

Healing from White Supremacy & Colonialist Culture
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Maya Angelou once wrote, *“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”* This is, I think, one of life’s greatest yet most difficult truths.

Growing up, my experience of race and racism was variable, mixed, like my heritage. Being of blended white European settler *and* dark skinned Mohawk Indian heritage, I slipped between two worlds, depending on circumstances of time and place. We lived in a suburb of Montreal so white that black people on the street would draw stares and slow traffic. We lived on the other side of the tracks, literally, amongst poorer French Canadians and European immigrants. I practically lived outdoors in summer, and my indigenous skin took on a very dark tone. With my round face and dark hair (pre-product), I looked every bit the native kid. Sometimes, especially when out with my grandmother who had classic Mohawk features, I’d hear jeering shouts of “petite sauvagesse” or little savage girl. I could feel the venom behind these slurs.

I knew my experience was a little different from that of the Anglo kids I went to school with...but mostly I slipped easily back and forth across class lines, culture lines, colour lines, and language lines.

We all come with life experiences that shape who we are, and how we see the world. One of the ways we can “know better” is to reflect on the context of our lives in relation to others.

Let us begin with a little exercise. This is usually done as a physical activity with participants moving and thus creating a powerful visual representation... but today, we’ll do it as an individual visualization.

Close your eyes if you will. Imagine standing with other people, strangers, friends, coworkers, neighbours, black, white, indigenous. You are side by side in a row, standing at the mid point of a very wide road... Listen carefully as I read a series of statements, and imagine yourself taking a step forward or backward as the statement applies to you. If a statement is not relevant, stand still. Be as honest as possible. To interpret each statement, think about your background or a group of people you identify with, such as race, class, ethnicity, ancestry, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and dis/ability.

- If you identify as male, take one step forward.
- If people you identify with are widely represented in the media, on TV, in the movies, magazines-- take a step forward.

- If your native language is not English, take one step back.
- If you were ever called names because of your background, take one step back.
- If you have ever felt as though you were feared, inferior, or an unwanted member of society, please take one step back.
- If you are frequently followed when you enter a store, take one step back.
- If your parents were professionals - doctors, lawyers, etc., take one step forward.
- If you ever tried to change your appearance, mannerisms, or behavior to avoid being judged or ridiculed, or to gain more credibility, take one step back.
- If you are taught the culture and history of your ancestors in school, take one step forward.
- If you were raised witnessing violence, addiction to drugs or alcohol, prostitution, or crime, take one step back.
- If you own a car, take a step forward.
- If you have health insurance take one step forward.
- If you had more than 50 books in your house as a child, take one step forward.
- If you have ever been stopped or questioned by the police because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take a step backward.
- If you ever had to skip a meal or were hungry because there was not enough money to buy you food when you were growing up, take one step back.
- If you were ever denied access to jobs or services because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.
- If you were encouraged by your parents to attend college, take one step forward.
- If you were raised in a single-parent household, take one step back.
- If your family owned the house where you grew up, take one step forward.
- If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear or ridicule or violence, take one step forward.
- If you were ever offended by a joke or remark about people you identify with, but felt unsafe to confront the situation, take a step back.
- If you were ever paid less in a job because of your race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation, take one step back.

Can you see where you are standing? No doubt, some people are standing ahead, and some behind you.

Taking guidance from Maya Angelou, today I ask how can we do the best we can until we know better? And when we know better, how shall we do better?

Last spring, our American Unitarian Universalist cousins suddenly found themselves in a controversial, contentious, and challenging time. At least, white UUs found it sudden. For Black UUs, it was a long time coming. Claims of racist hiring practices emerged around the Unitarian Universalist Association

and led to the president's resignation, soon followed by other key leaders, both in the UUA and the UU Ministers' Association.

This was a huge deal, which, for a time, threatened the very future of our movement. The words "white supremacy" were deployed to describe the subtle but powerful culture within UUism, not just in administrative hiring practices, but also in our congregations.

UU Minister Rev. Krista Taves, wrote a commentary that captures her response, that I also shared.

