**White Supremacy System Model**

This document explains AWARE-LA's model of the White Supremacy System and white people's position within it. The model argues that living within the system damages everyone, including white people. Thus, white people have a personal stake in joining a collective, multiracial effort to end it.

The text below draws on material that has been part of AWARE-LA's Unmasking Whiteness program since 2009. The primary author, a co-producer of the Unmasking Whiteness program, drafted it for inclusion in a book project. Because the book focuses on white identity development (as described by Janet Helms), this text includes occasional references to positions or "frames of mind" that white people often use on the way toward cultivating a positive, antiracist white identity. (*See AWARE-LA's Theory of Personal Transformation for more on our investment in identity development.*)
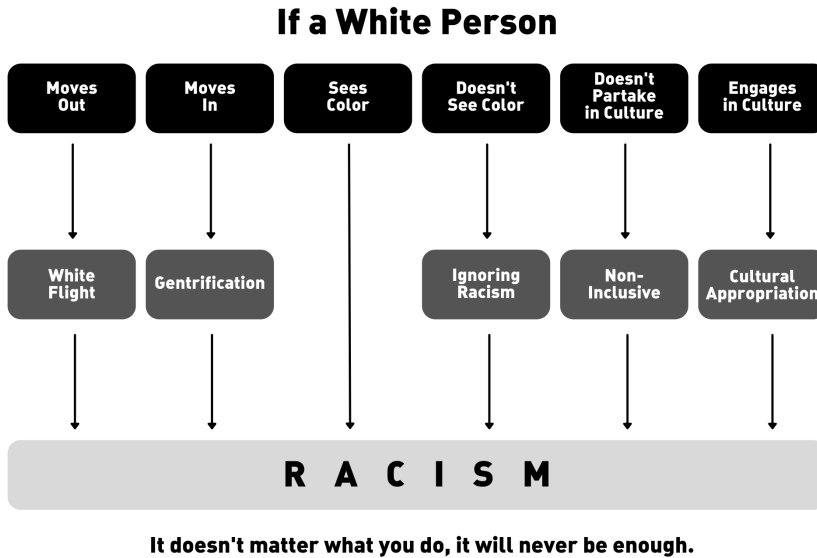
To maintain the integrity of the text, we retain references to the racial identity development positions. For readers unfamiliar with Helms' model, in brief, it describes six positions from which white people consider issues of race. Our movement through them is typically more haphazard than linear, and we often shift back and forth between these positions, using different lenses over time. The six positions include:

- *Contact* - This is when white people focus on colorblindness with no recognition of systemic racism. When the denial of racism in *Contact* cannot be sustained, we shift.

- *Disintegration* - This is when we begin to recognize moral dilemmas associated with racism. The stress of wrestling with these dilemmas creates cognitive dissonance that must be resolved in order to shift.

- *Reintegration* - If we defend whiteness while in *Disintegration* and alleviate our difficult feelings through a retreat into whiteness, we land here and often blame racism on people of color. However, there is another way to resolve the dissonance. We can identify with people of color. In doing so, we tell ourselves we can't be racist because we support people of color.

- *Pseudo-Independence* - If we land here, we typically have a false confidence in ourselves. This is where we tend to focus on helping or "saving" people of color. If we delve into a deeper learning process that includes self-reflection, we begin to challenge our internalized racism and we move out of this position.

- *Immersion/Emersion* - Here, we seek knowledge and experience to understand how racism functions individually and systemically. We emerge from this learning with a steadier belief in the possibility of a positive, antiracist white identity.

- *Autonomy* - From here, we can confidently and skillfully take action to disrupt racism and build larger multiracial collectives working together to end racism. *(Please note that although the model uses a term commonly associated with individualism, it refers to the capacity for a White person to work effectively across race.)*

The book project offers AWARE-LA's White Supremacy System model as a resource for readers who want to influence white people to 1) recognize their personal investment in antiracism and 2) work actively toward racial justice and collective liberation.

# AWARE-LA's White Supremacy System Model

This graphic landed in the inbox of a person of color who is sensitive to white people's reactions to antiracism. Concerned, he forwarded it to others. The graphic offers a lament or an accusation, depending on your point of view. The core idea is that if you're a white person, no matter what you do, it will never be enough, and it will always equal racism.

**If a White Person**

| Moves Out | Moves In | Sees Color | Doesn't See Color | Doesn't Partake in Culture | Engages in Culture |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| White Flight | Gentrification | | Ignoring Racism | Non-Inclusive | Cultural Appropriation |

**R A C I S M**

*It doesn't matter what you do, it will never be enough.*

The graphic radically simplifies, conflates, and flattens three complex topics: housing justice, racial consciousness, and cultural appropriation. The hook, and the reason the graphic's message is powerful, is that many white people are told all their lives that focusing on other people's race, living in a segregated way, and engaging in white flight are all wrong. People raised with those messages will understandably be confused later when told that their attempts to do the opposite are also problematic.

The power in the graphic is not that the overall message is true (because it is not), but that it *feels* true to so many white people, especially those perceiving the world through the lens of *Reintegration* (toward antiracism) or *Pseudo-Independence*. These are the points in the racial identity journey when white people are most concerned about being "good" antiracist people and consistently receive criticism for well-intentioned efforts. The confusion and frustration so typical of these positions leave people vulnerable to the kind of manipulative messaging this graphic provides.

A primary issue at play with this graphic is the complex, nuanced nature of racism and antiracism and white people's general inexperience. A seasoned antiracist could argue back to each point on this graphic by acknowledging the complexity and teasing out when and how to engage in different activities.

A second issue is that the graphic implies that white people's success at addressing racism (defined as doing "enough") is measured externally, implying that white people take antiracist action only for the sake of people of color. Given the way most people look at the problem of racism in the US today, this is unsurprising. Many antiracist organizers see white people's investment differently, though, believing that ending racism benefits all people, both people of color and white people. (More on that later.)

