

THAT “CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY” ARTICLE ISN’T THE PROBLEM... but the way we’ve been using it might be

adapted from a blog post by Garrett Bucks

[Okun] pointedly warns against using “Characteristics” as a weapon. In a recent interview, she discussed how her own definition of White supremacy has changed since 1999, how she now understands it not merely through the lens of individual characteristics or even merely as a system of racial oppression but “as a cultural project of disconnect in service of the power elite courting power and profit- wed to capitalism.”

That’s a powerful statement.

That’s a statement I can get behind.

If that’s what White Supremacy is, it’s self-evident why we have to dismantle it. I mean, let’s go! Let’s not rest until all the institutions of oppression and isolation that it props up are turned on their head. Let’s challenge our relationships to corporations and wealth and home ownership and property and cops and prisons and every myth we’ve bought that our life is just an individual competition between our family unit and others.

That’s not what I hear when White people from across the country talk about “Characteristics” though. I hear— implicitly if not explicitly— that the primary purpose of anti-racism is a never-ending process of individual reflection and “unlearning” (which isn’t bad, but which is often a destination-less, circular pursuit). I hear about endless meetings in professional managerial class workplaces— government, corporate and nonprofit alike—where the only end goal seems to be making upper middle class White people slightly less annoying to their upper middle class colleagues of color (a worthy pursuit as well, but woefully insufficient). I hear about the compulsive tinkering around the edges of White system-upholding institutions rather than about work that might actually challenge those systems.

All of this is how we end up with a multi-million dollar DEI training industry with very few meaningful results. It’s how we end up with REI executives doing a land acknowledgment at the top of a union-busting call. It’s how we end up with Coca-Cola in hot water for a training where employees are asked to “be less White” but not for its role in the deaths of labor leaders in Colombia or its multi-year history of campaign donations to candidates supporting Black voter disenfranchisement.

Others have offered similar critiques of the emptiness of this sort of institutional hijacking of anti-racism rhetoric. The most comprehensive (and best) example is Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò’s recent book *Elite Capture*, but you can find similar points in articles like Bhaskar Sunkara’s “Stop Trying to Fight Racism With Corporate Diversity Consultants” or Anthony Conwright’s “The Trouble With White Fragility Discourse” (the latter points out the irony that so many individualistic “reflection-based” diversity trainings are being called “Critical Race Theory” when CRT is, at its root, about systematic analysis rather than individual critique).

We often talk as if unjust systems just keep rolling on because of apathy, or addiction to power, or because we haven’t reflected or unlearned enough. We don’t talk enough about the real barrier to change, to imagining, to building something better: We’re exhausted! And disconnected!

It's easy for smarty-pants socialists (particularly smarty-pants socialist men like myself) to wax polemically about how middle class White people shouldn't spend all our social change energy perseverating on whether or not we're keeping up with our fellow middle class Woke Joneses. . . Sure, we all should be organizing mutual aid efforts with our unhoused neighbors and going to planning board meetings to fight for affordable housing and joining a prison visitation and letter-writing team and doing deep canvassing in rural, conservative areas but also... dammit that sounds logistically and spiritually impossible. And so, it's easier to go to another affinity group meeting at our desk-based job and have another conversation about how "you know, the characteristic I'm struggling to unlearn the most is 'quantity over quality' and that's why my Powerpoints always have too many slides and oh shoot I forgot to say that I'm sharing that reflection from the unceded lands of the Ohlone People and yes I'm realizing that's probably my perfectionism coming out but I promise I'm working on that, too."

If I care about them and their potential impact though, I need to resist the temptation to prejudge why they are or aren't doing more, and instead become curious about what it would take to move forward, away from the comfortable cocoon of Slack and Zoom and further into their community. What would they need for child care? What would they need so that work colonized less of their free time? How can I help hold them accountable? How can I help cheer them on? What night coming up can I make them dinner? How can I show up?

I don't think of myself as an expert on all the manifestations of something as ephemeral as "White Supremacy Culture." I bet if I were to try to make my own list, it would be way less helpful than the one Tema Okun was inspired to write down a couple of decades ago. I bet my list would be even more likely to die a slow efficacy death in so many fluorescent-lit workplace conference rooms.

My best hunch, though, is that White Supremacy believes that it will always win, that it will have those of us who want to resist it perennially on the ropes of our own confusion and exhaustion. It thinks it will win because White people will always shove their kids to the front of the achievement line rather than fight for great schools for all. It thinks it will win because White people won't be able to stand a single month of hearing "defund the police" before running back to the warm embrace of reactionary politics. It thinks it will win because it believes that upper middle class White people only care enough to look concerned and pretend to reflect— that we'll never quit corporate jobs and join a picket line or spend more time with our unhoused neighbors than our friends from Wesleyan with the nice taste in natural wines.

If I'm right about the hunch, then I've got no time for judgment about why you or I or any other White person hasn't done more to disprove that assumption yet. I just need to trust that there are many of us who want to move just a bit further away from the mere recitation of correct words and instead towards the messy, beautiful world of human action and interaction. The trick isn't in persuasion, it's helping each other do the work we truly want to do.