I get why there is so much pushback about using the term "white supremacy" to describe the culture in Unitarian Universalist institutions. We have been trained to see white supremacy as an overt expression of racism, replete with burning crosses, white hoods, confederate flags, lynchings and angry white people in black and white footage shouting racist epithets at black children trying to enter white schools.

This allows liberal whites to distance themselves from racism and believe that we aren't part of it. At least we aren't calling people names, threatening their lives, or muttering under our breath.

I admit my stomach turned when I first heard the term "white supremacy" used to describe the culture of Unitarian Universalism and our institutions. But I've reconsidered that response.

White supremacy is way bigger than the way we've been trained to understand it. White supremacy is a way of thinking that devalues the experiences, insights, and lived reality of people of color. The consequences of this thinking goes beyond an abstract state of mind and has the real life impact of denying people of color a real voice with real power. Rarely is this culture explicit or even conscious in liberal white communities. It is implicit and unconscious.

This is why I totally believe that those responsible for the latest hires are fully convinced they did nothing wrong and were not acting out of racial bias. However they were unconsciously acting out of racial bias.

Naming this as an act of white supremacy is pretty scary but it is the right thing to do. It sure has shocked a lot of whites into paying attention. Calling what happened "implicit bias" gives it a pass. It makes it softer than what it actually is, the devaluing of people of color and the denial of authority and power to people of color.

We are being very brave to call it what it is. In fact, it sets us apart from most liberal institutions which are in complete denial about the power of racism to shape their decisions and their processes.

There is not one institution in this country that is not shaped by white supremacy, and that includes institutions run by people of color. We have all been indoctrinated into white supremacy thinking. Therefore there is no reason to feel shame or fear. It is not your fault. You are not stained. We are not irredeemable. Our Universalist heritage says that no one is left behind.

Let's anchor in that promise. I implore you to resist your urge to run away or to distance yourself from the term. Stay with us. Bend into the task at hand. Dare to be vulnerable.

I like being the minister who tries to help people feel better about themselves and their lives. What I bring today is instead daunting and uncomfortable.

I'm a smart woman; so, (looking left) over here, I see the history of slavery, which perpetrated horrendous oppression of people of colour, both in America and here in Canada...

And (look right) over here, I recognize the history of the Black Empowerment Tragedy that took place in 1960's which created a painful diaspora of Unitarian Universalists of colour, who either left our so called inclusive faith, or withdrew to the margins hurt, rejected, and disempowered. (called "Controversy" by white folk)

And (look centre) here are the narratives of Indigenous people at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings, I have attended where I heard them speaking about their experience of the Residential School era on their lives as a result of the cultural genocide attempted on Indigenous people by powerful colonialist governments and churches.

But when I am asked to hold all these experiences and truths (sweeping gesture), and to hold the stark new reality that appears...well, I am out of my comfort zone.

Turns out my Unitarian Universalism is not all rainbows and unicorns when it comes down to racial equity for black people in our congregations, or for ministers of colour.

And the more I read about racism, white supremacist and colonialist culture, and the false narrative we hold, I am tempted to hide under the covers.

Last spring, in the aftermath of the UUA scandal, the largest joint effort among Unitarian Universalist congregations in recent memory over 700 Unitarian Universalist Congregations joined the call to host teach-ins on white supremacy as called for and led by UUs of color and indigenous UUs., 706 congregations—68 percent of the total 1,088 congregations in United States and Canada—participated in a White Supremacy Teach-Ins.

Sparked by racist hiring practices, this is part of a denomination wide protest and conversation for racial justice values inside the UU association, inside UU congregations, as our UU faith works for racial justice throughout society.

It is an incredible time of possibility; it's also a time when many white UUs are deeply uncomfortable, scared, and alienated by the calls to challenge white supremacy within the UU faith.

Let me first give you a snapshot of the Black Empowerment Controversy/Tragedy to give context:

America had experienced a decade of volatile and cathartic activity focused on the Civil Rights Movement. At the 1968 UUA General Assembly, delegates voted for \$1 million for programs to support black empowerment in the Unitarian Universalist Association over four years. A controversy over the funding began at the 1969 General Assembly in Boston, and many Unitarian Universalists walked out of the Assembly. By 1970, the funding was reduced and eliminated.

