

## New Orleans and the uncertain beyond

### A Report on the recent White Antiracist Leadership Conference

by Jeff Hitchcock

This is not an easy report to write. Although the conference turned out well, one difficulty lies in describing the next step for those who were not there. Another difficulty lies in my role as principal organizer of the event.

Having brought people together, I experienced my role as one of keeping focus on the task of building a collective white antiracist voice and planning a convention. Participants, in many cases, did not know one another, sharing only an interest in white antiracism. Trust between various groups was not always present, although participants did show a willingness to work with the process. Given the ambiguity of the situation, it was entirely possible that as principal organizer I could have become the issue and focus of concern and discontent. Under such circumstances, there would not be room for discussion of other issues and concerns, nor would a broader leadership emerge to take ownership and further the process. Accordingly, once the conference was underway, I stepped out of a leadership role. In the end, I believe that was the correct thing to do, but there is some irony at hand, for I was not party to some of the inner workings of the decision-making process that took place. Consequently, I cannot account for how some significant decisions were actually made.

Leading up to the conference, some people began to question the inherent exclusivity of an invitational process. And while the Advisory Council held a concern that youth be involved, a self-check of our process following a first round of invitations revealed those who committed to coming were still largely a group of middle-class, middle-aged professionals. The Steering Committee then focused intensely on recruiting youth, and by the time the conference took place, a large contingent of youth and young adults was present.

However, many younger participants held a concern that those of older generations were not willing to make a place for them, or respect the already considerable

experience they brought with them from the global justice movement. In effect, as white antiracists, we ran headlong into a classic generation gap; this collision shaped and informed much of the conference.

Thursday evening many of us met informally during the registration period, then shared dialogue over dinner. Later, a “facilitators’ meeting” was held to discuss the next day’s events. The meeting was open to all, and this openness helped set the tone for the conference. Several non-facilitators attended, including a small group of youth. Although there was a basic plan in place, we made key revisions to incorporate youth and women, and introduce a spiritual tone at the outset of the proceedings.

The Center, borrowing a page from Horace Seldon’s book, was acting as a catalyst to a larger process. As a specific organization, we have a specific history, a specific philosophy, and a specific set of alliances that define us. All this is good. We want to have an identity, to stand for something—and we do. But other organizations also have their histories, philosophies, and alliances, and there is no reason to expect they will willingly subsume their identity and stance under ours. The only practical way to build a stable broad-based collective white antiracist voice is through collaboration and shared ownership with other groups. The Thursday night facilitators’ meeting was an important step in that direction.

Friday morning the conference opened with introductory, tone-setting talks. I had the honor of speaking. As a necessary administrative task, I thanked, and then officially retired, the Steering Committee and Advisory Council, freeing the conference, as a collective process, to develop its own leadership.

All day Friday we spent with “process” concerns, getting to know each other and our issues and experiences. Having a surplus of training and organizing experience among us, we understood this was a preliminary and necessary first step toward coming together as a group.

Friday night was cultural sharing, a thoroughly enjoyable evening. Following the evening’s events there was

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**See Conference, back page**

## New to our board

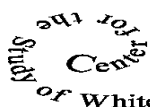
Dee Catarina, Ph. D. is a psychologist/educator who has worked in higher education both as administrator and faculty member for more than two decades. For the past four years, she has been Director of the Graduate Program in Counseling Services at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. As Director of the graduate program, she has redesigned the curriculum to meet national standards, in the process bringing to the program an increased emphasis on multiculturalism that has earned commendations from outside evaluators.

Dr. Catarina presents regularly on a national, state and local level, including presentations at the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), the National Conference for Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education (NCORE), the American Counseling Association (ACA), and the New Jersey Counseling Association. She has done many workshops for teachers in the local public schools.

Dee is currently involved in the development of a Multicultural Research Center for the College of Education. Previously, she chaired the committee to write the charter for the New Jersey State Chapter of the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME). In November of 2000, the charter for the NJ State Chapter was approved at the NAME annual conference, and Dee now serves as President. Her research interests, which include student attitudes toward race and gender, inform her work in multicultural counseling and teacher training.

