Rationalizing Liberation: 
Producing Knowledge-Practices 
and Subjects in an Antiracist Training

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Seeking to move beyond de-politicized “diversity” discourse, a seasoned group of antiracist organizers and a nascent collective of antiracist “helping professionals” are collaborating to problematize and transform power relations in the domain of social work. This thesis is an ethnographic analysis of the training workshops that serve as foundation and threshold to this budding social movement. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this study examines the co-/re-production of knowledge-practices through which organizers work with and on participants to remake them into antiracist subjects. Moreover, it considers the ways that workshop participants strategically and inadvertently appropriate and mediate the knowledge-practices of antiracist subject-making in light of intervening knowledges, relations, and experiences. This project thus reveals that participants engage in unpredictable ways in their own subjectification with and against organizers’ intentions and that the (dis)junctures between organizers’ subject-making efforts and participants’ “self-making” have important and unexpected consequences for this movement of professionals-cum-activists.
To my grandparents,
Chana and Max Landsman
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I would like to thank the activists and organizers of the Anti-Racist Alliance of Social Workers and the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond for welcoming me as a participant, ethnographer, and ally in the Undoing Racism workshops. I greatly admire their work and commitment to antiracism and social justice. I also extend my gratitude to all those alongside whom I participated in Undoing Racism. I am particularly grateful to the four first-time participants who enriched this project with their insights and reflections during our interviews, and to Sandy Bernabei for the impassioned and challenging discussion that inspired my focus on questions of antiracist subjectivity.

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INTRODUCTION

This training is called ‘Undoing Racism slash Community Organizing. It’s not like other diversity trainings with cute activities. We do organizing. We’re recovering from the cute activities.

Elena,¹ Undoing Racism Core Trainer

Project Background

In summer and fall 2004 I participated in a workshop called “Undoing Racism.” On both occasions I joined with about thirty other women and men—mostly social workers and professionals in related fields—in these rigorous two and a half day events held in the New York metropolitan area. The Undoing Racism workshops are part of a collaboration between two organizations—the Anti-Racist Alliance of Social Workers (the Alliance) and the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (the People’s Institute).² Together, these organizations aim to problematize power relations in the domains of social work and transform the field by building an antiracist movement among social workers and allied professionals. The People’s Institute developed the workshop, for which they are well known, over the course of their 25-year history, and it is they who facilitate Undoing Racism. However, the

¹All personal names are pseudonyms except for that of the Alliance founder, Sandy, who declined anonymity.
²The Alliance has gained support from other organizations since its inception, but for the purposes of my work here, I will focus on the Alliance and the People’s Institute, since they are the most visible organizations involved in these workshops.
Alliance, a much younger group, has incorporated Undoing Racism as the touchstone for its organizing efforts.

Having worked for several years in a women’s and girls’ organization that emphasized access to health- and childcare, leadership development, and economic empowerment for mostly low-wealth communities of color, I found that diversity “interventions” were de rigueur. It was not unusual for me to take part in, and sometimes organize, several diversity workshops and seminars each year. (This, I learned, was also the case for many other Undoing Racism participants whom I met, some professional “diversity trainers” or consultants.) Yet, as ubiquitous as “diversity” and related notions of “multiculturalism” and “cultural competency” are within the contemporary US nonprofit sector, I have observed that these professionalized discourses on difference tend to avoid dealing with racism and hierarchical power relations. Instead, they often resemble “colorblind” discourses, which Howard Winant (1994) suggests are characteristic of post civil rights, and “culturalist” or “ethnic absolutist” discourses, which Gilroy (2002) critiques for their de-politicized and essentialist implications. Responding to a post civil rights political climate, the People’s Institute emerged to explicitly re-center race and power relations within community organizing and distinguishes itself from the wide-ranging field of “diversity” discourse as an explicit political project.

This paper grows out of my own varied encounters and negotiations within the professionalized, de-politicized field of diversity discourse. It also stems from a desire to explore my personal commitments to a race- and gender-conscious social justice, and is influenced by my identity as a white-second-generation-American-
Jewish-woman. These have informed each other in ways I am still unable to map completely but have directed my focus on social movements and race through anthropology. More immediately, this paper attempts a critical analysis of my recent experiences and observations during the Undoing Racism workshops. Concerns that guided my research included understanding the conditions and ways in which organizations and individuals engage in self-reflection and critical knowledge production concerning racism; the discourses on race and racism that this antiracist project generated, negotiated, and reproduced; and the ways subjectivities were negotiated and constructed within the context of the workshop and how these might be significant to the training and the broader work of the groups involved.

Methods and Positionality

In this paper I will give most attention to my second encounter with Undoing Racism in the fall of 2004. However, my experience at the summer 2004 training was a significant starting point. In a search for forums on diversity within the nonprofit sector, I was indirectly led by a faculty member to the People’s Institute website, where I learned of their work and of a training sponsored by the Alliance. It was the Alliance that initially piqued my interest. Their reflexive orientation as social workers critically examining social work practices and institutions was something I felt strongly about but had not encountered previously in an intentional, organized form. My own long-term research and political interests were of a similar nature, and I wanted to learn more. My initial participation provided a basis for understanding the range of players involved, their political projects, and the types of discourses and
interactions the trainings engendered. Out of the experience, I was able to develop research questions and methods and begin to think about the theoretical work that might inform my research. Throughout this paper, I will occasionally draw on the earlier workshop to elaborate on certain issues, demonstrate patterns of similarity, and illustrate significant variations.

My position in the fall workshop was both as a participant and participant-observer. Given the intersections of my professional experience with the practices and institutions of social work, my discovery that several other participants were situated in academia as students or as faculty, and the fact that New York is home to me, I did not feel out of place. Moreover, the structure of the workshop and the expectations placed on all present required my active engagement as a participant. As such, I was compelled as much as the next person to contribute to the process, which entailed listening “generously,” responding to questions posed to the group, offering my own thoughts, and so forth. However, my interest in being a participant stemmed as much from a concern with disrupting the researcher-subject hierarchy.

At the same time, I was aware of my charge to “soak everything up” as an ethnographer. During the workshop, I recorded extensive observations of what the People’s Institute trainers, “trainees” (myself included), and Alliance organizers (also trainees) said and did as well as the varied interactions that took place. I also took notes on the immediate space of the workshop, its peripheries, and the ways various groups and individuals used and negotiated these spaces before, during, and after

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3Throughout the paper, I use the terms participant and trainee interchangeably. These are my constructions, although the latter reflects my observation that People’s Institute facilitators call themselves “trainers.”
each day’s session. Given the very limited time in which I engaged with this transitory collection of people and the fact that I felt in significant ways like an insider, my approach could be characterized as a modified form of participant observation (Davies 1999:67). Because I count myself among the participants in these workshops, I insert myself in the account that follows, often by referring to the workshop trainees as we and us rather than they and them. My own sense of belonging, however, did not dictate how others saw me: as someone coming all the way from North Carolina (“Wow, you must be committed!”); as the woman taking all those notes (“Why are you writing so much?”); as the anthropologist (“Is it true that anthropologists invented scientific racism?”). Comments like these and my imaginings of others mediated my insider-participant role, but this was perhaps no more or less of a mediating factor than comments addressed to and imagined by others in the workshop.4 I will describe the workshop in greater detail below.

In addition to my participation in the trainings, post-workshop interviews, organization websites, and reports produced by and the Alliance and the People’s Institute informed my analysis. I invited interview participation in three ways. First, I distributed an email via my contact at the Alliance prior to the workshop. Second, I mentioned my project to several people with whom I made significant personal connections during the course of the workshop. These were often people next to

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4This experience of being placed by others in ways that did not necessarily correspond with, but ultimately affected, my own sense of place corresponds with Slocum’s (2001:141) experience doing research among women traders in St. Vincent. She describes “moments of being close and distant to the traders…guided [by]…traders’ perceptions of my identity and my own perceptions of and responses to their ideas.”
whom I sat during the workshop or whom I met during scheduled breaks.\(^5\) Third, I made a verbal announcement at the end of the second day and asked people to fill out a contact sheet if they were interested in talking with me. In total, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with four first-time participants and one founding member of the Alliance.\(^6\) Those with the newcomers took place within a 24-hour period following the completion of the workshop on Tuesday evening. My interview with the founder occurred nearly a month later.

Time, distance, race, gender, professional status, and interpersonal connections affected my sample of interviewees.\(^7\) Two of the four newcomers whom I interviewed, Nisa and Sarah, were women next to whom I sat in the workshop on two different days. As such, I had established a personal connection with each of them, which seemed to foster their interest or comfort in participating in an interview with me. Another, Lauren, was the first woman whom I met before the workshop began on Sunday evening. A graduate student herself, she expressed interest in participating in an interview, and had learned about my project via the email announcement. The fourth newcomer with whom I spoke, Joanne, approached me in response to my verbal announcement. I had not met her prior to this, but she expressed a desire to talk with me. Among the four, Lauren and Joanne were white

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\(^5\)Over the three days of the workshop, I intentionally rotated my seating position in order to meet new people and achieve different perspectives on the event.

\(^6\)It was not uncommon for participants to take part in Undoing Racism multiple times though the majority of participants were “newcomers.”

\(^7\)My trip to New York was very brief and, thus, scheduling possibilities were limited. I arrived in New York late Saturday afternoon, the day before the workshop began, and I left two days after its completion on Thursday. Though I attempted to mitigate this limitation by distributing the email announcement in advance, I was unsuccessful at garnering much interest through this impersonal approach.
women in their late twenties to mid-thirties; Nisa was a black woman approximately
sixty years old; Sarah was an older white, Jewish woman in her late sixties. A fifth
newcomer, a middle-aged black woman named Rachelle whom I had gotten to know
on the first day, was also interested; however, she was an out-of-towner like me and
needed to cancel our appointment at the last minute in light of personal obligations
during her short visit. Others who responded to my verbal announcement were
mostly white women. A middle-aged black man expressed interest when I asked
him in the context of an informal discussion during one of our breaks, and two black
women became interested when they learned that Nisa would be talking with me.
Unfortunately, scheduling conflicts prevented these meetings, given my brief stay in
New York.

The first interview was with Nisa and Lauren together. The three of us met for
about two hours in a café within the building where the workshop had been held.
After nearly three intense days, we were all quite tired but the interview gained
momentum thanks to the group dynamics and the personalities involved. Davies
(1999:104) explains that group interviews can enhance an interactionist approach to
interviewing in that respondents provoke each other’s responses and may even ask
their own questions of each other. This was certainly the case in my interview with
Nisa and Lauren. Davies (1999:105) also notes that group interviews can help
break down barriers in communication arising from the power differential between
interviewer and interviewee since interviewees may feel more at ease with company.
On the other hand, group interviews may present certain hazards. For instance,
participants may feel more reluctant to share intimacies and may fall prey to “group
think” and pressures to conform to peers. My second interview, with Sarah, took place late the following morning for about an hour. We talked together in the comfortable living room of her apartment, located in a suburb not far from where I was staying. For my interview with Joanne we met late that afternoon at her workplace and talked in the staff lounge, which was private save for two brief appearances by other employees. Our conversation lasted for about an hour as well. My interview with the founding member of the Alliance, Sandy, took place nearly one month later via telephone. I spoke to Sandy from her suburban home for approximately an hour the day before Thanksgiving. During our lively conversation, she managed to glaze yams and do her laundry before heading into the city to meet with a client.

During the interviews, as in the workshop, I was particularly aware of power relations between researcher and subject and wished to maintain the more egalitarian co-participant relationship. I attempted to disrupt the implicit hierarchy by encouraging interviewees to ask me questions and occasionally interjecting to share my own opinions and experiences. While this interviewing approach has historically been critiqued, feminist and native anthropologists have validated methods of engaged rapport (Davies 1999:41, Slocum 2001:132). During my first interview, in which I spoke with two participants simultaneously, my attempt to shift the power relations in this way was playfully dismissed by one of them. Nisa, herself a once-upon-a-time anthropology major, declared that she and Lauren would “let [me] be

8I had planned for an in-person interview but scheduling a face-to-face meeting proved impossible.
Margaret [Mead]. On other occasions interviewees responded with questions of their own, which gave way sometimes to a veritable conversation.

