

## When BIPOC Make Whiteness Visible: Mapping the Cycle

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Something significant happens when BIPOC folks enter white institutions which lack an antiracist orientation. Our very presence as BIPOC folks in these institutions serves to claim space for ourselves, and therefore to make [whiteness](#) visible. The resulting cycle consists of racist defensiveness, denial, and backlash that can be exceptionally confusing, disorienting, and harmful for the BIPOC folks at the center.

As confusing as it might be while we are in the midst of it, this cycle is entirely predictable. By learning and labeling the key moves and moments that happen, we can know where we are in the process, normalize our responses, find intentional ways to regulate and respond, and recognize and celebrate the myriad shapes of our resistance.

While the racism cycle in this piece arises from our experiences within professional training programs and workshops rooted in psychology and therapy, we do not believe the experience of this cycle is specific to certain fields. Additionally, we are writing from our own unique positions as racialized settlers with complex accountabilities to the Indigenous territories we currently inhabit. The white supremacist spaces we seek to describe are also exclusionary in their [settler colonialism](#).

We don't believe we are the appropriate people to write the following, but we would love to see a mapped cycle that takes into account toxic settler colonialism in white supremacist spaces, as well as the other cycles that are likely to show up when heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, classism etc. are made visible.

### The Cycle

#### Step 1: Making the embedded whiteness visible

When we enter these white corporate institutions and learning environments, a framework is presented that is [white supremacist](#) to its core, both in terms of the knowledge being shared and the mechanism by which that knowledge is shared. These spaces are also steeped in [white liberalism](#), which is marked by a fundamental belief that because they [vocalize](#) commitment to social justice and equity, that there can be no way in which they can be complicit in or responsible for perpetuating systemic racism. A stated commitment to equity, diversity, or inclusion is different from an [antiracist](#) orientation, which requires a commitment to recognizing and taking action against racist structures.

The techniques presented in these learning environments have been developed by practitioners embedded in white spaces (who are almost universally white themselves), and reference white academic knowledge (though often drawing unofficially on and appropriating Indigenous or racialized traditions). The training itself inevitably is presented in a way that is consistent with these white-dominant ways of being, meaning that priority is given to efficiency and the downloading of knowledge. This knowledge is copyrighted and privatized in a manner consistent with white ways of being. The existence and participation of BIPOC people and communities are at best a peripheral last minute inclusion. This facade of explicit commitment without addressing any structural components initiates a dynamic where the naming of whiteness and white supremacy feels like an attack has been staged by BIPOC.

The cycle begins when BIPOC folks enter these spaces that have no antiracist orientation, and engage in some action that makes the structure of whiteness visible. Actions can include requesting a BIPOC-specific breakout space, naming cultural appropriation, identifying racist stereotyping in the material, or asking questions about the applicability of the material for BIPOC communities.

BIPOC participants have a deeply embedded, embodied, and in many cases intergenerational knowledge about what happens when we take this space for ourselves in white-dominant environments. As BIPOC, we know we are engaging in dangerous behavior; it is risky and vulnerable to be located in our racialized bodies while deciding to make white supremacy visible. Our bodies reveal this danger through trembling, flushing, and shakiness.

## **Step 2: Revealing the Veiled Attack**

Calling attention to white supremacy by BIPOC evokes a response from white people. We have noticed that white trainers and leaders will respond with dysregulation, which can look like shock, defensiveness, or lashing out. The ask by BIPOC for structural equity is treated as a threat to the white space.

The subtext in this part of the cycle seems to be that we have disrupted homeostasis. For example, a white trainer might say, “We don’t have an issue talking about this but we are concerned about others in the room,” or “about the time we’ll spend discussing this instead of continuing the training.” If a BIPOC attendee experienced and named racism as an attack, a white response might take the form of accusations of lack of objectivity, neutrality, or kindness in not assuming another’s best intentions.

All this is communicated in polite and coded ways, which can feel like a veiled attack, and lands as a threat on BIPOC attendees, particularly given the historic [anti-Blackness](#) and demographic features of our field of psychology. Most of the leaders in our therapy training spaces are white women, and there is a [long, dangerous, ugly history](#) of white women claiming they are unsafe in the presence of Black people.

In the context of white professional spaces, the attack and risk is likely less physical and more professional. For us as therapists, the racialized threat is therefore to our professional reputations, careers, financial wellbeing, and ability to continue providing support to our communities. We can imagine that the attack and the threat are similar in other professional spaces.

In this stage of the cycle, our bodies respond to this very real racialized attack, though our minds get fooled by the gentle, polite language. There might be shame and embarrassment for responding so intensely to polite words framed as well-meaning concern. Teachings from generations of white supremacy tell us that if we cause whiteness to target us, we have likely done something to deserve the attack. The initial threat response causes distress and harm, but so does the discordance between our intellectual and embodied responses; this is racial gaslighting. In all of this, Blackness is in crosshairs in a particular way.

With all of these forces swirling within us and between us as BIPOC folks, it is inevitable that we respond. It is our response at this part of the cycle, specifically naming the coded veiled attack as racism, that triggers the next stage of the cycle by making the racialized harm that we have suffered visible.

We suspect that in past years, our responses would have been less public. This year of COVID-19 has initiated a new period of technological hyper-surveillance, and there is additionally a new hypervisibility of BIPOC bodies and a call to action experienced by many BIPOC folks in the wake of the global #BlackLivesMatter uprising. We are more likely to speak out, and even if we don't name anything out loud, we do it with our bodies and our dysregulation which is picked up and noticed on camera. The body speaks.

So, we end this stage by naming in shaky voices that we have suffered an unnecessary racialized attack and asking what is to be done.

