

# **THERE IS HONOR IN STRUGGLE THERE IS HONOR IN THE WORK**



## **SONG ON THE ROLE OF WHITE PEOPLE IN THE MOVEMENT AT THIS TIME**

*"White people are taught that racism is a personal attribute, an attitude, maybe a set of habits. Anti-racist whites invest too much energy worrying about getting it right; about not slipping up and revealing their racial socialization; about saying the right things and knowing when to say nothing. It's not about that. It's about putting your shoulder to the wheel of history; about undermining the structural supports of a system of control that grinds us under, that keeps us divided even against ourselves and that extracts wealth, power and life from our communities like an oil company sucks it from the earth. The names of the euro-descended anti-racist warriors we remember – John Brown, Anne Braden, Myles Horton – are not those of people who did it right. They are of people who never gave up. They kept their eyes on the prize – not on their anti-racism grade point average. This will also be the measure of your work. Be there. There are things in life we don't get to do right. But we do get to do them."*

-Ricardo Levin Morales, 2015, for Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) work

Over the last year, SONG's base and thousands of other LGBTQ people have taken to the streets answering the call to do our part in demanding Black Lives Matter and Not1More Deportation. Black, immigrant, white, rural, urban, transgender, queer and undocumented SONG members have invited strangers over to their homes, planned their first vigil or protest, shut down highways and intersections, staged actions at city council meetings, launched campaigns, facilitated their first planning meeting and much more.

Also in this moment our membership, constituency, allies, different organizations in and out of the region have asked SONG to name some of our practices and to call on our white LGBTQ family to persevere in the struggle for liberation, both within our SONG roles and in the community. As current white leaders in SONG, now is the time to match the courage of our comrades, to make room and support Black, of color, immigrant, undocumented, and transgender and gender nonconforming people in launching and leading 21st Century movement building in this country.

**The following tool is a starting point for developing more connection, unity and shared work inside of our white membership at SONG – across broad class, ability, locations, ethnicity and levels of experience.** With this document we hope to centralize some of our orientation, principles, practices and possibilities towards our roles in advancing anti-racist, multi-racial organizing.

As a Southern, multi-racial, cross-class, multi-gendered, membership-based LGBTQ liberation organization with a 21-year lifespan, SONG has continually engaged questions about race, about power and how to reshape it, and about role and position of different people in all levels of the organization. Our legacy is rich with elders, both Black and white, who have dedicated their lives to dismantling racism and rebuilding communities.

As SONG leaders wrote in the 1990's, "We are a part of each other." We invite you to join us in wrestling with these questions and engaging these ideas, experience, thoughts, and theories in practice:

- *What does white leadership look like in this time? As white people in the movement for Liberation, what is our role in this time (not for all time)? How does our feminist, pro-poor, pro-Black, pro the oppressed, pro-queer and trans politic inform not just what we think or say, but what we do?*
- *What is the greater organizing and work needed in this time from white people, so that we can move beyond just safety and survival and into leadership in the struggle for Black lives, immigrant lives, and trans women of color lives?*
- *What are the key fights in our time that we white people can engage to advance broad movement goals that confront and dismantle white supremacy and structural oppression?*

While this initial document was primarily drafted by Caitlin Breedlove and Kate Shapiro as two white people on SONG's staff, the frame and politic were all vetted and improved upon by SONG's full acting staff. We are not **experts or anti-racist scholars** but we are people who give the best part of most days and years to this work, inside an organization much bigger than our individual experiences or ourselves. Just like all tools generated by SONG staff, we create them in the spirit of dialogue, and we hope to hear from you. Get at us! Via email: [takeaction@southernersonnewground.org](mailto:takeaction@southernersonnewground.org) or call the SONG office 404-549-8628.

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### **1. Our Work Is Our Gain. Assumptions and Principles Underlying Our Work:**

- It is our job to dismantle white supremacy. Beyond personal, familial or community interactions we have to advance community organizing and confront power at sites of violence, fear and scarcity.
- We understand liberation work to be an inherently interdependent combination of the following: *Identity + Consciousness + Vision + Work*.
- We know that not any one document can provide all the answers we are searching for.
- We prioritize organizing over activism, collective and shared leadership and accountability over 'Individual Rock Stars'.
- There is honor in struggle. There is honor in the work. To this end, struggle is protracted and lifelong.
- Our work is our gain. As we transform our world and relinquish privilege, we gain integrity, peace, humanity, and collective liberation.
- It is our responsibility to build, develop and grow each other as white leaders in movement. The only way any of us have come this far is because people invested in us, were generous with us when we messed up, and pushed us to be better and stronger.
- We are opposed to fundamentalism in all its forms - political, spiritual, identity-based and beyond. We do not believe that there is any one dogma, ideology, or method that will liberate us completely. Otherwise, we would be free already. We create hybridity with concepts and practices that are quite varied, though all are within our principles.
- We unapologetically side with oppressed people. Our relationships, organizational culture and strategies must reflect that. We are pro-Black, pro-working class, pro-queer, pro-trans, and pro-Feminist.
- We believe in approaching this work, our conditioned selves, and our inevitable mistakes, with a combination of chutzpah and humility.

