



**ABOLISH  
WHITE  
SUPREMACY!**

**WHAT IS WHITE SUPREMACY**

**BY ELIZABETH 'BETITA' MARTINEZ**

**WHITE SUPREMACIST CULTURE**

**BY KENNETH JONES AND TEMA OKUN**

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This booklet was originally put together by the group that was the predecessor to Red Machete, the Revolutionary Abolitionist Group. RAG formed as an affinity group during the George Floyd Rebellion. Red Machete formed as a more intentional revolutionary communist organization.

Red Machete centers our analysis on white supremacy being one of the most strategic pillars of US Empire/Imperialism/Capitalism. The primary manifestation of this being the Prison Industrial Complex. We remain an abolitionist organization seeking to build with others a movement of movements against the death juggernaut of capitalism and building a communist world in its place.

Abolish Carceral Society!  
Build Revolutionary Praxis!  
For Communism!



# What is White Supremacy?

By Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez

“White Supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.”

(Definition by the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, San Francisco, CA)

## I. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY IT IS A SYSTEM?

The most common mistake people make when talking about racism (White Supremacy) is to think of it as a problem of personal prejudices and individual acts of discrimination. They do not see that it is a system, a web of interlocking, reinforcing institutions: political, economic, social, cultural, legal, military, educational, all our institutions. As a system, racism affects every aspect of life in a country.

By not understanding that racism is systemic, we guarantee it will continue. For example, racist police behavior is often reduced to “a few bad apples” who need to be removed, instead of seeing that it can be found in police departments everywhere. It reflects and sustains the existing power relations throughout society. This mistake has real consequences: by refusing to see police brutality as a part of a system, and that the system must be changed, we guarantee such brutality will continue.

The need to recognize racism as being systemic is one reason the term White Supremacy is more useful than the term racism. They refer to the same problem but:

A. The purpose of racism is much clearer when we call it “white supremacy”. The word “supremacy” means a power relationship exists.

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B. B. Race is an unscientific term for differences between people. Although racism is a social reality, it has no biological or other scientific basis. There is a single human race.

C. The term racism often leads to dead-end debates about whether a particular remark or action by an individual person was really racist or not. We will achieve a clearer understanding of racism if we analyze how a certain action relates to the system of White Supremacy.

## **II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY WHITE SUPREMACY IS HISTORICALLY BASED?**

Every country has a creation story— it can also be called an origin myth—which is the story people are told of how their country came into being. Ours says the United States began with Columbus's so called "discovery" of America, continued with settlement by brave Pilgrims, won its independence from England with the American Revolution, and then expanded westward until it became the enormous, rich country you see today.

That is the origin myth. It omits three key facts about the birth and growth of the United States as a nation. Those facts demonstrate that White Supremacy is fundamental to the existence of this country.

1. The United States is a nation state created by the conquest of other peoples in several stages. The first stage was the European seizure of territory inhabited by indigenous peoples, who called their homeland Turtle Island. Before the European invasion, between nine and eighteen million indigenous people lived in what became North America. By the end of the so-called Indian Wars, about 250,000 remained in what is now the United States, and about 123,000 in what is now Canada (see *The State of Native America*, ed. by M. Annette Jaimes, South End Press, 1992).

That process created the land base of this country. The seizure of Indian land and elimination of indigenous peoples was the first, essential condition for the existence of what became the United

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States. The first step, then, was military conquest and what must be called genocide.

2. The United States could not have developed economically as a nation without enslaved African labor. When agriculture and industry began growing in the colonial period, a tremendous labor shortage existed. Not enough white workers came from Europe and the European invaders could not put the remaining indigenous peoples to work in sufficient numbers. Enslaved Africans provided the labor force that made the growth of the United States possible.

