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# Whites Only: SURJ And The Caucasian Invasion Of Racial Justice Spaces



The DiDi Delgado [Follow](#)

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by *DiDi Delgado*, *Black Lives Matter-Cambridge*

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# White-led racial justice groups have displayed problematic behavior, lack of accountability, and outright anti-Blackness.



ast summer — after a 20 year hiatus — Hollywood released the long awaited sequel to the alien invasion blockbuster, *Independence Day*, entitled *Independence Day: Resurgence*. The original film was a massive success, thanks to groundbreaking special effects, a diverse ensemble cast, and (most importantly) a charismatic lead performance from the perpetually sexy Will Smith.

The sequel, however, was trash.

To be fair, I didn't actually see *Resurgence*, but neither did anybody else in the U.S. As it turns out, most Americans decided back in '96 that we had no interest in revisiting *Independence Day* unless the Fresh Prince was involved. The studios apparently missed the memo. When Smith turned down the role, they went ahead and made the sequel without him. It was a bad idea, and like most bad ideas, I blame white people. Specifically, I blame the room full of white writers, producers, directors, and executives who greenlit this doomed disappointment from the start. And this isn't the first time a room full of white people has let me down.

Need I remind you of purple ketchup? The Spider-Man musical released on Broadway? George Zimmerman's acquittal by jury? The Holocaust? All of these bad ideas started with a bunch of white folks sitting around a table being extra white. If history has taught me anything, it's that there's nothing more disappointing or dangerous than a room full of white people. With that in mind, I'd like you to consider why anyone would expect white-led anti-racism organizations to be any different.

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White-led anti-racism groups have existed for hundreds of years, and they've often been problematic, counterproductive, and just fucking weird since their inception. Take, for instance, the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society of 1833, which believed that slave owners were missing out on a business opportunity by not putting slaves on the payroll. They argued that paying slaves "would make them doubly valuable to [their] masters," because paid laborers are more motivated than forced laborers. That's the whitest thing I've ever heard, and I own two Hanson records. I can think of a thousand better reasons not to own a person aside from increased productivity. The Anti-Slavery Society was equally concerned with growing the free labor market in order to sustain capitalism as ending the gruesome practices of slavery — and these were among the **most radical** white folks of the day. Even Frederick Douglass used to chill with them. And while Frederick was no-doubt working with what he had at his disposal, we have to acknowledge that sometimes what we have at our disposal leaves much to be desired.

Today, we have a myriad of predominantly white-led racial justice groups to choose from, with memberships booming thanks to frantic constituents still in shock from the latest political regime change. That's a recipe for disaster; and I've personally observed problematic behavior, lack of accountability, and outright anti-Blackness from predominantly white-led groups like Resource Generation (RG), White People Challenging Racism (WPCR), Unitarian Universalist (UU) churches and Association (UUA), Anti-Racism Collaborative (ARC), and Capital Area Against Mass Incarceration (CAAMI) — to name a few. But arguably the most visible (and potentially harmful) white-led anti-racism group in recent years is Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ).

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SURJ, for those who don't spend their weekends dodging pepper spray, is a chapter-based network intent on "organizing white people for racial justice." It was founded, in 2009, by white folks brimming with enthusiasm following the presidential victory of Barack Obama. According to [their website](#), SURJ believes "white people must partner across race and other differences to create social change." They go on to say they are "here to provide resources and support for white people to make this happen."

Setting aside how problematic it is to tackle white supremacy by "providing resources and support for white people," SURJ has evidently been in crisis for quite some time. Last fall, the Charlotte chapter promptly disbanded and [released a statement](#) noting, "The end of white supremacy will not come from a room of white people talking to each other about racism. We need to take action, and now." I've gone on record as being critical of SURJ's strategy for dismantling racism, but this was the first time I stood in whole-hearted agreement with a chapter. It's telling that this statement of disbandment, unlike other initiatives and calls-to-action from SURJ, was shared so widely among Black organizers. It seemed that one chapter finally got it right, and they did so by realizing they got it wrong. As [more](#) and [more](#) (and [more](#), and [more](#)) [troubling testimonies](#) criticizing SURJ came to light, I became increasingly vocal in my opposition. This prompted pushback and defensiveness from SURJ members and affiliates.

Recently, I spoke with a member of [Community Change Incorporated](#) (CCI) — a predominantly white-led anti-racism organization providing oversight and guidance to [SURJ Boston](#). The member expressed genuine concern that if I continued to publicly admonish the organization I would potentially alienate white allies, effectively discouraging them from doing anti-racism work. This is something Black organizers hear endlessly. It's usually framed as friendly advice, but I recognize it for what it is: a thinly veiled threat. "If you're not nice to us, we won't help end your oppression!" Ironically, that sentiment is the main reason I believe it's important to be critical of white racial justice groups. I'm exploiting their fragility. It helps weed out allies and accomplices who think "Black lives matter" is a conditional phrase. Black lives ALWAYS

matter, even when they're making white people uncomfortable. In fact, I'd argue that's when they matter most.

And believe it or not, challenging white anti-racism groups is a matter of life and death.

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## Black lives ALWAYS matter, even when they're making white people uncomfortable.

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Last January I helped lead an act of resistance at the presidential inauguration in Washington DC. During the action, BLM organizers chained themselves to various access points and formed a human wall barricading entrances to the proceedings. This was a high-stakes action with serious risk of arrest and/or injury. In retrospect, I have no way of knowing how many white activists in attendance were one valid criticism away from abandoning me. When my body is on the line, I can't take the chance of surrounding myself with conditional accomplices. Holding allies accountable, and being vocally critical of their missteps, is not just vital to the movement, it's vital to my survival. White folks need to ask themselves if they're doing this work because it's a moral imperative, or because they want accolades and kudos to soothe their white guilt. If it's the latter, then they've picked the wrong hobby. Sex worker and activist, Laura LeMoon, put it best when she wrote, "An ally should be personally gaining NOTHING through their activism. In fact, if you are an ally, you should be *losing* things through your activism; space, voice, recognition, validation, identity and **ego**." I suspect many white people combatting racism have been so busy checking their privilege that they've forgotten to check their egos. That's where I come in.