## **2. Positioning + Role. What this Time Asks of Us:**

**By positioning we mean → In this time politically, what is our orientation, grounding and responsibility?**

**By role we mean → HOW we can better engage this moment, the work and each other?**

- We are in a time with too few highly trained organizers. By this we do **not** mean paid or professional organizers but local leadership that is trained up, supported, and brave moving local work. It's time to use and share ALL of our skills and training with other LGBTQ people of color and white people.
- We need more powerful, experienced, supported and developed LGBTQ people of color leaders. In order to advance wins for all of us, the pool of such leaders must be grown, and leadership power of existing LGBTQ leaders of color must be advanced.
- We understand that women of color (trans and not) and LGBTQ women of color already are (whether acknowledged publicly or not - ahem white supremacy!) central and key protagonists of our time in the work of movement building.
- We must fortify our commitment to show and not just tell our politics (Consciousness + Work + Vision + Identity).
- Our movement objectives are grounded in resiliency and against fragility. We always lean towards growing our ranks of fierce, determined and agile white leaders who can make interventions for justice and liberation.
- The struggles and impacts of white privilege are political, spiritual, emotional and conduct-based and thus need to be addressed on all of those different levels.
- We share a commitment to supporting other oppressed people to come out, destroy fear and unleash power.
- We refuse to play "oppression olympics" and recognize that white people who experience different forms of oppression *can have the potential* to move against white supremacy in powerful ways. Often, we do not. It is our work to make that happen whenever we can.
- We share a commitment to support concrete organizing WINS against white supremacy that are in line with our values and build more people of color and white leadership.

### **White People in this Time Should Come Together in Struggle to:**

#### **Come Out**

- Break silence (interpersonal, communal, organizational, societal) and amplify (through support, flanking, resourcing) strategic people of color-led liberation efforts.
- Organize white people, not as a monolith [meaning looking at specific sets of white people –older lesbians etc. towards liberation goals (vs. organizing people of color communities).
- Develop other white leaders. We share a commitment to supporting others to come out, destroy fear and unleash power.
- Make a case to other white people to secure resources in support of strategic, key, radical, people of color-led organizing.
- Center collective resiliency over shame, discomfort and hesitancy. As Brene Brown and many others have said, "Courage comes through struggle."

#### **Destroy Fear**

- Dismantle the, "Fear of a Black Planet," mentality and work together to root out and dismantle the specific poison that is anti-Black racism. We believe that deep-seated fear

(rooted in racism) lies under that discomfort or lack of connection with Black people and communities.

- Find new ways to articulate, deepen understanding, and amplify the ways that white supremacy injures our own soul survival and our collective survival.
- Let us return again and again to living out in action core SONG values including 'Hope over Fear' and 'Excellence and Rigor over Perfectionism'.

### **Unleash Power**

- Organize against the right wing by fighting and defeating their origin sites of violence, death and fear.
- Transfer and offer ALL the skills we have acquired to leaders of color. One of the ways power and white supremacy is maintained is through not engaging in full skill transfer (providing 1 workshop on grassroots fundraising or base building instead of longer and deeper investment in each others leadership). Often times these are skills that we have gained because of cultural capital, political capital, class privilege, more free time etc.
- Co-conspire with people of color to execute key interventions with other white people, targeting origin points of harm, putting our bodies on the line in strategic ways, and setting examples of principled leadership in white communities.
- Develop stamina and reflection by incorporating reflection, self-criticism, and accountability into all we do.
- Build trusting, life-changing relationships and the fortification of our spiritual will to do this work through struggle and shared work.
- Commit to not working solo to be the "good white person" by identifying other white people as accountability partners (at SONG we often call them 'accountabili-buddies').

### **3. Conduct: 'No Manners, No Mercy, No Sense'**

Within ourselves, inside SONG, in coalitions, campaigns and other formations, we have seen some of the ways that white privilege, white superiority, white pathology and neurosis have caused harm and damaged our ability to build trust, confidence and long-term comradeship with communities of color, particularly Black Southern communities.

Conduct is about how we as white people conduct ourselves in the work, in white spaces, in multi-racial spaces, and in majority people of color spaces. This non-exhaustive list was important for us to include because it reflects how our collective pathology manifests in ACTION, and we need to be able to acknowledge, minimize and correct these tendencies to prevent further inhibition of true comradeship with communities of color.