A third important issue, and the one addressed here in great detail, is that the most common explanation of "systemic oppression" (and how to work against it) is too simplistic. It locates white people in a no-win situation that tends to inspire guilt or shame, feels fundamentally disempowering, and leads to continuous, unproductive hand-wringing. It also prolongs the time white people spend operating out of *Reintegration* (toward antiracism) and *Pseudo-Independence*.

Thankfully, alternative, more inspiring explanations are available. The Alliance of White Antiracists Everywhere – Los Angeles (AWARE-LA) articulates a model that addresses white people's felt experience of being caught between a rock and a hard place.[1]  It also explains how a system based

in white supremacy dehumanizes everyone, including white people. This model opens the door for white people to explore why it is in our own best interests to join with a collective, cross-racial movement to create an entirely different system, one in which everyone can prosper. It is an empowering model, one that provides a sense of clarity, purpose, and personal stake. With this model under white people's belts, the graphic image intended as a swipe against antiracism looks narrow-minded and silly.

AWARE-LA's model can help white people move more quickly into the *Immersion/Emersion* work of racial identity. In fact, some AWARE-LA members manage to largely avoid the *Reintegration* (toward antiracism) and P*seudo-Independence* positions altogether, such is the power of early introduction of this model. The self-reflective, inner work of *Immersion/Emersion* reduces guilt and shame, and it sets white people on a track toward a more solid, positive, antiracist white identity.

What follows is language drawn from a presentation first included in AWARE-LA's Unmasking Whiteness Institute in 2009, with modification over the years. The organization continues to share this model year after year.

Readers may experience a bit of cognitive dissonance while reading, especially those who have spent years engaged in antiracism, as this model charts a less guilt-dependent position for white people than is typical. This may be particularly true for readers who spend a fair amount of time operating from *Reintegration* (toward antiracism) and *Pseudo-Independence*.

Readers who are not used to looking at US society through the lens of a "system" may also feel a bit stretched. Because white people operating out of *Disintegration* do not yet have a systemic analysis of race, this material is not generally what someone would offer as the first step on the racial identity journey.

On the other hand, the comparative analysis offered below often provides a light-bulb moment of relief, clarity, and excitement. This is particularly true for those who recognize the downsides of the most common explanation of how oppression works (regardless of position on the racial identity roundabout). Many feel uplifted by AWARE-LA's understanding of white people's legitimate role in organizing within solidarity partnerships and taking action for racial justice.
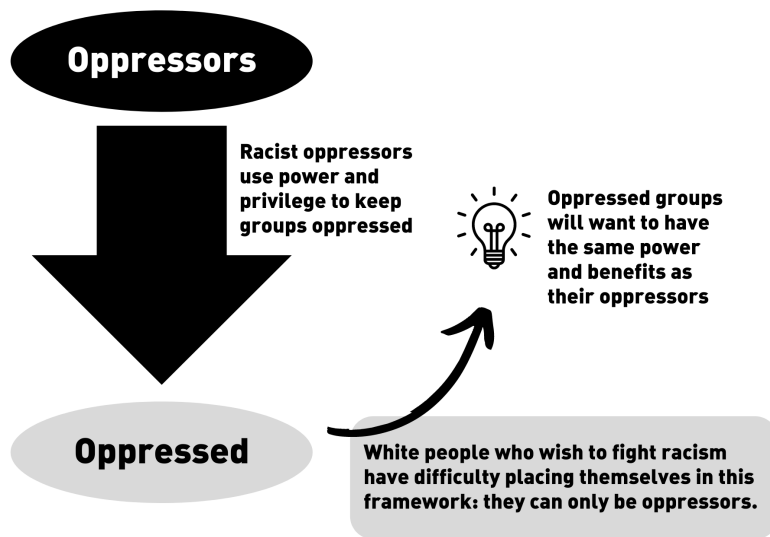
**The Common Explanation of Systemic Oppression**

AWARE-LA rejects the most common explanation for how oppression works. However, because it is the foundation for how so many people think about racism and systemic oppression, we need to understand it before exploring an alternative. Within this explanation, there are two groups. One is the oppressor, and the other is the oppressed. Oppressors have all the power, and the oppressed have none or almost no power. The relationship is direct and based on exploitation. Oppressors exploit the oppressed.

The idea is that oppressors use their power, and the privileges that come with it, to keep others oppressed. The more that oppressors disadvantage the oppressed, the more they sustain and increase their own advantage and power. According to this view, it clearly benefits the oppressors to maintain control and exploitation. In racial terms, the oppressors are white. The oppressed are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.[2]

By the very nature of oppression, individuals who experience it want things to change – at the very least in their personal lives. People in oppressed groups also want the benefits and power enjoyed by the oppressors.

## Common Explanation of Racial Oppression

**Oppressors**

Racist oppressors use power and privilege to keep groups oppressed

Oppressed groups will want to have the same power and benefits as their oppressors

**Oppressed**

White people who wish to fight racism have difficulty placing themselves in this framework: they can only be oppressors.

Because this model offers only two positions – being an oppressor or oppressed - it makes sense that oppressed people want to move out of that position. Unfortunately, the only place to go is to become an oppressor.

Oppressed people may believe they will not oppress others, but once they are in that group, according to this framing, they have no other option.

Take the early women's movement as an example of how this works from a gender perspective. If a woman found herself oppressed due to her gender, her only alternative was to become like a man. This translates to stories of women succeeding in what had been "male dominated" positions and being accused of acting just as badly, if not worse, than the men in those positions.[3] The problem is that this way of understanding oppression provides no other language or vision for the way different groups can be positioned or interact with one another.

It is important to understand and acknowledge the complex ways that Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color both 1) resist falling victim to white supremacy norms and 2) experience their own identity development process. Therefore, this explanation's assumption that any oppressed person will seek to oppress if given the opportunity is just as error-filled and reliant on false assumptions as the idea that all white people can only and forever be oppressors.