The formal analysis of my observations began with a detailed reading of my field notes and interview transcripts. This involved informally coding and cataloguing the material, discerning themes, and determining which themes appeared particularly salient and frequent. I received assistance from a second reader, my advisor, in conducting the thematic analysis in order to control for biases. With a running list of themes gleaned from the catalogue, I then returned to my original field notes and looked for connections and relations among them, creating thematic clusters and determining which examples from my observations would best illustrate these themes.

Organizational Culture & Counterpublic Spheres

I form my analysis of Undoing Racism around two sets of concepts: organizational culture and counterpublic spheres. I situate my work within the conjunctures and tensions that exist among Allen Batteau’s (2001) anthropological conception of instrumental organizations; Aihwa Ong’s (2003) analysis of techniques of rationality, agency, and subjectivity; and the notion of counterpublic spheres advanced by Nancy Fraser (1990), Marla Frederick (2003), and Melissa Harris-Lacewell (2004). Literature on antiracism (Gilroy 2002, Stoler 2002, Starr 2004, Weher 2003) provides a context for my research and analysis—especially ideas about antiracist knowledges, logics, and regimes of truth—but my emphasis here is
on the process of producing and organizing a reflexive antiracist movement among professionals-cum-activists.\textsuperscript{9}

Batteau (2001:726) characterizes organizations as regimes of rationality continuously undergoing a “struggle to impose order, for strategic ends” while at the same time engendering difference and fragmentation. Through contested processes of rationalization, organizations create structures of meaning, or what he calls “the cultures of rationality, inclusion, command and authority, and adaptation and resistance” (Batteau 2001:726). Batteau conceptualizes this contestation largely between management (dominant culture) and various factions among workers (countercultures) and emphasizes that organizations are more successful at creating the appearance of order than producing “the real thing.”\textsuperscript{10} One way that this contestation plays out in organizations is through “strategic ambiguity,” the use and manipulation of symbols to which many different meanings, perspectives, and positions may be attached (Batteau 2001:733). Batteau explains, “Since cultural elements are multivocal, an actor can manipulate the code to produce alternative justifications, or the actor can read different signals within a situation indicating different courses of action” (Batteau 2001:733). Organizations entail the “management” of this ambiguity through the creation and negotiation of functional boundaries and hierarchies, by which difference may be incorporated or negated


\textsuperscript{10}Batteau focuses on corporate organizations but contends that his analysis applies to all sorts of organizations, including significantly less formal ones like block associations.
(Batteau 2001:734). This incorporation of difference coincides with certain notions of hegemony (Williams 1997, Winant 1994).

Ong (2003) also explores organizational rationality, hegemony, and discipline as well as forms of agency in her work with Cambodian refugees and “helping professionals” in Northern California. Her analysis attends closely to the ways rationalizing processes and ideologies produce differentially valued, racialized citizen-subjects. Ong’s (2003:195) ethnography explores refugees’ experiences of “self-making” and “being made” in the contexts of encounters with representatives of social service, healthcare, education, law enforcement, and religious institutions. She argues that these are the domains in which “the technologies of government…attempt to instill in citizen-subjects particular values (self-reliance, freedom, individualism, calculation, or flexibility)” (Ong 2003:6). Through her research in these settings, Ong accounts for the often subtle ways that “helping professionals” diagnose, survey, classify, treat, and discipline Cambodian refugee-immigrants into stations of more or less meritorious citizen-subjectivity based on their negotiated placement on a bipolar racial scale. She also considers ways that Cambodian refugees strategically appropriate, negotiate, and resist these processes and the bipolar racial ideology that undergirds them.

In tension with Ong’s and Batteau’s rationalizing, hegemonic, and authoritarian organizations, is the notion of the counterpublic sphere. Fraser defines “subaltern counterpublics” in contrast to Habermas’ “public sphere,” with which she identifies important shortcomings that bear down on possibilities for true participatory democracy. Significant among her critique is Habermas’ idea that social inequalities
should be “bracketed” in the public sphere to make way for open discourse among peers (Fraser 1990:59). In effect, she asserts that “leaving inequalities at the door,” so to speak, is incommensurable with the goal of free deliberation among equals. This prospect is linked to the notion of colorblindness to which I allude above. In contrast, Fraser offers the notion of subaltern counterpublics, “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1990:67). Fraser notes that alternative publics are not necessarily always bastions of egalitarianism or democratic engagement, but they remain vital spaces through which to expand discourse beyond the hegemonic.

Recent works by Marla Frederick (2003) and Melissa Harris-Lacewell (2004) analyze the conditions and practices that constitute personal transformation, ideological development, and possibilities for mobilization through participation in black counterpublic spheres (e.g., grassroots organizations, black churches, black-owned businesses, etc.). Within these domains, the authors explore the possibilities that alternative public spheres offer for shaping activist selves and negotiating political worldviews. Through Frederick’s work with black Christian women in Halifax, North Carolina, she devises the dual notions of “gratitude and empathy” and “righteous discontent” (Frederick 2003). She contends that gratitude to God and empathy toward other people’s suffering are necessary preconditions for righteous discontent, or political mobilization, among her respondents. However, Frederick points out that the precondition for activism does not predict its actualization. In
other words, gratitude and empathy do not assure mobilization. Harris-Lacewell’s experimental and ethnographic research explores the complexity and heterogeneity of black political thought as evidenced in the black counterpublic. She highlights the processes of contestation and negotiation that shape multi-faceted political ideologies through discourse and dialogue in counterpublic spaces. She also underscores the ways that influence manifests itself in unpredictable ways, sometimes inverting and circumventing hierarchies of authority.

In what follows, I will argue that Undoing Racism is a site in which trainers work with and on trainees to remake them into new or improved antiracist subjects. Through a (co-)productive process that is notably rationalized, disciplined, and stylized, Undoing Racism attempts to forge helping professionals into antiracist knowing-doing subjects who will employ the knowledge-practices necessary to radically disrupt racial hierarchies, thereby transforming the arena of social work. I also argue, however, that Undoing Racism participants strategically and inadvertently appropriate and mediate the knowledge-practices of antiracist subject-making, participating in unpredictable ways in their own “self-making.” Moreover, I suggest that Undoing Racism, as a particular kind of training, may have unexpected consequences for engagement and mobilization of professionals-cum-activists.

In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I will provide an overview of the primary organizations involved in Undoing Racism and their collaborative relationship. I will also present a view of the training—what it seeks to accomplish, who participates, and how the various actors engage with each other. In Chapter 3, I will discuss a distinctive feature of Undoing Racism, what Alliance members and Peoples’ Institute
trainers commonly call the “Analysis” or “Power Analysis.” Here I will explore the techniques through which Undoing Racism engages participants in (re)producing antiracist knowledges and practices through negotiated construction of the People’s Institute’s hallmark Analysis and discuss what some of these knowledges and practices are. I will also examine tensions that characterize participation in Undoing Racism, including those between discipline and liberation, expert knowledge and shared knowledge, and deconstruction and reproduction of social hierarchies. Chapter 4 will consider the ways that Undoing Racism seeks to produce antiracist subjects along with the unpredictable ways that subjects make themselves with and against organizers’ intentions in light of intervening knowledges, relations, and experiences. I will conclude with a discussion of some of the implications of antiracist training and raise questions for future research.
Organizations and Trainings

Collaboration Against Racism

From its inception, the Alliance has been closely linked to the People’s Institute, and in particular, to its “Undoing Racism/Community Organizing” workshop. The Alliance was founded in 2002 in the greater New York City area as a multiracial, antiracist organizing and support network comprised of social work practitioners, educators, and students, and other human service professionals. It seeks “to build a national antiracist movement to transform the way [social workers] are educated and practice” (Anti-Racist Alliance Annual Report, 2003-2004). The Undoing Racism workshop is an important means to this end; it is both the foundation and threshold of the Alliance’s movement.

The group’s founding member and director, Sandy Bernabei, is a white woman in her early 50s who currently practices clinical social work and teaches a course on social justice at an area university. In an interview with Sandy, she recalled how her participation in a People’s Institute training instigated the group’s ultimate formation:

Well, in [19]96 I took the Undoing Racism workshop, and at that time, I was working for an institution of higher education. And so the best I could do in that setting was really see white culture operationalized in pure form. But I really couldn’t do antiracism work in that culture because it isn’t the mission, it isn’t the vision, it isn’t the soul…So rather than being discouraged, which I ultimately did become, I just used it as an opportunity to be in the belly of the

11People refer to the workshop conversationally as “Undoing Racism” rather than “Undoing Racism/Community Organizing.” They also refer to it simply as “the training” or “the workshop.”
beast...to really learn about white culture, and experience it. Then when I, I guess about two summers ago, I left them...and decided that I was going to spend the rest of my, my days, um, doing antiracist work...[I had] experienced, at that point, as much as possible.\textsuperscript{12, 13}

The Alliance took shape when Sandy began to gather a few associates, also “graduates” of Undoing Racism who shared an understanding of the knowledge and practices that the workshop advanced through its political and historical Analysis of racism. They began to organize with the intention to “transform social work education and practice” in light of and through this Analysis. “Our dream,” Sandy explained, “was that social workers wouldn’t have to take this workshop when they are fifty years old.” In other words, according to Sandy, the founding members of the Alliance envisioned the People’s Institute Analysis as part of the bedrock of social work education, rather than as a corrective measure to be taken at a late stage in one’s career.\textsuperscript{14}

Sandy is passionate about antiracist organizing and the People’s Institute Analysis that guides the Alliance’s work. Though she has attended numerous Undoing Racism workshops in the last few years, her demeanor during these events suggests she is just as “tuned in” as she was when she first encountered the People’s Institute in 1996. The excitement and sense of commitment she projects did not escape Nisa, who commented with approving wonderment during our

\textsuperscript{12}Sandy also explained that she received inspiration from an antiracist organizer based in California who advised her to, “go back home, and go back to [her] people...social workers. Go back to [her] friends, and just start organizing [her] base with [her] friends” (Interview, Sandy 11/24/04).

\textsuperscript{13}Throughout this text, quotes derived from electronically recorded interviews retain the speakers’ verbal emphases (noted in italics), expressions like \textit{um} and \textit{like}, and repeated words. Quotes from the workshop do not include these elements due to the nature of manual recording during the training.

\textsuperscript{14}Interview, Sandy, 11/24/04
interview on the way Sandy sat attentively at the edge of her seat throughout the training. Sandy was described by some African-American workshop participants as a “fireball,” as one of the “first white people I can say I love,” and as “one of the baddest white people I’ve ever met.” Comments such as these suggest Sandy possesses certain charismatic leadership qualities and an unusual politics for a white woman. For many workshop goers, this fast-talking, energetic, and polished woman is the vanguard of the Alliance; however, she is quick to insist on the collective nature of the work in which she is engaged. According to Sandy, “each person [in the Alliance] represents an organization and organizes within her or his circle of influence.”

At the same time as individual Alliance members operate in this networked fashion, the Alliance organizes itself within a number of working and support groups that meet monthly in New York City and neighboring Westchester County to engage in strategic planning, facilitated topical discussions, and exchange of ideas across institutional boundaries. These activities are publicized via email and participation is open to all graduates of Undoing Racism workshops. Meeting times appear planned to loosely accommodate nine-to-five work schedules. They take place fairly early in the morning and in the evening and are held at a restaurant, in university facilities, and in spaces provided by social service agencies with which Alliance members are affiliated. Although these action and support meetings are open,

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15 Interview, Nisa and Lauren, 10/26/04

16 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations I have attributed to the trainers, organizers, and participants during the Undoing Racism workshop are derived from my field notes from the fall 2004 training, which took place from October 24-26, 2004. All quotations represent statements that I was able to record word-for-word.

17 Guests are sometimes present at working group meetings as well.
Sandy informed me that the proportion of Undoing Racism graduates who become active with the Alliance is frustratingly low. Transitioning workshop participants into Alliance organizers remains a significant challenge in her mind.

