Detour Spotting and Barriers to Organization in Anti-Racist Contexts

For people living and learning in white supremacist, heteronormative, and ableist spaces–in other words, for all of us–the anti-racist mindset is necessarily a re-education process. We must unlearn our thorough racist conditioning to re-educate and re-condition ourselves as anti-racists. We are constantly tempted to detour off course by the racist propaganda of society (internalized or otherwise). Another powerful temptation to detour is our guilt and denial about our own privileges, be they seen or unseen. In the face of societal resistance, as well as our internal struggle, sustaining the will to continue this journey takes bold and stubborn effort.

This journey sends us into unfamiliar territory. No one has ever lived in an unbiased North America. We were never taught the skills of anti-racist, anti-ableist, or anti-homophobic living. Indeed, we were carefully taught the opposite: how to maintain the status quo and uphold systems of power. Systems of oppression and advantage depend on the collusion and cooperation of all people for their perpetuation.

When we discuss detouring, it is often through the lens of white privilege and white fragility. However, it is helpful for all people to not only understand potential detours in conversations about race but also how those detours can exist in conversations about any inequity, particularly if you occupy a place of privilege.

Detours and barriers are attitudes or behaviors that signal a detour or wrong turn into white guilt, denial or defensiveness.

To change the detouring/barrier behavior:
- I must first be fully conscious of what I'm doing, the behavior and its consequences.
- Next, I need to reflect on the behavior's attitudinal roots.
- Finally, I determine the prescribed, desired change I want to make and the best strategy for achieving it. Sometimes I need to remove the behavior from my personal repertoire. More often though, re-tooling is necessary, replacing the discarded pattern with new behaviors. It will likely take repeated attempts before I have fully internalized and externalized the desired change.

Some Examples of Common Detouring Behaviors and Barriers

(1)The Isolationist : "I thought we resolved this issue (racism) when it came up on the board last year." Or "We need to deal with this specific incident. Don't complicate it by bringing up irrelevant incidences of the past." Or "This only happened today because the TV news last night showed police beating a Black kid."

(2)The white knight or white missionary: "We (white people) know just where to build your new community center." Or "Your young people (read youth of color) would be better served by traveling to our suburban training center."

(3) "Bending Over Backwards": "Of course, I agree with you." (Said to a person of color even when I disagree) or "I have to side with Betty on this." (Betty being a woman of color.)

(4)Teach Me, Please: "I want to stop acting like a racist, so please tell me when I do something you think is racist."

(5) White On White, and Righteously So: "What is wrong with those white people? Can't they see how racist they're being?" Or "I just can't stand to be around white people who act so racist." And ***You're Preaching To The Choir*** "You're wasting your time with us, we're not the people who need this training."

(6) The "Certificate of Innocence": Sometimes we seek or expect from people of color some public or private recognition and appreciation for our anti-racism. Other times we look for a "certificate of innocence" to tell us we are one of the good white people.

(7) <u>Competition & Scarcity:</u> Commodification of social justice training and education hoarding of best materials, techniques, and skills to sell as "the Key" to building multicultural organization locations in which there is limited room for white folks and therefore the competition to be one of those white people is intense.

(8) <u>Definitions Games:</u> Requests for clear, absolute definitions, agendas, or objectives. Usually leads to involved discussion. Not to be confused with actual need to clarify differences among concepts like racism, discrimination, prejudice, etc. people of how to convey strong opinions based on complexly constructed sense of justice in a way that others can hear.

(9) <u>Where are the People of Color:</u> Assuming/insisting that in order to make progress combating personal racism we must be in a discussion with people of color. Combined with this is the idea that there are no or few people of color in a given community, that racism isn't a problem. (In fact, racism may be such a great problem that few people of color can stand to live there.)

(10) <u>Racism Isn't the Only Problem:</u> Refocusing on sexism, classism, and other oppressions. Focusing on how we are hurt or how hard it is for us as whites.

(11) <u>Instant solutions:</u> Oversimplification by choosing and pushing single solutions to racism may be a kind of avoidance and might, even if sincere, be unproductive because it's not looking deep enough.

(12) <u>Geography:</u> Focusing on places with a reputation for racism, rather than looking to discover how racism is affecting your own community, your own relationships, and yourself.

(13) <u>Seeing racism as an interpersonal issue:</u> Having to do with prejudices between people. Believing everything would be fine if we could all just get along together.

(14) <u>Seeing racism only on the personal level:</u> Viewing racism through the lens of how it impacts individuals can be a detour from seeing the bigger picture of systemic oppression.

Lists adapted from *Detouring Spotting for White Anti-Racists* (olsson 1997), *Barriers to Organization Between Anti-Racist White People* (Mayer 1997) *Distancing Behaviors Among White Groups Dealing With Racism* (Elder and Irons 2006), and *Barriers to Clarity* (Kendall 2002)

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