

**CREATING**

**ANTI-RACIST**

**LANGUAGE**

# CREATING ANTI-RACIST LANGUAGE

## CREATING A CULTURE OF RESISTANCE

### Introduction to the Exercises

***Culture is a way of life.*** (Definition by People's Institute in New Orleans.) Culture is created and recreated by individuals, groups, communities and institutions in every act of our daily lives. Culture is expressed and passed on through language, values, symbols, history, attitudes, behavior, food, music, dance, art, patterns of child rearing and making love.

Although the dominant culture of the United States is the culture of white supremacy, the area of culture is a contested domain. *They* exert their *power* by using their ***ability to define reality and to convince other people that it is their definition.*** (Definition by Dr. Wade Nobles) The media labels the Los Angeles rebellion a "riot." Academics trivialize Afrocentrism as "extremist" while Eurocentrism is called "universal." A woman who steals a box of pampers is a "looter," while Charles Keating is an "entrepreneur."

But we also have power, if we choose to use it. ***We have the capacity to create an anti-racist culture, a culture of resistance,*** using new definitions to express our own anti-racist values. And we have the capacity to challenge the dominant definitions of the white supremacist culture. Anti-racists in the 90's can learn from feminists of the 70's who created new definitions, a new vocabulary, to express a feminist reality; and demanded that male supremacist institutions change *their language* accordingly. Anti-racists can demand that white supremacist institutions change their language, if our demands are backed up by powerful movements of grass roots anti-racist activists.

The Bay Area has always been a center of oppositional resistance to the U.S. death machine. It is also a center of oppositional culture. As anti-racist activists, we should celebrate that culture, promote it in our daily speech, in our behavior toward each other, and in the ways we teach our children.

### Building an Anti-Racist Vocabulary An Exercise

The English language is filled with racist expressions, some overt, many subtle. We can begin to act as anti-racists by changing our vocabulary, asking our friends to think about the language they are using, and challenging acquaintances when they use racist language.

The following exercise is based on Robert Moore's "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language," (in Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology. Edited by Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins. Belmont, Ca: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992. pp. 317-329) which is in the *Culture of White Supremacy* section of the reader.

The exercise asks you to practice building an anti-racist vocabulary by changing, in writing, the racist language in the text. But the real usefulness of the exercise is in your daily speech. So, when you re-write the sentences, try to put them in a style as close to your speaking style as possible. In the workshop, we will create role plays based on "*Building an Anti-Racist Vocabulary.*"

### Building an Anti-Racist Vocabulary

The following sentences employ racist language and values. Please identify and underline the racist terminology. Then, re-write the sentence using anti-racist language.

*Example: 82% of the students in San Francisco's public schools are minority students.  
Anti-racist rewrite: 82% of the students in SF public schools are students of color.*

1. She told just a little white lie, so I quickly forgave her.
2. Faculty who supported the 1968 strike at San Francisco State were blacklisted from teaching at other state universities in California.
3. I've lived here so long I'm going to get a license plate that says "Native Born Californian."
4. Non-white as well as white residents of Los Angeles were tense when the jury brought in its verdict in the trial of the four police officers who beat Rodney King.
5. If the FBI investigates the BART police murder of Jerrold Hall, they'll do a whitewash.
6. Conservative sociologists like Nathan Glazer call America a melting pot.
7. Columbus discovered America.
8. It was an encounter between the cultures of the Old World and the New World.
9. U.S. foreign policy brings democracy to underdeveloped nations.
10. The underclass in ghettos and barrios need education and jobs.
11. Slaves were brought to the colonies to work in rice, tobacco and sugar plantations.
12. The women's movement has made 'feminism' a familiar term.
13. Saving the forests and endangered species are major goals of the environmental movement.
14. Surprisingly, Martin Luther King, Jr. was a strong opponent of the U.S. war against Vietnam.
15. The media feared another riot when the four LAPD officers were acquitted.
16. Striking workers in the 19th century called attention to the brutal exploitation they were suffering by calling themselves, "wage slaves."
17. The Plains Indians were destroyed by the devastating wars of the 19th century.
18. We celebrate our democratic ideals that "All men are created equal."
19. Her car has a bumpersticker that says, "Keep Abortion Safe and Legal."
20. According to Roget's International Thesaurus (Fourth Edition, 1997, page 398) a synonym for "Discrimination" is "white power or black power."