SOURCE: GET OUT (2017)

Despite my criticism, I've never told anyone not to collaborate with white-led anti-racism groups. I've worked with many, and will probably continue to do so (assuming I don't alienate them all). I do, however, insist that today's white anti-racism initiatives stay in their lane, and do not co-opt POC movements or center themselves in any way. This work was being done long before them, and will continue long after they've grown tired of dabbling in the waters of thankless atonement. There are no perfect individuals or organizations, and I think SURJ and similar outlets need to acknowledge that from the onset. If they believe there's a "right" way to perform whiteness within a white supremacy they're sadly mistaken. **You cannot be a member of an oppressive group without inflicting harm on those you oppress.** The objective for allies should be to inflict as little harm as possible. And the way to do this is through accountability. But who are white-led anti-racism groups accountable to? And what does that accountability look like?

According to SURJ National, they're accountable to "people of color" and, occasionally, "Black leadership." They also have an Accountability Council consisting of "eight to twelve" non-white members. That's frighteningly ambiguous, so last month I reached out to 134 SURJ chapters and affiliates to ask them a few specific questions about accountability. Namely: "What people of color are you accountable to?"; "How are people of color actively influencing your initiatives?"; and "How did you celebrate the news that Beyoncé was pregnant with twins?" Only 28 chapters responded, and of those

28, less than half could definitively answer my inquiries related to accountability. This is dangerous, y'all. It also reeks of tokenism. There are chapters of SURJ that are not accountable to ANY people of color, and there are chapters seemingly accountable to any random Black person they can find. Some have 2 or 3 non-white members out of hundreds, and they wield them like accountability shields. One chapter admitted, "our SURJ meetings are probably the last place on Earth any Black/Latinx folks [would] want to be." That should tell you something. Imagine a vast network of men meeting up on weekends to discuss dismantling patriarchy, and every once in awhile they check in with a woman to see if they're doing it right. Fuck. Just writing that sent me to the sunken place.

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If there's one thing white people DON'T need, it's more spaces reserved for their comfort at the expense and exclusion of people of color. I understand there are white folks eager to openly dismantle racism and flex their social justice vocabulary without burdening POC. To those people, I'd suggest focusing on pre-existing white spaces: their homes, their office buildings, their college campuses, their financial institutions, their health care facilities, their shopping centers, and every other space designed exclusively with them in mind. By creating bubbles within white supremacy where it's "safe" to practice anti-racism, we're implying there are places where racism can remain unchallenged. In many ways, white anti-racism spaces serve as safety nets protecting allies from their own uncertainty and fear of failure, while simultaneously keeping people of color at a distance. I recently took flak for a social media post in which I facetiously compared all-white SURJ meetings to Klan rallies. While I was obviously joking, it's worth noting that new-age Klan chapters may eventually have more POC involvement than existing SURJ chapters. I wonder if they have hoods and robes to match my Louboutins.

Speaking of shoes I can't possibly afford, I can't conclude this rant without discussing the role money plays in all of this. I believe a big reason many organizers are reluctant to criticize white anti-racism groups is because white-led groups have significant financial resources at their disposal. Their base is largely comprised of college-educated white folks and aging retirees. They know how to fill out a check. SURJ, for example, has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars over the past decade through crowdsourcing and direct asks. Much of that money has found its way to Black organizers and communities of color. Much of it hasn't. And while it can't be denied that money is valuable to the resistance, we have to remember that any money coming from white communities is essentially reparations (i.e. back pay). Reparations cannot buy our silence. Reparations do not warrant civic immunity or even thanks. That might be hard to digest, but reparations are just monies owed. And while we're on the subject of money, I'm also on the fence about SURJ hiring white people to do anti-racism work. Obviously I'm against unpaid labor (\*hint\*), but I'm also against white people profiting off of racism. I'll save that debate for another day.

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I'm not suggesting that "good work" hasn't been done by white folks in the fight against white supremacy (it has), or that it should stop (it shouldn't), but we can't ignore the ways approaching anti-racism work with a white lens is inherently flawed. White people have a sense of entitlement that POC rarely develop, and they bring that entitlement with them everywhere. I believe that's why so many white allies treat dismantling racism like they're demanding to speak to the manager at Whole Foods. They want instant gratification, and they want to be credited for the inconvenience. But there is no quick fix to this problem. And if you're doing this work so you can sleep better at night, I'd ask that you remove yourself from this fight. You're not ready; if you were, you'd be

sleeping *worse*. Isolating yourself from the parts of white supremacy that make you feel “icky,” surrounding yourself with like-minded white people, and blocking your racist Facebook friends is primarily done to ensure your own comfort. What I’m asking is that you make yourselves uncomfortable at every opportunity. Because unlike *your* discomfort, mine is not optional.

If SURJ and other white-led anti-racism organizations aren’t prepared to handle public critique, they should try trading places with Black Lives Matter for a day. I think they’d find that the amount of criticism they receive pales in comparison. And criticism of BLM (valid or otherwise) often comes with a side of unbridled hate and threats of violence. It’s not the type of criticism that fosters accountability and growth. If white-led organizations insist on having a seat at the table, they’d better get used to being held accountable by people of color. Until then, they’re just another ill-conceived invasion story in desperate need of a strong Black lead.

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