

DETOUR-SPOTTING  
for white anti-racists  
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For white people living in North America learning to be anti-racist is a re-education process. We must unlearn our thorough racist conditioning to re-educate and re-condition ourselves as anti-racists. There is scant social or political encouragement for this journey of re-education. We are constantly tempted to detour off course by the racist propaganda of society and our own guilt and denial. In the face of society's and our own resistance, sustaining the will to continue this journey takes bold and stubborn effort.

This journey sends us into unfamiliar territory. No white person has ever lived in a non-racist North America. We were never taught the skills of anti-racist living. Indeed, we were carefully taught the opposite: how to maintain our white privilege. Racism, the system of oppression (of people of color) and advantage (for white people) depends on the collusion and cooperation of white people for its perpetuation.

Most of us first became aware of racial prejudice and injustice as children. As white infants we were fed pabulum of racist propaganda. That early "training" was comprehensive and left little room for question, challenge or doubt. Our childhood games, rhymes and media conspired: "Eenie, meenie, minie, mo; Catch a n. . . r by his toe..." We played cowboys and Indians, and we all knew the Indians were the "bad guys." My WWII generation watched "Bugs Bunny" outwit evil Japanese villains.

As Lillian Smith acknowledged:

"These ceremonials in honor of white supremacy, performed from babyhood, slip from the conscious mind down deep into muscles and glands... and become difficult to tear out." (1)

Our generous child wisdom told us racism was wrong, but there was no escaping the daily racist catechism. We resisted the lies, the deceit and the injustice of racism, but we did not have the skills to counter the poisonous messages. Our conditioning filled us with fear, suspicion and stereotypes that substituted for true knowing of people of color. We internalized our beliefs about people of color, ourselves, other white people and about being white. Those internalized attitudes became actualized into racist behavior.

As I continue my journey toward becoming a re-conditioned and effective anti-racist, I have become aware of "habits," attitudes and their attached behaviors, which divert me from my intended goal. To change the detouring behavior, I must first be fully conscious of what I'm doing, the behavior and its consequences. Next, I need to reflect on the behavior's attitudinal roots. Finally, I determine the prescribed, desired change I want to make and the best strategy for achieving it. Sometimes I need to remove the behavior from my personal repertoire. More often though, re-tooling is necessary, replacing the discarded pattern with new behaviors. It will likely take repeated attempts before I have fully internalized and externalized the desired change.

Most of the obstacles and detours encountered on our journey of re-education are those same habitual behaviors birthed in our internalized beliefs. The behaviors will vary with each white

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person. I recognize that no two white people share exactly the same experiences and societal molding. We learned racism in our own unique and personal ways from different teachers and at different times. But we all learned the lessons well. I have observed in myself and other white people some common patterns of guilt, denial and defensiveness which appear regularly in our interactions with people of color and other white people.

Each one will be formatted in this way:

## **#) The Detour**

Attitudes or behaviors that indicate a detour or wrong turn into white guilt, denial or defensiveness.

[A Note: Some statements, at first reading, may seem too obviously racist to be included here. I have found that even as I identify myself as an anti-racist, if I search deeply and honestly enough I still harbor attitudes on some level of consciousness, that sound very much like these. I am also painfully aware that earlier in my life I thought and said these things. That recognition of evolution may help me be an ally to another white person on her or his own anti-racist journey.]

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

A clarification of the underlying meaning and consequence of this behavior pattern.

[A note about consequences: There are always consequences to our actions or inactions. Since our intentions have little or no bearing on these consequences, our unintentional racist behaviors will often have the same consequences as the intentional racism of a confirmed bigot. This is a tough lesson for white people of conscious. If we are doing our best, have good intentions, then we want everything to be made better. We, at least, want to feel better for the attempt. We want others, especially people of color, to appreciate what we've done. This is another trap for white anti-racists.]

## **1) I'm Colorblind**

"People are just people; I don't see color; we're all just human." or "I don't think of you as Chinese." or "We all bleed red when we're cut." or "Character, not color, is what counts."