### **Step 3: Slowing down and assessing in the midst of white urgency**

Once white attendees and trainers hear the explicit naming, this part of the cycle begins with overt bids to fix their discomfort, which can look like statements such as, "We are confused by what has transpired," or "It seems like some of you are struggling." The framing of these sentiments, while seemingly well-intentioned, center white comfort and fall flat as they fail to do the fundamental first step in repair work, which is to take accountability by naming the specific individual racialized attacks in the previous stage as racism or white supremacy. Urgency to remove discomfort is the overwhelming energy of the response from white spaces here.

In turn, our response reflects this frustration and further entrenches us in the dance of whose comfort and safety matters; we guard and defend against further harm by

retreating into silence. When the harm, hurt, and pain have not been acknowledged, there is no repair that can be done.

#### **Step 4: Decision Making**

In this next step, which we characterize as a demand for approval, our silence seems to mobilize white folks into even more urgency. Questions like, “What can we do to make this better so we can move on?” start being posed. The subtext of this demand is a desire from white folks to be told that they are good enough white people who are not racist.

There is likely to be a new chorus of white backlash to the awkwardness and the perceived demand to diverge from intended topics, that is seen by white folks as being driven by BIPOC folks. The BIPOC folks in this moment are being held accountable for the direction of a space over which we have never had control.

For BIPOC folks this becomes an inflection point. Continuing to push against the system is dangerous, and not continuing to do so also presents with danger in that it normalizes behavior that is racist and gives into the oppressor. It is important to note that either choice is strategic and about safety and energy.

It is also worth noting that at this stage, in our experience, there is not much remaining hope that any of our initial concerns will be addressed or repaired. Hopelessness and exhaustion are important components of the decision making at this stage.

#### **Step 5: Appeasement**

The lack of explicit direction from BIPOC folks in the last step leads white folks to move towards appeasement. We find that appeasement is particular to what we’re calling white liberal spaces. Appeasement looks like:

- bringing in a trainer of color in the last minute to speak to multicultural issues
- delineating a set amount of time to allow BIPOC folks to air their grievances
- triangulating with BIPOC folks one-on-one and congratulating them on their bravery for speaking up and sharing their experiences, and then offering to connect independently to learn more from them (without paying, of course!)
- committees being formed, enlisting the labor of BIPOC folks

Appeasement externally presents as a response to what has been named by BIPOC folks, but instead essentially re-centers whiteness in the conversation to achieve racial homeostasis. Underlying all of this is a clear lack of understanding that what has transpired is structural, historical, and not incidental. One element common to many tactics of appeasement is that they serve to delay any substantive response. Committees, guest speakers, and “listening sessions” take months, sometimes years to

organize and run their course. No remedy is offered to BIPOC folks in the meantime.

We also recognize that as we leave this one space where harm has been caused, we prepare to re-enter back into the daily fold of our lives and into other spaces where we are negotiating similar dynamics. In relation to the training experience that brought the two of us together as co-writers, and also in relation to the many other training spaces we've drawn on in presenting these ideas, this last step for BIPOC folks is where we find ourselves at the time of writing this piece.

## **Final Thoughts**

As part of our commitment to writing and sharing a piece that is valuable to our communities, we shared this with colleagues before considering publication. A common question that emerged from both white and BIPOC folks was whether we could speak to some ways that these spaces could be safer. We believe that BIPOC folks already know what would make these spaces safer. For white folks in positions of leadership who might convene spaces like this and might seek answers, we don't believe we are the ones to provide them.

Finding answers is a project for white folks; they must come together, re-educate themselves, and wrestle with and resolve to attend to the racial trauma that lives in their bodies as well. We are reminded here of MLK's words, "Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to re-educate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn."

We believe that in every part of the cycle there is an opportunity (or many) not taken by the white folks with power to de-escalate and break out of the cycle in a seemingly simple way, often as simple as listening to what was being asked by the BIPOCs in the room. It is for white folks to do the work of determining what it is in them that prevents them from engaging with these opportunities.

Ultimately we hope that our mapping of this cycle offers the regulation, grounding, and support needed for our BIPOC community to enter white spaces while recognizing and honouring our myriad responses. We also hope that this reads as an invitation and call to white folks to continue taking action to do the work of dismantling racist structures so that this cycle no longer needs to be repeated in this way.

## **Who We Are**

Sacha: I am a Black cisgender heterosexual man currently living on the unceded Coast Salish territories of East Vancouver. My political education comes first from growing up poor in rural white-dominant communities as the only child of a single Black mother who

had emigrated from Haiti as an adult. These experiences taught me lessons about patriarchy, class, colonization, and anti-Blackness that continue to inform my work and life. I am currently a counsellor with an independent practice primarily focused on supporting BIPOC clients. I also teach in a masters level counseling program and do training and consulting on topics related to those being discussed here. My work in different spaces seeks to be connected by the liberatory political goal of supporting those living in the crosshairs of white supremacy, settler colonialism, patriarchy, hetero- & cis-sexism, and racial capitalism (amongst other forces), in their survival, resistance, and liberation.

Jaya: I am a cis-heterosexual South Indian woman, who originally immigrated from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, a state originally colonized by both the French and the British, with my parents and sister in the 1980s. As a brown skinned woman in largely white spaces and as an immigrant with caste privilege and access to many places of privilege including class, education, and sexuality, I constantly navigate the tensions of being betwixt and between power and powerlessness, between belonging and being othered. I am currently a psychotherapist in private practice on unceded Duwamish lands (Seattle). As a politicized healer, I acknowledge that healing takes into account the broader systems that we inhabit and I work to move away from locating pathology in the individual. I see therapy as a space in which dominant narratives around white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism can be challenged and investigated, especially for those who hold more marginalized locations in society; it is a space to articulate a new narrative, possibly one that is subversive in being whole and integrated.