

White Eminence and the Case for Responsible Freedom

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White supremacy is a ubiquitous ideology that can surreptitiously greet us, like sunrise in the morning does after yet another night of insomnia, or can punch us squarely on the jaw with brass knuckles after an impassioned lesson about the virtues of turning the other cheek. Micro- and macro-presentations of white supremacy, othering and socio-political phobias are direct results of the insecurities and laziness of colonialists and their contemporary progeny, neocolonialists. Whichever way it shows up (and it does relentlessly, surviving on something more than oxygen), this so-called supremacy and those committed to working on its behalf inherently resist freedom. Conversely, autonomy is inevitable when we take for ourselves chief components of what is necessary for any deep-rooted infrastructure, personal or otherwise: space and time. Taking space and time to learn, strategize, explore and create—individually and cooperatively—are essential to persevere and overturn an intangible, inescapable ideology meant to snuff out our very life force.

A white man lied on me today. It's not the first time he's done this either, but it's the first time I didn't cry about it. I was angry. I was sad. I was on the verge of tears, but they didn't fall. My stubbornness kept them in: "It is what it is."

The first several times I sat down to write about white supremacy's uninterrupted access to my life and the lives of the people I love (whom I know personally and have never met), and how I fight it, I couldn't. Thinking about the evil and how I—a fat, black sometimes meek, always opinionated, spiritually-led, southern woman—fight the agents and institutions of white supremacy, I am overwhelmed. The request to write about the fight seems an unfair one, though I know the editors of this journal hope and work for a just world as I do. The request seems unjust because navigating a white supremacist, patriarchal world day in and out, even in my dreams, is unjust. How do I write about a Monday afternoon, a Thursday morning, particularly when I see white supremacy's impact on my life far more insidiously than most people talk about in common areas? I just write.

In my worldview, there are few things, once drilled down, untouched by white eminence. I choose the word eminence here, instead of supremacy, because I do not believe the settler colonialists who came to this country to be supreme or an authority in anything good. Eminence, on the other hand, solely denotes repute (perhaps notoriety). For the sake of this writing, however, I will oblige status quo and use the more well-known term.



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This is an invited commentary for PJSE's special issue on 'White Supremacy—uninterrupted access to surplus, labor, and property over the ages.'

I submit colonialists were and neocolonialists are the most noxious combination of insecure and lazy. (I hear Erykah Badu singing the chorus “What good do your words do / if they can’t understand you” in my head, so let me pause. One of the things we do often is use words and assume the people we’re talking to understand them, weakening our point; or we hardly have a grasp of them ourselves but believe if we don’t use them we’re unfit to engage in systems and community change conversations. Ridiculous. Said simply: Colonialists take over part or the whole of a country politically, then abuse it economically. Neocolonialists use politics, economics, even culture to control other countries, especially ones that were once dependent on them.) Yes, they’re insecure. This insecurity isn’t the impotent refrain we Black folks often hear about whites when we’re trying to explain away personal and even distant anger, hurt and disappointment: “They want to keep it like that because they know we’d do better with it, if we had it.”

Insecurity is usually discussed in the context of intrapersonal relationships. And in those relationships, we consider how insecurities show up and impact the two individuals in the relationship and the roots of said insecurity. One of the things I like best about marriage and family therapy is its systemic approach to individual healing. I bring this up because it’s germane we consider this framework simultaneously with white supremacy.

There are a few ways insecurity shows up that are most relevant to this conversation: fight/flight/freeze, conflict aversion, dependency and broken trust. It might seem strange that both fight/flight/freeze would be in a list with conflict aversion, but it’s not. One may, indeed, prefer not to engage in conflict. This does not mean, however, that when one does, he isn’t willing to do any and everything possible to “win,” even if winning isn’t, necessarily, an option. When one is always on the defense to fight for something that is not rightfully his to begin with, his posture must always be erect. Manipulators never unwind and use isolation as a tool; insecure people manipulate and are only lonelier than those they seek to isolate.

Operating as a person who’s always trying to get his own way with cheap grabs at happiness, trinkets—big or small—and unending competition is not only tiresome but anesthetizes one from his own humanity. Everyone and thing becomes an antagonist, conquerable. This explains why some and, certainly the system itself, is willing to eat its young and suffer its old to maintain a position atop an invisible yet imposing altar their ancestors built.