That growth peaked from about 1800 to 1860, the period called the Market Revolution. During this time, the United States changed from being an agricultural/commercial economy to an industrial corporate economy. The development of banks, expansion of the credit system, protective tariffs, and new transportation systems all helped make this possible. The key to the Market Revolution was the export of cotton, and this was made possible by slave labor. So the second, vital step in the creation of the United States was slavery.

3. The third major step in the formation of the United States as a nation was the seizure of almost half of Mexico by war—today's Southwest. This expansion enabled the U.S. to reach the Pacific and thus open up valuable trade with Asia that included markets for export and goods to import and sell in the U.S. It also opened to the U.S. vast mineral wealth in Arizona, agricultural wealth in California, and new sources of cheap labor to build railroads and develop the economy.

To do this, the United States first took over by military force the part of Mexico called Texas and made it a state in 1845. The following year it invaded the rest of Mexico and seized its territory under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the 1846-48 War on Mexico. In 1853 the U.S. acquired a final chunk of Arizona, by threatening to renew the war if not agreed. This completed the territorial boundaries of what is now the United States. Those were the three foundation stones in the creation of the United States as a nation. Then, in 1898, the U.S. take-cover of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba by

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means of war against Spain extended the U.S. to become an empire. All but Cuba have remained U.S. colonies or neo-colonies, providing new sources of wealth and military power for the United States. The colonization and incorporation of Hawaii completed the empire.

Many people in the United States hate to recognize the truth of the three steps. They do not like to call the U.S. an empire. They prefer the established origin myth, with its idea of the U.S. as a democracy from its early days.

### **III. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY THAT WHITE SUPREMACY IS A SYSTEM OF EXPLOITATION?**

The roots of White Supremacy lie in establishing economic exploitation by the theft of resources and human labor. That exploitation has then been justified by a racist ideology affirming the inferiority of its victims—and this continues today. The first application of White Supremacy or racism by the Euroamericans who control U.S. society was against indigenous peoples, whose land was stolen; then Blacks, originally as slaves and later as exploited waged labor, followed by Mexicans when they lost their land holdings and also became wage-slaves. Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and other Asian/Pacific peoples also became low-wage workers here, subject to racism. Arab workers have also been exploited in this way.

In short, White Supremacy and economic power were born together. The United States is the first nation in the world to be born racist (South Africa came not long after) and also the first to be born capitalist (not just replacing feudalism, for example, with capitalism). That is not a co-incidence. In this country, as history shows, capitalism and racism go hand in hand.

### **IV. HOW DOES WHITE SUPREMACY MAINTAIN AND DEFEND A SYSTEM OF WEALTH, POWER AND PRIVILEGE?**

Racist power relations are sustained by the institutions of this society together with the ideology of Whiteness that developed during

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western colonization. The first European settlers called themselves English, Irish, German, French, Dutch, etc—not “white.” Over half of those who came in the early colonial period were servants. But by 1760, about 400,00 of the two million non-Indians here were enslaved Africans. The planters who formed an elite class in the southern colonies, were out-numbered by non-whites. In the Carolinas, 25,000 whites faced 40,000 Black slaves and 60,000 indigenous peoples in the area.

Class lines hardened as the distinctions between rich and poor became sharper. The problem of control loomed large and fear of revolt from below grew among the elite. Elite whites feared most of all that discontented whites – servants, tenant farmers, the urban poor, the property-less, soldiers and sailors – would join Black slaves to overthrow the existing order. As early as 1663, indentured white servants and Black slaves had formed a conspiracy in Virginia to rebel and gain their free-dom.

Then, in 1676, came Bacon’s Rebellion by white frontiersmen and servants alongside Black slaves. The rebellion shook Virginia’s planter elite. Many other rebellions followed, from South Carolina to New York. The main fear of elite whites everywhere was a class fear. Their solution: divide and control.

On one hand, certain privileges were given to white servants. They were now allowed to acquire land, join militias, carry guns, and other legal rights not allowed to slaves. At the same time, the Slave Codes were enacted that legalized chattel slavery and severely restricted the rights of free Africans. The codes equated the terms “Negro” and “slave.”

