

CONFRONTING THE MYTH

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The events of the past year have driven businesses to confront racial inequity, but some still shy away from the challenging language needed to make real, restorative, and economic progress.

WHAT CAN LEADERS IN REAL ESTATE DO?

That is the question AFIRE CEO Gunnar Branson recently posed in his Summit Journal article “A Real Estate Reckoning.”¹ In the article, Branson discusses the uncomfortable truths further illuminated by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests sparked in the US in summer 2020. BLM is a member-led global network established seven years ago by organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometti. Beginning in May 2020, the movement generated the highest number of protests since the last major period of civil rights in the 1960’s. Scholars and crowd-counting experts confirm that BLM has since become the largest movement in US history.²

Branson writes, “The problems addressed by the protestors call for much more than another corporate diversity initiative. They ask for meaningful change while empathetic and supportive people everywhere ask, ‘what can we do?’”³

It is necessary to know the impetus of the historical protests of 2020 to understand the import of Branson’s question. In short, resistance to the myth of White supremacy—the illusion that races of people exist and ranks people categorized as White at the top of the racial hierarchy — catalyzed protestors to center affirmation of the humanity of Black people.

The video of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd was the initial spark for the protests. The energy of the protests then grew and was partially sustained by other videos of police violence against protestors and the Black community. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black communities was also a driving factor. The myth of White supremacy is the reason for these gruesome realities and was fuel for massive resistance last summer.

So, what can leaders in real estate do to bring about meaningful change? What part can leaders in real estate play in the resistance to the myth of White supremacy? In his book *The Power of Darkness*, Leo Tolstoy famously wrote that “everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” However, in this environment, everyone can do something. Change starts with individuals, so leaders in real estate can start with a focus on themselves.

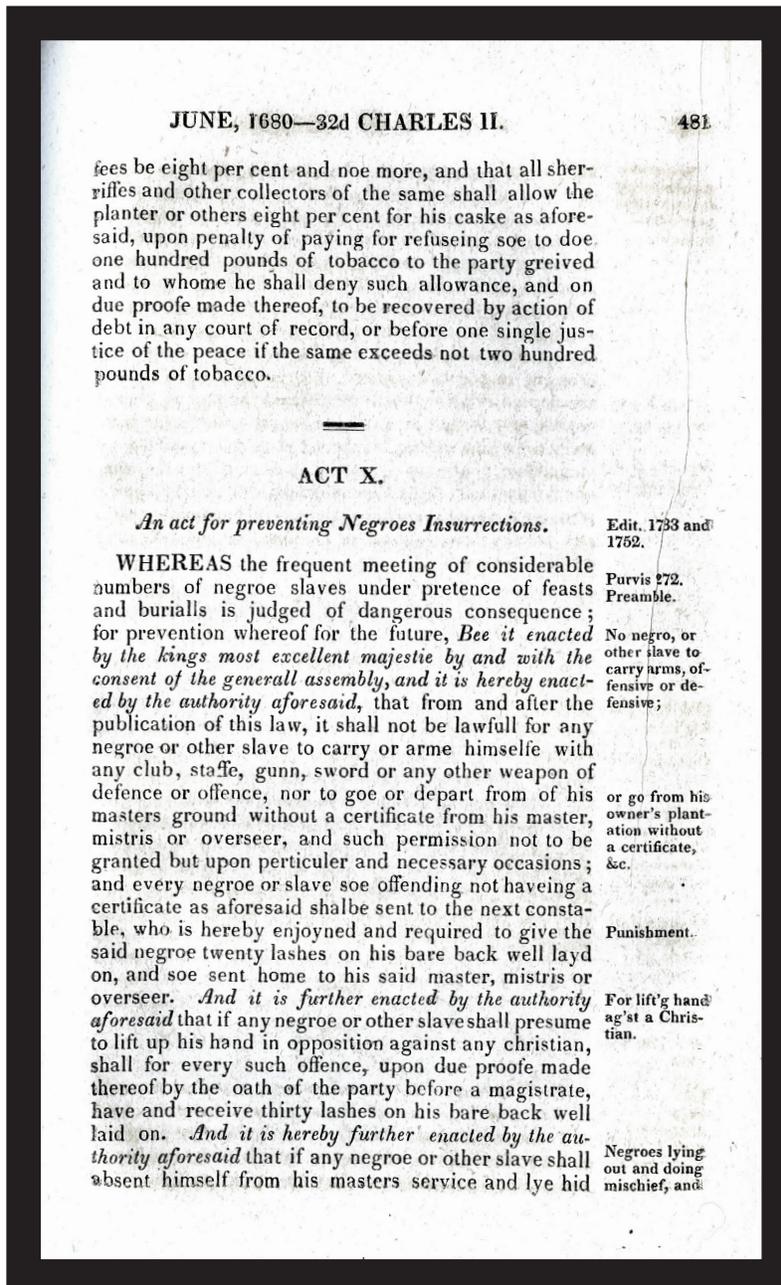
WHAT IS WHITE SUPREMACY? WHY DO WE NEED TO CONFRONT IT?