That is why this model is such a problem for white antiracists. If we want to fight racism, the model does not provide an obvious way for white people to contribute. Instead, it leaves hard questions unanswered:

- What is the motivation for an oppressor to challenge the system?
- Why would a white person want to join an antiracist collective if it means identifying as an oppressor?
- Within this model, how can white people be trusted? How can white people build relationships and alliances across race?

This common explanation also conflates real power with privilege. And power and privilege are not the same. White people may have privilege within the system, but that does not mean the average white person has the power to change how the system operates, even if they want to change it. Think of it like a giant factory assembly line. White people may have the choice jobs on the line. Some may even be supervisors, overseeing how the assembly line functions. All workers may have the ability to throw a wrench into the line's functioning for a while. That doesn't mean the typical white worker or supervisor can fundamentally shift the assembly line's pathway, its mechanisms, or what it produces. This is a real source of frustration for white people who recognize systemic injustice, want to do something about it, but also feel powerless to make big, meaningful changes.

An additionally troubling issue, and one that undercuts white people's identity development, is that this model does not take into account the way the system diminishes white people's fundamental lived experience, sense of self, and core humanity. Being an oppressor violates the personal values

and beliefs many white people hold dear. Yet, this explanation provides no avenue by which white people can become non-oppressors, even if dedicated to resisting the system. This is a problem because it is fundamentally demoralizing, and it leads to the idea that a white person's antiracism will never be enough.

How can white people find solid antiracist ground? In terms of racial identity, many people today suggest that antiracist people should relinquish whiteness and not identify with being white. What does that really mean, exactly? Yes, white people can push against dominating white cultural norms and push against the system. But, where does that place antiracist white people within this explanation of oppression? According to this view, there is no other role to play besides that of an oppressor. White people are trapped into a particular position on the assembly line, one that expects investment in maintaining the system's current functioning, no matter what.

From this vantage point, the most common way people talk about oppression is both limiting and dangerous. It is limiting because it provides no vision for antiracist white people to hold trusted positions alongside cross-race solidarity partners working for mutually beneficial change. It is dangerous because it reinforces the fears many white people retrenched into whiteness have of being dispossessed of their historic power (replaced as the supervisors on the assembly line). In this way, this explanation aligns with how the far-right thinks about power as a zero sum game: *Either white people have it or dangerous "others" have it, and the "others" would like to flip the script and become the oppressors.* This is what scares the daylights out of the far-right and many other white people when they look toward the US becoming a "majority minority" nation in the decades to come.

**AWARE-LA's White Supremacy System Model**

AWARE-LA's White Supremacy System model views our situation very differently.  Before describing the model, the title needs an explanation. The use of the term "white supremacy" does not refer to the KKK or neo-Nazis. Instead, it refers to a complex set of policies, practices, and cultural norms that have historically prioritized the entire range of behaviors, attitudes, and peoples associated with whiteness. This has allowed white standards to be the most valued, to dominate, to reign supreme; thus, we get white supremacy.

The idea of the "white supremacy system" is that a range of social, economic, political and cultural mechanisms were set in place hundreds of years ago that function in a coordinated fashion (like an assembly line). These mechanisms treat white people and white norms as the standard by which all else is measured. Because of this, the system rewards white people who adhere to white norms first and foremost. This results in historically uneven outcomes, with white people faring better than Black people, Indigenous people, and other Peoples of Color.

Because the laws and policies that set the system into motion function automatically, conscious, racist intent is not necessary for the mechanisms to continue uninterrupted. This allows people with no ill will to fill available roles and function as the system directs, having no conscious awareness of how they contribute to a discriminatory result. This means many well-meaning people often do not recognize their role in the final outcome (or product) of the assembly line. And although there have been significant tweaks and modifications made to the system over time (policy and legal changes), these have not fundamentally altered either the overall mechanics of the system or its results; thus, it remains a white supremacy system, with white people continuing to fare better.

The White Supremacy System model proposed by AWARE-LA still identifies a group of oppressors. This group is small, though. This is the group that occupies the uppermost power positions in the society. These people are not simply rich, they wield outsized control over how the overall system functions. In the factory assembly line analogy, these are the people who own all the factories. They

wield influence not necessarily or strictly through government power – but as a body of people with ultimate power who are at the top of the hierarchy, having a distinct status. They influence, control, and shape policy, culture, and institutions through governmental bodies, economic practices, cultural and media-propagated ideology and imagery, etc. They are the ones who have the power to alter the basic structure of the assembly line and what it produces, were they inclined to do so.

Defining exactly who these powerful few are is, admittedly, a bit tricky. The Occupy Wall Street social movement termed them "the 1%." Various scholars have written about them as the bourgeoisie, the power elite, or as the transnational capitalist class, for example.[4]

Historically, they are white, extremely wealthy, male, Christian, and heterosexual. They are a small fraction of the 1% of the U.S. population in terms of wealth and influence. Sometimes they are well-known, but more often they assert their control from behind the scenes, have many others who work for them, and rely heavily on ingrained cultural practices and beliefs to support their dominating influence and the system as a whole.

Interestingly, these people who wield power from the top do not necessarily have to be conscious of the racism interwoven within the system to maintain their dominant position or the larger system's outcomes. After all, the basic structure of the assembly line (and its expected outcomes) were set in place and in motion long before the current owners and operators were even born. This makes it very difficult to convince those in power that the results of the system they own and operate are oppressive and discriminatory. It is equally hard to convince those who are subject to oppressive conditions that what they experience and how it negatively affects their lives is not intentional on the part of everyone who holds power. After all, many current owners and operators are aware of the harms experienced by their employees and make decisions prioritizing profit over people on a regular basis.

In terms of the ingrained cultural beliefs that keep the system moving along uninterrupted, one of them is the individualistic ideology that if you work hard, you are bound to succeed. The corresponding flip side of that coin is the belief that those who have the lowest status in the factory are there because of their own choices. This belief allows us to blame poor people for being poor and then keep them poor by not supporting enhanced welfare or programs that might make a real difference in people's lives.