With their new privileges, those in the servant class were legally declared “white” on the basis of skin color and continental origin. That made them “superior” to Blacks (and Indians). Thus whiteness was born as a racist notion to prevent lower-class whites from joining people of color, especially Blacks, against their common class enemies. The concept of whiteness became a source of unity and

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strength for the vastly outnumbered Euroamericans – as in South Africa, another settler nation. It became key to defending White Supremacy against class unity across color lines.

## **V. WHITE SUPREMACY AND MANIFEST DESTINY**

In the mid-1800s, new historical developments strengthened the concept of whiteness and institutionalize White Supremacy. Since the time of Jefferson, the United States had its eye on expanding to the Pacific Ocean and establishing trade with Asia. Others in the ruling class came to want more slave states, for reasons of political power, and this also required westward expansion. Both goals pointed to taking over Mexico.

The first step was Texas, which was acquired for the United States by filling the territory with Anglo settlers who then declared their independence from Mexico in 1836. After failing to purchase more Mexican territory, President James Polk created a pretext for starting a war with the declared goal of expansion. The notoriously brutal, two-year war on Mexico was justified in the name of Manifest Destiny.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, born at a time of aggressive western expansion, said that the United States was destined by God to take over other peoples and lands. The term was first used in 1845 by the editor of a popular journal, who affirmed “the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government.”

The concepts of Manifest Destiny and institutionalized racism are profoundly linked. Even those who opposed expansion did so for racist reasons, as when some politicians said “the degraded Mexican-Spanish” were not to become part of the United States; they were “a wretched people...mongrels.”

In a similar way, some influential whites who opposed slavery in those years said Blacks should be removed from U.S. soil, to avoid

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“contamination” by an inferior people (see Manifest Destiny by Anders Stephanson, Hill & Wang, 1995). Native Americans have been the target of white supremacist beliefs that they were dirty, heathen “savages” and also fundamentally inferior in their values. For example, they did not see land as profitable real estate buy as Our Mother. Such people had to be forcefully isolated on reservations., assimilated by being re-moved from their own culture and having their own culture either outlawed or ridiculed.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny established White Supremacy more firmly than ever as central to the U.S. definition of itself. The arrogance of asserting that God gave white people (primarily men) the right to dominate everything around them still haunts our society and sustains its racist oppression. Today we call it the arrogance of power and it can be seen in all U.S. relations with other countries.

One persistent example of that arrogance is the habit of calling this country “America” when that is the official name of almost an entire hemisphere composing over 20 other countries. From left to right, organizations and publications and individual leaders obliterate millions of other human beings, mostly of color, by mindlessly giving the United States the only meaning, importance, and reality worth of recognition. We can assume it comes from habit, not conscious imperialism at work, but that is no excuse for not recognizing white supremacist thinking among our most progressive forces.

Finally, the material effects of White Supremacy on peoples of color are all too clear in terms of economic, social, political and cultural inequity.

Even that ultimate affirmation of dominion, racist murder or lynching, still occurs to remind us that age-old power relations remain unaltered. That is not to deny the positive effects of long years of struggle to change those power relations, but to recognize that White Supremacy remains intact systematically, as seen in the constant harm it does to the daily lives and aspirations of peoples of color.

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Less understood than the material are the psychological and spiritual effects of White Supremacy. Few whites understand what internalized racism does to people of color, who do not discuss those effects easily themselves. The self-hatred, desire to be like whites or even to be white, and assumption of inevitable failure are the dreadful legacy of White Supremacy's teaching those lies by every means at its disposal. Maintaining control over any community has always required not only physical domination but also the ideological domination that says: things are as they should be. As you inferior creatures deserve them to be.

## **VI. WHITE SUPREMACY AND GLOBALIZATION**

Racism has never stood still or remained unchanged in history. Today we see new forms emerging from the rapid growth of globalization. We can see that White Supremacy has become more global than ever and millions of people of color have become globalized.