Micro Supremacy

This brings us back to the insecure white man who lied on me. Not only does white supremacy embolden whites, it allows them to assume and project their worse on to others. Black people use it to safely cower and abdicate responsibility to whites. White supremacy teaches Black people to rarely question perceived authority and to project its best on to whites.

What he said specifically doesn’t matter outside of a few facts. 1) He avoided culpability for his failings and disconnectedness; 2) questioned my ability to do what I’ve been doing well for a while; 3) yelled at a couple people; and 4) made up facts to suit a narrative he needed, which couldn’t be backed up by an alibi or proverbial receipts. It’s also worth noting that none of these

facts are isolated incidents. In response, the people to whom he railed, didn't defend me (which I didn't expect) but also allowed him to throw a tantrum in a professional setting, like a petulant child, without recourse.

I imagine any man I've ever loved romantically, who are exclusively Black, doing any of these things without at least a stern reprimand from a supervisor. Imagine your husband, brother, neighbor who's a trans-man screaming in any public setting and being met with the equivalent of a calm, "What do we need to do for you to feel better?" and not a call to the cops or pink slip.

White man assumed he had the right to my innocence, essentially, my job, if he wanted it, and his presence all but demanded my subordination. It didn't matter what I'd worked for and done to support it all. It didn't matter that I'd maintained meticulous records and built relationships of my own. My clean house was his, and his crumbling one also belonged to him.

There are numerous problematic angles to this. The primary one is his white maleness and my Black womanness. Any self-proclaimed white ally who isn't always working at understanding their privilege and building deep, genuine relationships with disenfranchised people isn't any ally at all. That person is a masochist with a sense of virtue derived from any number of sources who wants to be on the right side of history but will find any justification to abandon principle, when the safety pins and other outward forms of solidarity run out.

It is impossible to determine if, in this situation, as with most, I was being undermined or disrespected because I'm black, a woman and/or don't lead with deference. People who have more identities and layers to their personalities and are less palatable than I (I can really turn it "on," when I want to) are often left to wonder, what it is about them that leaves the metaphorical white man to lie on and scream at them.

A what's yours is mine, what's mine is mine psychology isn't just a personal one, of course. It's (neo)colonial.

Macro Supremacy

When Europeans escaping religious oppression came to, what we know now as Virginia in the 1500s, they brought with them a desire for power and supremacy. They learned that from their foreparents, the British empire. They found themselves free of their religious oppressors (i.e., an economic impact ... how else could they pick up and move? sound familiar?) and ill-prepared to establish the new world they imagined. They needed workers to build it.

The settlers first tried to enslave the indigenous peoples; that didn't work because the people knew the land and could escape. Ugh. Next, they proposed buying land from the people. This was a completely foreign concept to the natives—owning land. How can you own earth? She belongs to herself. The capitalists gave the natives money, they owned land, and now they needed someone to work it. Work is hard, y'all. So, in 1619, the first group of Africans were brought to work the land and build the foundation for what would become the United States of America. Contrary to

popular belief, the Africans who were brought to live in servitude weren't chosen without reason. They were brought for their intellect, skill and aptitude.

Not only did the colonialists take advantage of the benevolence of the indigenous people, but their laziness allowed them to exploit their way into a country they didn't deserve, eventually relegating its original inhabitants to reservations and multi-sphered poverty.

Enslaved African's stateside genius is rarely celebrated, but it's here. Look even to a place so many see as a site of shame and wretchedness, like a plantation. From the window placement to the way crops were planted, the creation of secret ways to communicate to maroons, continental Africans were used to build an economy and society. Their engineering, agricultural and linguistic proficiencies, among others, are evident. Not paying Africans for their work created the wealth that allowed whites to exploit the globe and build wealth for Europe. It also allowed the oppressors and exploiters to build institutions of higher learning, expand west, industrial booms, whatever you come up with can probably be added to this list. Despite our value, sweat and blood equity, we were collectively denied humanity. We could not access all we'd built within and in the name of America until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

All the while, the lie that merit, hard work and true democracy hung to the oxygen, daring each of us not to breathe it.

Nothing about this has changed except some of the players and vocabulary. Black women, in particular, are still too often only valued for our work and what we can contribute to an ever-evolving society that white supremacy and its fathers plagiarized and submit to their daughters to grade. Yes, their daughters who are just as dangerous, if not more so, than their fathers to a world free of oppression and domination because of race and phobias, like homo-, trans- and fat-.

