

Excerpts from **Five Things White Activists Should Never Say**

I've decided to compile a list of things that white people — specifically, white activists — should never say.

1. "They belong to that religion."

I have yet to visit an activist group with religious homogeneity. That said, in my experience certain religious views are more acceptable among activists than others. If a disproportionate number of the people who hold a religious stance are European or of European descent, the stance is acceptable. So it's okay to be an atheist, a pagan, or a Quaker. If a religious stance doesn't meet this criterion, it tends to be viewed with suspicion. If white people don't want to alienate people of color from their organizing, they're going to have to learn to show more tolerance for the religions they adhere to.

2. "All nationalism is bad."

The idea all nationalism, including ethnic nationalism, is bad is often rooted in anarchism, an ideology that was first propounded by European men in the nineteenth century and which since then has drawn more than its fair share of white thinkers. Even if we set this aside, white people who raise the "all nationalism is bad" objection often miss the point that the essence of ethnic nationalism has nothing to do with what anarchists mean by state and everything to do with racial or ethnic identity.

If white people can avoid doing this, this doesn't mean they're all awesome anti-statists; rather it means they have the privilege of being part of the group that is seen as the default racial or ethnic group. When white activists forget this, it's a disaster in the making.

3. "I know what it's like to face racist oppression; I face oppression too."

This denies one of the central components of anti-oppression work which is that the oppressed have unique insight into their oppression by virtue of having experienced the oppression, including the ways in which it is disanalogous to other kinds of oppression. This is important, because it may be that it was just these disanalogous elements were at play when you said what you did five minutes ago and that what you said is therefore racist for reasons you don't understand. Not incidentally, the unique knowledge that an oppressed group has is known as the epistemic privilege of the oppressed. If your goal is to eliminate inequality, you don't want to appropriate one of the few kinds of privilege that oppressed people have, do you?

4. "If we focus on this other kind of oppression, racism will disappear."

If this piece were about the oppressions I face, you'd see I have a lot to say against

classism. However, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to focus on it here. All too often white activists derail conversations about racism by bringing up classism. The problem with white activists' saying that racism reduces to classism is that it is an attempt to keep people of color from directly confronting their oppression so that they will instead confront an oppression that directly affects white people.

5. "There are no people of color in our activist group; let's go to a meeting of people of color and invite them to join our group."

Many white activists have the impression that they no longer have any racist bullshit they need to work on. Perhaps the bigger problem with this remark is it's blatantly tokenizing. The people who make it aren't primarily interested in forming a diverse coalition to confront the problems people of color face; if they were, they'd visit the meeting of the people of color regularly and ask them how they could help without expecting glory for themselves or their organization. Instead they want to use people of color to make their activist group more diverse. They are making one more thing — segregation itself! — the responsibility of people of color.

By **freelark**

