W.A.I.T. (Why Am I Talking?):

A Dialogue on Solidarity, Allyship, and Supporting the Struggle for Racial Justice Without Reproducing White Supremacy

By Geoffrey Leonard and Laura Misumi

Geoffrey Leonard *(a thirty-one-year-old White, middle class, cat-loving native New Yorker pursuing a dual JD/MPP at Georgetown University) and* **Laura Misumi** *(a twenty-eight-year-old, middle class, Japanese American from the suburbs of Boston, and law fellow at the Service Employees International Union, or SEIU) have a sprawling conversation on the role of allies in multi-racial organizing spaces, and the role of lawyers (both White and people of color) in organizing space;, multi-racial organizing in general; the failures of allies; and the importance of cultural competency—all from a wildly personal (and mostly anecdotal) place. Their perspectives represent their own experiences, and not the view of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), any of its chapters, or any other organization.*

Laura Misumi graduated with high distinction from the University of Michigan in 2009, double majoring in political science and Latin American and Caribbean studies, with a minor in Asian/Pacific Islander American studies. As co-chair of the flagship Asian American student organization at the University of Michigan, Misumi worked with fellow students on Asian American issues and how they connect to multiracial issues of immigration and workers' rights.

Upon graduation, Misumi worked on the "Clean and Safe Ports" campaign with Puget Sound Sage in Seattle through the Center for Third World Organizing's Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program, and served as an AmeriCorps volunteer Youth Civic Engagement Specialist at the United Teen Equality Center in Lowell, Massachusetts. Before law school, she served as a National Teaching Fellow and Family and Student Engagement Lead at Van Buren Middle School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, through Citizen Schools. Misumi was a public interest law scholar at Northeastern University School of Law, a member of the National Lawyers Guild, co-chair of Harvard Law School Asian Pacific Law Students Association, representative on the Committee Against Institutional Racism, and vice-chair of communications for the Student Bar Association. She is currently the Home Care Law Fellow at the SEIU. She loves food.

Geoffrey Leonard is a native New Yorker. He studied anthropology and English at Goucher College, where he earned a BA in 2008. From 2008 until 2010, he did Hurricane Katrina recovery work, serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA, community outreach officer, and case manager with Rebuilding Together New Orleans, and a housing tester with the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center. Between 2010 and 2012, Leonard worked as a legal advocate at the Urban Justice Center's Homeless Outreach and Prevention Project, where he represented welfare and food stamp recipients at admin-

istrative hearings to contest illegal denials or withdraws of benefits. He also helped organize the Urban Justice Center's staff union under UAW NOLSW Local 2320, and served on the unit's first bargaining committee.

He is currently pursuing a dual degree in law and public policy at the Georgetown University Law Center and the McCourt School of Public Policy. As a student, Leonard has been an active member of the Georgetown Law chapter of the National Lawyers Guild, serving at various times as their treasurer, communications officer, and member of the steering committee. During school, he was a Peggy Browning Fellow at the DC Employment Justice Center, interned at Make the Road NY, and clerked with the SEIU. After graduation, he will be replacing Misumi as the Gleichman Fellow for Home Care at the SEIU. He loves cats.

On the Role of Allies in Organizing Against White Supremacy

LEONARD: In thinking through the role of allies, two things. First, I think that anti-racist and anti-oppression work should be led by the folks who bear the brunt of racism/oppression. So when it comes to amplifying Black voices in the struggle against anti-Black racism, I think White folks and all non-Black people doing ally/solidarity work should be playing a supporting role, not trying to lead.[1] Which is hard for us as White people, because we've been told our whole lives that our opinion and sense of self is central. So, stepping back, shutting up, and realizing that you're there if you're useful and that's about it, is really challenging.

Second, I think that there is room for White people to lead anti-racist work in the White community and I think that's really important. I think of the Stokely Carmichael critique of White liberals hiding out in the Black community because the White community is, say, hostile to their ideas of racial justice and it's just like, "that's cute," but it's super counterproductive.[1] There's another Stokely Carmichael quote about White folks needing to organize their own community.[2] The major force driving anti-Black racism and White supremacy is the extent to which White people have gained material and psychological benefits from White supremacy and then denied its existence through the entire ideology of White supremacy.

> White people committed to Black liberation have an obligation to push the White community and its institutions to just do better—to be less racist, to confront the history of their privilege, and to understand how it is pervasive and inescapable through mere personal atonement and hand-wringing, but requires both not constantly reproducing White supremacy in everything we do, and challenging White supremacist institutions.

While perhaps too much of an aside, and somewhat difficult to even imagine, I think this ultimately requires people of all races working to both end Whiteness as an identity, and end capitalism as a system of allocating resources. They are mutually reinforcing systems that justify and perpetuate the denial of full equality to all but those who own the means of production, but especially people of color and Black people. Derrick Bell's Faces at the Bottom of the Well and Karen and Barbara Fields's Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life are good starting places for understanding the relationship between White supremacy and capitalism.