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

Statements like these assume that people of color are just like me, white; that they have the same dreams, standards, problems, peeves that I do. "Colorblindness" negates the cultural values, norms, expectations and life experiences of people of color, and most importantly, their experience as a target of racism. Even if an individual white person could ignore a person's color, the society does not. By saying we are not different, that we don't see their color, we are also saying we don't see my white-ness. This denies their experience of racism and our experience of privilege.

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“I’m colorblind” can also be a defense when afraid to discuss racism, especially if one assumes all conversation about race or color is racist. Speaking of another person’s color or culture is not necessarily racist or offensive. As one of my African American friends says, “I don’t mind that you notice I’m Black.” Color consciousness does not equal racism.

## **2) The Rugged Individual, the Level Playing Field and the Bootstrap Theory**

“America is the land of opportunity, built by rugged individuals, where anyone with grit can succeed if they just pull up hard enough on their bootstraps.”

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

These are three of the crown jewels of U. S. social propaganda. They have allowed generation after generation to say, “If you succeed, you did that, but if you fail, or if you’re poor, that’s your fault.” Belief in this propaganda is founded in a total denial of the impact of either oppression or privilege on any person’s chance for success.

Attacks on programs like affirmative action find rationalization in the belief that the playing field is now level, that is, that every individual, regardless of color (or gender or disability, etc.), has the same access to the rights, benefits and responsibilities of the society. The rationalization continues: since slavery is ended and people of color have civil rights, the playing field has now been leveled. It follows then, that there is no reason for a person of color to “fail” (whether manifested in low SAT scores or small numbers in management positions) EXCEPT individual character flaws or cultural inadequacies. This form of denial asserts that such “failures” could have no roots in racism and internalized racism.

The consequences include “justified” victim blaming, and denial of the daily impact of generations of institutionalized racism and white privilege.

## **3) Reverse Racism**

(a) “People of color are just as racist as white people.”

(b) “Affirmative Action had a role years ago, but today it’s just reverse racism; now it’s discriminating against white men.”

(c) “The civil rights movement, when it began, was appropriate, valuable, needed. But it’s gone to the extreme. The playing field is now level. Now the civil rights movement is no longer working for equality but for revenge.” or

(d) “Black Pride, Black Power is dangerous. They just want power over white people.” (Include here any reference to pride and empowerment of any people of color.)

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

(a) Let’s first define racism:

Racism = Racial Prejudice (white people and people of color have this)

Plus

Systemic, Institutional Power (white people have this)

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To say people of color can be racist, denies the power imbalance inherent in institutionalized racism. Certainly, people of color can be and are prejudiced against white people. That was a part of their societal conditioning. A person of color can act on their prejudices to insult, even hurt, a white person. But there is a difference between being hurt and being oppressed. People of color, as a social group, do not have the societal, institutional power to oppress white people as a group. An individual person of color abusing a white person - while clearly wrong, (no person should be insulted, hurt, etc.) is acting out a personal racial prejudice, not racism (by this power definition.)

(b) This form of denial is based in the false notion that the playing field is now level. When the people with privilege and historical access and advantage are expected to suddenly (in societal evolution time) share some of that power, it is often perceived as discrimination.

(c + d) c is a statement by Rush Limbaugh. Though, clearly he is no anti-racist, both c + d follow closely on the heels of "reverse racism" and are loaded with white people's fear of people of color and what would happen if they gained "control." Embedded here is also the assumption that to be "pro-Black" (or any color) is to be anti-white.

## **4) Blame The Victim**

"We have advertised everywhere, there just aren't any qualified people of color for this job." or "If he only worked harder, applied himself more, or had a stronger work ethic." or "If she just felt better about herself..." or "Internalized racism is the real problem here." or "She uses racism as an excuse, to divert us from her incompetence." and "If he didn't go looking for racism everywhere..." (As if racism is so hidden or difficult to uncover that people of color would have to search for it.)

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

All "blame the victim" behaviors have two things in common. First, they evade the real problem: racism. Second, they delete from the picture the agents of racism, white people and institutions, who either intentionally perpetuate or unintentionally collude with racism. (Similar to discussions of rape. Most statements that refer to a woman being raped focus on her clothing or behavior and delete the male rapist from the picture.) As long as the focus remains on people of color we can minimize or dismiss their reactions, and never have to look directly at racism and our own responsibility or collusion.