As of my second encounter with Undoing Racism in fall 2004, the Alliance had collaborated with the People’s Institute to organize ten Undoing Racism workshops involving approximately three hundred participants. These workshops are central to the Alliance’s work in a number of important ways. Of primary concern to the organizers is recruiting new participants who will become actively engaged in the work. Sandy revealed, “We fill the room for the trainings up only for the purpose of finding people who would like to continue working on this.” However, the workshop is also instrumental as a site for teaching, learning, networking, and politicization of newcomers. Further, it is apparent that active Alliance members return to the workshop to re-energize, receive and offer support, and to refine and reinforce their understanding of the Analysis. As one returning participant, an active Alliance member, reported, “I’m here for support and encouragement to keep fighting.” Another mentioned that, finally, after attending several trainings, a certain idea made sense to her in a visceral way.

In contrast to the budding Alliance, the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond is an organization based in New Orleans that has been doing antiracism training and organizing for 25 years. The People’s Institute was formed by two men, an experienced community organizer and an organizer-academic, who came together with the intention, “to develop more analytical, culturally-rooted and effective community organizers…who do their work with an understanding of history, culture,

18Interview, Sandy, 11/24/04
and the impact of racism on communities” (People’s Institute website). One People’s Institute trainer remarked during the workshop that this fruitful collaboration was a response to the dismantling of social justice movements during that period, the increasingly dominant notion that racism was no longer a problem, and the founders’ dissatisfaction with many other community organizing approaches that emphasized technique but overlooked history and racism. In an article about their work and that of the Alliance, a co-founder conveyed their position on community organizing trainings with which they were familiar and which were, in his experience, frequently run by white activists:

I realized white people were trying to give people [organizing] skills, but if you give someone skills and you haven’t dealt with racism, they’re going to become skillful racists. We had a lot of white folks who worked in primarily black communities—people with good intentions that add[ed] to the oppression because they hadn’t dealt with their privilege or access.” [quoted in Jackson 2004]

Thus, identifying and interrogating white privilege is central to the organization’s work, and they advance this critical approach within Undoing Racism through the Analysis.

The People’s Institute describes itself as “…a national, multiracial, anti-racist collective of organizers and educators, …dedicated to building a movement for social transformation…to end racism and other forms of institutional oppression” (Mission, People’s Institute Summary of 2003 Activities). To date, it has worked with over 100,000 activists and community members in the United States through its highly regarded Undoing Racism workshops and other projects that support and promote activism according to their Analysis of racism and the antiracism principles that they have defined and promoted. Among this collective are a cadre of
experienced and dynamic trainers who facilitate workshops and work with groups and communities on longer-term antiracist organizing efforts. The Anti-Racist Alliance of Social Workers is one such group with whom the People’s Institute has been involved over an extended period, and this relationship, according to a recent Alliance report, represents “the first time that the [People’s Institute] analysis has reached institutional depth” (Anti-Racist Alliance Annual Report 2003-2004). Unlike the Alliance, the majority of groups with which the People’s Institute has worked are those comprised of community-based activists who are neither necessarily situated within one particular institutional sector nor seek to transform one particular set of institutions. Though the people the Alliance convenes hail from varied organizations, all are ostensibly affiliated with institutions related to social work and social services.¹⁹

Training Against Racism

The People’s Institute has refined its signature training, “Undoing Racism/Community Organizing,” over the course of its 25-year history. A shifting combination of three or four trainers from the People’s Institute national network facilitate the fairly standardized workshops, but trainings are organized and coordinated on an ongoing basis by the Alliance’s core organizing committee. Workshops take place at an irregular frequency, sometimes more than once per month and other times once within a few-month period. Among the workshop’s manifold objectives, of primary significance are the linked goals of engaging Undoing

¹⁹Trainers at the fall 2004 workshop referred to work they have begun within the field of health care. This work would likely also fit under the Alliance’s usage of the phrase, “institutional depth.”
Racism participants in the People’s Institute Analysis and incorporating these newcomers into the Alliance as active contributors to the movement they are trying to build. To adapt a phrase from Sandy, the Alliance uses the training to find (and I would argue to produce) “knowing-doing subjects,” people who appropriate its particular antiracist Analysis and organize with and through it.20 “I’m hoping that we find doers who have the Analysis,” she declared during our interview, “…Because there’s a lot of people doing, but without the Analysis, I don’t know what the hell they’re doing… So I’m really only interested in people who’ve completed the Undoing Racism workshop and are now organizing.”21

The training on which I will focus took place in fall 2004 at an attractive suburban satellite campus of a private New York City university.22 It occurred over a two and a half day period, from Sunday evening to late afternoon on Tuesday. This workshop, like others, had been publicized on the websites of the People’s Institute, the Alliance, and the National Association of Social Workers, New York City chapter. The Alliance and Undoing Racism also received exposure from a cover article several months prior in Social Work Today, a professional journal. However, word of mouth is perhaps the most common form of publicity for Undoing Racism. Several trainees mentioned the interpersonal connections through which they learned about the Alliance and were encouraged to attend Undoing Racism. Based on these forms

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20 When I asked Sandy what challenges the Alliance faced, she expressed particular concern about “this knowing-doing gap…ya know some people know a lot…what makes somebody move from knowing to doing?” (Interview, Sandy 11/24/04).

21 Interview, Sandy, 11/24/04

22 The Alliance is based in this suburban county as well as in New York City. It organizes frequent trainings at the Manhattan campus of this university as well.
of publicity, there appeared to be no difficulty filling the workshop seats. Despite a substantial fee of $250 (which the Alliance is responsible for collecting), attendance nearly reached the cap of thirty-five set by the People's Institute (People's Institute website).  

The number of participants fluctuated slightly over the three days we met, but approximately thirty trainees attended along with four trainers. Given the Alliance's focus, it was not surprising to find that most participants worked in various, sometimes multiple, capacities within the field of social work, as clinical practitioners, as administrators of service agencies, as researchers, and as faculty and administrators in area schools of social work and social service. In addition to credentialed social workers, a number of participants worked in the broadly defined field of human or social services. Based on my past work in the women's and girl's organization, I could be included within this more amorphous grouping. Apparently of great interest, one Alliance organizer highlighted, "This training today moves beyond social workers. Board members [of a local nonprofit organization] are in attendance today."  

Their participation was framed as an important milestone for the group. In similar fashion, Sandy announced with enthusiasm the growing

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23The People’s Institute recommends a sliding scale fee but it is not clear whether the Alliance uses such a scale according to publicly available registration information. However, according to the Alliance website, effort is being made to generate scholarship funds. Also, a number of trainees received funds and time off from their employers to attend. For two people with whom I spoke, getting employer permission and sponsorship involved some subterfuge since both believed their employers would not approve of the critical and political nature of the workshop.

24One woman new to the group did not return after the first day, and a few active Alliance members did not return after the first day.

25Interesting to me, these board members, along with a few directors, represented a local branch of the antiracist, women’s organization in which I had worked. Local branches, however, are not affiliated with each other in any direct way.
number of college and university faculty who had attended to date, seventy-five of
the three hundred total participants. These two pronouncements pointed toward
some of the priorities of the key players in the Alliance. Lastly, two women from a
local progressive radio station attended on the second and third days to record the
training for a later edited broadcast. One of the two was a social worker and
Alliance member.

In addition to participants’ professional identities, race, gender, class, and ethnic
identities were salient within the group. Just fewer than 40% of trainees were people
of color and just over 60% were white. Among people of color, all identified as black
except one who identified as black and indigenous (i.e., Native American). Among
the white participants, people noted various ethnic and second generation immigrant
identities, including Italian, Irish, and a significant number of Jews of European
descent. Immigrant identities were also salient among participants of color; some
noted first or second-generation immigration from the West Indies, East Africa, and
South America. Further, women were unequivocally in the majority at the training.
Only three men attended from start to finish, representing about 10% of the group
and reflecting the feminized character of the social work profession. Moreover, class
identities were less explicit than race, gender, or ethnicity, but were signaled to
some extent by references to professional background and place of residence. For
example, one participant, an older black woman named Deborah who was dressed

26 These self-identifications emerged at various points during the course of the workshop, beginning
with introductions in which some people made statements like, “As a black woman…” The woman
who identified as black and indigenous stated this during an activity called “culture sharing.”
Participants also self-identified during an exercise in which we were divided into what I have termed
racial cohorts. Here, trainers instructed white participants to speak from the position of how they are
perceived racially rather than how they see themselves; however, a similar statement was not
directed toward participants of color, all of whom identified and spoke as blacks at this time.
in business attire, mentioned she was a manager on Wall Street who “talk[s] to senior-level white males about diversity in their organizations,” while a younger white woman introduced herself as a “recovering lawyer.” In personal conversations, I learned that the woman who identified as black and indigenous lived in a suburb known to have a high proportion of low-income residents, and that a senior white woman subsisted on a fixed income. One trainee who explicitly stated her upper-middle class status, complicated this by pointing out that as an African American, her money did not mean the same thing as that of a white person in the same class situation. In addition to these crosscutting identities, all but three of the trainees lived or worked in the Greater New York City area. Out-of-towners included a quiet white clergyman from Kentucky, a black woman from Utah with a personal connection to an Alliance member, and myself from North Carolina.

A multiracial, multiethnic group of trainers, two women and two men, represented the People’s Institute, ranging in age from mid-thirties to late fifties or older. Candace, the youngest of the group, was an African-American woman from New York City who works as a corporate trainer and has been an activist since high school when she got involved in anti-apartheid organizing. Elena was an anti-militarism activist from Puerto Rico who had also organized with Latino communities in New England, where she lived for many years. Michael, a white organizer and minister from the south, was one of the older trainers in the group. Among them, he has been most involved with the Alliance. Weeks prior to the workshop, he relocated to New York for a two-year period to help the new group on a more frequent and intense basis to strengthen and expand their organizing efforts.
Assefa, also older, was an African-American man living in Atlanta whose organizing background included founding a church. Interestingly, Assefa’s first encounter with the People’s Institute was as a reluctant, even cynical, workshop participant. Unlike Assefa and Candace, Elena and Michael identified themselves as “core trainers,” and they each facilitated a greater proportion of the training than did either Assefa or Candace. This may suggest racial hierarchy among People’s Institute trainers; however, among the core trainers at the summer workshop I attended, one was a black woman and, like Elena and Michael, she had a prominent role in that training. Still, within the context of this training alone, there appeared to be a racial correlation to status among trainers.

One of the very first actions the trainers took, at the beginning of the first day, was the presentation and ratification of a “contract.” Michael introduced this to us, remarking that the People’s Institute had devised the guidelines based on years of experience. He also alerted us that the terms were nonnegotiable, but that we were welcome to leave if we disagreed with them. All four of the trainers contributed to verbally presenting the contract, which they simultaneously transcribed on a flip chart in list format, each item accompanied by brief verbal clarification or elaboration. Although the trainers inserted witty remarks here and there to keep our attention, the overall tone was one of gravity. The guidelines—*listen, respect, focus on racism, focus on the US, no hierarchy, liberated space, participate, no quick fix, be mindful of your “growing edges,”* cut off your cell phone, stay the whole time, don’t jump the trainers—defined the forms of trainee and trainer engagement and

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27Trainers explained that “Growing edges” referred to areas of internal resistance that can be opportunities for growth.
set the parameters of the discussion. Implicit within the contract—whose terms were at once familiar, idiosyncratic, and sometimes ambiguous—was a tension between discipline and authority on the one hand and openness and horizontality on the other. This tension, or relation, would surface at many other points throughout the workshop as well.

Once presented, the contract was reviewed, and Michael asked us to demonstrate our consent by a show of hands. All hands went up and he remarked with humor that we had not raised them very high, perhaps indicating reservations. Laughing and noting each others’ reactions, we raised our hands higher to indicate firm agreement. No one asked questions and no one appeared outwardly concerned about the scant level of discussion regarding the contract or its terms. But even with this initial consent, trainers reinforced the contract two more times early on in the workshop. Furthermore, during the training, trainers and trainees alike alluded to the contract at times to frame certain questions, comments, and positions in order to understand and communicate their subjective experiences in the training. The somewhat ambiguous nature of the contract—What exactly do respect or no hierarchy look like? How much participation is too much or too little?—and the lack of clear consequences associated with not abiding by it, facilitated its being taken up in these ways.