MISUMI: Yes, to one. Also, I feel like a key component is a healthy dose of humility and the ability to take it when folks call you out. Some White folks have done more work than others, but at the end

[1] **MISUMI**: To add a shade of nuance, while anti-Black racism and the legacy of slavery is in many ways much worse than how White supremacy affects other people of color, I'm hesitant to describe it in such a way as to make a hierarchy of oppression. It's too easy for those who do not have such a nuanced view of White supremacy and American history to then say things along the lines of, we'll get to your [other non-Black POCs, including indigenous folks] issues later, because this is the most pressing and the worst. It manifests in different ways for sure, but there will be no dismantling of White supremacy without a full and comprehensive understanding of ALL the ways in which it operates and manifests itself, INCLUDING internalized White Supremacy that conveys some benefits at great cost.

of the day, no matter what amount of work you've done (as a White person), it is still not the same as experiencing [the effects of] White supremacy as a person of color (POC). Sometimes you will be called out in ways that are hurtful. Sometimes you will be called out when you think you already know. And, in those moments, you have to swallow your pride and take it, because it's important to recognize that we as people of color have to fucking swallow our pride and take microaggressions and the weight of White supremacy every day and get on with our lives without blowing up and getting defensive every time.

> "This also crystallized the importance of something that I think a lot of White folks, including myself, struggle with: noticing when space is all or majority White, and that that, itself, is White supremacy."

We have to pick and choose our battles because, as you said, White supremacy is everywhere. A real important step is to recognize that the calling out, the anger, it's not necessarily personal, often what's being called out is one example and is but emblematic of larger issues. We all slip up, but when White folks slip up in being anti-racist, the default, then, is being racist. This is a process. It's fine to make mistakes—most people don't want to be racist—but we live in a White supremacist, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchy. And when we're not actively fighting against it, the status quo persists as it's meant to.

LEONARD: Right. For example, with the student chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) at Georgetown.[3] When I joined, at least, and the year the NLG got involved in the struggle for racial justice on campus and became more active in off-campus activism, it was essentially a de facto White, middle class, liberal/progressive/"radical" space. This has changed over time, with more people of color joining and taking on leadership roles in the NLG—our current president is Black—so much of this is from the perspective I had when we were a White-led, majority-White organization. However, the organization continues to have a number of White members, so we have continued to be careful around the role we play both as an organization, and how White members are specifically involved. It has been crucial that all of the campus activism we have been involved in around racial justice has been in partnership with Black students and students of color, not nominally, but robustly, through building institutional relationships with affinity groups and students of color that are organizing and offering resources and support from NLG when desired and useful.[2] It's also meant deferring to the leadership of Black and POC members of the NLG. For example, we've participated in die-ins that centered Black students (they spoke, they "died," they directed the messaging on signs); we've helped edit letters, reserved rooms, or used our budget to provide food for meetings. We've also gone to meetings with White faculty/administrators to support voices of Black students.

However, we've made mistakes. For example, White NLG students, when the organization was White-led, did initiate a protest on campus, where we stood outside of the cafeteria on campus holding signs about structural racism in the legal system. This was interesting because there were so few students of color and Black students who participated. It was the NLG's day of action around police violence and the murder of Black men and women by police. We organized at the last minute and reached out too late to the groups - specifically the Black Law Students Association (BLSA) and the Coalition—even though we had been supporting and working in solidarity with these groups at earlier actions.[4] We tried to remedy this mistake by centering students of color and Black students at the action. I think, initially, a POC member of the NLG noticed how few folks of color were at the protest, which speaks to the frustrating and perpetual role POCs are forced to play in holding White folks accountable. In that moment we handled it well, not by getting defensive, but by taking some time to reach out

[2] **MISUMI**: Though, as this is all part of an ongoing process, let's recognize that you contrast "all" with a story of NLG organizing a protest that had few POCs, so in an exercise of humility, the "all" is something y'all are still working towards.

to students of color who had expressed interest, see if they were available, and centering POC and Black students who participated. This also crystallized the importance of something that I think a lot of White folks, including myself, struggle with: noticing when space is all or majority White, and that that, itself, is White supremacy.

> "This is another crucial component of what it means to be an ally, to really think about what it means to give up something and to have an idea of how much of yourself and how much of what you've earned and built for yourself is dependent upon a system—a system that, if pulled from beneath you, would cause you to personally lose power, social standing, and actual things."