Global economic integration is not new in itself, we have seen the world capitalist economy in operation for centuries. But today it is an extremely powerful set of inter-related policies and practices with a huge field of operations. It includes the "global assembly line" for production, with parts made in different countries; the whole world defined as the potential market for a commodity; and technological advances that facilitate economic integration more than ever in human history. With corporate globalization has come a neo-liberalism that means privatization, deregulation, the decline of social services, and other policies.

The main victims are nations of color (politely called "developing" instead of impoverished) and peoples of color, as shown by the vast increase in migrant labor. The vast majority of immigrants to the U.S. today are the globalized: women and men, mostly of color, driven from home by dire personal poverty to find survival usually in the global capitals. New eruptions of White Supremacy often confront them.

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It's been said that militarism is racism in action. We could also say that globalization is White Supremacy in action, as never before. Manifest Destiny now rages across not only Las Americas but the whole world. Given current ruling-class policy in the United States itself are increasingly victimized. Are we becoming a "Third World" country?



# White Supremacy Culture

From Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001

This is a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture which show up in our organizations. Culture is powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to name or identify. The characteristics listed below are damaging because they are used as norms and standards without being pro-actively named or chosen by the group. They are damaging because they promote white supremacy thinking. They are damaging to both people of color and to white people. Organizations that are people of color led or a majority people of color can also demonstrate many damaging characteristics of white supremacy culture.

## Perfectionism

- little appreciation expressed among people for the work that others are doing; appreciation that is expressed usually directed to those who get most of the credit anyway
- more common is to point out either how the person or work is inadequate
- or even more common, to talk to others about the inadequacies of a person or their work without ever talking directly to them
- mistakes are seen as personal, i.e. they reflect badly on the person making them as opposed to being seen for what they are ó mistakes
- making a mistake is confused with being a mistake, doing wrong with being wrong
- little time, energy, or money put into reflection or identifying lessons learned that can improve practice, in other words little or no learning from mistakes
- tendency to identify what's wrong; little ability to identify, name, and appreciate what's right

**antidotes:** develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization

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takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated; develop a learning organization, where it is expected that everyone will make mistakes and those mistakes offer opportunities for learning; create an environment where people can recognize that mistakes sometimes lead to positive results; separate the person from the mistake; when offering feedback, always speak to the things that went well before offering criticism; ask people to offer specific suggestions for how to do things differently when offering criticism

### **Sense of Urgency**

- continued sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, to consider consequences
- frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results, for example sacrificing interests of communities of color in order to win victories for white people (seen as default or norm community)
- reinforced by funding proposals which promise too much work for too little money and by funders who expect too much for too little

**antidotes:** realistic workplans; leadership which understands that things take longer than anyone expects; discuss and plan for what it means to set goals of inclusivity and diversity, particularly in terms of time; learn from past experience how long things take; write realistic funding proposals with realistic time frames; be clear about how you will make good decisions in an atmosphere of urgency

### **Defensiveness**

- the organizational structure is set up and much energy spent trying to prevent abuse and protect power as it exists rather than to facilitate the best out of each person or to clarify who has power and how they are expected to use it
  - because of either/or thinking (see below), criticism of those with power is viewed as threatening and inappropriate (or rude)
  - people respond to new or challenging ideas with defensiveness, making it very difficult to raise these ideas
  - a lot of energy in the organization is spent trying to make sure that
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people's feelings aren't getting hurt or working around defensive people

- the defensiveness of people in power creates an oppressive culture

**antidotes:** understand that structure cannot in and of itself facilitate or prevent abuse; understand the link between defensiveness and fear (of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege); work on your own defensiveness; name defensiveness as a problem when it is one; give people credit for being able to handle more than you think; discuss the ways in which defensiveness or resistance to new ideas gets in the way of the mission