The engaging manner in which the trainers presented the legalistic contract was a preview to the facilitators’ dynamic rhetorical and pedagogical style. They were a charismatic, witty, articulate, and forthright group, as skilled at engaging and charming participants as they were at working together in a cohesive, even intimate,
fashion. At any given moment, only one trainer had the floor but transitions from one facilitator to the next were barely noticeable. Furthermore, the trainers on the sidelines supported the one “on deck,” whether by helping to field questions or handling the task of transcribing terms on the flip chart, for example. Sarah, an elderly white woman with whom I spoke, offered the following impressions of the trainers and their craft:

Sarah: I thought it was a very good workshop. Very well run. These four people must have worked together for a long time ‘cause they just knitted into each other. Ya know? They didn’t have to say, “And now somebody’s gonna talk, and now this person’s gonna talk.” They just were like woven in, ya know? And, all four of them were quite good, in their own way. Um, I was admiring their skill. Especially [Michael]. [Michael’s] in a hot spot, because he’s white. You can’t, pretend you’re black. You can’t go, you can’t bend over backwards, but I thought he handled it very well…And I noticed that his [southern] accent came and went according to need. And that was true, that was true of, what was the tall big black man’s name?

Leslie: [Assefa]

Sarah: [Assefa]?

Leslie: Mm hmm.

Sarah: Um, that also was, was true. I mean, I can see him on stage. He’s a performer…I felt we were really in, in good hands.28, 29

Trainers garnered considerable respect and admiration from trainees who were taken in by their passionate, eloquent, and knowledgeable performances and remarkable sense of cohesion. In addition, some participants noted with surprise

28Interview, Sarah, 10/27/04

29In addition to illustrating that trainees’ viewed trainers as artful, cohesive, and dynamic, Sarah’s comment points to the ways participants’ formed impressions of trainers in terms of race and gender identities, among others.
the atmosphere of trust and openness the facilitators created in the workshop. This sense of trust may have been due in part to the contract’s call for a “liberated space,” but the trainers’ own demeanor and engagement gave life to the contract through their modeling forms of reflexivity, incorporating serious critique with humor, and engendering a mix of more active and more passive participation from the trainees.

As Sarah’s comments indicate, dramatic performance was a prominent technique the trainers employed, although it did not constitute the bulk of the training.30 These performances were solo enactments that involved embodied narration, sometimes of ostensibly autobiographical situations but other times of hypothetical or abstractly historical storylines. Dramatic segments employed combinations of role-play, verbal asides, exaggerated gestures, and self-caricature. “Autobiographical” performances were first-person narratives about becoming increasingly self-reflexive and effective antiracist community organizers. As critical self-portrayals, they involved a degree of personal exposure and humility, coupled with humor and optimism. Thus, these performances derived authority in part from personal experience and often had the effect of engendering identification among trainees.

In addition to this pedagogical approach, trainers were oftentimes professorial. They engaged participants in compelling mini-lectures, offering scholarly interpretations strewn with academic citations (e.g., Karen Brodkin and Noel Ignatiev) and references to judicial decisions and legislation (e.g., the 1954

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30 I use the term *dramatic performance* here to distinguish between other aspects of trainers’ performative pedagogy. I do not wish to suggest that other aspects of the training were not also performances, but that dramatic performances were a distinct theatrical form.
Charitable Giving Law and the 1967 U.S. Supreme Court case, Loving v. Virginia). Another important approach, which I will describe further below, involved facilitating and directing trainees' participation in processes of collective knowledge production. The trainers and the implicit curriculum largely shaped the timing, form, and content of the more active forms of participation, though trainees themselves mediated these processes through subtle and obvious forms of agency. The nonnegotiable contract also illuminated the ways that participation was conceptualized.

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31 Brodkin and Ignatiev write on ethnicity and whiteness. The Charitable Giving Law was characterized as an important move by the state to increase control over social work and thereby depoliticize its practices and institutions. Loving v. Virginia was cited as an important case that codified whiteness.
CONSTRUCTING THE (POWER) ANALYSIS

The Undoing Racism Analysis is clear, it’s crisp. It has integrity, truth.
Sandy Bernabei, Alliance Founding Member

That Power Analysis that race construct model is deep and it’s profound, and it requires you taking a deep look, that even as you’re doing good, or you’re attempting to do good, who you are and what you represent as a gatekeeper needs examination in terms of, “Am I doing the best good I can do with these people, for these people, in alignment with these people?” Uh, raises lots of questions about who you are and what you represent, in the do-gooding.
Nisa, Undoing Racism Participant

The Analysis: Foundation and Threshold

Many aspects of Undoing Racism make a powerful impression on participants, but none seem to evoke such reverence as the People's Institute Analysis, a core of antiracist knowledge and practices advanced and produced through pedagogy and participation in Undoing Racism. The creation of the People’s Institute stemmed from a desire to incorporate an antiracist analytical approach into community organizing, against what the co-founders perceived as a predominantly ahistorical, technique-centered array of organizing models that were ineffectual against racism. People’s Institute trainers and Alliance organizers conceive of the Analysis as uniquely promoting and enabling antiracist practices of community organizing and movement building while providing a common framework for action. At the same

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Interview, Nisa and Lauren, 10/26/04
time, the Analysis is considered an antiracist practice itself, perhaps the central antiracist practice. Comments by Sandy and others indicate that the Alliance has worked to build its own discourses and practices upon this Analysis, using it as the foundation for its work. Also, the Alliance positions the Analysis as a threshold to its movement, stressing to newcomers the importance of understanding and appropriating it in order to be a valid part of the group.

In Undoing Racism, the Analysis signifies at least two different albeit related things: a body of knowledge, framed as a historical narrative, that traces the origins and perpetuation of racism and a set of practices to identify and strategize against contemporary power relations that are rooted in this history. Trainers and organizers often implied the former meaning with the general term, “the Analysis”, and the latter with the “Power Analysis.” In the former sense, the Analysis provides a historical perspective on racism as the gradual and ongoing consolidation and codification of whiteness and power through institutional means and differential incentives to various European-descended groups and classes. It explains that this process began with the political and social reduction of African slaves to status of sub-human property and the virtual and symbolic annihilation of Native Americans through European-American conquest. This process, trainers informed us, created a hierarchy that assigned power to whites and subordination to blacks. Native Americans were “set aside” in reservations with the expectation and intention that they would not survive white expansion and settlement. In this way, they were also placed at the bottom of the hierarchy, although they figure less prominently on this pole than do blacks due to the assumption of their imminent eradication. Others—
“yellow” and “brown”—have historically found themselves in the “manipulated middle” and have “always [been] played between black and white, but their positions are tenuous.” At times US society has incorporated members of this uncertain middle ground into whiteness, as in the case of various “ethnic” European immigrants and their descendents. Trainer Elena illustrated this in her exegesis of the 2000 US Census. She pointed to the ways Latinos have recently been “given the option” of being white based on the Census’ separation of the category “Hispanic/Latino/Spanish” from the question of race. Thus, the Analysis contends that the construct of race was based on a white–black dichotomy, which endures into the present moment. Within this set-up, “systems and institutions” have always been sites and means for reproducing racism as an arrangement that confers power and benefits to whites, not just by default but also through intention, and the Undoing Racism Analysis asserts that this function continues into the present as well.

The Analysis as a strategic, antiracist practice—the “Power Analysis”—rests on this assertion about systems and institutions and an important corollary: institutions and systems are potential sites of subversion and transformation. This dual claim about institutions links the first meaning of the Analysis with the second and lends legitimacy to the Alliance, whose members are well positioned to struggle within and transform oppressive institutions. Based on information from the two workshops I attended, doing a Power Analysis often first involves talking to and privileging knowledge from those to whom social workers should be most accountable, their constituents, who are often poor individuals and communities of color. According to Power Analysis methodology, it is necessary to ask people in communities most
affected by these institutions what is going on from their perspectives and to learn about the power relations from their responses. Gayle, a trainer at the summer workshop, explained, "We have to ask people what’s going on. There are various phrases people will use as responses. There’s stuff under the phrases and we have to listen to this stuff to get at the power relations" (Undoing Racism 6/14/04).

Building upon this “grassroots” knowledge, Power Analysis also entails identifying “gatekeepers” who help reproduce the racial hierarchy. Gatekeepers are the institutions and individuals, including ourselves, that maintain control over material and intangible resources—money, space, credentials, authority, validation, publicity, the right discourses. Through this control, gatekeepers help perpetuate oppression while benefiting from the power arrangement. In the case of social workers and human service professionals, these benefits may take the forms of salaries, occupational prestige, good feelings, and so forth. However, the Undoing Racism Power Analysis asserts that gatekeepers have the potential to participate in political and social transformation by subverting hierarchy instead. Doing so requires looking at ourselves, reflexively, to determine how we play gatekeeping roles, and likewise looking at the institution(s) of which we are a part.

Concerned with other dimensions of power, the Power Analysis also entails looking for alternative forms and sources into which oppressed people and communities can tap. It requires inclusion of people who are “external” to our organizations in the process of assessing the institutions and their positions within fields of power that affect poor, racialized communities. External people, trainers assert, will not be inclined to defend the institutions as internal people would be.
Trainers contrasted the Power Analysis with a familiar diagnostic tool in social work, the needs assessments. Whereas they characterized the latter as a practice of therapeutic intervention targeting the individuals and communities on which human services works, the former, we learned, focused critically on institutions with the goal of their transformation.33

The twofold Analysis is so critical to the Alliance that participation in Undoing Racism is a prerequisite for individuals interested in getting involved in the organization. In the workshops I attended, this point was stressed and defended several times. For example, Sandy stated, “Without this Analysis these conversations go nowhere. We stick to this Analysis. Unless people go to the training, tension begins within the movement. At first we were told this was too rigid, too exclusionary. But we told them we are sticking to the Analysis. Without it, this wouldn’t have gone anywhere.” In this way, the Analysis is a discipline that disciplines, focusing and delimiting the ways participants understand, talk about, and work against racism. This is true of the practices in Undoing Racism by which trainers and participants co-construct the Analysis, and Sandy’s statement above hints at the same for the Alliance’s work more broadly. However, such structuring in Undoing Racism was mediated by trainees who variably negotiated, contested, and consented to the terms of these knowledge-practices and created meanings from and about the experience that would have consequences for their continued involvement in the Alliance, consequences not necessarily predictable from the standpoint of trainers and organizers.

33At the June workshop, a similar contrast was drawn between the familiar social work practice of outreach, which also focuses on individuals and communities, and what the People’s Institute referred to as “in-reach to institutionalize antiracism” (Undoing Racism, 10/25/04).
The Analysis: Well-Organized Production

The process of constructing the Analysis during the Undoing Racism workshop entailed trainers, in rotation, engaging trainees in more and less participatory roles. These roles included listening to and watching trainers expound upon and illustrate key ideas in often provocative, creative, and persuasive ways, as outlined in the previous section. They also included participation in various interactive exercises through which the Analysis was further developed as a body of knowledge and practiced as an antiracist organizing strategy. To understand the twofold Analysis as knowledge and practice, it is instructive to look more closely at the ways and conditions in which it was produced and at the forms it took in Undoing Racism. Exercises that entailed a structured collaboration between trainers and trainees were an integral part of these practices in their ability to actively engage participants and create a sense of ownership in and practical understanding of the Analysis.

What I will call *respond-in-turn* activities were those in which trainers posed a question or submitted a prompt to the group, to which we were expected to reply in the order in which we were seated in the circle. Responses during these activities tended to be very brief—a few words or, at most, a few sentences. Our introductions on the first evening of the training took this form. The trainers asked us to address the following questions: *Who are you? What do you do? Why is it important for you and your organization to deal with racism?* While our introductions were more elaborate than the standard responses to this type of activity, the trainers had requested that we keep our introductions concise, and this

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34I have developed this vocabulary and classificatory scheme for the sake of describing Undoing Racism. These are not terms that People’s Institute trainers or Alliance members employed.
may have influenced the brevity of our input during most other respond-in-turn exercises as well.