There's also another side to this. Georgetown University Law Center (GULC) is a White institution, so directly confronting GULC requires organizing against both interpersonal and institutional racism. So at times, I think it has been appropriate and even necessary for White students and non-Black POCs in the NLG, or wherever, to take on more robust roles in challenging and pushing the institution. For example, when Darren Wilson and Daniel Pantaleo were not indicted, myself and another White student put flyers on every seat in every classroom, which acknowledged the non-indictment and stated, "As law students, we are training for a legal system that does not value Black life. What is your role?" While we collaborated with Black students on the language and the decision to flyer, this felt appropriate as an action for White people to take, in part because it did not center White students, but mostly because it was an attempt to confront our community with its role in structural and systemic racism and White supremacy. Likewise, another White NLG member organized a White privilege study group that, though not exclusively White, it often ended up being a space largely for teaching White people about White supremacy.

But more generally, this kind of White-facing work, on a personal level, can be tedious and hard. It requires not severing ties with racist White people in your life, but instead actually talking to them about race. And I still struggle with this. For example, I have many friends who are "apolitical" in that they feel they are not affirmatively saying bigoted shit, but are certainly not doing anything to advance racial justice, and are also passively sexist and racist all the time. And it may be "boring" to bring it up all the time but they are my community, that's how that works—and White people should absolutely be out in front on in their own community. That being said, I feel like White-facing work can risk becoming very self-indulgent and ineffectively penitent, especially if it becomes about just excising the racism inside of us without acknowledging that personal racism is only a part of a much broader system or White supremacy and oppression, and without organizing against that system, from the criminal justice system, to property ownership, to capitalism itself, you can't end White supremacy. Additionally, in doing that work it's important to do your due diligence around knowing history and, where possible, have people of color in your life and organizations that you can be accountable to.

Yet, even with all these potential pitfalls, there's just so much really easy individual-level work that even if done in a ham-handed way is still usually a step in the right direction. For example, I've had some real success with my parents, just by sending them articles about White supremacy. Or, by asking my parents—and now my brother—to donate money to Black Youth Project 100 for my birthday and holidays. That's just better than being totally silent about it or not doing anything. In that sense, everyone doesn't have to be—nor should they be—at the forefront of the movement, but everyone should be accountable to our collective progress.

MISUMI: Right. Which makes me think of this comparison between the language of the New Left versus the post-New Left specifically around the shift from the term "solidarity" to "allyship."[5] And I think allyship is a way less useful term. First, allyship is passive; it's an inert state, and therefore

does not explicitly require action. On the other hand, you can't passively be in solidarity, you have to actually take actions against White supremacy to be in solidarity with someone, and you're only in solidarity to the extent you are doing something. Second, solidarity makes clear that even for White people, ending White supremacy—and capitalism and patriarchy—is necessary for their liberation, too, and that freeing themselves from participation in oppression of people of color is ultimately in their best interest. I don't think "ally" really conveys that.

On the Failure of Allies

MISUMI: So, where do allies fail? I definitely feel that as a non-Black person of color, if I'm trying to do organizing around Black Lives Matter, I want to stand in solidarity and take direction from Black folks that are organizing. Being an ally is much more passive, like, "I theoretically support your movement and so I will say I stand with you," as opposed to me actively standing with you and being more proactive around what I can do within my own community, or me showing up and articulating what I can bring while respecting the space I've entered into. That requires a lot of introspection and in-group conversation—what does it mean to be in solidarity?

I think the biggest failure of allies is when they value their self-identity of being an "ally" over doing any actual "ally" shit, since this rarely is used through a designation that some panel of POCs has bestowed upon the folks that assume it's most often an accolade one gives themselves. To be an "ally" without actually doing anything perpetuates White supremacy because, again, we have to remember that without active resistance, the default of White supremacy continues as it's meant to.

Additionally, allies fail in being able to truly understand White supremacy because it is so utterly all encompassing that it's really hard to replicate a comparable scenario of which they can relate. Pick a time when you were incredibly uncomfortable in your social surroundings. What about it made it really uncomfortable for you? Imagine that being your default situation and then counterbalance it with the different coping mechanisms you've developed, or that you've been taught by your family to navigate those spaces to make it less oppressive. How much of your behavior has changed because of that and how much of yourself have you lost every day living that way? I don't know if you've ever seen "The Color of Fear."[6] It's amazing, a documentary by Lee Mun Wah, and involves a group of men of different races in a room talking about race. It's incredible, though clearly limited in scope but helpful nonetheless.

> "There was a lot of deliberate thinking about who would speak at the action and what the signs would say. Ultimately, the majority of participants in the action were Black students, so there was limited risk of centering White students—even by accident. I believe that's how our thinking should be guided moving forward: reaching out to Black students organizing on campus and offering our resources and support."

One line that really stood out is when the darker-skinned Black man, who works in corporate America, said "I just can't wait to go home at the end of the day so I can be Black again." For those of us non-Black people of color who have been positioned more able to assimilate as White, it's not entirely the same. For me, being fourth generation, I didn't feel the same kind of cultural disconnect coming home. But it's so pervasive in every aspect of yourself that it's difficult to unpack and to be able to describe the most egregious aspects of it is only the tip of the iceberg, you know?