What this does is maintain a pool of low-wage workers for the assembly line to use without adjusting how the overall system functions or to compensate people adequately. It keeps collected taxes lower for the rich, while less money is available for poor people. This is the basis for the twisted situation where Walmart and McDonald's employees can *both* work full-time *and* be part of the largest groups to receive governmental Medicaid and food-stamp assistance, all while wealthy people call for cuts to these basic assistance programs[5] The entire set up advantages those already in power.

Those that wield the most power are not necessarily part of a stable group, though, as the top of the hierarchy involves people and positions that rotate and shift as the culture changes. The key is that it always manages to maintain and work in service of those already in power. For example, if one of those at the top of the power hierarchy is charged with a crime, there is a chance that the person could go to prison and lose status. The person may or may not remain in the elite group. However, the person will certainly not suffer the same consequences that someone who is not an elite would suffer if the same thing was discovered about them.

This top-of-the-hierarchy group does include some people who have "pulled themselves up by their boot straps," so to speak. These are formerly poor people, people of color, women, non-Christians, and members of the LGBTQ+ community who are in this elite group or on the fringes of it.

Importantly, the fact that there are some exceptions to the overall rule of who gets to wield significant power represents how the system allows some people to rise to the top in order to maintain a myth of equal opportunity. However, those who attain this position generally must conform and assimilate to the norms and expectations of the hierarchy, and therefore maintain it.

One of the ingrained cultural beliefs that supports this is the idea that the few exceptions prove the cultural value that any and all of us can make it to the top. This is not true in any meaningful way, however, as the pathway that allows a person to rise to that level is exceedingly narrow. However, it keeps hope alive all the way down the line.

As with the previously described common explanation of oppression, AWARE-LA's model still identifies a group that is oppressed by the system. This group is the main target of discrimination, state-sponsored violence, and cultural stereotypes because it is racialized. This is the group targeted by white supremacy, and it includes Black people, Indigenous peoples, and People of Color.
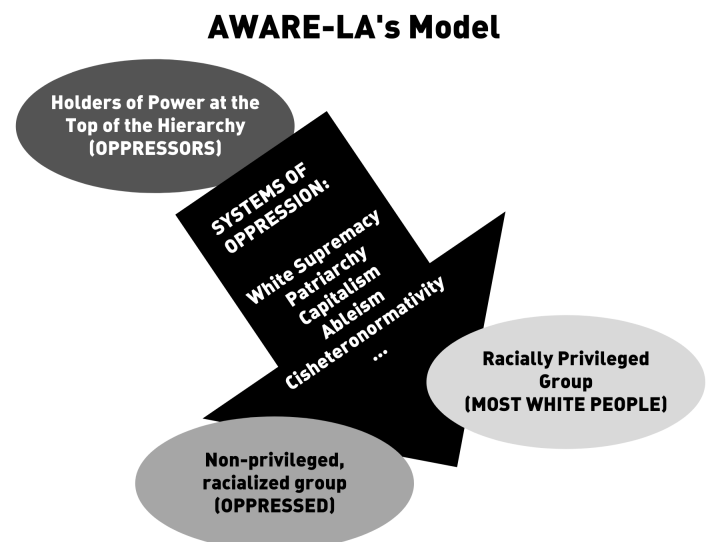
**Racially Privileged, Yet Differentially Powerful:** A key difference from the common explanation of oppression previously described is that AWARE-LA's White Supremacy System model recognizes the difference between white people being privileged versus white people having significant power (working on the assembly line versus owning it). In this model white people are privileged (not racially oppressed). Yet, as a group, white people do not have the same level of power as those at the top of the power hierarchy. Thus, they do not have the same level of investment in maintaining the system as it currently exists. This is the place where most white people in the U.S. find themselves.

This model allows white people to recognize that we have more in common, ultimately, with those who are oppressed by the system. We too can invest in fighting the system and oppose those who pull the levers of power. This is where a role for white people clarifies and provides fertile ground for creating cross-race alliances.

Still, racial privilege is real, and it will act as a barrier and liability when attempting to build trust. It would be dishonest if we ignored the fact that, for those who are supervisors, the experience is radically different than for those who do the manual labor. However, when white people are honest and vigilant about race and privilege, we can develop productive and mutually-supportive relationships across race.

**Multiple Systems of Oppression:** Another important difference between the common understanding and AWARE-LA's model is that AWARE-LA identifies multiple oppressive mechanisms that maintain the power and status of those at the top.
They include: white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, ableism, and cisheteronormativity. The point is that the system, overall, creates divisions between people in numerous ways. Racism is not the only tool used to divide people, so it is not the only issue that matters. Each of the different identity-based divisions (race, gender, class, etc.) ultimately has its own ways of supporting and maintaining the power of those at the top.



**AWARE-LA's Model**

Holders of Power at the Top of the Hierarchy (OPPRESSORS)

SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION:
White Supremacy
Patriarchy
Capitalism
Ableism
Cisheteronormativity
...

Racially Privileged Group (MOST WHITE PEOPLE)

Non-privileged, racialized group (OPPRESSED)

Because there are multiple systems operating simultaneously, they *intersect* with one another in a variety of ways. This creates a complex of oppressive forces. For example, as Kimberlé Crenshaw illustrates in her work, Black women experience both racism and sexism simultaneously, and often in the same moment. Black women, thus, experience sexism differently than white women, and they experience racism differently than Black men. This makes adjudicating discrimination cases complicated and difficult (if not impossible), which is why the term "intersectionality" was coined by Crenshaw in the first place.[6]

Also important is that white supremacy is not necessarily the most important or significant form of oppression because a racial hierarchy is not the only way that people are kept in their place on the assembly line. Every type of oppression creates a hierarchy; Every type of oppression matters, whether it is based on race, socio-economic class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.