## Who Are the Real Criminals?

(This exercise is based on "The Criminalization of Poverty" by Sabina Virgo. Crossroads, October, 1991. pp. 2-6.

### Introduction

Many contemporary racist stereotypes are crafted in political terms. The stereotypes *both* "blame the victim," (specific groups of people of color) *and* shield the oppressors--those who control the institutions of power-- from responsibility for their actions. Terms such as "illegal alien," "welfare cheat," "gang member," "looter," are implicitly *color-coded*. When the terms are used, we are supposed to see a person of a certain color (and class, nationality or gender) in our mind's eye, even though that color-coding is never mentioned. And we are *not* supposed to see *the real criminals*, whose race or nationality, class and gender are very different.

When we try to challenge racist stereotypes with facts which demonstrate the racist nature of the stereotype, we often find that the person who sees in stereotypes cannot *hear* the facts. A mind in a box cannot *listen*. We need to pry open the box first before it can take in a fact. I call this process "blowing open a person's mind" *This is an exercise in "anti-racist mind blowing."*

The purposes of this exercise are to develop our abilities to:

- Understand the connections between **power** and white supremacist culture;
- Do grassroots anti-racist education work;
- Personally challenge the "**white bonding**" of white supremacy culture in our daily lives.

This is an *Small Group* exercise:

1. Divide your newsprint into three columns with these titles:
  - *Racist Code word* (example: "looter")
  - *Racist Stereotype:* (example: "young Black male")
  - "*The Real Criminal*" (example: if racist code word was "looter," then "**Real Criminal**" would be *Neil Bush.*)
2. *Brainstorm* several racist code words, such as "welfare recipient," "criminal," "gang member." Fill in all the blanks under the other columns.
3. Then *role play* spontaneous dialogues using "anti-racist mind blowing" tactics:
  - First person makes a comment using a racist color-coded word;
  - Second person changes the implicit color coding behind the racist stereotype, replacing it with a "real criminal" reference that "blows the first person's mind."
  - Observers analyze and evaluate effectiveness of the "mind blowing."
4. *Gather your group's wisdom:*
  - What **insights** did you gain from doing the exercise?
  - In what ways did doing the exercise **empower** you?
  - What **skills** did you learn that will enable you to challenge some aspect of the white supremacy system?
  - How can you **share** this experience with someone who was not in your small group? (**Each One Teach One**)
  - What suggestions do you have for improving this exercise?

## DEFINITIONS

### Introduction:

What difference does it make if we use terms like *prejudice* or *bigotry* or *discrimination* when we try to understand and address issues stemming from *racism*? Why do most white Americans in 1994 think of someone in white sheets when they hear the term *white supremacy*? Why do white Americans call *flan* an "ethnic" food while *apple pie* is a "dessert?" And why do some white people turn purple when they read the definition of "a racist" used by this workshop? ("A racist is one who is both privileged and socialized on the basis of race by a white supremacist --racist-- system.")

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, an anti-racist training institute in New Orleans, says that language used to talk about racism is deliberately obscured and confused to prevent people from coming together to challenge racism. Those who are both privileged and empowered by the white supremacist system, especially most white academics, educational institutions, and the mass media, have a vested interest in maintaining and spreading this confusion.

If people who want to challenge racism do not even have a common language to talk about the problem, it will be very difficult to come up with common strategies to confront the problem. Each one of us remains encased in our own experience of oppression and of privilege, of guilt, fear, anger and a sense of powerlessness. Our confused language isolates us; our isolation creates further confusion. And the white supremacist system goes unchallenged.

### The Purposes of this exercise are to:

- (1) To challenge the right wing's ideological attack on progressives which goes by the name of *Political Correctness*;
- (2) To highlight the political significance of anti-racist language as a component of anti-racist activism;
- (3) To discuss in depth some of the key anti-racist terms that will be used in the workshop.

### Homework for the exercise:

Read : -- *Definitions and Descriptions* (in *Political Perspectives*)

### DEFINITIONS:

- Look up the terms listed in **DEFINITIONS** in a dictionary and in Roget's Thesaurus. Notice similarities and differences of definitions.
- Why are the connotations of these terms significant for understanding racism and anti-racism in the English language?

### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS:

- What does the term mean to you? If you do not use the term, why not?
- Give some examples of how the media uses the term;

### BLACK and WHITE:

- Look up both terms in the dictionary and in Roget's Thesaurus;
- What connotations do the terms carry that have nothing to do with colors?
- Give examples & meanings of compound words using "Black" or "white."

### WHITE PEOPLE and PEOPLE OF COLOR:

- If you are a person of European descent, do you call yourself a "white person" or a "white activist?" If not, why not? How do you identify yourself? Why?
- If you are a person of color, how do you refer to yourself? Why? How do you refer to people of European descent? Why?
- (All) Do you call yourself "American?" Why?
- Before you saw the workshop brochure, what did the term "*white supremacy*" connote to you? Would you show the workshop brochure to someone at your work place?
- For white activists: What do you like about being white? For activists of color, what do you like about being a person of color? (*Thanks to People's Institute for Survival and Beyond of New Orleans for these questions.*)

### RACIST, 'NON-RACIST,' ANTI-RACIST:

- If you are white, how does it feel to consider yourself a racist?
- Why do so many white people say, "I'm not a racist but...?"
- If you are a person of color, do you think all whites are racists? Why? Do you agree or disagree that 'people of color cannot be racists.'
- How can a white person be a racist and an anti-racist at the same time? How would you respond to someone who notes the 'logical contradiction' in this assertion?
- The definition of the term "*anti-racist*" includes the phrase "conscious choice to act" as part of the definition. What do you think of this definition? If you are white, conscious of anti-racism, but have not yet taken any action against racism, do you consider yourself to be an anti-racist? Why or why not? If you are a person of color, how do you view this issue?

### POWER:

- Give specific examples of the different meanings of the term;
- How do you understand the term "*power structure*?"
- Describe an incident in which you have felt "*powerful*." Describe an incident in which you have felt "*powerless*." What accounts for the different feelings you experienced?
- What does the political term "*Power to the People*" mean to you?
- In Roget's Thesaurus a synonym for "*discrimination*" is "*Black power or white power*." What is your opinion of that definition? What are the implications of this definition?

### OPPRESSION:

- Give examples of as many different *kinds* of oppression (racial, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc.) as you can. Identify the *kinds* of oppression in your examples.
- Give examples of as many different *forms* of oppression (individual or experiential, interpersonal or social, cultural, and institutional, etc.) as you can. Identify the *forms* of oppression in your examples.
- Give examples of the *means* by which these oppressions are expressed, such as: verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, abuse, violence, etc.
- Identify some significant differences between these kinds of oppression: racial/national, class, gender and sexual orientation. Be specific.
- Now identify interconnections between these kinds of oppression. Be specific.
- Why do you think that the workshop organizer has asked you to think in such detail about the term '*oppression*?' What are the political implications for anti-racist work?

## i am i and you are you

### Introduction

White progressive activists are not immune to any of the cultural expressions of white supremacy predominant in the rest of white society. But there are two forms which seem to be particularly deep-rooted in progressive culture: *false universals* and *false analogies*.

A *false universal* is a statement which purports to speak for all, but in reality, speaks only for some. A *false analogy* is a comparison between two sets of experiences which emphasizes the similarities but blots out the differences.

The following exercises will help us to discern the use of false universals and false analogies in progressive language; to increase our awareness of how "false universals" express, and perpetuate, white privilege in progressive culture; and to create anti-racist alternative language.

### Exercise #1: False Universals

1. On newsprint, list as many false universals in progressive language as you can think of. (*Examples: the women's movement, the environmental movement, the holocaust.*)
2. For each term, discuss why and how the term is expressive of white privilege in progressive culture. Note your reasons on newsprint.
3. For each term, think of an alternative, anti-racist term, that does not use a false universal. Note the new term on newsprint.
4. What feelings come up for you while doing this exercise?

### Exercise #2: False Analogies

On the next page of the packet is a sample letter to Congress urging an end to the ban on inclusion of openly gay and lesbian people in the military. The letter was drafted by a Bay Area organization, and is one of many that activists can send to their congress people.

This letter analogizes the ban on gays and lesbians to the prior segregation of African Americans in the military. The analogy has been used frequently by activists fighting the military's homophobia.