LEONARD: Yeah. I mean, I think growing up in New York I got really lucky or unlucky in a lot of ways in that I never got to not be White. Just like growing up in a city where at least fifty percent of my friend group was people of color, meant that fifty percent of my friend group was also White, I didn't get to be raceless. I didn't get the invisibility of it, and that had effects in other stupid ways. I definitely thought that reverse racism was a thing for a while because I was made fun of for being White and just did not appreciate the power dynamic. Like, the idea that for White people, you have to take whatever sort of discomfort you have around race, and multiply that by the constant threat of lethal violence. I feel like I've had that conversation with a couple White folks and that has been somewhat helpful in getting the wheels turning . . .

MISUMI: But it's so interesting because it's a constant process and has to be ongoing and that's what's difficult. I feel like I have talked to White friends about this a lot and they just don't want to engage. But this is what it means: it's your responsibility as an "ally" to at least try because that's our day-to-day all the time, and it should not be on people of color to teach White people both about White supremacy and how to dismantle it.

LEONARD: And who cares if they're not going to change necessarily; this isn't necessarily about changing minds, this is also about . . .

MISUMI: Doing work . . .

LEONARD: Yeah, but also, by not calling it out as unacceptable, you allow it to be acceptable. And I think that calling out White racism by another White person is helpful if it's done in a way that, even if not effective at changing minds, is effective at changing what is an acceptable way to be, to act. It's a step in the right direction.

MISUMI: But it's not always as effective for a person of color to say that because it may only feed into it. They may be admonished for being over sensitive, and maybe even be retaliated against. That's even worse. Then you have someone doubling down on their racism.

On Lawyering to Dismantle the White Supremacist Capitalist Cisheteropatriarchy

LEONARD: Another huge mistake for solidarity work is thinking of yourself as a savior or lone change-maker. This is especially a problem for lawyers. The story that a lot of us have been told—specifically White lawyers interested in social justice—is that you're going to be in the trenches with folks, which literally means, having worked in legal services for two years, doing nothing to empower people to deal with their problems on their own, but certainly constantly getting to feel like a hero . . .

MISUMI: Though not not necessary work . . .

LEONARD: No, no, no, you're absolutely right. It's still very necessary work. I think the organization, Make the Road, really gets it right in calling it "survival services." It's about people in the community making it, not to the rally, but to the next day. But also I think you should do legal services in a way that empowers people. Like in almost every poor people's court, pro se defendants represent themselves and could be trained by lawyers to do so and to even represent others.7 Also combining legal services with organizing, like the anti-displacement program used by Legal Services of New York, or Make the Road, which works with organizers to conduct building-wide representation and to set up tenants' associations.

Then I think the flip side is the civil rights lawyer who imagines bringing a case that changes the law and the world. That's how I thought the law worked when I came to law school. I was inspired by cases like Goldberg v. Kelley that looked like proof that we can change the world through smart litigation. But I soon realized that this was really just about who was on the Supreme Court at the time . . . and they're not on the court anymore. And when that happened, smart litigation became something of a dead end on a lot of issues, especially racial and economic justice.

MISUMI: The idea of it—lawyers as the gatekeepers of justice—is inherently disempowering. The

whole purpose of being an attorney as defined by the Model Rules of Professional Responsibility dictates what decisions a client can make, and what decisions a lawyer can make, and whether or not you even have an obligation to tell your client about certain things. It seems a little at odds to anyone's idea of social justice in terms of empowering people to be able to actualize, and do and be and achieve what they want in their lives.

> "So, my approach is similar, but employs more intention on working across racial lines within POC-only spaces, [and] requires a huge amount of humility and acknowledgment of difference. The power dynamics are different."

Law school, these rules, the profession, they fail to acknowledge the inherently disempowering relationship between an attorney and a client. Like the whole purpose of law school, the Bar Exam, and the system of licensure is to prevent just anyone from doing it. This whole ridiculous pedagogy of case law, briefing of going through a faux-intellectual (horrible) experience is to create separation; the system tries to weed people out and make people fail. To make people leave they're so discouraged because it doesn't make any sense—when you take a step back and look at the actual practice, you're not writing anything new; it's not a new theory, it's all the recycling arguments that you've done before. Everything comes from what has already come. Everything is based in precedent. You can try and wiggle, and you can try and distinguish, but it's distinguishing on the premise that your scenario is novel, but is it really?

LEONARD: Yeah, we've definitely tried—and though sometimes failed—to push at GULC this idea that lawyering is not the centerpiece of social justice or social movements, and have tried to make the NLG a space people can go for reframing legal work with that in mind. Which is largely about understanding the history of the NLG. For instance, we did a talk with Anthony Cook, a professor at Georgetown Law, who studies social movements and their impact on the law, about the history of the NLG as distinct from other groups involved in the civil rights movement. The idea being that the NLG, at the time, was a group that showed up subordinated themselves to [the] SNCC and other groups that were doing mass-movement work, as opposed to co-opting it and doing strategic litigation and then just leaving. Despite their legal expertise and even long-standing history, they respected the role of organizers and organized people and mass movements, and the power that they held as the real force for social change.