Dee earned her doctorate from Fordham University in Urban School Psychology and a 2-year postdoctoral certificate in Family Therapy from the State University of New York—while raising 3 children as a single parent. She is currently completing a chapter on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren with a focus on school needs and grandchildren with HIV/AIDS.

Over time our newsletter has slipped to later in the quarter, so that now our "Fall" issue is appearing on the threshold of winter. Look for us to make up some ground with the Winter newsletter, which should appear a couple months from now.



### Center for the Study of White American Culture, Inc.

The *Membership Newsletter* is a publication of the Center for the Study of White American Culture, Inc. sent exclusively to its members 4 times per year. The Center for the Study of White American Culture is a multiracial organization whose mission is to define and examine white United States culture and to address its role in, and impact on, the greater American culture.

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### embers - new and renewing since last issue

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# A Recovering Racist for the Destruction of White Supremacy

What I learned at the leadership conference for a white anti-racist convention, November 14-17

by Kim A. Case

Well, it's confirmed yet again—I am a racist. Make that a Racist with a capital “R.” At a meeting in New Orleans with mostly white anti-racist educators and activists from around the country, I found myself in a swirl of mixed emotions ranging from white guilt to empathy to white defensiveness and back again as one of the few people of color in attendance, Eddie Moore, Jr., put it all into perspective. At the close of our Saturday evening session, Eddie expressed his own frustration, and undoubtedly that of other people of color, with the uncertain outcome of our two days together. He very accurately pointed out that people of color are dying every day because of racism, that we need major changes now to end white supremacy, and that dialogues about racism only occur in a manner that is comfortable for whites. As he spoke, the mood of the room shifted from hopeful “aren't we great white folks working for justice” to anxiety and discomfort.

“If this conference accomplishes nothing, white folks will be just fine.” Sitting next to Eddie and physically absorbing the intensity of his words, the quite effective white supremacy training I have been receiving for 26 years washed over me and erected a barrier of denial that protected me, for the moment, from facing reality. My initial internal dialogue that grew out of my racist training included the self-congratulatory defensiveness of “but we white people are here because we care, we are working toward something bigger.” Mostly, I just wanted his comments to end so that I could retreat into white supremacy culture where Eddie's views are considered “over-sensitive, dramatic, emotional, unappreciative of ‘good whites,’ and undeserving of a response.” The rest of me knew he was speaking the absolute truth. The thoughts and feelings of the Racist within me played tug-o-war with my passion for racial justice and my desire to honor Eddie's valid perspective. As someone pointed out during our weekend together, each time a person of color takes the risk to raise their concerns, their points go unaddressed as we whites collectively move away from the tension toward a comfortable new topic. This is the unconscious power of white supremacy.

As I sit here on the plane back to Cincinnati, I recognize that my own racism can sneak up on me when I least expect it and lead me to invalidate what people of color say. Reflecting on Eddie's comments and those of other people of color during the conference, I am yet again thrust into the reality that my white supremacy training

and internalized dominance automatically trigger thoughts and words designed to silence Eddie's voice and the voices of all people of color. I have been calling myself a white anti-racist for a couple of years, but this experience quickly reminded me of the power of my own deep-seeded racism and the constant comfort that white supremacy culture and structure provides for me. Perhaps the term “anti-racist” unconsciously reinforced the idea that my work was done. Intellectually, I knew I had much more to learn and have always guarded against thoughts that I was “fixed,” but Eddie forced me to face an emotional test of character that proved my racism runs deeper than I will ever know. So what do I call myself? What words will be the most effective in keeping all of this at the forefront of my white supremacist mind? For now, I will think of myself as a recovering Racist for the destruction of white supremacy.