1. Whole Group: Discuss the issue of how and why the analogy is a "false analogy."
  - a. In what ways is the analogy expressive of white privilege in progressive culture?
  - b. If you don't think this example is a false analogy, give your reasons.
2. Record your ideas on newsprint.
3. Each person rewrite the sample letter to Congress without using the "false analogy."
4. Read sample rewritten letters to the whole group.
5. Analyze the political impact of your rewritten letters, as compared to the original. Do you think the rewritten letter carries as strong a message as the original? Give your reasons.
6. What feelings come up for you while doing this exercise?

### Gather your group's wisdom

- What **insights** did you gain from doing these exercises?
- In what ways did doing the exercises **empower you**?
- What **skills** did you learn that will enable you to challenge some aspect of the white supremacy system?
- How can you **share** this experience with someone who wasn't in your small group? (**Each One Teach One**)
- What suggestions do you have for improving the exercises?

Congress Person....  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Washington, DC. 20515

Dear...

One of the strongest arguments used by those opposed to lifting the ban on lesbians, gays, and bisexuals serving in our nation's Armed Forces is that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, lead by General Colin Powell, unanimously oppose lifting the ban.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff are experts on military strategy and tactics, logistics and training, but they are not necessarily experts on personnel. This is because personnel assignments are normally viewed as impediments to remaining on the fast track for promotion. Thus, several generals have rarely had S-1, G-1 experience, and they have a blind spot on the subject matter.

Clearly, on the matter of personnel policy, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were wrong in the 1940's when they opposed integration of the Armed Services. Even General Eisenhower was on the wrong side of the issue, arguing that "Negro" officers and enlisted personnel could not compete equally with their white counterparts.

Many of the arguments used by the JCS in 1948 (that southern whites couldn't be housed with Blacks without creating racial conflicts and barracks fights, or that they wouldn't take orders from a Black officer or NCO) are similar to those used by the JCS today in support of the ban.

Notwithstanding the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposition to change, the military, as an institution, was successful in integrating the Armed Forces following President Truman's Executive Order, and there is no reason to suggest that it will be unsuccessful in its efforts to carry out an executive order dealing with Gays in the military, were it to be issued by President Clinton.

I firmly support President Clinton in completely and unequivocally lifting the ban against gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans serving in the U.S. military.

Sincerely,

(Note to participants: Nothing in this exercise should be construed as support for the U.S. military, or its deadly work in murdering peoples of color around the globe. The exercise deals with just one part of the issue: linguistic strategies used in the fight against the military's institutional homophobia.)



- °° Demonstrate, 'statistically,' the bad or immoral behavior of a group of people of color.
- °° Assert that bad behavior of a white person is a case of "one bad apple."
- °° Illustrate the point that racism is no longer institutional because that's 'illegal.'
- °° When speaking of an allegedly racist act, focus on the intention of the white person, rather than the effect on the person of color.
- °° Show how Asian Americans are 'model minorities.'
- °° Give an example of "special rights" accorded to people of color on the basis of skin color or ancestral origin.
- °° Give several examples of terms that came out of the African American freedom struggle of the 1960's that are now used to assert the rights of white people.
- °° Demonstrate why contemporary white folks are not responsible for the racism of white institutions or white people in the past.
- °° Show how contemporary white institutions, especially educational and employment, are not responsible for institutional racism in the past.
- °° Document the different groups of peoples of color who are "a burden on the tax payer."  
Who is the 'tax payer?'
- °° Show your outrage at a typical "politically correct" statement about European culture.
- °° Blame the government, not the corporations, for the problems of white people.
- °° Manipulate white fear of young African American and Latino men.

## PART TWO

- (1) Analyze some of the many methods by which the Right has fostered homophobia.  
Look for parallels with the Right's Racist Rhetoric.
- (2) Analyze some of the many methods by which the Right has vilified women.  
Look for parallels with the Right's Racist Rhetoric.
- (3) Analyze some of the many methods by which the Right has blamed poor people for their poverty, and supported the criminalization of the poor.  
Look for parallels with the Right's Racist Rhetoric.
- (4) How have these methods effected your own attitudes? Focus on a few you want to change.

### Evaluation

- What new *insights* did you develop from doing this exercise?
- In what ways did the exercise *empower you: strengthen your creative capacity to act?*
  - What new *skills* did you learn from doing the exercise?
  - How can you share this exercise with a friend (*Each One Teach One*)?

#41:rhetoric