### **Quantity Over Quality**

- all resources of organization are directed toward producing measurable goals
- things that can be measured are more highly valued than things that cannot, for example numbers of people attending a meeting, newsletter circulation, money spent are valued more than quality of relationships, democratic decision-making, ability to constructively deal with conflict
- little or no value attached to process; if it can't be measured, it has no value
- discomfort with emotion and feelings
- no understanding that when there is a conflict between content (the agenda of the meeting) and process (people's need to be heard or engaged), process will prevail (for example, you may get through the agenda, but if you haven't paid attention to people's need to be heard, the decisions made at the meeting are undermined and/or disregarded)

antidotes: include process or quality goals in your planning; make sure your organization has a values statement which expresses the ways in which you want to do your work; make sure this is a living document and that people are using it in their day to day work; look for ways to measure process goals (for example if you have a goal of inclusivity, think about ways you can measure whether or not you have achieved

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that goal); learn to recognize those times when you need to get off the agenda in order to address people's underlying concerns

### **Worship of the Written Word**

- if it's not in a memo, it doesn't exist
- the organization does not take into account or value other ways in which information gets shared
- those with strong documentation and writing skills are more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission  
antidotes: take the time to analyze how people inside and outside the organization get and share information; figure out which things need to be written down and come up with alternative ways to document what is happening; work to recognize the contributions and skills that every person brings to the organization (for example, the ability to build relationships with those who are important to the organization's mission)
- only one right way the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it
- when they do not adapt or change, then something is wrong with them (the other, those not changing), not with us (those who know the right way)
- similar to the missionary who does not see value in the culture of other communities, sees only value in their beliefs about what is good

**antidotes:** accept that there are many ways to get to the same goal; once the group has made a decision about which way will be taken, honor that decision and see what you and the organization will learn from taking that way, even and especially if it is not the way you would have chosen; work on developing the ability to notice when people do things differently and how those different ways might improve your approach; look for the tendency for a group or a person to keep pushing the same point over and over out of a belief that there is only one right way and then name it; when working with communities from a different culture than yours or your organization's, be clear that you have some learning to do about the communities ways of doing; never

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assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community

### **Paternalism**

- decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it
- those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power
- those with power often don't think it is important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions
- those without power understand they do not have it and understand who does
- those without power do not really know how decisions get made and who makes what decisions, and yet they are completely familiar with the impact of those decisions on them

**antidotes:** make sure that everyone knows and understands who makes what decisions in the organization; make sure everyone knows and understands their level of responsibility and authority in the organization; include people who are affected by decisions in the decision-making

### **Either/Or Thinking**

- things are either/or, good/bad, right/wrong, with us/against us
- closely linked to perfectionism in making it difficult to learn from mistakes or accommodate conflict
- no sense that things can be both/and
- results in trying to simplify complex things, for example believing that poverty is simply a result of lack of education
- creates conflict and increases sense of urgency, as people are felt they have to make decisions to do either this or that, with no time or encouragement to consider alternatives, particularly those which may require more time or resources

**antidotes:** notice when people use either/or language and push to

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come up with more than two alternatives; notice when people are simplifying complex issues, particularly when the stakes seem high or an urgent decision needs to be made; slow it down and encourage people to do a deeper analysis; when people are faced with an urgent decision, take a break and give people some breathing room to think creatively; avoid making decisions under extreme pressure

### **Power Hoarding**

- little, if any, value around sharing power
- power seen as limited, only so much to go around
- those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes in how things should be done in the organization, feel suggestions for change are a reflection on their leadership
- those with power don't see themselves as hoarding power or as feeling threatened
- those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart and assume those wanting change are ill-informed (stupid), emotional, inexperienced

**antidotes:** include power sharing in your organization's values statement; discuss what good leadership looks like and make sure people understand that a good leader develops the power and skills of others; understand that change is inevitable and challenges to your leadership can be healthy and productive; make sure the organization is fo-cused on the mission

