture was portrayed as promoting laziness (lacking a Protestant work ethic), with Black people exhibiting the playfulness of children and the lustfulness of beasts (totally lacking the values of self-sacrifice and self-mastery). Below the surface, the minstrel show was teaching European-Americans what it meant to be white in a capitalist economy. Being white meant you were supposed to be a self-made man (or married to one), exercise self-control, work hard, not rock the boat, and pull your weight (i.e., make bosses rich, not complain about wages or work conditions). Being a white man meant protecting white women from the uncontrollable lust of the Black man.

The minstrel show taught European-Americans that to be white meant despising the supposedly “incompetent” and “lazy” culture of Black people that makes them forever dependent on white people to take care of them. In the minstrel show, white people are civilized and Black people are borderline animals who either need to be taken care of for their own good, or are dangerous beasts out to get white women.

The underlying themes of the minstrel show are all around us today. Everyone must pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and if you aren't economically prosperous, well then, you have no one to blame but yourself. White people are told they are superior to all others, and so if you are white and not wealthy, then it must be because those dependent, lazy, childlike Blacks and other people of color are pulling you and the economy down. Or, Blacks and other people of color are cheats and criminals, both common minstrel show characters, who are stealing from white America directly or have pulled a con and are stealing from white America collectively—through welfare, food stamps, or by taking unionized public sector jobs or spots in college away from more qualified whites through Affirmative Action. None of this is true, of course, but white supremacy isn't about truth. White supremacy in the United States is primarily about organizing the economy and the political system to serve the interests of elites at the expense of the vast majority of people. White supremacy is a divide-and-rule strategy to maintain structural inequality and the logic and culture of supremacy systems that normalize and rationalize inequality.

James Baldwin famously said to white America, “If I am not who you think I am, you are not who you think you are.” Our responsibility as white anti-racists who want to dismantle white supremacy, who want to win and build a world where Black lives matter, who want economic justice for all, our responsibility is to understand that white racist rage and white resistance to Black equality is rooted in white anger and pain for not achieving the American Dream. Working class and poor white people, and even more and more white middle class people, are experiencing the long-term effects of stagnant wages while CEOs make millions and TV shows make it seem like everyone is bringing in \$150,000 a year (even middle class Blacks).

With decades of right-wing-led cuts to public institutions like schools, libraries, and parks, alongside massive spending to expand policing and the prison system, many white people are told that society is both out of control and that the pathologically dependent and criminal culture of Black and Brown America is to blame. White people have been sold a pack of lies about working hard and achieving economic prosperity. When that prosperity doesn't happen, it isn't the fault of multinational corporations that moved decent paying union jobs out of the U.S. to exploit third world workers, and it isn't the fault of the Republican and Democratic Parties that

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have passed legislation funneling money to corporate power; it's because of Brown-skinned immigrants and dark-skinned welfare families.

Recently, I was at an immigrant rights demonstration in Nashville, Tennessee. President Obama was visiting an immigrant social service provider and there were dueling protests. There were those, like myself, who wanted Obama to pass far-reaching immigration reform based in economic justice for all and multiracial democracy rather than criminalization. Then there were the Tea Party anti-immigrant protesters calling for mass deportation and further militarization of the Border. I was standing next to a working class white mother, holding her young child in one hand and an anti-immigrant sign in the other. She told me she was protesting Obama because he was letting "illegal" immigrants stay in the country and get food stamps, while she herself had been denied food stamps to take care of her kids. Most of the white Tea Party people there were middle class, and I felt quite confident that most or all of them had been fighting to have food stamps cut. While the majority demographic utilizing welfare and food stamps is white people, the rhetoric used is that it's Black and Brown women who are taking advantage of the system and eating lobster, while hard-working whites can barely afford to put food on their families' plates.

**“This is the process of embracing our shared humanity, creating a just world and building beloved community.”**

I was holding my son at that rally as well. In the mother's words, I felt the pain and tragedy of anti-Black racism in white lives, as well as its ability to marshal violent political racist action. I looked at our children, both being raised white in a culture still teaching the values performed in the minstrel show, and I felt the tremendous need to save our kids from the death culture of white supremacy.

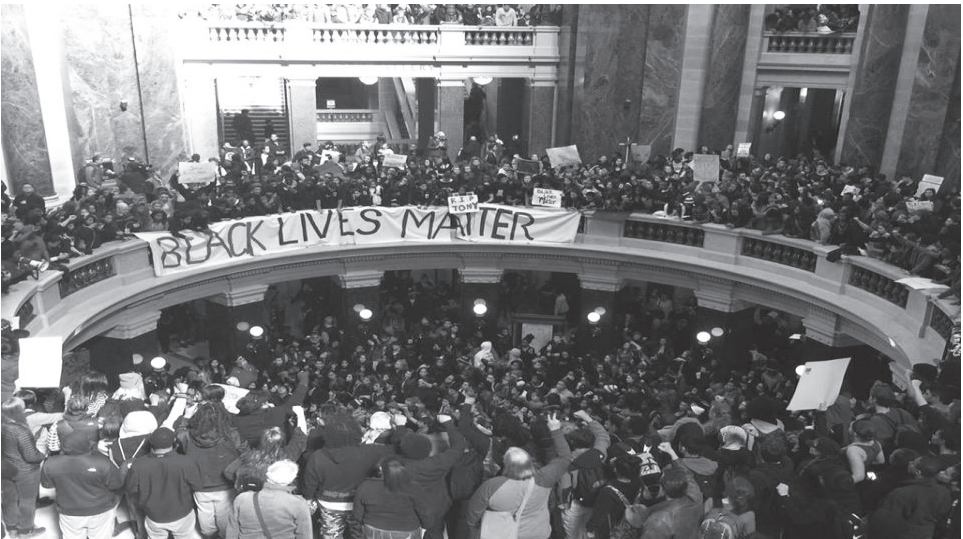
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For white anti-racists, our task is to demand that Black lives matter and learn to deeply speak to, bear witness to, and listen to the pain underneath white racist rage and resentment. We must learn how to listen to white racial pain and attach it to the real enemy of structural inequality and name racism as the violent poison that it is.



Our task is to simultaneously work in solidarity with Black leadership and people of color building this movement, and to develop the leadership of white anti-racists, particularly working class and poor people's leadership. Our vision is both a world where Black lives matter and a society based on multiracial democracy and economic justice for all, where the hearts and minds of white people have been freed from the death culture of white supremacy and anti-black racism.

As people racialized as white in a white supremacist society, we must forge new identities rooted in liberation values, and committed to challenging structural oppression. This is the process of unlearning the lies of capitalist individualism and racist fear. This is the process of embracing our shared humanity, creating a just world and building beloved community. When we break white silence that gives consent to racism, we must speak fluently and courageously about a life-affirming culture and society that also uproots capitalism and builds economic justice for all.



*Occupation of Capitol, Madison, WI. Photo: Leslie Amsterdam Peterson*