On Organizing in Law School

LEONARD: Well, you know the rules of organizing are one, you pick the campaign yourself, independent of the people it affects, and two, you start in the place that is as far from where oppressed people confront the power that oppresses them: the voting booth.

Oh wait, no. Those are both the things not to do.

MISUMI: I received organizing training at the Center for Third World Organizing's Movement Activist Apprenticeship Program, and most of my organizing was done as a college student with the United Asian American Organizations at the University of Michigan, through AmeriCorps as a Youth Organizer in Lowell, Masschusetts, and as a teaching fellow in Albuquerque, New Mexico through Citizen Schools.8 These contexts are so different from the law school environment—so much so that I think of them as experiences and methodologies utterly distinct.

The NLG at Northeastern University School of Law was a catchall progressive space—if you have any left-leaning politics and/or are in an affinity group (since most law school affinity groups have professional ties and can't necessarily take the most radical stances), you come to NLG and we can take action on some of those things. Since Northeastern's NLG runs by "consensus," it quickly became clear that without any structure, the ones with the loudest voices, the most time, the most will to take initiative, and the most patience for bullshit, for example, would be the de facto

leadership of the organization, even if they think they are just serving the broad consensus.

At some point it no longer becomes a space that is actively participating in breaking down systems of White supremacy, or even acknowledging that they exist. Instead, and I'm speaking generally, it becomes a space where a bunch of White anarchists talk about all the things they want to do and email their only Black friend to send something "to their networks," when what they really mean is BLSA listserv. It shouldn't just be you reaching out to the person of color you know, you should reach out to the appropriate person in the organization you are trying to work with, the person in that organization's leadership you should be working with already.

> "Through racial-justice organizing in law school, my idea of community has crystallized a bit: my community is affluent liberals who fully participate in, and arguably, perpetuate White supremacy more than some dated redneck with a confederate flag."

This is an excellent—horrible?—example of what not to do when White folks are organizing themselves. I've talked about this before but it bears repeating: this work CANNOT be a White folks' circle jerk of sadness and impotence—real critical steps need to be taken and conversations need to be had that result in White folks who want to be in solidarity with Black liberation struggles and with other non-Black POCs attempting to fully understand their power and privilege and at least have a working understanding of what White supremacy is on multiple levels—even if it doesn't come from a place of real empathy.

LEONARD: Yeah, as a comparison, I feel something White students in the GULC NLG—and the GULC NLG as a multi-racial but majority White organization—have tried with varying successes is to actively cultivate relationships between our leadership and the leadership of organizations representing and led by students of color that are also organizing around racial justice. During my 2L year, when our NLG was largely White and White-led, we were approached by students of color who wanted to organize an action in the months following Mike Brown's killing. We showed up to the planning meeting and took direction from the Black students, their decision, and their vision on what they wanted to do. We discussed and we participated. There was a lot of deliberate thinking about who would speak at the action and what the signs would say. Ultimately, the majority of participants in the action were Black students, so there was limited risk of centering White students—even by accident. I believe that's how our thinking should be guided moving forward: reaching out to Black students organizing on campus and offering our resources and support. When the Coalition at Georgetown issued a letter of demands for addressing racial justice on campus, the Coalition reached out to the NLG to send a letter of support.[9] In part, this was because Coalition members were also NLG members, but also because the Coalition knew that Georgetown is a White [supremacist] institution and having as many voices, including White voices, calling for racial justice, would amplify the call.

However, despite increasing the number of students of color members of NLG and reaching out to spread awareness of what our organization represents, at some point, and sometimes it feels inescapable, that the NLG just is a predominately White organization at least at GULC.

MISUMI: Why?

LEONARD: I don't know why entirely. I think some of it has to do with predominantly White leadership in past years. But, I also think it attracts a crowd that generically identify as "activists," and those who identify as "activists" in law school often are White, relatively privileged, and have sought out social justice struggle as a form of identity, for reasons you talk about. But, I also think we're also sort of a small, obscure organization—though less so than we used to be—so given how segregated social networks often are, if you bring in somebody to the organization and you are White, odds are

you're inviting another White person. With this in mind, we've made conscious efforts to explicitly reach out to students of color to join the NLG and do work that is led by members of color. But all encompassing is the fact that, at GULC, any space that is not explicitly reserved for students of color just gets taken over by White people. We tend to be really entitled, so unless we are explicitly excluded, we become a majority when we already make-up 85-90 percent of an institution.

MISUMI: I think it's interesting that you raised it in terms getting more people of color into the NLG, because I think from my perspective, the NLG has some internal work to do before I would want to subject more people of color to it. I'd be interested to hear how GULC NLG students of color feel about the internal work you all have done. And I think that obviously it's hard to have a perspective on race when you grow up White and are surrounded by White people. How can you empathize with something you've never seen, experienced, or had any contact with? What does institutional racism feel like on a personal level? It's very difficult to describe.