Many black Unitarian Universalists left the denomination following these events. Since then, for the most part, we have carefully not talked about what happened in 1968-69. "The Black Empowerment Controversy" is treated as a family secret that is not talked about.

Mark Morrison Reed writes in his article, *The Black Hole in the White UU Psyche*:

In 1969 at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Boston, there was a greater presence of Black UUs than ever before; nearly 10% of Unitarian Universalist congregations had African American members holding positions of leadership. We mostly don't know the important history and contributions of black Unitarians and Universalists. And that's part of the problem. We have not wanted to pay attention.

In UU worship and liturgy, as in our scholarship, African Americans did not exist. A 1989 study of UU worship preferences tells us that African Americans do not fit the UU pattern. What was most important in worship overall (mostly white) to UUs was "intellectual stimulation." What was most important for African Americans who responded to the survey: "celebrating common values" (69%), "hope," "vision," and "music."

Morrison Reed writes: *the white conscience does not want to know...not knowing the history and not being reminded during worship means white liberals don't have to feel guilty or be confronted by the emotional aridness of UU worship.*

In saying "All Lives Matter", UUs telegraph that we do not really understand. Saying "All Lives Matter" tells African Americans we do not know the difference between privilege and oppression. This echoes our religious ancestors. They said, "God is love" and "We are all God's children," but did not act in accordance with that belief, nor did they try to articulate how it might speak to black suffering. Why? Because UUs saw black lives when it served their ego needs. That is to say, black lives didn't matter—except insofar as white folks got to feel good about themselves as abolitionists and civil rights activists.

What about Canadian UUs in this talk of white supremacy culture?

My Canadian ministry colleagues have also been talking, reading, working to address the topic of white supremacy in the Canadian UU context.

We chose to read a recent text called *Policing Black Lives: state violence in Canada from slavery to the present* by Robyn Maynard.

Here's a description: "delving behind Canada's veneer of multiculturalism and tolerance, Robyn Maynard traces the violent realities of anti-blackness from the slave ships to prisons, classrooms, and beyond, providing readers with the first comprehensive account of nearly four hundred years of state-sanctioned surveillance, criminalization and punishment of Black lives in Canada."

Reminiscent of the way Mark Morrison Reed talks about the false narrative UUs have created around the reality of black lives in our denomination, Maynard outline how Canada intentionally began to brand itself as a multicultural society in 1970, and manufactured pride in a Canadian identity of tolerance.

This effective PR campaign served to disguise Canada's brutal and violent history of slavery and colonization, and Canada's continuing abuse of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities.

When multiculturalism was introduced, Black migrants and Black Canadians were largely living and working in conditions of extreme exploitation, or else excluded from high paying labour and facing high unemployment rate—in other words, Black Canadians were nowhere near equal with white Canadians. These conditions remain largely unchanged.

We like to think that Canada benevolently and generously allows sanctuary and opportunity to the disadvantaged, racialized peoples of the world. Except this image is incomplete – the conditions of black migrants in Canada and worldwide has been the result of what Cedric Robinson calls, racial capitalism.

Like the global systems of inequality that preceded it, racial capitalism relies on the use of race and racial hierarchies to justify unequal power relationships and makes them appear natural.

The fact that our society can normalize such disparity has its foundation in the dehumanizing racial logics set in place long ago.

The logic of racism was manufactured around so-called characteristics of blackness. First, "race" is a socially constructed difference; there is no evidence of genetic differences across the peoples of the world, only a variation of our skin pigmentation. But, if one group of people is going to systematically enslave another group of people for the purpose of exploiting them for wealth extraction, they have to create a story they can buy into and sell. Hate must be manufactured by creating fear and practicing surveillance and control of movement.

The attributes that have been attached to Blackness – subservience, criminality, lack of intelligence, and dangerousness – set a road map for the 19th and 20th centuries

The issue of slavery in Canada has long been glossed-over by historians and by Canadian society in general. We don't talk about it because it continues to serve Canada. The practice of slavery that set the stage for the subsequent centuries of dehumanization of Black life across Canada, says Maynard. Social amnesia about slavery, as is common in Canada, makes it impossible to understand anti-black policing happening today.