A variation on this type of activity was the racial cohort activity during which trainers asked trainees to respond in the order in which we were seated in the circle but also depending on our ascribed racial identities. Thus, for one such exercise, trainers asked all white trainees to address a question in the order dictated by the circle followed by all participants of color in circle-order as well. This structure limited the possibilities for trainees to engage each other since remaining in sequence and on task was tacitly important. At the same time, it suggested and produced parity among all participants, each of us having one brief turn to contribute.

Only on one occasion did a participant speak out of sequence during these activities; this trainee had already spoken but asked the trainers if she could address a subsequent participant’s comment. No one in the room seemed to object to either her request or the commentary she offered. In fact, one trainer followed up on this participant’s thought and added to it, thus validating her point and the break in the routine. This brief shift in the standard order of things did not alter the dynamics of the activities in any noticeable way over the long term; however, it suggested that possibilities for greater participant input were indeed available, even though activities were quite routinized and stylized. Despite the limited cross-fertilization, both variations of respond-in-turn exercises promoted a degree of collectivity since they compelled participants to express themselves to the group and to actively listen to each other.
Racial cohort exercises had the added effect of emphasizing certain collective identities, meanings, and positions, although responses within each cohort were internally differentiated, exposing differences as well as similarities. The racial cohort activity in which Assefa asked us to respond to the question, “What do you like about being [X race],” reproduced the category of people of color. This was so despite the fact that we were asked to speak as black, Asian American, Latino/a and white, not as people of color and white per se. People’s responses were recorded on the flip chart under headings representing these four cohorts (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Racial cohort exercise](image)

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35 In providing these categories, trainers disregarded one participant’s self-identification as both black and Native American. Participants were grouped in racial cohorts at one other time during the workshop, when asked to share their reactions to the Peoples’ Institute definition of racism.

36 I would like to thank the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond for their permission to reproduce images of the flipcharts generated during the fall 2004 Undoing Racism workshop.
While each cohort’s set of responses was listed as distinct from the others’, trainers followed up by asking us what the differences were between the “two lists,” implicitly “collapsing” black, Asian American, and Latino/a into people of color. The salience of this category of identity for trainers and for trainees was evident at various points throughout the workshop.

Q&A activities resembled those described above but involved trainers asking the group a series of questions to which individuals who wished to respond did so, either by raising our hands to be called on or by calling out our ideas. At these moments, individual trainees initiated participation, rather than being compelled to so, as in the respond-in-turn activities. Thus, withholding responses was as much a subtle act of agency here as was sharing. These activities often involved trainers “processing” trainees’ responses in certain ways to produce a type of collective knowledge. A trainer, either the one asking the question or another, would typically transcribe individual answers on the flip chart. Oftentimes, transcription entailed abbreviation, distillation, and interpretation of trainees’ already concise remarks. An instance of this process occurred when Elena asked, “Why are people poor?” Among the many people who responded, one participant offered, “The system punishes people who try to move out of poverty.” What Elena transcribed was “Resentment/Punitive.” Another example of interpretation involved a trainer grouping trainees’ responses into categories that she devised, or perhaps those that the curriculum supplied. Particularly because these activities involved collecting and visually representing the group’s contributions, they worked to produce collective knowledge for the Analysis; often, what trainers documented on the flip charts became a reference and basis for
later discussions upon which we built the Analysis. However, because trainers played a significant mediating role during these moments, Q&A activities entailed a subtle tension between collaborative knowledge production and trainer expertise.

Another common participatory component of Undoing Racism, the *call-and-response*, was less formal than those described above and frequently took the shape of an *inventory*. Our responses to inventory exercises consisted of nonverbal gestures. In such cases, trainers asked the group a series of self-identification questions to which those of us who wished to identify in the affirmative would raise our hands. In one such case, Assefa asked, in quick succession, “How many people have asked themselves before why people are poor?...How many have heard of a needs assessment?...How many have heard of a Power Analysis?” Hands rose and eyes darted as many of us took advantage of the opportunity to take stock of the group. Such inventories informed trainees and trainers alike. Furthermore, inventory activities called for a lower-risk form of participation. We were not asked to say anything, our responses were quick, and, in most cases, several participants identified with the affirmative and the negative responses, so no one individual was under a “spotlight” at these moments. At the same time, inventory activities allowed the least amount and variation of trainee input; we were restricted to expressing ourselves in a binary fashion. Further, trainers frequently inserted inventories into the program as a way to draw people’s attention in a transition from one segment of the workshop to another.

The spatial arrangement of trainees and trainers in the workshop also played an important role in shaping our participation in activities and, thus, the construction of
the Analysis. Trainers and trainees sat together in sturdy chairs arranged in a rough circle. This circle “made sense” and worked on a number of levels. First, it indicated and produced from the start a collective enterprise, facilitating interactions among trainees rather than just between trainers and trainees. It helped to create possibilities for interpersonal relationships and alliances among participants, essential to a network-oriented organizing effort. During breaks and before the trainings began each day, the open space of the circle also facilitated sociability, much more so than would rows of tables and chairs that inhibited circulation. But, as much as the spatial openness promoted these interactions and connections, it also fostered increased anxiety among some participants for its implications of surveillance and exposure. In my interview with Joanne, a young white woman who described herself as painfully shy, she indicated as much when she reflected on her experience participating in a voluntary activity that the trainers called “cultural sharing”:

The piece that didn’t hit me until cultural sharing was, like, I was exposed. I had read [about white privilege and complicity in racism] in books in my little cubbyhole and thought about it and written about it, and, and I even worked on that issue, in academia…in a classroom in which I was the only white person. And that was really, intense also. But sitting in a roomful of thirty people, who were all thinking about the same thing and hearing the same words, and, um the impact was tremendous. And I, I remember on my way home feeling like, I was thinking to myself, “I feel like I got my hand caught in the cookie jar.” Like, like, I know this. I, and I sit there and I admit that I’ve known that I’m white, I have privilege and I use my access to that privilege on a regular basis, and I enjoy it. And I was just absolutely horrified and disgusted with myself, and humiliated.

Joanne’s statement underscores the idea that the space of the workshop could leave one vulnerable to scrutiny. Her comparison to being the only white person in her college classroom also implied the salience of racial identities for her in this
moment of exposure. It was not only admitting that she had tapped into race
privilege, but acknowledging as much in the company of people of color, with whom
she now shared a frame of reference, which made the revelation so “intense.”
Additionally, however, surveillance engendered a sense of mutual accountability or
obligation, compelling people to “bring something to the table,” as Joanne stated
further.37

The spatial arrangement also undoubtedly evoked other familiar, albeit diverse,
settings for the social workers, educators, and students in the room: group
counseling sessions, seminars, roundtable discussions, and perhaps other
workshops. Thus, it implicitly sanctioned and proscribed certain interactions and
forms of participation. Of course, this familiarity could prompt unrealized
expectations as well. Moreover, the meanings participants attributed to the spatial
set-up would differ despite certain common associations. In this way, the circle
worked as a strategically ambiguous symbol from which various people could draw
meaning and determine varied courses of participation.

Circular seating also discursively positioned everyone in the room as both learner
and teacher, echoing the contract’s appeal to “no hierarchy.” However, it is
interesting to note that within the circle certain spaces were reserved as trainers’
territory, evoking both a sense of privilege and at times fortification. Whereas
participants were constrained to the perimeter of the circle when the workshop was
in session, trainers often worked the interior. (This spatial differentiation was not the
case before and after the workshop or during breaks when participants moved freely

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37Interview, Joanne, 10/27/04
in this space). There were two exceptions during the two and a half day program, and on both occasions, trainers selected the participants who entered the circle for a particular activity. The trainers also sat together at the front of the circle flanking the flip chart (itself a privileged space), designating a marked region of authority and knowledge. Their clustered position during the training called into question the nonhierarchical intentions purported by the contract, but also suggested an effort on the part of trainers to consolidate their authority in anticipation of contestation.

Trainers intimated this sense of vulnerability, particularly when outlining the contract early on. Elaborating on the meaning of “liberated space,” for example, Elena stated, “Some of us have been ‘enthusiastically encouraged’ to come…by our employers. Others come to observe—those who do this kind of work themselves—and they try to pick apart what we are saying.” In this sense, the appeal for liberated space was intended to provide sanctuary for the trainers as much as for the trainees. Assefa underscored this idea when he semi-facetiously submitted the final directive of the contract, “Don’t jump the trainers.”

Under these spatial constraints and conventions, trainers organized the participatory activities and a few others which were less patterned to form interconnected segments of the workshop, which they handed off at imperceptible cues from one trainer to the next. Although the primary facilitation role rotated among the trainers, those who were in the wings often spoke up to support the one

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38 Before and after each day’s session, and during short breaks each day, participants and trainers moved freely about the space to talk with each other, meet new people, and partake of the refreshments and browse the small sampling of organizational literature at the back of the room. The atmosphere during breaks was generally relaxed. During these times, people also made use of “peripheral” spaces of the workshop—hallways, bathrooms, the building lobby on the ground floor, and outdoor spaces nearby—to socialize and network, to make phone calls, and so forth.
who had the floor, offering additional thoughts that might reinforce a particular point, and occasionally offering contrasting viewpoints. Trainers did not appear to be territorial amongst themselves about center stage. From the outset, they also encouraged us to ask questions and share our perspectives. For instance, Michael explained, “Participating is bringing your own experiences. Don’t hold back. Don’t say at the end that we didn't talk about your situation,” while Elena implored us to constantly ask “Why?” At the same time, we were admonished not to “play devil’s advocate,” and were told this was not a space for debate. With these varying messages about participation, some of us accepted the call to share our experiences and ask questions, but many spoke up only in the context of prescribed activities that solicited specific forms of information.

The first segment on the second day, which followed a reiteration of the contract that had been delineated on day one, illustrates the elaborate composition of activities and the roles of trainers and trainees. Since the first day was more of an orientation, this segment might be considered the initial plunge into the Analysis. Candace, who was sitting in the circle among the other trainers at the front of the room, stood up to introduce the first exercise, which I will call the box activity. As she drew three rows of three dots on the flip chart, in a box formation, she instructed each of us to copy the image and connect the dots without taking our pens off the page, using exactly four straight lines. Obediently, we pulled notebooks and pens out of tote bags and briefcases we had placed earlier under, next to, and hanging from our chairs. Candace acknowledged that some of us might be familiar with this exercise and several of us admitted we had done this puzzle before, but had
forgotten how to solve it. For a few minutes each of us drew and redrew the nine dots and attempted to connect them properly, in vain. Candace walked around the circle glancing over our work. We laughed to ourselves, commented to our neighbors, or sighed with frustration. Finally, Candace asked the one participant who had cracked the puzzle to demonstrate the solution on the flip chart. We discovered that to solve this brainteaser it was necessary to extend some of the lines *beyond* the box represented by the dots (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: “Box” exercise](image)

The independent work involved in this activity was unusual but the collective knowledge practices that followed, by which we constructed certain meanings around this activity, were in line with the patterns described above.
Candace asked, “What does this box represent?” Several people responded with variations on the cognitive “box” signifying entrenched and rigid thinking that has become an object of contempt and critique in organizations of late.

Q: Where does the “box” come from?

A1: Socialization

A2: Personal experience

“My nephew is three years old,” Candace related, “and when he draws, he goes all over the place, but in a few years we’d tell him to stay in the lines.”

Q: How does this [“box”] play out in our work?

A3: Following rules

A4: Emphasis on policy over the person

A5: The idea that there’s only one right way, structure

A stream of additional responses included, “hierarchy,” “it affects coalition building,” “understanding subjective experiences—preconceptions of who we are working with,” “focus on paperwork and bureaucratic duties instead of doing something,” “the idea that there’s not enough time,” “forming committees,” “thinking certain things are not priorities.”