Understanding the complex nature of the intersecting systems, AWARE-LA prioritizes and organizes around race for two reasons. First, the historically interwoven nature of racial oppression and capitalism (set in place in the colonial era) continues to fundamentally shape the economic and political hierarchy within the US Second, the US has a very hard time focusing on race as an ongoing, structural oppression.

**Hearts and Minds vs. The System:** Within each of the multiple systems of oppression, there are various norms, policies, and practices that cause harm. The harm extends throughout US culture, its institutions, as well as between individuals. An important insight this model makes clear is that changing "hearts and minds" is *both* important *and* completely insufficient for meaningful change to occur. It may be true that part of ending systemic oppression includes white people becoming more conscious of race and then becoming more inclusive and embracing difference. That's important. It may lead to fellow assembly line workers interacting more compassionately and humanely with one another and supervisors making more equitable decisions. That's good. And - we also have to change the system itself, as it will continue to produce uneven and discriminatory outcomes if there is no significant reconstruction.
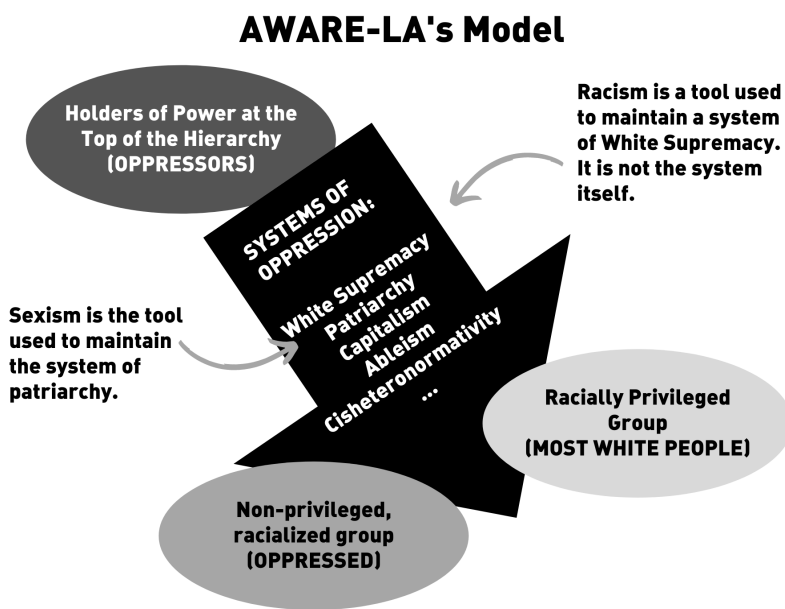
## AWARE-LA's Model



In terms of racial oppression, AWARE-LA's model views racism as a tool of white supremacy; the tool (racism) is what allows and keeps a discriminatory and oppressive white supremacy system to continue operating as it is. Similarly, patriarchy is a system, and sexism is the tool that keeps the patriarchal system humming along. For example, negative stereotypes, crude jokes about women, and undermining behavior against women in interpersonal relationships are sexist, individual expressions, to be sure.

However, that is just the tip of the iceberg. The patriarchal system has historically placed a higher value on male bodies and masculinity. The subsequent degradation, violent treatment, and exploitation of women is part of a larger system that has spawned countless policies and norms at the institutional

and cultural levels that maintain an overall hierarchy with men at the top. The patriarchal system is the larger problem; sexism is the tool that supports it.

In a similar way, classism is a tool used to divide people and maintain the current form of capitalism we have in the US. The stereotypes against poor people, for example, are so severe that the term "white trash" developed to indicate that poor whites are not even good enough to be part of the white category. (Please see the notes for a discussion on ableism and how each hierarchy results in some people being considered disposable and lacking in value.)[7]

The innumerable ways poor people are disrespected by wealthy people, consciously and unconsciously, leads to regularly-occurring oppressive experiences on an interpersonal level. On a larger scale, though, adherence to the exploitative version of capitalism operating in the US leads to policies and norms that continue to prioritize the needs of the wealthy. For example, some states within the US reject federal funding that would help poor people of all backgrounds through social programs and advocating for maintaining wealthier people's low taxes.[8]

The point is that although changing hearts and minds is a good and important thing to do, changing the system is required to end oppression and achieve a more prosperous nation for everyone.

**The System Works Against All Groups:** Systems of oppression work against the mass of people on both sides of oppression, the non-privileged and the privileged. This is a key insight of the model. Understanding how negative outcomes exist for everyone in a white supremacy system first requires an explanation of how the system privileges white people (to varying degrees) in order to maintain white people's allegiance to the system. After all, those at the top of the hierarchy could not maintain their power if white people en masse joined with the racially oppressed to resist or oppose the system. In other words, white people investing in the assembly line is what keeps it functioning.

Looking back at the origins of white supremacy reveals a throughline from the late 1600's to today. Historical analysis indicates that the legal creation of whiteness, in part through the passage of white privilege laws, involved an intentional effort to drive a wedge between poor, European indentured servants and free and enslaved people of African descent and Native Americans in a plantation-based economy.[9] Because indentured servants and enslaved people had developed community with one another and modes of resistance together prior to the white privilege laws, lawmakers and plantation owners worked to find a way to encourage poor Europeans to align with the system rather than other oppressed people.[10] This is how those in power discouraged poor and oppressed groups from rebelling and seeking revolutionary change all those years ago.
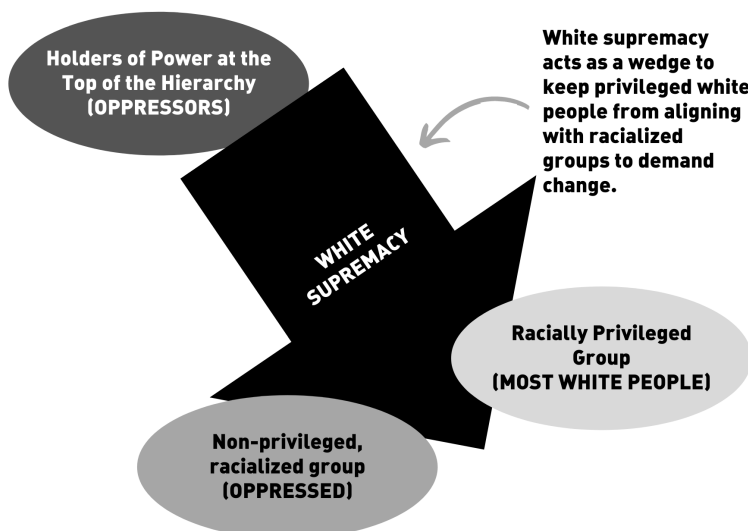
Racial privilege has, thus, long been the direct incentive for white people to go along with the status quo. For whites, this meant separating themselves from enslaved people of African descent and, in essence, giving up allies in their own struggle. In other words, European indentured servants received privileged status for giving up the larger goal of freedom from a system that exploited them. Throughout US history and up until today, appeals to white people's sense of ownership