## **5) The White Knight or White Missionary**

"We (white people) know just where to build your new community center." or "We (white people) created know your child (of color) needs this special program to succeed." or "We (white people) organized a used clothing drive for you, where do you want us to put the clothes?"

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

It is a racist, paternalistic assumption that well-meaning white people know what's best for people of color. Decisions, by white people, are made on behalf of people of color, as though they were

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incapable of making their own. This is another version of “blame the victim” and white is right. It places the problems at the feet of people of color, and the only “appropriate” solutions with white people. Once more the power of self-determination is taken away from people of color. Regardless of motive, it is still about white control.

## **6) *Lighten Up* (lighten? whiten?)**

“Black people are just are too sensitive and thin-skinned.” or “Indians should get a sense of humor. We’re just kidding around.” or “I didn’t mean anything racist, it’s just a joke.”

### ***Reality Check and Consequence***

Here are racism and agent deletion in partnership again. Agent deletion is a convenient way of saying something has been done, but the person who does it is not named or held accountable. The problem and perpetrators are exonerated, because the rationale declares that humor isn’t hurtful. This form of denial serves most to trivialize the pain and reality of daily racism.

## **7) *Don’t Blame Me***

“I never owned slaves.” or “I didn’t vote for David Duke.” or “None of my family joined the Klan.” or “I taught my children that racism is wrong.”

### ***Reality Check and Consequence***

Often white people hear blame whenever the issue of racism is brought up, whether or not blame has been placed on us. As beneficiaries of racism and white privilege, we sometimes strike a defensive posture even when we are not being individually blamed. We may personalize the remarks, put ourselves in the center, but most references to racism are not directed personally at us. It is the arrogance of our privilege that drags the focus back to us. When we are being blamed or personally accused of racist behavior, this defensiveness and denial further alienates us and precludes our examining our possible racist behavior.

## **8) *BWAME***

“**But What About Me.** Look how I’ve been hurt, oppressed, exploited...?”

### ***Reality Check and Consequence***

This diminishes the experience of people of color by telling our own story of hardship. I lose an opportunity to learn more about the experience of racism from a person of color, while we minimize their experience by trying to make it comparable or less painful than mine.

## **9) *We Have Overcome***

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“We dealt with racism in the 60’s with all the marches, sit-ins and speeches by Dr. King. Laws have been changed. Segregation and lynching are ended. We have some details to work out but real racism is pretty much a thing of the past.” “This isn’t a racist country because we elected a Black President.”

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

The absence of legalized, enforced segregation does not equal the end of racism. This denial of contemporary racism, based on inaccurate assessment of both history and current society, romanticizes the past and diminishes today’s reality. We just have to look at the volcanic rise of racist hate groups during the campaign and since the election of President Barack Obama, to know racism is alive and well in the United States.

### ***10) The End Run, Escapism***

“Of course, racism is terrible, but what about sexism? or classism? Or heterosexism?” or “Racism is a result of classism (or choose any other oppression,) so if we just work on that, racism will end, too.”

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

I agree with Audre Lorde’s statement, “There is no hierarchy of oppression.” At the same time, we cannot attempt to evade recognition and responsibility for any form of oppression. Statements like the ones above divert attention away from racial injustice to focus on some other form of oppression. They are usually said by white people (women, working class people, Lesbians, gay men or others) who experience both white privilege and oppression in some form. We are all more willing and more comfortable decrying our oppression than scrutinizing our privilege. Oppressions are so inextricably linked that if we allow our fear, guilt and denial to constantly divert us from confronting racism, even while we work to dismantle other forms, no oppression will ever be dismantled.

### ***11) Due Process***

“Lady Justice is [color] blind.” White parents who tell their children, “The police are here to protect you. If they ever stop you, just be polite and tell the truth.” Then when a Black teen is beaten or killed by police, those same parents say, “He must have been doing something wrong, to provoke that kind of police response.”

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

Many white people believe that the police, courts, the legal system and social services work without bias; that due process, fair trials, juries, judges, police officers and case workers have everyone’s best interest at heart, including people of color. Or at least, no less than they do for white people. This belief clouds reality. We tend to look at isolated incidents rather than the patterns of institutionalized oppression.