As people called out ideas, Candace wrote them on the flip chart, around the figure of the connected dots. She grouped the responses on the page under the headings of Time, Structure, Rules, and Resources. This quick classification appeared to be both a function of her familiarity with common responses to this question and a predetermined taxonomy, rather than a spontaneous decision on her part. In either case, however, it was the trainer
who made sense of trainees’ responses by determining the categories. Under and around “Time” she wrote meeting, conflicting demands, re-organizing, NOT a priority. Under “Structure”, she wrote one way, hierarchy, relative. Under “Rules” she transcribed policy vs. person, paper trail, and under the heading of “Resources” she jotted down coalition, limited* understanding, misperception, pre-perception, $$$, staff. Then she added, “We will desire to break out of the box, but sometimes there are parameters…and we need to be aware of the parameters.”

Q: What are these parameters?

A₆: Money

To this, Michael stepped in and offered, “It’s interesting how when we talk about antiracism work, the resources dry up.” The answers continued.

A₇: Risk

A₈: Job loss

A₉: Fear

Candace confirmed, “Fear is the main box. Fear of what?” A few people replied: “Fear of mobilizing because people will say, ‘Oh, she’s one of those folks;’” “fear of not taking it all the way,” “fear of failure,” and “fear of inadequacy.” In a supporting role, Elena stepped in and stated, “We all bring our own boxes, our own perspectives…We’ll get ‘box’ questions [in this workshop] but don’t expect ‘box’ answers. Fear doesn’t allow people to think critically…We need to think like two year olds—ask ‘why?’ We’ve lost our capacity for asking ‘why?’” Ask this in here!”

Candace’s segment, which began in a familiar and lighthearted way with the
brainteaser, was the beginning of the process of constructing the Analysis through directed and strategic forms of participation and collective knowledge production. These knowledge-practices often drew from our personal experiences as professionals and as “everyday” people. Candace returned to her chair on the perimeter of the circle and Elena took the floor to engage us in the next segment, again composed of a cluster of interactive exercises punctuated with trainer commentary and performance and trainees’ occasional, unsolicited questions or comments.

Through the facilitation process trainers elicited particular knowledges and experiences from participants in very specific ways. In authoritative negotiations, they often selected, synthesized, interpreted, and re-presented trainees’ input to fit the particularities of a given workshop into the Undoing Racism Analysis and to negate or modify elements that did not easily fit. An example of this process occurred in the midst of a Q&A exercise which Michael facilitated. To his question, “What are the systems that create, maintain, and support [oppression]?” we generated a list of answers including: “banking,” “education,” “real estate,” “transportation,” “criminal justice—*injustice,*” “local government—and the whole political system,” “health care,” “taxes,” “HUD,” “religious [institutions],” “the social service system,” “immigration,” “Bureau of Indian Affairs,” “media and entertainment,” “public works,” “philanthropy,” “drugs—legal and illegal,” “capitalism,” “tourism,” “insurance,” “environmental.” Provokingly, Michael suggested, “Let’s look critically at these systems. Education. How can it be [oppressive] and a window of opportunity?” Our clipped responses ranged from “assembly line teaching” to the
poor quality of school food programs to violence and criminalization of youth. Pushing us further, Assefa added that schools condition children to conform and obey. With this, the discussion took a turn when Deborah, the Wall Street consultant and a former military serviceperson, interjected with frustration and confusion. “How are rules a problem? How can we teach without rules? Did I hear something wrong? Are we saying something against rules?”

An intense exchange followed when two trainees took the reins. Citing an article she had read, Melissa, a thirty-something Jewish woman, directly addressed the question of education and the reproduction of class strata. Taking a different tack, Sarah, an anti-war activist, drew a comparison between schools, military regimentation, and sanctioned violence, proclaiming, “Soldiers are learning the rules to kill without thinking.” Deborah logged her adamant objection to this statement, asserting that the military was not just about rules and killing. Elena, an anti-militarism activist and Puerto Rico native, then stepped in to moderate and reclaim authority: “It depends. In Puerto Rico, the military people are abusive to the local people. The military is there to control people’s movements. The military has been capitalizing on people in poor communities.” Assefa re-entered the negotiation, appealing to yet another source of authority. He declared, “Carter G. Woodson said, ‘If you control someone’s mind, you don’t have to control their actions.’ We have to think critically about these institutions. Why are they the way they are?” Now Michael entered the fray, and echoing Assefa, he said, “We have to do a systemic Power Analysis and look at the institutions…If we look at it individually then we can see education as ‘my way out’ but systemically and historically, this is not
necessarily the case.” At this point, order had been restored; participants had resumed their more constrained roles as active listeners and respondents. Deborah’s protest had been contained and defused.

This exchange and a handful of others like it suggest that while the Analysis is indeed produced together by the trainees and trainers, in many ways its production is a negotiated and contested reproduction of practices and knowledges prescribed by the trainers and the curriculum. Still, the collaborative nature of the workshop remained salient. At the summer workshop Gayle alluded to this when she told the trainees, “You are the [People’s] Institute. We call ourselves the People’s Institute. You are a part of it whether you like it or not. We feed off your energy and need you to do this work” (Undoing Racism 6/15/04). Though Gayle mentioned the importance of trainees’ “energy,” it was also the case that the trainers “fed off” trainees’ experiences and knowledge during the workshop through the various interactive exercises used to produce the Analysis and to create a sense of ownership, identification, and measured urgency among participants.

Moreover, trainees actively mediated these organizing and interpreting processes, in many cases overtly and subtly consenting to and affirming the arrangements and meanings that the group constructed through directed participation, but at other times negotiating and contesting them, as the scenario above illustrates. Negotiation and contestation of the practices and knowledges were evident in the ways that we trainees verbally interjected questions and unsolicited comments, occasionally took charge of the flow of discussion, and created subtle forms of participation that were more self-regulated than the activities
described above. In fact, much of our participation in the workshop involved these subtle forms through which we engaged with trainers and with each other. It is worth noting that these included listening to the facilitators and observing their actions as they moved around the space of the circle. Trainers were by far more physically and verbally active than we. We also interpreted the words and images on the flip charts that facilitators had written down, and many of us jotted notes on the content of the workshop.

Importantly, understated aspects of our participation also included observing each other and responding to the training in subtly embodied and affective ways. We noted how others nodded their heads, scooted up to the edge of their seats or leaned back, crossed or uncrossed their legs, took notes, and leaned over to their neighbor to say something quietly; we all performed some version of these actions ourselves as well. We listened and responded to each other’s verbal reactions to the workshop: loud and soft exclamations and affirmations, comments or utterances that indicated frustration or disagreement, exaggerated breathing, and laughing in response to the trainers’ wry humor. We all contributed to this low hum and these small-scale movements, knowingly and unknowingly signaling others in the room. For example, on the second day of the workshop, I sat next to a middle-aged white woman named Barbara whose quiet but constant “wow’s” told me she was deeply engaged and moved; she did not take the workshop or racism lightly. But these subtle, or less explicit, forms of engagement were important ways that we participants negotiated our positions in the workshop and the knowledges we co-produced therein. They extended the possibilities of interaction beyond the trainers’
well-orchestrated activities, stylized “lectures,” and dramatic performances that comprised the focal point of the workshop.
KNOWING-DOING SUBJECTS

It isn’t that the subjects are there and we just can’t get to them. It is that they don’t know yet that they are subjects of a possible discourse. And that always in every political struggle, since every political struggle is always open, it is possible either to win their identification or to lose it. [Stuart Hall 1998:291]

Reflexivity and Identification

Trainees’ embodied responses signaled the considerable extent to which they regarded the People’s Institute Analysis as credible and authoritative. One racial cohort activity, in which trainers asked for our reactions to the People’s Institute definition of racism, underscored this observation. At its most elementary level, trainers presented the People’s Institute definition of racism as a formula: \( \text{Racism} = \text{Race Prejudice} + \text{Power} \). They situated the definition within the larger framework of their analysis and framed it as a “common language” necessary for organizing. The definition distinguished between race prejudice and racism, and trainers asserted that black people might be race-prejudiced but never racist, due to their structural lack of power.\(^{39}\)

Several reactions to this definition provided evidence of participants’ affirmative reception. Judith, a white “returnee” to Undoing Racism, expressed a sense that the

\(^{39}\)An in-depth, critical study of this definition and other constructs advanced through the People’s Institute analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis. For a critical perspective on this formulaic definition, see Gilroy 2002.
definition of racism represented an objective and rational truth, offering, “I feel a grounding in reality, and it makes my work more effective because it’s not based on delusions.” Participants also assessed the Undoing Racism Analysis as an accurate, common sense articulation and explanation of personal experiences. For instance, Diana, a reticent black woman, declared, “I’ve heard this [definition] before, but it’s the first time I’ve been floored by it. It makes sense finally that black people can’t be prejudiced [sic]In my everyday life—home, church, school, this room—white people have a choice, but I don’t.” 40 Such responses suggest that participants gained powerful clarity and new understandings of racism through the knowledges and practices of the training. At many other moments throughout the workshop, trainees interjected to affirm that the Analysis “made sense.” They offered personal and professional anecdotes and drew connections to things they had learned through other sources to confirm the validity of the Analysis. Yet, despite the degree to which the knowledge and linked practices resonated with many trainees, Sandy believes that the Alliance’s goal of incorporating new members who would activate this knowledge beyond the workshop falls short. Another Alliance organizer, the middle-aged white woman named Barbara mentioned above, expressed concern less about absolute numbers of active participants than about the relatively few people of color, especially men, who become active in the Alliance after attending the workshop.

40 It is interesting that the participant substituted the word “prejudiced” for “racist,” thereby misapplying the terms of the definition to which she was referring, underscoring the haziness surrounding these various terms. Furthermore, while Diana did not properly restate the definition, trainers did not correct her, signaling the significance of her “story” at this moment over a full grasp of this analytical tool.
However valid or compelling the Undoing Racism Analysis may be, it is apparent that the knowledge generated there does not yield the degree or kind of participation for which some Alliance organizers expressed hope. Eve Sedgwick (1997) notes that the relation between the truth-value of knowledge and what knowledge does is not self-evident. In her critique of “widespread critical habits” in academia, Sedgwick asserts, “For someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin on that person any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences” (Sedgwick 1997:7). One could extend her claim to the realm of knowledge and practice in antiracist movements and to the potential consequences therein. In other words, knowing how racism works and learning knowledge-practices to “undo” racism are not in themselves predictors of future engagement and action as prescribed. With this in mind, I will examine the intended consequences of the Undoing Racism workshop for the Alliance and will further discuss circumstances beyond the Analysis that work with, against, and alongside it, potentially mediating the realization of organizers’ intentions.

By engaging participants in producing the Analysis, Undoing Racism intends to interpellate a certain kind of subject, which I have referred to above as a “knowing-doing” subject. Sandy revealed this goal when she told me that through the workshops, she is “hoping that we find doers who have the Analysis” and when she explained that the purpose of the workshops is “finding people who would like to continue working on this.” However, while Sandy speaks in terms of finding certain people, it appears that Undoing Racism is also intended as a site to create knowing-doing subjects. This understanding came across in my interview with Sandy when I
asked her what she considered some of the challenges to the Alliance and the movement she envisions. One major concern for her was what she called “the knowing-doing gap.” She asked me, “What makes somebody move from knowing to doing?” and continued with consternation,

[Be]cause some people say, “After I heard this [People’s Institute Analysis], I started praying.” Ok! I need more than prayer, ya know? I wanna know who actually prays—which we all do—and actually started doing something?…Who are these people? What are the qualities that they have, so I can start finding more of them? We need to know who are these doing people? Maybe it’s their sun sign. I don’t know…There are tons of people who hear this and they say, “Wow!” But they don’t move. They don’t even mention it to their families again. What is that?…The knowing-doing gap. Who are they?…Were they always “doing people”, or were they inspired or outraged? But I wanna know. What did they hear?…Was it the training?41

Sandy’s distressful and ardent statement suggest that, on one hand, she believes there may be something intrinsic that makes people “doing people”, and this is most evident in her speculation about sun signs. If this is the case, it is incumbent upon the Alliance to “find” such individuals, bring them to the training, equip them with the Analysis, and make sure they remain engaged in the Alliance’s network. On the other hand, Sandy implies that particular experiences and exposure to certain knowledges may actually engender “doing people”, and she proposes that Undoing Racism may be one such experience. Thus, Sandy expresses a tempered expectation that knowing yields doing while she acknowledges that this assumption has not materialized to her satisfaction.