I've experienced this on several different occasions when I'm in a completely White space and have mentioned that I was the only person of color in that room. They've said something along the lines of, "Oh really? I didn't notice." They weren't able to register that experience as a feeling—like, unable to understand what it means to be completely alienated. And yeah, they can travel the world and be the only White person in a space and have a novel experience, but they then can just leave and return to a world in which they feel completely normal. You are everywhere, things are made for you, and the world feels right because the world is comfortable. In that space, there are a lot of things that you no longer have to think about. It's easy to take for granted.

That's my hesitation when people say, like, reaching out to people and trying to build relationships with POCs. It needs to be organic; you also have to put in fucking work to know that just because you're friends with a POC, that doesn't mean you use that person as your POC connection for all things POC. As a non-Black POC, when I walk into a room, I'm always thinking about what those dynamics are, what is the program, who is here, who is leading this meeting? Who is talking already? And, if it's an open Q and A, I'm not ever going to be the first person to raise my hand if I'm not leading the meeting or if it's not a meeting for me. I'm going to see who's raising their hand first because that's always telling—it shows whether or not the ground rules have been laid and if people are aware of those dynamics.

I remember being at a report back from Ferguson that was led by Black folks and moderated by another person of color, and the first two people to raise their hands were White men. I was just like, come on, you're in a mixed group talking about serious issues of race in this country—be aware of yourself. This is a level of entitlement that is innate and so subconscious for most White people: it's important for me, as a White person, to voice my opinion because we have earned our place to be here. And therefore, important for you, person of color, to hear my thoughts because I am truly an individual and my opinion is unique.

> "Had this not happened to my people, I don't know if they [or I] would have looked to other diasporas and other communities to find commonalities and ways to build power together."

Which is seductive. People put work in all the time, so it's easy to believe you've earned the right to have an opinion. Like, you've done the work and you've done the reading and it's really hard to separate that from knowing whether your opinion or your regurgitation of that article you read is really what's necessary at this moment, or whether it's a time for people to have a space to reflect personally on how they felt about that situation. So especially as lawyers, we've been trained to think that the only things that matter

are objective and subjective intent, and that the law is written in an objective way and that context doesn't matter. So, it's hard not to replicate that limited frame in activist spaces in law school. I think that especially with NLG, there are a lot of lawyers who wish they were organizers and don't understand that there is a very specific time and place for legal skills and that legal frame, and it's really narrow.

So what role do we have as non-Black POCs organizing in solidarity with Black liberation? I think that being Asian American and being involved in Asian American activist spaces in Boston, it is really important for us to be really cognizant of what it means to be in solidarity and have a full understanding of the breadth and the diversity of experience of who constitutes "Asian American." This perspective is really important. A lot of Asian American organizing starts with the premise of the model minority, which is really trite as it arose post-World War II and reflects a very particular part of our history.[10] It's really important to think about what it means to identify as a POC and locate your type of Asian identity within the spectrum of Asian American history overall, from the 1740s to the present, and then locate what that means to be your kind of Asian as related to other POCs. For example, I believe affirmative action is a fake controversial issue in the Asian American community. But, when it comes up and when people don't know the history of these policies, the outcome is again dependent upon this issue of context, whose story, and what space.

The Asian American organizations I know that work on issues of racial justice, like CAAAV (Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence) in New York, CPA (Chinese Progressive Association) in Boston and San Francisco, NAPAWF (National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum), Khmer Girls in Action, spend a lot of time talking about this, about what it means that you come standing on the shoulders of others. What does it mean, that you were shipped in after successive waves of other immigrants and other people of color and slavery, to do labor in this country? How do you locate yourself and your family, and what does it mean to still be here? What does it mean to not only stand on civil rights successes, and all of the racial justice work that has come before by other POCs and also Asian Americans themselves, and to have your immigrant experience be utterly divorced from that? It's really complicated.

LEONARD: In thinking about organizing White folks, I struggled with a somewhat similar thing. I remember hearing "go organize your own community" and feeling like, well okay, I guess I'm moving to suburban Connecticut or rural St. Bernard Parish since I'm White. But that's not my community, either. Through racial-justice organizing in law school, my idea of community has crystallized a bit: my community is affluent liberals who fully participate in, and arguably, perpetuate White supremacy more than some dated redneck with a confederate flag.