### AWARE-LA's Model



Holders of Power at the Top of the Hierarchy (OPPRESSORS)

White supremacy acts as a wedge to keep privileged white people from aligning with racialized groups to demand change.

WHITE SUPREMACY

Racially Privileged Group (MOST WHITE PEOPLE)

Non-privileged, racialized group (OPPRESSED)

over the country and fears of cultural change have continued to serve the same function.[11] They keep poor and working class white people from banding together with racialized groups to demand larger, structural change that could allow everyone to experience decent, economic prosperity.

There are limits, though, to the value of the privilege bestowed within a system of oppression. When white people challenge the white supremacy system, white privilege does not necessarily protect them against severe backlash. In fact, some of the earliest victims of Klan violence were white people who fought for racial justice.[12]

**Reduced Humanity:** We may not see too much direct violence enacted upon white antiracists today (although social media and hate groups provide plenty of death threats, and the killing of Heather Heyer in Charlottesville in 2017 stands out), however this does not mean there are not negative impacts on white people in general. In fact, white supremacy results in significant harm on both the individual and structural levels. The core issue is that a system based in oppression treats people inhumanely, both the oppressed/non-privileged and the privileged.

Our collective socialization into the system leads white people (the privileged group) to internalize an inhumane attitude. As white people occupy many of the positions along the assembly line that provide oversight (as supervisors) and serve as gatekeepers, white people are often the ones who reinforce and maintain oppressive conditions. The result is that white people within a white supremacy system are socialized to see people of other racial groups as less valuable (not worthy of full consideration) and needing oversight to "stay in their place." The toxic nature of the attitude is so encompassing that people in the privileged group often extend inhumane treatment to anyone who does not fit within the status quo or occupies a position "beneath them."

On the individual level, the evidence of this appears as reduced human connection and empathy. Examples of an impaired sense of humanity occur across the range of racial identity positions.

The following reflect the variety of early positions (*Contact*, *Disintegration*, and *Reintegration*):
- Feeling uncontrollably nervous or "unsafe" around people of color, especially Black men, just because of their skin color.
- Considering racial disparities as normal and acceptable.
- Teaching children, through inaction and inattention, that some people in our society are not worthy of assistance or care.
- Learning to ignore racialized trauma by turning the TV channel away from a tragedy and feeling no empathy for the human suffering.
- Identifying with racist actions and thoughts.
- Identifying more with the perpetrator of harm than the Black people, Indigenous people, or other People of Color experiencing the harm.
- Experiencing a stronger emotional reaction to stranded dogs during a natural disaster than to distressed Black people, Indigenous people, or People of Color in a similar situation.
- Failing to recognize any loss when living a segregated life, absent of Black people, Indigenous people, or People of Color.

The following examples become more recognizable as we use the latter positions of racial identity and take on more antiracist action:
- Experiencing the lack of trust or acceptance available from Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color because of our collective history.
- Experiencing isolation and alienation from other white people, even family and friends, when standing up for racial justice.

The reduction in human connection also extends to other white people as in the following examples:

- A sense of conditionality within families; love can be withdrawn and family members can be disowned if they fail to meet expectations.
- A general attitude of hazing, "If I had to deal with it, you do too," when justifying abusive behavior at school, on the job, etc.
- The entire concept of "white trash" and how it is used to demean.

Among antiracists at the latter positions this also looks like:
- Cutting oneself off from white people who do not meet racial justice expectations.
- Messages that white people's feelings don't matter (at all).

To many white people, the negative impacts may seem slight against the privileges gained. However, the callousness and disregard for fellow human beings make white people less of who we can be and less of who we ought to be - unless we consciously work against it.

On the structural level, myriad US policies fail to extend basic human care to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color groups in ways that also end up harming white people. Two books detail some of the harm. *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland*, by Jonathan Metzl details how right-wing backlash against care extended to people of color has led to mortal consequences for white people.[13]  The book highlights three case studies exploring the defunding of public schools, a lack of health care for the overall population, and a high suicide rate among white men. *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, by Heather McGhee, details how racist policies have led to the destruction of community resources that served white people.[14]

The dehumanization that allows for community harm is not solely race-specific within a complex system of oppression. Just as white supremacy dehumanizes everyone, a patriarchal system injures everyone as well. Consider that, for decades, feminists only concerned themselves with the oppression women experienced under patriarchy. More recently, a renewed look at men reveals how a patriarchal system also harms men as well. As it turns out, the stress of earning and keeping male status is damaging, in and of itself. This, too, operates on individual and structural levels.

Individually, the patriarchal system negatively affects men's sense of self and their relationships. For example, men have been consistently shamed for showing emotion, expressing vulnerability, in essence, engaging in difficult situations in fully human ways. Just as sexism has allowed injury to women under the guise of "boys will be boys," the suggestion that a boy should "take it like a man" clearly conveys the expectation that men should experience pain and trauma without complaining when injured. A culture that fails to address emotional or physical trauma leaves men less functional, which is damaging to men as well as to their families and communities. Ironically, it is within the US military where attention toward PTSD is more readily addressed. The same cannot be said for US culture more broadly.