Our call is to act, to organize, and to move rather than to analyze and espouse politics that are disconnected from collective work. We know that this list is not exhaustive, and behaviors vary widely in white communities based on class, gender, ethnicity, disability, and so many other factors. Some of the ultimately racist tendencies, sometimes compounded or complicated by other privileges or oppressions we might face, that often prevent or inhibit organizing, include:

- **Martyrdom.** *I will work my fingers to the bone, forefront my fatigue, suffering and pain and inadvertently take up a lot of literal and emotional space in work and friendship.*
- **Need for validation and credit for each action.** *Expectations of affirmation and attention from anyone for every little thing, but often people of color.*

- **Condescension. White on white ‘call out culture’.** *Overly critical of what work is or isn’t happening, or other white people’s ‘wackness’ without intervening or offering support. We all got where we are because people believed in us and invested in us even as we made multiple mistakes.*
- **Gatekeeping.** *Establishing relationship or position, and then closing the door behind us.*
- **Language Injustice.** *Using the fact that we had the privilege to learn languages besides English (Spanish, for example) to be an inappropriate, self-centering, cultural bridge between monolingual Spanish speakers (and others) to English-centered organizing work.*
- **Distancing self from other white people or white exceptionalism.** *The need to constantly prove our politics or that we are ‘down’ in social and/or political spaces, not acknowledging other white people, loudly and publicly criticizing white people, only trying to be around people of color, etc.*
- **Credentialing.** *‘Proving’ our legitimacy or down-ness with the struggle because of our proximity to people of color (‘My partner is a person of color’) goes along with distancing self from other white people or white exceptionalism.*
- **Rock Stardom.** *Self-promotion with disconnectedness from a current base of work and base of people.*
- **Constant centering of our own opinions and concern or being ‘academified’.** *White people offering thoughts before or instead of work, and weighing in on decisions or discussion in a setting that they are new to. This is often a tendency that corresponds with people fresh out of college or academia. The tendency to believe that what we contribute to the work is ‘ideas,’ while everyone else should be the ones who see to planning, logistics, execution of tasks, etc. Intellectuals have a huge place in every social justice movement, but criticism without problem solving urgently needs to be unlearned.*
- **Privileging of individual choices or ‘self-determination’ over collective.** *Unwillingness of individual white people to get in line with a collective plan or the leadership of people of color often manifests as blocking collective processes due to individual preferences. As white people, we are often not aware how much space we take up with this, or how much it harms collective work.*
- **Political Fundamentalism and Rigidity.** *Leading with criticism or judgment that other people’s work isn’t radical enough (YOU and your crew are the only radicals!); unwillingness to think creatively, listen or follow; unwillingness to seek compromise.*
- **Tokenism.** *This can look so many ways from ‘only hearing feedback from other people of color’ to putting undue pressure on individual leaders of color to come join ‘your initiative’.*
- **Entitlement.** *An often unconscious, and deeply rooted, belief that we deserve attention, credit, space, airtime, and physical space for ourselves and our concerns.*

- **Taking things personally and thinking about yourself all the time.** *Thinking that everything is about us (disagreement, decisions, etc.) and getting stuck in our feelings and using that as a reason to not follow through with work.*
- **Taking everything so seriously.** *Our conditions are serious, but warmth and humor help move groups through struggle and conflict. People who are really uptight are just really hard to work with, and often come off as caring more about small things (Did we start on time????!!), as opposed to big things (Are we all clear on the risks we are taking in the action tomorrow?).*
- **White Ethnicity.** *Part of how white supremacy functions in the US is the invisibilizing of ethnicity and difference in order to white wash our understandings of history. The two extremes of this are suppression of truth and exceptionalism:*
  1. *Suppression of truth: white people suppressing our actual lived experience of immigration, or ethnicity, culture etc. because we don't want to come off as 'trying to be down or exceptional' but then end up withholding big parts of ourselves from work.*
  2. *Exceptionalism: White people who say, "But I'm a JEW or I'm IRISH, etc." and then choose some of the more justice-minded parts of Jewish or Italian history to use to legitimate how 'down and non-white' we are.*
- **Fragility.** *Taking everything personally, being overly sensitive or cautious or inadvertently brittle or inflexible when plans change. Organizing is a practice done with people, and working with people means plans always change. We need to get used to that. No perfect win is born from following a perfect plan perfectly. That does not exist.*
- **Not recognizing the immense pressure that our current grassroots LGBTQ people of color leaders are under.** *A desperate need for more LGBTQ people of color leaders means that the current leaders we have are under immense pressure from navigating daily and systematic oppression, while also holding movement pressure and demands on their time. They also hold the reality that they are in movements that sometimes seek to elevate their leadership and sometimes seek to tokenize, undermine and extract time and energy from them and often do both at the same time. If they do not answer your email immediately it could very well not be personal.*
- **Leading with anxiety, hesitancy, and fear.** *Needing to over process, always being worried, demanding more time and energy of our comrades. Not realizing how exhausting this is for others to deal with, etc.*
- **Formality vs. Informality.** *Because of racism, white people and people with other forms of privilege granted through oppression will be informal in relationships, meetings, and work environments with people of color. This is conveyed through tone of voice, our way of speaking, using someone's first name, body language (touching someone's arm in conversation or going in for a hug), etc. Sometimes this is clearly appropriate, but not always. White supremacy hurts people of color by limiting their choices including choices about when and how they interact with white people. Respect people's self-determination around how much proximity they want to have to you.*
- **Assuming over-familiarity.** *Often we find that a certain kind of informality is immediately acceptable in many white communities, whereas in many southern*