The legacy of institutionalized racism has left its indelible mark on the U. S. legal system. Even when individual police officers, judges or juries strive to be fair and unbiased, the system

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itself has been corrupted by centuries of racism. “Innocent until proven guilty” may be turned to “guilty until proven innocent” for too many people of color who enter the legal system.

## **12) Innocence By Association**

“I’m not racist, because... I have Vietnamese friends, or my lover is Black, or I marched with Dr. King.” “I voted for Obama.”

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

(Perhaps, if every white person who says they marched with Dr. King actually had, the current situation would look different!) This detour into denial wrongly equates personal interactions with people of color, no matter how intimate they may be, with anti-racism. There is an assumption that our personal associations free us magically from our racist conditioning.

## **13) The Penitent**

“I am so sorry for the way whites have treated your people.” or “I am sorry for the terrible things that white man just said to you.”

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

While there is probably no harm in the “sorry,” if it is not attached to some action taken against racism, it is most often just another expression of white guilt. Being an ally to people of color is not limited to our apology for other white people’s behavior, it must include anti-racist action.

## **14) The White Wash**

“He’s really a very nice guy, he’s just had some bad experiences with Koreans.” or  
“That’s just the way Uncle Adolf jokes. He’s very polite to the Black janitor in his building.”

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

This “detour” is another manifestation of our guilt. We attempt to excuse, defend or cover up the racist actions of other white people. We are particularly prone to this if the other person is a family member or friend, or if we feel their actions may reflect on us.

## **15) Not Here In Lake Wobegon**

“We don’t have a racism problem here at this (school, organization, community)” or  
“We didn’t have a racism problem in this town until that Mexican family moved here.”

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

As white people we do not have to think about racism when our school, organization or community is all white. Racism does not usually become apparent TO US until there are people of color in our frame of reference.

## **16) I Was An Indian In a Former Life (2)**

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“After that sweat lodge I really know what it feels like to be an Indian. I have found my true spiritual path.”

## **Reality Check and Consequence**

This is spiritual or cultural appropriation and poses a serious threat to the integrity and survival of Native cultures. To fill a void in their own spiritual core, some white people are drawn into the New Age garden to pick from a variety of Native spiritual practices usually offered for sale. (White writers, such as Lynn Andrews and others, garner high profits from fictitious “Indian” writing and teaching, while many Native writers can’t find publishers.) Since Native spiritual practice is inseparable from history and current community, it cannot be disconnected from that context to service white people searching for life’s meaning. Appropriating selected parts of Native cultures romanticizes the lives of Native peoples while denying their struggles. Their land and livelihoods stolen, indigenous peoples now see white people trying to steal their spirituality. Rather than escape our white racism by finding a spiritual path, we instead collude in one more way with the genocidal attacks on Native cultures.

### **17) The Isolationist**

“I thought we resolved this issue (racism) when it came up on the board last year.” or “We need to deal with this specific incident. Let’s not complicate it by bringing other irrelevant issues into it.” or “This incident only happened today because the TV news last night showed police beating that Black kid.”

## **Reality Check and Consequence**

Attempts are made to isolate a particular incident of racism from of the larger context. We blame a publicized incident of racism outside our organization to rationalize an internal incident and to avoid facing the reality of racism within. When trying to resolve an accusation of racism within an institution, we often see the incident in a vacuum, or as an aberration, in isolation from an historic pattern of racism in this institution and nation. Racism has been institutionalized so that every “incident” is another symptom of the pattern. When we continue to react incident-to-incident, crisis-to-crisis, as though they are unconnected, we will find genuine resolution only further from our reach.

### **18) “Bending Over Blackwards” (3)**

“Of course, I agree with you.” (Said to a person of color even when I disagree) or “I have to side with Jerome on this. (Even when Jerome, a man of color, represents opinions counter to mine.)

## **Reality Check and Consequence**

Our white guilt shows up here as we defer to the person of color. The person of color is always right, or we never criticize or challenge her or him. We try not to notice that we notice they are Black or Native American or Latina or Asian or Middle Eastern. We don’t disagree, challenge or question a person of color the way we would a white person. And if we do disagree, we don’t do it with the same conviction or passion that we would display with a white person. Our racism plays



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out as a different standard for people of color than for white people. If this is our pattern, we can never have a genuine relationship with a person of color. People of color know when we are doing this. Our sincerity, commitment and courage will be rightly questioned. We cannot grow to a deeper level of trust and intimacy with people of color we treat this way.