Advocate and artist Doris Davenport in "The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin" writes the following about white feminists in the early 1980s:

"When we attend a meeting or gathering of theirs, we are seen in only one of two limited or oppressive ways: as being white-washed and therefore sharing all their values, priorities, and goals, etc.; or, if we (even accidentally) mention something particular to the experience of black wimmin, we are seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests. ... Because of their one-dimensional and bigoted ideas, we are not respected as feminists or wimmin. Their perverse perceptions of black wimmin mean that they continue to see us as "inferior" to them, and therefore, treat us accordingly. Instead of alleviating the problems of black wimmin they add to them."

As I've already posited, it's insecurity, which is deeper and requires more self-reflection and honesty, than inferiority. Inferiority simply allows I'm better than you or you're less than I am without any interrogation. But davenport's sentiment remains strong and accusatory.

Responsible Freedom

If white supremacy in its many iterations presumes us at every turn, in our homes, at work, even in our quiet times, how do we overcome? It is imperative we heed Audre Lorde's admonishment that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. We cannot outwit a devil; you don't manipulate the consummate manipulator; it's unreasonable to use one's energy to become who they aren't to overcome opponents who've perfected their fighting stances for centuries. Authenticity and creative imagination can be among our tools of choice.

Self-care is such a commonly-used term at this point, its meaning has become just as trite as many of the conversations where it dances. We must rid ourselves of the impotent belief that self-care is mimosas, manicures and manscaping. Too many of us have been lulled into a false sense of self-work, believing the things we do to care for our physical bodies ineludibly translates to the work of our souls, which shows up in our households and communities, subsequently transforming and liberating our world. No.

I'm not advocating for deprivation here, though if that is part of your personal philosophy for liberation, I support you. And I hope you don't judge me for indulging in a manicure/pedicure at the nail salon around the corner from my house twice a month. I like it. It's fun. But it's not self-care in the way Lorde meant "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare." Anyone who proposes that it is not considering context. Context, again and again, is key.

At the point Lorde wrote these words, as my friend Pamela Thompson so eloquently put it, "Care was to nourish the life force raging inside of her defiant, decaying body." The poet had cancer and had refused western treatment. She'd chosen to pour as much as she could into the days she had left, and her preservation was ... literal.

Ours is too. Though many of us don't share the same context, warm bubble baths, though nice, won't help us overcome our enemy. What will? Space and time. One of the things Black American women, principally, have never been given that propelled white supremacy to its near-sovereign place are space and time, which yield power.

Space is physical space but doesn't always have to be a lot of it. Sure it'd be nice to own a Spanish colonial style home, but it'd also be nice to sit in the seat of an airplane and not have the white woman next to me (who also happens to be much thinner than I am) try to take up all the space and ask if she can be moved when I don't yield my seat for her things. I will not bend my shoulders or hang my head walking down the sidewalk because the universe expelled this air for me too. Timeout in the corner is no longer an option of punishment for states in which I exist that aren't crimes, like black femininity.

I would apologize, but I don't want to and wouldn't mean it. I'm working on being even more genuine. Space.

I also urge us to take time. When's the last time you took time to play and rejoice? Experience your emotions. All of them. The anger, the sadness and confusion. Take time to figure things out, your next steps. Here's a heads up: You may screw up, and that sucks. But you may not, and that can be scary too. But there's time until there isn't, and the only thing worse than wasted time is that done in a space that don't fit.

All the work I do is predicated on seven programmatic principles. They are 1) basic human rights, 2) space and time, 3) community connectedness, 4) self-awareness, 5) analysis 6) personal definitions and 7) responsible freedom.

These principles put us in a position where our independence is just as important as our interdependence and never allow us an opportunity to avoid examination and study, drawing our own conclusions, reconsidering and autonomy. Such autonomy, however, doesn't encumber others, but lifts them up. That is responsible. Freedom that doesn't liberate is oppression.

I fight white supremacy personally and professionally by actively working to become more of who I am with as much intention and zeal as I can. Yes, my proposition is that our self-work and -healing is the initial retaliation to white supremacy. It takes emotional and philosophical rigor and honesty, but we and our communities will be better off for it. The personally authentic will always be prepared to out-grit and outwork those who are insecure and lazy. (This doesn't mean we might not want to buy a few rounds and increase our bench-pressing weight, though.) Our preservation depends on it.