Structurally, men are regularly punished or injured by laws, policies, and institutional and economic practices, and they suffer when attempting to adhere to the standards and codes of what it means to "be a man." To offer just one example, consider that some sports have particularly aggressive standards for males. A result is the lack of early attention to the brain damage that can occur when playing football, even for young boys. This is in addition to the social and economic pressures that exist to resist changing the violence of the sport to reduce the risk.

Ultimately, it is important to acknowledge that while this model suggests that the system, overall, dehumanizes everyone within it, this happens in very different ways for different groups. Even though the information here outlines the nuanced, sometimes subtle, but very real, individual and structural

harms that extend to white people in a dehumanizing system, for racialized groups, the dehumanization is constant and unprovoked, and it can be all-encompassing and lethal.

**Identifying Our Personal Stake:** What AWARE-LA realized when articulating this model is that not only does the white supremacy system dehumanize everyone in it, it also perpetuates a lie. The system convinces many white people to go along with the system (and the agenda of the those in power) with the promise that becoming part of the elite group is possible if one does all the right things. It relies on an individualistic cultural norm to convince white people that "going it alone" is better and offers a more hopeful future than joining with a mulitracial collective.

AWARE-LA rejects the white supremacy system and the lies it perpetuates. Instead, the organization recognizes that white people can experience more connected, fulfilled, and prosperous lives by getting together and fighting for racial justice. From a racial identity development perspective, AWARE-LA's model supports white people's ability to engage in the work of *Immersion/Emersion*, as it includes moving through a self-reflection process to consider one's personal experience of what it means to be white. This is a crux point. Finding one's personal stake in the work is essential.

- How have the multiple systems of oppression injured you and/or those you love?
- How has white supremacy injured you and/or those you love?
- How have the cultural norms of white supremacy created challenges in your life?

Important to consider is whether resistance arises within you when asked to think about these questions. What feelings surface? Why? What messages have you received that tell you this approach is inappropriate or problematic? It is not uncommon for white antiracist people to struggle to accept that we can and should consider how white supremacy harms white people (although differently and less severely than it harms Black, Indigenous, and other Peoples of Color).

While it is certainly true that caring for Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color is part of healing from white supremacy's dehumanization, the personal exploration allows white people to move beyond "antiracism only for the sake of others" and dedicate to an "antiracism for the sake of everyone" that includes ourselves.

For a number of years, the action arm of the AWARE-LA organization, White People 4 Black Lives, offered workshops to help white people identify and articulate their "personal stake" in racial justice. As it turns out, taking time to engage in a deep personal exploration can reveal the unique harm each of us has experienced living in a culture rooted in white supremacy. Some reflections recognize injury derived from family disconnections encouraged by a system that treats people as disposable, allowing white families to more easily cast out troubled family members. Others include the loss of family members due to drug use or other behaviors rooted in a desire to escape from the pressures of not "measuring up" to white society's expectations. Although the details are all different, the common thread is that our lives are less than what they could be because of white supremacy's toxic belief that some people are more important than others.

The result of the "personal stake" exploration is a more solid grounding for our antiracism. This transformative experience allows us to unequivocally and authentically state that racism is a problem that we all need to address, not only for others, but also for ourselves. From this perspective, each instance of racism we witness or participate in reinforces a system that depends upon us treating one another as less than fully human. From this perspective, each of us has every right to, and a self-interest in, refusing to go along with anything we recognize as rooted in racism. After all, racism is a tool of white supremacy that dehumanizes us all, and all the more so when we allow racialized insult and injury to go unnoticed, unnamed, and unaddressed.

What AWARE-LA has noticed over time is that its models, including this one, provide a foundation that often allows white people operating from *Disintegration* and *Reintegration* (toward and emerging into antiracism) to either bypass or more quickly move through the guilt-ridden, unhealthy aspects of *Reintegration* and *Pseudo-Independence*. This is an important point because there is no requirement that people spend a lot of time in each position. Because both *Reintegration* (emerging antiracism) and *Pseudo-Independence* often involve destructive attitudes and behaviors (both toward oneself and others), having an uplifting model that white people can anchor to (while engaged in the work of *Immersion/Emersion*) is important.

This explanation concludes with two notes regarding the need for a both/and approach to this model.

One is that the uplifting vision provided by the AWARE-LA model requires a balancing recognition of how challenging it can be to disentangle ourselves from white supremacy's norms. We need to *both* feel the excitement that comes when recognizing our own stake in fighting for racial justice *and* take care to avoid an individualism that would allow us to believe the task ahead is primarily about our own self-development or working only with other white people. In other words, recognizing our personal stake does not replace the need to partner with Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color to take antiracist action within solidarity partnerships.

Second, simply understanding how the system functions, and how it affects white people, while potentially ideologically transformative, is but one step on the road to constructing a positive, antiracist racial identity. AWARE-LA offers a Theory of Personal Transformation that articulates the variety of essential understandings and skills that are part of cultivating an antiracist practice that supports our antiracist identity development.[15]