Who are these antiracist, knowing-doing subjects, and how does Undoing Racism seek to produce them? According to the Analysis, knowing-doing subjects

41Interview, Sandy, 11/24/04
are attentive to the structural and political nature of racism and its historical roots, above and beyond interpersonal relations; however, they are self-reflexive, mindful of and vigilant about their own positions, and the positions of the institutions of which they are a part, within fields of power relations. As antiracist gatekeepers, they seek accountability to communities of color and maneuver within these fields in ways that undermine (white) institutional power, white privilege, and white culture. Moreover, they are mindful of their “growing edges,” areas of internal resistance to antiracist knowledges and practices that, if examined, can lead to further personal transformation. Knowing-doing subjects are also relational, collectively oriented, and respectful and nurturing of cultural differences. As collective actors, they are strategic and careful organizers, not impulsive. Their collective orientation speaks as well to their reflexivity and accountability in that it implies that they are aware of being part of and having an impact on a broad web of social relations. As reflexive actors, they recognize the collective stakes involved in their actions. Sociologist and activist Amory Starr’s (2004) comparison of North American antiracist and antiglobalization activisms illuminates this idea and resonates with the People’s Institute founder’s concern about technique-centered organizing, discussed above. Starr (2004:145,150) maintains that many antiracist activists regard the “policy of absolute tolerance” to a “diversity of tactics,” often advanced among antiglobalization activists, as irresponsible toward communities of color and exclusionary toward

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42Undoing Racism trainers almost exclusively refer to institutions in the generic sense; however, I noted one occasion in which a trainer referred to “white institutions.” The implication throughout the training was that “institutions” stood in for “white institutions.” This conflation corresponded with the idea put forth in the analysis that US institutions, intentionally and by default, confer power to whites and thereby reproduce racism. Frederick (2003) and Harris-Lacewell (2004) describe black counterpublic spaces that contest a blanket notion of institutions. Undoing Racism itself is in fact predicated on the possibility that alternative to “white institutions” are possible.
activists of color. In addition to a collective orientation, knowing-doing subjects feel personal stakes in antiracism and recognize that racism affects everyone, regardless of race, class, or achievements. Undoing Racism works to create these antiracist subjects through practices that liberate and discipline, disrupt hierarchies, enact and engender reflexivity and collectivity, and generate multilateral recognition of rewards linked to dismantling racism.

The concept of antiracist gatekeeping discussed earlier is useful in understanding the reflexive nature of knowing-doing subjects. Knowing-doing subjects are antiracist gatekeepers who seek to align themselves with people and communities in, on, and through which institutions operate and to use their positions as gatekeepers to transform the institutions in which they are situated. As Michael avowed, “A community needs gatekeepers, allies in institutions, people who understand the power arrangement. They become the support for larger organizing efforts in the community. We need to organize institutions as well as do community organizing.” The Power Analysis is an important means by which knowing-doing subjects seek to understand the “power arrangement”, and identify their own power, roles, and positions as gatekeepers. It is also a critical way that knowing-doing subjects align themselves with constituencies.

An ostensibly autobiographical sketch that Michael performed demonstrates the reflexivity I claim Undoing Racism attempts to produce. This dramatic performance followed Michael's discussion about what it means to be a gatekeeper and how gatekeeping can be an antiracist practice. It effectively illustrates one of the means through which trainers seek to produce the reflexive knowing-doing subject, by
provoking identification with the protagonist who undergoes transformation toward greater reflexivity himself. In the fashion of the other trainers, Michael created a “stage” from the empty space marked off by the circle of chairs in which we all sat. He performed with confidence and flair as he laid out the storyline and took advantage of the space for expression, striding from the center to the perimeter and back again and emphasizing his narrative through gesture, stance, facial expression, and shifts in tone of voice. He seemed particularly adept at this pedagogical practice.

The story Michael told was about his early days as a minister assigned to a church in a community of color in a city somewhere up north. The story began with his first awkward and problematic attempts to meet and connect with people in the neighborhood based on the premise that, “As an institutional person inserted into a community, it’s important to learn about the community.” Stiff-shouldered and tight-gated, Michael penguin-stepped about the circle and declared that when he arrived in the community he stood out as a rigid, southern white guy. Problematizing “common sense” assumptions that this meant he needed to keep his guard up, he called attention to his position within the field of power relations, declaring, “I’m the safest one in the community, but my being there puts the community at risk because if something happens to me, the powers that be will crack down on the community.” In other words, the community was not a threat to him as much as he was a threat to the community due to his subject position as a white man with strong institutional ties. While his being a risk factor did not necessarily diminish, Michael explained that he came to know people in the community and, simultaneously, he “loosened
No longer acting the part of the stiff white guy, his tone of voice and body language changed to accommodate and underscore his narrative. Michael was so loose, in fact, that he strode across the circle and enlisted some trainees as “community folks” in his story, greeting them colloquially and vigorously grasping their hands to dramatize his intimate knowledge of an intricate handshake. After this personal transformation and learning what was important to people in the community, Michael returned to the bishop to ask for funding to support a community organizing project. In this “scene”, his demeanor and voice reverted to that of the stiff white guy. As an aside, he remarked that he made sure to couch the request in language that the bishop would hear and respond to—code words like “at-risk” and “low self esteem.” However, the underlying purpose was to assist community members in advancing interests they had determined.

Michael’s story served to model a certain type of activated reflexivity and hinted at the open-ended process of becoming an antiracist, knowing-doing subject. His narrative emphasized the (shifting) positionality of the gatekeeper in relation to constituents and institutions and conscious and intentional maneuvering within the field of power relations. It is important to note that this narrative, as others the trainers performed, drew a good deal of laughter and recognition from participants. The trainers’ ability to engender such personal identification worked to convert the training space into a site of subject-making, within which participants vicariously but often vividly experienced and understood becoming knowing-doing subjects.

Aside from the highly stylized moments of performance, trainers’ provoked and modeled reflexivity in more “ordinary” ways during the workshop. For example, in an
informal but instructive tone, Michael elaborated on the concept of “internalized racial superiority” when we all returned from a lunch break. It appeared as if he had thought about this during the break and wanted to bring it up to further explicate the concept:

Internalized racial superiority includes my ways of speaking. I’m not aware of how people of color hear what I say. When I say, “I’ve already heard this,” this is heard as one-upping a person of color. It’s ok to sit with it and not say, “I’ve heard this.” When a person of color says, “I’ve heard this” it affirms her experience. It’s not a critique of the presentation, whereas for a white person it may be a critique, or it sounds like a critique because of the history of white dominance.

Speaking largely in first person, Michael identified his own position, not just that of white people in general. His statement also implied that, based on a history of white domination, white people need to be more reflexive about “internalized racial oppression” than people of color. Expanding on Michael's pronouncement, Nisa followed with her own reflection on “internalized racial inferiority,” the counterpart to internalized racial superiority that the Analysis attributes to people of color. She volunteered, “[It’s] subtle pieces of culture. I’m refining where this [internalized racial oppression] lives. [For instance,] people of color protect white people.” While Nisa’s adoption of the first person voice was more conservative than Michael’s, it seems that his statement helped to create the conditions for Nisa to reflect on her own roles and positions within the matrix of racism. Comments such as these, by trainers and trainees alike, suggest that Undoing Racism was indeed a reflexive, “liberated” space for some.
Later, during my group interview with Nisa and Lauren, Nisa referred back to her comment above in response to my question about tensions they detected in the training:

I also recognize that in the process of all of us growing, uh the things I alluded to in the workshop, the real subtle [things that are] hard to get at. That when you touch it, it’s like, “Oh no, that’s me.” The recognition of how deep this thing is, how deeply embedded—the automatic wanting to protect massa or white woman. [grasping Lauren’s arm to demonstrate] I mean, I got you!

Here Nisa confirmed the self-reflexivity of her earlier observation and underscored the role of the workshop in engendering this reflexivity through processes that produced identification and spaces that welcomed its expression. She continued with her response, urged on by Lauren:

Nisa: The other conflict, and I think they were brilliant at putting this forward, [Michael] said, “We um in our own organization, in the People’s Institute, we got issues. We have issues in our organization!” So it wasn’t like they’re saying, ‘We’re free. We’ve made it!’ There is no “arrived.” There’s constantly working on this thing. There’s constant practice. There’s constant refining. There’s constant, “Oh, wow! That’s, that’s ya know, there it is again!” It’s constant recognition of how deep this thing is, and I think people, if they’re humble enough, and allow themselves to be vulnerable enough, are there to admit all those subtle layers that keep creeping in.43

Lauren: “We’ve made it!”

Acknowledging problems within the People’s Institute, trainers sanctioned others to reflect on themselves and their own organizations, to be “critical lovers of [their] institutions,” as trainers liked to say. Doing so also reinforced the idea that knowing-doing subjects are always in the process of becoming.

43Interview, Nisa and Lauren, 10/26/04
Knowing-doing subjects also recognize that racism harms them personally along with everyone else. For many participants of Undoing Racism, this was taken for granted, but it was not the case for all. However, concepts like “no exceptionalism” and “internalized racial oppression” attempted to construct racism as universally (though differentially) injurious, casting a net that includes white “beneficiaries” of privilege and people of color who have “made it.” For knowing-doing subjects, racism involves personal and collective loss regardless of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or professional status.

One of the clearest attempts to produce identification of this sort, particularly among white participants, was a racial cohort activity alluded to earlier in which Assefa asked participants to express what we liked about being white, black, Asian American, or Latino/a. White participants were instructed to speak first. The room was quiet as we muttered our brief responses in turn, many like solemn confessions: safety, opportunity, access, comfort, ease, affirmation, education, open doors, suntan. One woman prefaced her response with an explanation that she was referring to how she benefited from being white, but Assefa explained that they wanted to know what she liked; she declared, “I don’t like it.” As we spoke, Elena recorded our responses in a column on the flip chart. Next, black participants offered their responses in affirmative tones: never dull, connection, complexity, perseverance, spirituality, gifted, our culture, victorious spirit, food, party, the way we move, the way we walk, our hair, my sisters. Elena recorded these in a second column. One of the volunteers from the local radio station, a woman named Janine, served as a proxy for Asian Americans, though she pointed out that she spoke as a
Japanese American. What she liked about being Japanese American was, “In workshops like this, not being white,” which drew some laughter from the group, “and my appearance.” Elena added this to the flip chart in a third column. As the only Latina, she then shared what she liked—rhythm, humor, food, language, music—and jotted that down beneath Janine’s response.

Assefa followed the exercise by asking participants to interpret the differences between the items whites listed and those that people of color listed. One participant, an African-American woman named Sharon, suggested, “If these lists weren’t labeled [according to race], we’d know the white side was white because people of color don’t have these things.” Assefa then asked, “How could I get different answers from white people?” I replied, “Ask the question in terms of ethnicity,” and Assefa affirmed my answer. Then, echoing Sharon, he continued,

Is there anything wrong with [the white participants’] list? The only thing wrong is that it’s not under the other categories! People of color don’t have access, opportunity, safety. Whites give up the cultural stuff to be part of the exclusive club called “White”…This is why racism hurts us all. White people gave up their humanity and then were capable of lynching [a reference to an earlier mention of lynching]. Part of this exercise is to show that to be part of “White” is to give up things that make you human. [emphasis added]

Elena connected Assefa’s point to organizing work. She critiqued the assumptions and implications underlying the notion of “white allies”:

There’s the idea of the “white ally”, that people of color need white people. What do white people get from being allies with communities of color? A sense of life. [There’s an] exoticization of people of color. The concept of “white ally” implies that whites have it going for them but they don’t. They need to accept that people of color have something to teach. Whites’ humanity is being jeopardized. [emphasis added]
These critiques of whiteness as cultural loss and lack of “a sense of life” or “humanity” resonated with some whites participants. For instance, a middle-aged Jewish woman named Andrea logged her identification with Elena’s commentary, interjecting, “I grew up in a white suburb and always wanted to experience other cultures, to travel, see movies that transported me.” The loss of “cultural stuff” and its link to antiracism also resonated with Joanne, whose European mother had consciously disassociated herself with her extended family in an effort to “Americanize.” In our interview, I asked Joanne whether the workshop had provided her with any useful strategies. She replied that the workshop had inspired her to create a “to do list” and continued, “On my to do list, I, I thought to myself, ya know there’s a piece about just my personal sense of culture, or lack thereof, that needs to be addressed before I can really be effective at all.” Thus, Joanne identified with the idea of whiteness and loss, and planned to seek redress.