Using Georgetown's resources to fix White people has been a consistent refrain throughout a lot of this organizing. I think about 1Ls coming in and the opportunity to confront their racism. And, of course, this has come with confrontation. While we call for race-centered courses, an increase in student and faculty diversity, and/or mandatory implicit bias training, White students have articulated that they don't need these things, that they're outside of the "race equation," that race affects only a small segment of the population, and the rest of us live in a race-neutral world. Breanne Palmer, a founding member of the Coalition, suggested a goal be that we "stop graduating racists." That's a tall order, but focusing on that has felt more like organizing my own community than any sort of White liberal fantasy about organizing poor White communities. So, we try to figure out ways to make Georgetown better and use its resources to fundamentally change how White people view themselves and the world.

In doing so, historical context is extremely important. Realizing that the suburb you grew up in was made—and entirely relied upon—the exclusion of Black people in order to maintain its wealth, and that the entire system of property ownership in this country was predicated on wealth accumulated by White people—and European and other immigrants who adopted anti-Black

racism to earn a White identity or proximity to Whiteness. Or, that the only way to fix this is by redistributing that property. There is no racial justice mechanism through which White people don't lose property and power.

MISUMI: Yes, exactly. This is another crucial component of what it means to be an ally, to really think about what it means to give up something and to have an idea of how much of yourself and how much of what you've earned and built for yourself is dependent upon a system—a system that, if pulled from beneath you, would cause you to personally lose power, social standing, and actual things. Most people probably have not actually thought about that, so when you're in mixed spaces and you're talking about these things, it can make folks really uncomfortable really quickly. But even White allies can say, "Of course it's not a meritocracy, it's all built upon X-Y-Z, but my opinion is still important and my experience is still something that is important to share with this group at this particular time."

On the Importance of Personal Connections to Struggles for Racial Justice

LEONARD: I think if you cannot understand it in the abstract, you need some personal connection or experience with things against the "norm," and a capacity for empathy. It's hard for me to say how I developed this connection, though. I'm relatively privileged, but I've also been through a lot.

As a teenager dealing with mental health issues, I was twice the victim of minor, but incredibly scary, police violence. I had a really awful home environment that invited me to reject "the dream" of White supremacist material security on an abstract level. I grew up in a largely integrated environment. I spent two years in reform school, from fifteen to seventeen. I also had the intellectual and personal frame from having lefty parents. So, my younger years were spent trying to learn an accurate history of oppression in America—in part because I felt frustrated and dislocated by the status quo, despite being privileged by it in a lot of ways.

I did a lot of anti-poverty work in college, which allowed me to have direct contact with folks dealing with some incredibly severe, and obviously structural, personal trauma, and PTSD after Hurricane Katrina. But even still, I was egotistical in a lot of ways, since for a lot of my youth, I definitely didn't understand my own role or ways I reproduced White supremacy. I think that's maybe the key. I was a shitty ally then, but I had the motivation to try and the willingness to learn. Maybe my own bullshit growing up gave me the willingness to listen and just suck it up when I messed up—to admit my faults and come back if it was helpful to have me there.

MISUMI: I think an emotion and personal connection—beyond the abstract—is absolutely a prerequisite, but it doesn't necessarily have to be direct. I derive my politics and views from a very personal place, knowing the history of my family in this country and how White supremacy has completely changed the trajectory of my community, my family, and myself. Had we not been "evacuated" and "interned" during World War II, there's a really good chance that my grandparents on both sides would still have met, gotten married, and remained within San Francisco's Japantown and been a part of a thriving JA community in the Bay Area.

Perhaps those communities would still be there and thriving, rather than suffering the consequence of racist "redevelopment" policies in the '60s and '80s, and gentrification today. While my grandparents on my dad's side ended up back in San Francisco, my mom's parents were able to get out of the camps early to finish their education outside of California. After my maternal grandmother graduated from BU, they settled in Connecticut as the only JA family in their town. But none of my grandparents ever talked about the camps.

So, many Sansei, like my parents, (third-generation Japanese Americans, the generation most likely born after the camps) didn't learn about the camps until college. They came of age during the fight for ethnic studies and the growth of the Black power movement. They cut their teeth on anti-war

organizing and fighting for third-world liberation and anti-colonialist struggles abroad. My parents actually met while organizing with the Committee Against Nihonmachi (Japantown) Eviction, a fight against the second round of redevelopment/erasure efforts in San Francisco to destroy Japantown after the war, and to further separate the Black and Japanese American communities. They joined the League of Revolutionary Struggle, an organization whose purpose was to unite different third-world communist organizations to organize collectively against the White supremacist, imperialist, and capitalist patriarchy at home, while also supporting independence struggles abroad.[11]

"Cultural competency/anti-oppression trainings can be crucial for one, providing basic knowledge about oppression and cultural difference, two, pushing people to think about how their own perspectives and behaviors can reproduce oppression and are entirely informed by oppressive systems rather than objectivity, and three, providing people the tools to have these conversations with others—so we all can learn how to keep ourselves in check. But unless there are tools for enforcement, or the training is tied into a larger institutional values, then it can easily just lead to our outcome at Georgetown: 'that was too hard on White people.'"