## **19) Teach Me or Help Me, I'm Stuck**

"I want to stop acting like a racist, so please tell me when I do something you think is racist."  
(Spoken to a person of color.)

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

White people often assume that they can learn about racism only from people of color. We further assume that people of color have the energy and/or desire to do this teaching. My understanding is that most people of color are weary of educating white people about racism. We will get stuck. We'll get frustrated and impatient with ourselves and other white people in this struggle. We'll stay stuck if we don't seek help from other white anti-racists.

Our inclination in the past has been to ask people of color to help us. We should seek out other white people BEFORE we go to people of color. Perhaps, as we become more trustworthy as allies, we will build genuine relationships with a few people of color who will offer their reflections for us when we get stuck. But this is at their discretion, not ours. We can't assume or act as though people of color should be so grateful for our attempts at anti-racism, that they will be willing to guide us whenever we are ready to be guided.

## **20) White On White, and Righteously So**

"What is wrong with those white people? Can't they see how racist they're being?"  
or "I just can't stand to be around white people who act so racist anymore." And  
"You're preaching to the choir, you're wasting your time with us, we're not the people who need this training."

### **Reality Check and Consequence**

We distance ourselves from "other" white people. We see only unapologetic bigots, card-carrying white supremacists and white people outside our own circle as "real racists." We put other white people down, trash their work or behavior, or otherwise dismiss them. We righteously consider ourselves white people who have evolved beyond our racist conditioning.

This is another level of denial. There are no "exceptional white people." (4) We may have attended many anti-racism workshops; we may not be shouting racist epithets or actively discriminating against people of color, but we still experience privilege based on our white skin. We benefit from this system of oppression and advantage no matter what our intentions are. This distancing serves only to divide us from potential allies and limit our own learning.

## **21) Smoke and Mirrors**

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We use the current politically correct language; we listen to the right music; we state the liberal line; we're seen at the right meetings with the right people. We even interrupt racist remarks when the right people are watching and when there is no risk to us. We look like anti-racists.

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

This is the "Avon Ally," the cosmetic approach. People of color and other white antiracists see through this pretense quickly. This pseudo-anti-racist posturing only serves to collude with racism and weakens the credibility of sincere white anti-racists.

## ***22) I Have To Do My Personal Work***

"I have to do my personal work first, then I'll say something or take action." or "Ending racism is only about changing personal attitudes."

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

If we assume that personal reflection and interpersonal work is the end of our job as anti-racists, we will stay out of the public, institutional arenas. We will ignore cultural racist practices that don't include us personally. We won't take action, until we have finished ridding ourselves of all racist conditioning. And since that complete "cure" will never happen, we will never take any institutional or cultural anti-racist action.

## ***23) The Accountant***

We keep a tally sheet. If we perform some "feat of anti-racism," we expect reciprocity from an individual or group of color, usually with some prestige or power that can serve our interests.

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

"I scratch your back, you scratch mine is NOT justice seeking nor ally behavior. It serves only to reduce justice work to some kind of power brokering currency.

## ***24) The "Certificate of Innocence"***

Sometimes we seek or expect from people of color some public or private recognition and appreciation for our anti-racism. Other times we are looking for a "certificate of innocence" telling us we are one of the good white people.

## ***Reality Check and Consequence***

If our ally commitment depends on positive reinforcement from people of color, we set ourselves up for sure failure. The first time a person of color is displeased with our actions, we could respond, "Well, if the very people I'm doing all this for don't want my help, then why bother?" Clearly, we're challenging racism for "them" not for us. We have not identified our self-interest, as a white person, for fighting racism. Until we do, we will not be able to sustain this lifelong journey.

**25) Silence**

We stay silent.