For those of us whose ethnic identities were particularly salient in relation to whiteness, Elena brought the idea of whiteness and culture loss home in a different way. “There are historical processes by which some entered the white ranks while others did not. Once you enter the white collective, you can’t preserve your values,” she asserted emphatically. “The push is to eliminate that. You’re allowed to be Irish for one day but don’t be Irish the rest of the time. Change your names, give up your language.” Following through with an inventory, she drove her point home. “How many of you speak the language of your [ancestors]?” Very few of us raised our hands. “How many of you cook the food of your [ancestors]?” Many more hands went up. “The first thing lost is language,” Elena proclaimed. “The last thing lost is

44Interview, Joanne, 10/27/04
food. The process is happening to all of us. The difference is when whites disconnect from their cultures they get goodies. When non-white people disconnect from their cultures, they get control.”

Though Undoing Racism did not attribute cultural loss to blacks, Latino/as, or Asian Americans, as groups, in the same way it did for whites, the notion of internalized racial inferiority worked in a similar way, engendering a sense that even the most professionally or financially successful person of color continues to experience the harmful impacts of racism. The concept identified or underscored social losses—increasingly tenuous ties to, or even alienation from, one’s community—that accompany various forms of success for individuals of color. Furthermore, internalized racial superiority maintains that high-ranking professionals of color are still doing white people’s bidding at the end of the day, a cog in the wheel of racist institutions, unless they become reflexive, antiracist gatekeepers, and utilize their positions to disrupt racial hierarchies associated with their institutions. As such, Elena proclaimed, “Our ancestors sacrificed for us to be here together [in these institutions] but it’s not enough to just be in an institution as a person of color while keeping the institution as is.” Her point resonates with Weher’s (2003:10) critique of organizations that appeal to the “add people of color and stir” approach to diversity without attending to white privilege and power within these organizations. However, while Weher primarily calls on white activist women to reevaluate their notions of racial equity, Elena puts the challenge to people of color.
Intervening in Subject-Making

Undoing Racism produced subjects who were more reflexive, who achieved a sense of personal and collective stakes in antiracism, and who gained knowledge about structural racism and a theory of its undoing; however, knowing-doing subjects remain difficult to “find.” As Frederick (2003) and Harris-Lacewell (2004) both suggest, processes that shape activist subjectivities and political ideologies create certain preconditions or possibilities for mobilization, but they do not promise mobilization as such. Hall (1998:291) raises the stakes of political subject-making in declaring, “since every political struggle is always open, it is possible either to win [subjects’] identification or to lose it.” Indeed, all manner of contingencies prevent any sort of certainty that knowing-doing subjects, once produced, will remain “intact” or engaged in ways that trainers and organizers recognize and endorse. The fact that several workshop participants returned to Undoing Racism multiple times suggests they recognize that being a knowing-doing subject involves something more than a one-time “transformation.” Trainers recognized this as well and often highlighted it by emphasizing the importance of organizing and practice. For instance, Michael once remarked, “People say we’re preaching to the choir. Well, the choir needs to practice!” The sense of practice this statement evoked was twofold. On one hand, Michael implied that the knowledge “the choir” already had was not sufficient if it were not put into practice. In this same sense, he also asserted earlier, “You can’t teach or learn racism away. You have to work it away.” On the other hand, the image of the practicing choir suggested the repetition, hard work, and refinement associated with rehearsal among an organized collective.
Various clues emerge from trainees’ own comments and questions during the workshop and interviews that suggest some of the contingencies through which participants mediate and participate in their own subject-making. *Intervening* knowledges and meanings—what people brought with them to the workshop and exchanged with others, as well as what people produced in the trainings as a result of these exchanges—were important considerations in this regard. These included knowledges and meanings of identities, social relations, and the risks and rewards of knowing-doing subjectivity within and outside of Undoing Racism. These contributed to the ways participants mediated the subject-making processes and thus would impact their future organizational involvement and antiracist mobilization.

An exchange during my group interview with Lauren and Nisa called attention to intervening knowledges concerning racial identities and commitments to antiracist work. This excerpt also follows from my question regarding tensions perceived during the workshop:

Lauren: I think a lot of the tensions too are, are uh, they’re more of a struggle for, for white people in a way, within [us]. I mean, this is gonna be a lotta work, and *frankly*, I don’t *have* to do it.

Nisa: No. Yeah.

Lauren: So, what the hell’s *wrong* with me that I need, some part of me even *wants* to take responsibility. That doesn’t make any sense. Doesn’t make any sense!

Nisa/Leslie: (Laugh)

Nisa: (Laughing) I don’t know! When you [Lauren] wake up at 2:30 in the morning and say, “[Nisa] was nice, but *sh*t*, I ain’t gonna do

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45I borrow the concept of negotiating risks and rewards from Ajulo Othow, Southern Rural Development Initiative (Anthropology and Community Development, guest lecture, 11/12/04).
that [take responsibility for racism]!

(All laugh)

Lauren: Right

Nisa: …I got enough to do. I’m trying to raise my children. I’m trying to pay my mortgage. I cannot be rocking the boat."

Lauren: Right. And the other thing is that looking within at your motivations. I mean, at some point you stop, you, you’re afraid you’ll stop getting things done. If I start looking at every single thing I do, I can’t get out the door in the morning.

Nisa: (Laugh)

Lauren: So there’s that kind of stuff too that’s going on.

Nisa: Mm hmm, mm hmm.46

Both Lauren and Nisa spoke explicitly about the negotiations involved in being a white knowing-doing subject; however, considerations about identity, family relations, and the risks and rewards of knowing-doing subjectivity also inform the self-making experiences of participants of color in various ways vis-à-vis Undoing Racism. Moreover, Lauren’s comment about “looking within” and not “getting things done” points to a perceived tension between the appeal to self-reflexivity and the demands of everyday life; she suggests that there is a point at which reflexivity can get in the way of the most basic functioning, like “get[ting] out the door in the morning.”

Nisa’s interjections above point to her negotiation with the antiracist project at hand and illuminate her recognition or concern that a white woman like Lauren might wake up in the middle of the night and decide not to take up the call of antiracism, as if it were just a bad dream. In a similar vein during the workshop, a middle-aged

46Interview, Nisa and Lauren, 10/26/04
black man named Harrell commented on whites’ equivocation toward antiracism. He observed that, in his experience, “white people tend to have to back off from their commitment, even get defensive,” and added, “Even blacks and the idea of forgiveness of the individual [white person], these are demons to antiracism.” Harris-Lacewell (2004:85) notes that talk within the black counterpublic contributes to the formation of political worldviews, and one could extend her thesis to subjectivities; one significant consideration she has observed involves blacks debating the value of political strategies that involve coalitions with whites. While this interview and the workshop would not be considered a black counterpublic in Harris-Lacewell’s terms (since both are discursive spaces that include whites) or a subaltern counterpublic in Fraser’s terms (since whites in these spaces are constructed as dominant regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality), I would argue that these and other similar interactions during the workshop suggest a counterpublic quality to these spaces such that counter-hegemonic exchanges ensue and contribute to shaping worldviews and subjectivities.

Another set of intervening knowledges that bears on subject-making in Undoing Racism are those related to participants’ familiarity with workshops and trainings as sites of learning and practice. Among social workers and human service professionals, “professional development” workshops are familiar, even customary.47 They are frequently important sites of professional and institutional reproduction and moments of validation, in which workers are reminded that their work matters; all sorts of resources—donuts and coffee, consultants’ and speakers’ fees, paid leave from work, and the like—have been devoted to demonstrating that this is true.

47I would like to thank Peter Redfield for his insight on this point.
Workshops may also be significant practices of community- and relationship-building and timely respites from a humdrum or overwhelming workweek, even if they themselves are often thought to be humdrum. Sometimes, they are invigorating experiences, in which one learns to see, and subsequently practice, their work in new ways. As a workshop or training, these are some of the histories one might bring to Undoing Racism, along with the more specialized meanings of "diversity" about which I spoke earlier. Not all of these meanings and associations articulate with Undoing Racism, an overt political project concerned at once with deconstructing and transforming the same subjects and institutions that familiar "professional development" workshops seek to shore up and reproduce. Still, such meanings likely mediate participants' experiences and the processes of subject-making entailed in Undoing Racism.
CONCLUSION

What I have considered here is a brief but important moment within a more expansive set of discourses and practices. Through the Undoing Racism training, the People’s Institute and the Alliance are working to engender an antiracist movement comprised of social workers and like professionals. I have argued that Undoing Racism seeks to interpellate and produce antiracist subjects who will work to disrupt and transform the fundamental power relations that render “helping” professions and institutions as sites and vehicles of racial subordination. However, Undoing Racism participants strategically accommodate, mediate, and dispute the knowledges and practices of antiracist subject-making. This accounts in part for the tensions that some participants observe. Yet, as I have argued, the Undoing Racism training is fraught with other contradictions: discipline and liberation, hierarchy and horizontality, expert knowledge and collective knowledge, and so forth. These speak to Batteau’s notion of organizational culture, to which he attributes a continuous struggle to establish order while unavoidably generating fragmentation and difference among those being organized.

Workshops or trainings are not inevitable methods for this kind of undertaking; however, they resonate in many ways with the Undoing Racism participants I encountered due to their familiarity as forms and fora of learning for the sake of practice and self-improvement among human service practitioners. What are the
political implications of a movement whose “threshold” resembles the specialized spaces and practices that reproduce and validate the very professions and institutions that Undoing Racism seeks to critique and radically transform? In some ways, this is a question about the relative merits of struggling from within versus from without. In a related sense, it is also a question about the location and composition of counterpublic spheres. Must counterpublic spaces be “beyond the gaze” of the dominant (Harris-Lacewell 2004:9), or disconnected from the state and its proxies (Frederick 2003:96-97)? To suggest the affirmative is to limit considerably the opportunities for “invent[ing] and circulat[ing] counterdiscourses” (Fraser 1990:67) while at the same time acknowledging the undeniable constraints with which such a situated counterpublic sphere would contend.

Indeed, a workshop like Undoing Racism is not a subaltern counterpublic space in the sense Fraser suggests; it is not necessarily comprised (wholly) of people who share a common sense of subordination based on certain subject positions or identities. Nor is it necessarily “virtuous”; however, Fraser contends that virtue is not a required trait of the counterpublic sphere. Frederick (2003) and Harris-Lacewell (2004) substantiate this contention in their respective research on black counterpublic spheres, noting forms of hierarchy and marginalization within these spaces, for example. Projects like Undoing Racism, tensions and all, represent possibilities for inserting and expanding dynamic “air pockets” of counter-hegemonic knowledge-practices within hegemonic structures, taking advantage of the inconsistencies and contradictions of structural power relations. I would contend
that what constitutes a counterpublic space may be as much what happens within that sphere as who occupies it.

A sustained period of ethnographic research would illuminate a great deal more about the discourses and processes discussed here, and other important aspects of the Alliance’s movement (e.g., the practices and actions of Alliance committees). Furthermore, longer-term research would enable an understanding of what happens once participants leave the training. In speaking with several first-time participants immediately following the workshop, I have gained some initial insight regarding their thoughts on, concerns about, and intentions for future collective action and personal reflection. What are participants’ expectations for themselves and others following their experiences in Undoing Racism? What is the impact of Undoing Racism on participants’ racial, gender, professional, and political identities? How do participants work to shape and reshape themselves as antiracists after their initial introduction to the Analysis? How and under what conditions do participants remain engaged or disengage? What types of negotiations do individuals make to incorporate or accommodate the Analysis in various aspects of their professional practices? These and other questions may contribute to knowledge about the tensions and possibilities that professional-activist practices and identities entail.
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