Eventually they worked with the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations, organizing their Nisei and Issei elders to present testimony before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in support of the redress and reparations struggle. They did so with a particular lens, one that stood in solidarity with other POCs seeking reparations/redress of some kind—including indigenous sovereignty and reparations for slavery.

They gave me my politics and the lens through which I see the world. They worked directly, and in solidarity with, other POC organizations carrying a strong Asian American identity. And through all of this, it all comes back to the personal. Had this not happened to my people, I don't know if my parents would have felt so strongly about rebuilding connections between Japanese Americans and Japantown. Had this not happened to my people, I don't know if they [or I] would have looked to other diasporas and other communities to find commonalities and ways to build power together.

On Cultural Competency and Cultural Competency Training

LEONARD: The first formal anti-racist training I ever took part in was the pilot "subversive" cultural competency training organized by the NLG and the Coalition at Georgetown Law. Recently, I took part in another one in Baltimore, one that focused on how to be a White person supporting Black Lives Matter at Law for Black Lives. Though I enjoyed both and definitely got a lot out of them regarding thinking about privilege, I also felt like I already understood to a degree. And this understanding was through trial-by-fire, real-life cultural competency "trainings" through working in organizations where women and people of color had power over me. Where I was actually confronted with my bullshit, and I could witness how my actions made other people uncomfortable. And even through having friends of color who would actually call me out when my privilege needed to be checked.

Cultural competency/anti-oppression trainings can be crucial for one, providing basic knowledge about oppression and cultural difference, two, pushing people to think about how their own perspectives and behaviors can reproduce oppression and are entirely informed by oppressive systems rather than objectivity, and three, providing people the tools to have these conversations with others—so we all can learn how to keep ourselves in check. But unless there are tools for enforcement, or the training is

tied into a larger institutional values, then it can easily just lead to our outcome at Georgetown: "that was too hard on White people." Perhaps had this not been an extracurricular activity, but actually a required part of new student orientation, I think the outcome would have been different. I think it would have helped set the tone and legitimize the administration's alleged attempts and commitment to push back against student racism, sexism, etcetera.

MISUMI: I think as a person of color growing up in a White town, I learned many aspects of cultural competency by virtue of survival and osmosis. I learned how to be Japanese American at home and I learned really quick how different the White world is and how to navigate it, because I had to. I already look different. I already eat different things, and have different cultural traditions. So, I had to develop a strategy early to deal with the ignorant comments.

So, my approach is similar, but employs more intention on working across racial lines within POC-only spaces, [and] requires a huge amount of humility and acknowledgment of difference. The power dynamics are different. I recognize the impact of the middleman theory and the damage the model minority myth has done both internally and across racial lines for how AAPIs relate to, and work in solidarity with, other POCs.[12] It is important to constantly do work to understand this and to organize with my fellow AAPIs to come to multi-racial spaces with the right intentions, the right humility. We're not here to tell you our struggle is the same as yours, or that the oppression we face is worse; we're here to stand beside you. And I'm a big proponent of using food to bring people together across cultural lines. The Feast of Resistance is a great way to begin a dialogue on history, both intragroup and intergroup, and is an especially good tool for multi-racial organizing in a POC-only space.[13] I've even done it with ethnic White folks and that's pretty cool, too.

I also truly believe in the crucial importance of ethnic studies in developing radical pedagogy that is both culturally competent and consciousness-raising. This gives space to question and critique the historiographical approach that's taught as the only proper way to learn about history and people, and it goes beyond a pure historical materialism approach to recognize the importance of culture, folklore, tradition, beliefs, faith, stories, and how people create identity for themselves and give value to it. We need not learn about our people as comparative to Western civilization. To learn about our people, we don't need to give credit only to the sources we've read in $500 textbooks. We can follow the principle of "each one, teach one," where the community is both a source of knowledge and an active participant in learning. This had such a huge influence on me as an organizer and later as an educator. How do we value the stories our people tell us and treat their narrative as important as the objective, logical, rational cause and effect of policy?

Conclusion

MISUMI: I think a lot of what I've experienced in multi-racial organizing is about learning to listen, to be open, patient, and try to find where people are at and where they are in terms of being able to hear certain things. We've got to understand what it means to be held accountable and how to hold oneself accountable. How to recognize a teachable moment and how to pass on a shitty opportunity for a better one, and trust that the relationships we build with each other, will result in more, and better, opportunities.

LEONARD: It's still super difficult to get called out and be held accountable. But, it's a privilege to even have people who are willing to put in that time, so squandering that by being defensive or not doing constant work to hold myself accountable is so much worse. Sometimes that means just saying some dumb shit, couched in terms of, "but, okay, I feel this way, but ultimately I know you're right." And it's definitely gotten easier to deal with, and maybe more importantly, I think I have gotten much better at not outwardly expressing any number of discomforts that would make it harder for folks to hold me accountable. Though, I will leave that for people of color in my life to speak to.

Endnotes

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