***Reality Check and Consequence***

Our silence may be a product of our guilt or fear of making people of color or white people angry with us or disappointed in us. We may be afraid that speaking out could result in losing some of our privilege. We may be silent because we don't know the right and perfect thing to say in that moment. We may be silenced by fear of violence. The reasons for our silence are many, but each time we are silent we miss an opportunity to interrupt racism, or to act as an ally or to interact genuinely with people of color or other white people. No anti-racist action is taken as long as we are silent. And we must remember that silence is assumed as agreement.

[A note about silence: Silence is a complicated matter. There are times when faced with a potential intervention situation that we may choose not to interrupt - for reasons of good sense or strategy. Anti-racists need courage, but taking foolish risks makes little sense. When the choice is between intervening in this moment alone or gathering allies to speak out later in a more strategic way, the latter may prove more effective. Though the fact remains: the racist incident in that moment was not interrupted.]

**26) Exhaustion and Despair - Sound the Retreat**

"I'm exhausted. I'm only one person. I can stop and rest for a while." or "Racism is so pervasive and entrenched, there just isn't any hope."

***Reality Check and Consequence***

Despair is a real enemy of anti-racists. If our commitment is a lifelong one, we must find ways to mitigate the effects. Neither burn-out nor desertion are of any use to the struggle. We can remember men who jumped on a "Take Back the Night" bandwagon, challenging violence against women - until the attention on them as good men waned, until the "glamour" of the issue faded. One of the historical, repeated failures of "liberals" in social justice movements has been their short-term and inconsistent commitment to the "issue du jour."

If we quit, for any reason, we are engaging our "default option." (5) As white people, we can rest, back off, and take a break from the frustration and despair of anti-racism work. There will be no significant consequence to us for this retreat. White people will not think less of us. Racism doesn't allow such a respite for people of color. One of the elemental privileges of being white is my freedom to retreat from the issue of racism. If things get too tough I can always take a break. And our work against racism doesn't get done.

**THE JOURNEY CONTINUES**

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Once identified, behaviors like those above are possible to change. The patterns are repeated less often. We re-educate and re-tool ourselves to take more potent antiracist action. Each anti-racist action we take brings new challenges and learning, propels us forward smarter, more confident, better prepared and most importantly, more effective. Every experience takes us deeper into new territory and the complexities of racism, expanding our vision of the possibilities of a future without racism. Each turn brings us face to face with another set of potential detours and reversals. Like traveling unmarked roads, staying on the right track demands constant attention and intention.

Racism oppresses and exploits people of color. While it grants white people undeniable advantages and benefits, racism also robs each of us of our full humanity. We didn't construct racism; we inherited it. But the unchallenged perpetuation of racism is our responsibility. Racism continues in the name of all white people.

People of color will continue to demand their rights, opportunities and full personhood. But racism in North America won't end because people of color demand it. Racism will only end when a significant number of white people of conscience, the people who can wield systemic privilege and power with integrity, find the will and take the action to dismantle it. That won't happen until white people find racism in our daily consciousness as often as people of color do. For now we have to drag racism into our consciousness intentionally, for unlike our sisters and brothers of color, the most present daily manifestation of our white privilege is the possibility of forgetting about racism.

We cannot.

While there is nothing about racism to celebrate, there is much to celebrate in a life lived in the pursuit of justice. It is the work of a lifetime.

## **ENDNOTES**

- (1) Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*. W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1949.
- (2) Paraphrase of title by Andrea Smith. "For All Those Who Were Indian In a Former Life." First published in *Sojourner: The Women's Forum*, November 1990. See also "Wanting To Be Indian, When Spiritual Searching Turns Into Cultural Theft" by Myke Johnson. Available from RESPECT, Inc. P. O. Box 2516, Boston, MA 02130.
- (3) I first heard this phrase from Rev. Joseph Barndt of Crossroads Ministry, also the author of *Dismantling Racism*. Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis. 1991.
- (4) Credit to Kathleen Carlin for her "Principle of Intentions versus Effect" from her antisexism work. Translated here to a racism corollary. Before her death in 1996 she was the Executive Director of Men Stopping Violence in Atlanta, GA.
- (5) Term used by Dr. Moles Kete Asante, Chair of African American Studies, Temple Univ., Philadelphia, PA.

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## **SEEKING YOUR COMMENTS**

I assume this will always be a work in progress, and look forward to your comments.

Please, send me your thoughts, questions, challenges and additional “detours.”

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