## NOTES

1. One of the co-founders of AWARE-LA originally created the PowerPoint Presentation that describes the White Supremacy System model used during the first years of the AWARE-LA Unmasking Institute. A second co-founder presented the material, honing and modifying the message over the next decade. Another long-time AWARE-LA member translated the presentation into a script narrative and continued modifications during the years that followed. This is the first time it has been written in the form articulated here.
2. Although AWARE-LA places Black, Indigenous, and People of Color groups in one bubble, this is not a wholly accurate way to convey the situation. Those who are oppressed are an extremely diverse category, and it includes groups that are diverse within themselves. The oppressions they experience are different and have different historical roots in the U.S. They are sometimes even pitted against each other to benefit the oppressors, and so the various groups within the oppressed category are not necessarily united with each other in opposing the oppressors.
3. AWARE-LA recognizes that this analysis does not fully convey the complexity of women's liberation and the liberation of Black people, Indigenous people, and other People of Color groups. While we use a gender-focused example to help the reader make a connection, there is no intention to equalize the positions. We do not mean to suggest that oppressed people necessarily want to take on the role of oppressor. Instead, we suggest that the system often pushes oppressed people into enacting oppressive behaviors in order to succeed within the system and that they are then roundly criticized for it.
4. For more information: On the bourgeoisie, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The Communist Manifesto. (1848). On the power elite, see C Wright Mills *The Power Elite* (1956) as one example. (There are may others that have different takes on elite theory), See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elite_theory. On transnational capitalist, see Robinson, William I. and Sprague, Jeb. (2018) . "The Transnational Capitalist Class." In Mark Juergensmeyer, Manfred Steger, Saskia Sassen, and Victor Faesse, Eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), P. 309-327. On the concept of the 1%, as coined by the Occupy Wall Street movement, see "Who exactly are the 1%?". The Economist (2012) https://www.economist.com/united-states/2012/01/21/who-exactly-are-the-1
5. Miao, H. Walmart and McDonald's are among top employers of Medicaid and food stamp beneficiaries, report says, CNBC (Nov. 19, 2020), https://www.cnbc.com/2020/11/19/walmart-and-mcdonalds-among-top-employers-of-medicaid-and-food-stamp-beneficiaries.html

6. For a discussion on Intersectionality, please see Coaston, J. The intersectionality wars: When Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term 30 years ago, it was a relatively obscure legal concept. Then it went viral. Vox (May 28, 2019), https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/5/20/18542843/intersectionality-conservatism-law-race-gender-discrimination

7. The term "Ableism" is used to describe both the system and tool within this analysis because our use of language does not currently offer a better alternative. Ableism normalizes and maintains a hierarchy that deems some people's bodies unfit, unproductive, disposable, etc. Ableism interconnects with all the other oppressive systems, as described below.

   "Ableism must be included in our analysis of oppression and in our conversations about violence, responses to violence and ending violence. Ableism cuts across all of our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against a mythical norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability. Ableism set the stage for queer and trans people to be institutionalized as mentally disabled; for communities of color to be understood as less capable, smart and intelligent, therefore "naturally" fit for slave labor; for women's bodies to be used to produce children, when, where and how men needed them; for people with disabilities to be seen as "disposable" in a capitalist and exploitative culture because we are not seen as "productive;" for immigrants to be thought of as a "disease" that we must "cure" because it is "weakening" our country; for violence, cycles of poverty, lack of resources and war to be used as systematic tools to construct disability in communities and entire countries." (Mia Mingus, Leaving Evidence blog)
   > Femmes of Color Symposium, Keynote Speech, Oakland, CA, Sept. 21, 2011, Moving Toward the Ugly: A Politic Beyond Desirability, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/

   Important to note is that there are two models of Disability, the Physical and the Social. In the Physical model (the one that translates into systemic oppression), the person with the disability is responsible for adapting to their environment (i.e. there's something wrong with the person, which limits them and which needs fixing). Success in this model equates with fixing the person with the disability to be like their able-bodied peers. In the Social model, (an alternative model embraced by disability justice advocates), the idea is that there is a mismatch between the person and their social environment. In the Social model, the problem does not lie within the person, but with how society is set up. For example, consider a person with dyslexia. This same condition would not be a disability in a hunter-gathering society, but it is within today's social structure. Success in this model requires society to take action to make environments accessible to everybody, regardless of disability. Disability justice embraces the social model of disability, while also acknowledging the reality of bodily challenges (e.g. chronic pain) that many people with disabilities experience. (Credit to Rachel Hamburg).

8. Sullivan, A. Reuters, Nov. 2, 2021. COVID-19 still rages, but some U.S. states reject federal funds to help. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/covid-19-still-rages-some-us-states-reject-federal-funds-help-2021-11-02/ ; Super, D. Washington Post, March 24, 2021. 21 states want the 'freedom' to use pandemic aid for tax cuts. They can't. https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/24/pandemic-aid-tax-cuts-constitution-federalism/ ; Ollove, M. PEW Charitable Trust, Aug. 22, 2013. State Resistance to Federal Assistance Goes Back to US Beginnings. https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2013/08/22/state-resistance-to-federal-government-goes-back-to-us-beginnings

9. Battalora, J., Birth of a White Nation (2nd Ed.) (Routledge, 2021).

10. Battalora, J., Birth of a White Nation (2nd Ed.) (Routledge, 2021).

11. Massey, D., The Bipartisan Origins of White Nationalism, pp 5-22, Daedalus, Spring 2021, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/daedalus/downloads/Daedalus_Sp21_Immigration-Nativism-and-Race.pdf
    Also see: Denvir, D., All-American Nativism: How the Bipartisan War on Immigrants Explains Politics as We Know It (Jacobin, 2020) and Ionide, P., The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness, specifically Chapter 4, Escondido, California: The Exclusionary Emotions of Nativist Movements (Stanford University Press, 2015).

12. Klanwatch project, Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence, Southern Poverty Law Center, https://www.splcenter.org/sites/default/files/Ku-Klux-Klan-A-History-of-Racism.pdf; History.com, Ku Klux Klan, April 20, 2021, https://www.history.com/topics/reconstruction/ku-klux-klan

13. Metzl, J. Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland (Basic Books, 2019).

14. McGhee, H. The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together, (One World, 2021).

15. AWARE-LA. Theory of Personal Transformation. Available at AWARELA.org in the White Culture Building Toolkit. See https://www.awarela.org/toolkit.

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/581e9e06ff7c509a5ca2fe32/t/6065161cba4fc9163381c36f/1617237532876/07+AWARE-LA%27s+Theory+of+Personal+Transformation.pdf