### **Fear of Open Conflict**

- people in power are scared of conflict and try to ignore it or run from it
- when someone raises an issue that causes discomfort, the response is to blame the person for raising the issue rather than to look at the issue which is actually causing the problem
- emphasis on being polite
- equating the raising of difficult issues with being impolite, rude, or out of line

**antidotes:** role play ways to handle conflict before conflict happens;

distinguish between being polite and raising hard issues; don't require those who raise hard issues to raise them in “acceptable” ways, especially if you are using the ways in which issues are raised as an excuse not to address the issues being raised; once a conflict is resolved, take the opportunity to revisit it and see how it might have been handled differently

## **Individualism**

- little experience or comfort working as part of a team
- people in organization believe they are responsible for solving problems alone
- accountability, if any, goes up and down, not sideways to peers or to those the organization is set up to serve
- desire for individual recognition and credit
- leads to isolation
- competition more highly valued than cooperation and where cooperation is valued, little time or resources devoted to developing skills in how to cooperate
- creates a lack of accountability, as the organization values those who can get things done on their own without needing supervision or guidance  
antidotes: include teamwork as an important value in your values statement; make sure the organization is working towards shared goals and people understand how working together will improve performance; evaluate people's ability to work in a team as well as their ability to get the job done; make sure that credit is given to all those who participate in an effort, not just the leaders or most public person; make people accountable as a group rather than as individuals; create a culture where people bring problems to the group; use staff meetings as a place to solve problems, not just a place to report activities
- I'm the only one
- connected to individualism, the belief that if something is going to get done right, “I” have to do it
- little or no ability to delegate work to others

**antidotes:** evaluate people based on their ability to delegate to others; evaluate people based on their ability to work as part of a team to

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accomplish shared goals

### **Progress is Bigger, More**

- observed in systems of accountability and ways we determine success
- progress is an organization which expands (adds staff, adds projects) or develops the ability to serve more people (regardless of how well they are serving them)
- gives no value, not even negative value, to its cost, for example, increased accountability to funders as the budget grows, ways in which those we serve may be exploited, excluded, or underserved as we focus on how many we are serving instead of quality of service or values created by the ways in which we serve

**antidotes:** create Seventh Generation thinking by asking how the actions of the group now will affect people seven generations from now; make sure that any cost/benefit analysis includes all the costs, not just the financial ones, for example the cost in morale, the cost in credibility, the cost in the use of resources; include process goals in your planning, for example make sure that your goals speak to how you want to do your work, not just what you want to do; ask those you work with and for to evaluate your performance

### **Objectivity**

- the belief that there is such a thing as being objective
- the belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process
- invalidating people who show emotion
- requiring people to think in a linear fashion and ignoring or invalidating those who think in other ways
- impatience with any thinking that does not appear “logical” to those with power

**antidotes:** realize that everybody has a world view and that everybody’s world view affects the way they understand things; realize this means you too; push yourself to sit with discomfort when people are expressing themselves in ways which are not familiar to you; assume

that everybody has a valid point and your job is to understand what that point is

### **Right to Comfort**

- the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort (another aspect of valuing “logic” over emotion)
- scapegoating those who cause discomfort
- equating individual acts of unfairness against white people with systemic racism which daily targets people of color

**antidotes:** understand that discomfort is at the root of all growth and learning; welcome it as much as you can; deepen your political analysis of racism and oppression so you have a strong understanding of how your personal experience and feelings fit into a larger picture; don't take everything personally

One of the purposes of listing characteristics of white supremacy culture is to point out how organizations which unconsciously use these characteristics as their norms and standards make it difficult, if not impossible, to open the door to other cultural norms and standards. As a result, many of our organizations, while saying we want to be multicultural, really only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms. Being able to identify and name the cultural norms and standards you want is a first step to making room for a truly multi-cultural organization.



[www.redmachete.org](http://www.redmachete.org)

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