So, I ask of white people—What will be our response to Eddie? Will we silence him in our minds or seize the opportunity to own up to our own racism? It is not enough to identify as an anti-racist, for we are merely one step ahead of whites that feel no connection to racism and identify themselves as colorblind. We may use a systems analysis of racism, recognize white privilege, and show up at anti-racist conferences, but we still have a white supremacist nation that kills people of color every day while we pat ourselves on the back. We, as white recovering Racists, must **truly listen to people of color** and consistently fight the urge to revert to the comfort of white supremacy. If we don't, everyone will know it is because we are assured deep down that “white folks will be just fine.”

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## Conference, from page 1

another facilitators' meeting. I was on the outside of a circle of chairs, and the ambient noise level in the room from other conversations was so loud that I couldn't catch what was going on. However, there seemed to be a sharing of leadership between older and younger leaders, with a commitment to giving the morning program to the younger leadership.

I should mention that it was not a done deal that a convention would be held. Despite the announced intention that we were meeting to plan a convention, not all present endorsed the idea. Concerns were raised as to whether there was such a thing as a white antiracist movement, and even if there was, whether a convention would be the best thing to advance the interests of such a movement. If we had not focused on process stuff for the first day, there would have been no way to get consensus and closure on supporting a convention. But at the same time, the feel good atmosphere engendered by the first day's activities seemed to hold little sense of urgency for moving ahead. It seemed enough for most people just to dialogue, and struggle with philosophical and generational differences. The possibility of planning a convention seemed a distant, secondary, and perhaps expendable goal.

It had been announced that "facilitators" (actually the emerging leadership cohort) would meet at 8 a.m. Saturday morning, an hour before our planned 9 a.m. start, to review the day's plans. With such a laid back atmosphere, I didn't expect much commitment from participants, but when I showed up at 8:30 a.m. there was an active dialogue among more than a dozen leaders who were crafting the final details of the day's agenda. By this time the younger and older leaders seemed to be functioning as a fully integrated group. Through it was not clear that the convention was itself a goal, there was a coming together of leadership across generations.

On the agenda was an item, "Call the question," which was to be a call for a decision on whether to have a convention or not. By the time midday came around, the question had still not been called. At that point, tired of the seemingly endless process, I asked that the question be called. But reassured by the facilitators that it would take place in a little while, I stood aside.

The conference continued through the afternoon. We broke into groups by geographic regions and each region considered what it had to offer in support of a convention. Some favored the idea. Others, such as the California bay area, did not see the need for a convention. As the groups reported out, it was clear there was support for a convention, but it was uneven at best.

At this late point in the afternoon, Eddie Moore, Jr., an African American man, gave voice to the frustration some of us were feeling. A white participant offered the

belief by some others that there were no clearly defined issues today, unlike in the 19th century when slavery led to anti-slavery conventions. How could we possibly say that, Eddie demanded. The white supremacist agenda is now clearly in place with Bush's wartime fanfare and posturing, and an unchecked Republican congress.

Eddie's words gave many something to think about. But at the end of the day, the question still had not been called. I left the conference and ate dinner alone. Others were partying. I didn't feel the spirit. The next morning I went to the meeting hall, expecting again that few people would be there. I felt discouraged and defeated, believing that the conference had failed to form a commitment to holding a convention.

When I arrived I found, once again, several leaders working on the day's agenda. As I listened, it became clear they were organizing a structure to support work toward a convention. It was as if the question had been called overnight, and they were simply going on with the work. How that happened, I have no idea.

We broke into regional groups again and held concurrent planning meetings. Each region appointed a spokesperson to serve on a spokescouncil that will coordinate between regions.

And that's what we came away with. The convention process is moving forward, authority is presently held by the regions and there is no national group charged with setting a date or location for the national event.

So now perhaps you understand the difficulty. I stand accountable to the Center's membership, and I understand that includes reporting on how members can become involved in the next step in the process. However, that "next step," whatever it is, rests in the hands of the individual regions. To complicate matters, it's not clear how people can connect with their regional group. No process has presently been set up for referring new people into regions. As it stands now, you have to know someone.

I expect this will change in the coming weeks. But for now we are up against a deadline to get this report, and newsletter, in the mail. Stay tuned and we will work to bring you further definition. To the several members of the Center who were present in New Orleans, thank you for your participation and support in bringing us to this point.

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