We don't talk much about Canada's history of slavery not in our history books, or over coffee at Tim Hortons.

For about two centuries, slavery was legal in New France, and in Lower Canada under British rule and affected the destiny of thousands of men, women and children descended from Aboriginal and African peoples. The entirety of the slave trade and colonization created enormous wealth for Europeans, including British colonies like Canada and the United States.

The settlements of Quebec City, Montreal, and Halifax were transatlantic network ports that frequently received ships containing enslaved Black men and women from the Caribbean.

Quebec historian Marcel Trudel writes, *"Captive human beings were owned by people from almost every level of society, including governors, bishops, military officers, merchants, priests, blacksmiths and tailors. James McGill, founder of McGill University, had slaves. So did Marguerite d'Youville, the Grey Nuns founder who was canonized in 1990."*

Maynard writes that the practice of slavery embodied not only economic exploitation but also a visceral "hatred of blacks" and the slave owners' inability to see their slaves as humans.

Segregated education of blacks and whites was common in many parts of Canada. Black schools were intended to keep black children apart from white children, but also to provide inferior education. The last segregated school in Canada closed in 1983. Segregation was practiced in hospitals, services, hotels.

Statistics show how systemic racism is practiced in Canada.

- Common experience of racial profiling of black people by police, young men in particular.
- Every black mother is justified in worrying about her children, especially boys, given the number of young black men in Canada who are shot and killed by police, for which there is little accountability—
- Restriction of movement and assembly of black people (if two or more white people are in conversation on the street, it's a reflection of community; if they are black, it's likely the police will check, inferring a stereotype of suspicious behaviour, criminality).
- Disproportionate numbers of blacks stopped without cause by police, arrested, and incarcerated. Drugs and the so called war on drugs are a smokescreen for criminalizing black people
- Discriminatory employment opportunity, and compensation.

- Racist immigration programs are preferential to white Europeans and creates barriers for black migrants – through credentialing bars,

If this sermon seems unfinished, it is. I've only scratched the surface today. We've covered a lot of ground, but this conversation must and will continue. Our faith is at a cathartic point, and it is calling us to bravely know better and to do better. May it be so, and amen.

Resources for understanding and combatting White Supremacy & Colonialist Culture

1. An example of something one artist is doing here in Canada: <https://actsofart150.com/>
2. Ten Ways to Fight Hate: a Community Response Guide: <https://www.splcenter.org/20170814/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide>
3. To be mindful of our potential to unconsciously perpetuate systems of oppression, to seek justice and right relations, and to cultivate practices of deepening awareness. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2017/05/spiritual-practices-curiosity-commitment-uuwhitesupremacyteachin/>
4. <https://wwhatup.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/wwhatup-week3-readings1.pdf>
5. A study in white culture and its defining characteristics: http://www.cswsworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html
6. Hard-hitting, but contains some good ideas about what we need to do to further this work: <https://theestablishment.co/welcome-to-the-anti-racism-movement-heres-what-you-ve-missed-711089cb7d34>
7. From Chris Crass...comes from a UU perspective: <https://medium.com/@chriscrass/im-scared-too-and-together-let-s-say-yes-917dd4317786>
8. *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel. 2002, New Society Publishers.
9. *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* by Robyn Maynard. 2017, Fernwood Publishing.
10. *Race & Well-Being: The Lives, Hopes, and Activism of African Canadians* by Carl James, David Este, Wanda Thomas Bernard et al. 2010. Fernwood Publishing.

11. *Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation & Residential School*. Selected by Shelagh Rogers et al. 2012. Aboriginal Healing Foundation
12. *"The Black Hole in the White UU Psyche" in UU World*. Fall 2017. By Mark Morrison Reed.
<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/black-hole-white-uu-psyche>
13. *"The Empowerment Tragedy" in UU World*. Winter 2011. By Mark Morrison Reed.
<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/empowerment-tragedy>