*communities of color, you start with formal behavior, and informality (if it ever comes) is a type of intimacy that is earned. Not using elder's titles, or demanding your personal preferences for how you are spoken to, regarded, etc. undermines good, multi-racial first impressions. It can feel like we are just trying to "bring our whole self to the space," but doing that outside of observing our surroundings and without listening to others is not appropriate.*

- **Appearance and Respect.** *White people have the privilege (especially those of us with class privilege) to choose to not think about if our attire and hygiene on a given day will impact how we are perceived to the point of affecting our safety. So, we definitely are often unaware of how we are read and perceived by those around us based on these factors. Don't get us wrong: we think gender, cultural, ethnic and personal representation is fantastic. Rep yourself as you are! But, we have heard again and again that it is hard for leaders in a multi-racial organization to build with white people who do not see how the cleanliness (or lack thereof) of our clothes is often seen as a sign of disrespect not only to communities of color but also to many poor communities. Most white, middle class people experience no (or much less) social punishment or repercussions for having holes in our clothes, etc., than working class people and people of color endure. If you cannot afford to wash your clothes, no judgment. But, if your aesthetic preference bends this direction, we ask our white comrades to consider how often we profess "all we are willing to do for the movement" and yet we are unwilling to compromise about something like washing our clothes. It feels like a privileged approach.*
- **Inconsistency.** *Getting very involved with many things quickly and then dropping off the face of the earth often erodes trust. Many people do this, white and of color, and over-commitment never helps build organizing in the long term if we cannot follow through.*
- **Self Obsession:** *Staying in our own brains, over-studying, over-thinking every move before we make it, over-analyzing, and over-criticizing.*
- **Deep-seeded Fear of Black People.** *This manifests as jumpiness, discomfort, disdain, hesitancy, over-accommodation.*

So, all of this writing is just a start. Here are a few timely and concrete ideas from SONG:

### **1. Accountabili-buddies**

Sharing power isn't easy, but let's get over ourselves and get an accountabili-buddy. SONG has used this little system for some years now, for many different things, including accomplishing work and growing leaders. At the center of the process is when we answer YES to the question, "Are we willing to be transformed in the service of this work?" Then, we find someone who also answers yes—in this case, as a white person with another leader who is white.

*Accountabili-buddies are so helpful in movement and organizing. What we mean by this is identifying and formally approaching someone who will support your co-development, someone to share your own development goals with, to push you, hear you out and strengthen you. In practice, accountabili-buddy's help us ALL by:*

- *Finding and formally approaching someone within your organization or network or community to act and to assist, not just someone to listen to periodic venting;*

- *Building relationships grounded in reciprocity, not just comfort or friendship;*
- *Centering the accountability-buddy in the context of shared work and values;*
- *Commitment to each other's development;*
- *Building trust;*
- *Work toward strengthening our resiliency and pushing against frailty, rigidity and self-obsession;*
- *It takes pressure off of people of color to have to take time and energy to intervene on us when we mess up;*
- *We know we're going to mess up, break down, etc. It's inevitable. What matters is that we correct it, reflect and strengthen, and come back around again.*

## **2. Other Tools:**

Here are some good 101 resources that should be widely available that we love:

- *Memoirs of A Race Traitor* by Mab Segrest
- *Uprooting Racism* by Paul Kivel
- '3 Pillars of White Supremacy' by Andrea Smith
- '[White Supremacy Culture](#)' - Tema Okun
- Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack by
- '[Whites Fighting Racism](#)' by Ricardo Levins Morales
- Any SURJ materials
- [SONG's glossary](#) of key terms used in this tool.

## **3. All of these mean so much less without action. Be part of SONG's 'white interventions' organizing.**

We are not sure where it is going yet, but we are being called to build it out—so we are answering that call. We will be exploring how we can formalize accountability-buddies, and take on actions inside of campaigns that need white-on-white interventions. We will also be exploring ways to strategically use direct action against the Southern Right Wing and 1%.

**For more information on this tool, or to continue the conversation  
contact [takeaction@southernersonnewground.org](mailto:takeaction@southernersonnewground.org)**