White supremacy is an idea based on a set of popular lies that distort and deny the value inherent in human beings. It assigns superiority to White people, inferiority to Black people, and measures all human beings based on their proximity to these two groups. The ideology was constructed by White people to acquire and preserve power for White people. White supremacy is expressed culturally, economically, and politically. The US was founded on the myth and it is powerfully embedded in US culture, systems, and structures.

EXHIBIT 1: "AN ACT FOR PREVENTING NEGROE INSURRECTIONS" (1619)

from *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*

Source: William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (New York: R. & W. & G. Bartow, 1823), 2:481; encyclopediavirginia.org/3788hpr-ade5c08e9d09009/



The original and earlier propagators of the myth used violence and laws to instill the mistruths. For example, as also detailed by the Brookings Institution, “In 1680, the Virginia assembly passed new legislation preventing ‘any negroe or other slave’ from raising a hand to any White person, a measure that put [White] servants on a par with their masters in their impunity for abuse of enslaved people, and stripped enslaved people of any right of self-defense.”⁴

The most underrated characteristic of White supremacy is the omnipresence of “Whiteness.” The fact that its omnipresence is underestimated demonstrates the strength of its effectiveness and durability. Everyone is susceptible to unknowingly ingesting the myth and perpetuating it. People cannot contend with something that they do not believe exists and are therefore prevented from knowing that they suffer from overexposure. An unaccredited adage says, “You cannot conquer what you do not confront, and you cannot confront what you do not identify.”

People tend to believe that White people who openly and brashly purport White supremacist or anti-Black sentiments are the sole or primary perpetrators of White supremacy. Everyone can be complicit in upholding the myth of White supremacy, so no one is completely free from blame. The myth was created by White people for their own benefit, such that White supremacy provides social and material rewards for White people. The fact that social and material rewards incentivize White people to preserve the myth is why looking inward is an especially crucial start for White leaders in real estate who want to confront it.

WHAT ARE CRITICAL FIRST STEPS TO CONFRONTING THE MYTH OF WHITE SUPREMACY? AND WHY?

People can go a lifetime unaware of their internal motivations. Self-interrogation and self-interrogation are critical first steps to confronting the myth of White supremacy. Self-interrogation is the examination of your motives and actions. It will highlight what you are doing and why. Self-interrogation is the examination of your emotional and mental processes. It will uncover how you feel and what you think.

Self-interrogation and self-interrogation are especially critical on a White person’s journey to confronting White supremacy because being White has often meant not having to think about what it means to be White. It has meant not having to examine how complicity with White supremacy dehumanizes and marginalizes everyone and causes the injury and death of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). It has meant not having to examine the utility of White supremacy.

A lack of examination diminishes the ability to see the myth of White supremacy at work within and around us. If people are unaware of their complicity with the myth of White supremacy, then they are not making conscious decisions to protect or abolish it. Unawareness robs them of the opportunity to choose to preserve or resist the myth. This unawareness is often glaring in otherwise well-intentioned corporate diversity initiatives that primarily or exclusively aim to racially diversify staff. Yet, the initiatives overlook the White supremacy in and around it that has led to and sustained an overwhelming racially homogenous staff.

A lack of examination also reduces the capacity they need to encounter the discomfort that comes along with seeing it. Self-interrogation and self-interrogation are ongoing, important and hard work and self-determination is needed to remain engaged.

These steps are commonly overlooked or undervalued. People who say they want to confront White supremacy sometimes neglect or refuse to identify White supremacy within themselves first. They often want to skip self-interrogation and introspection and immediately move to activism. Branson corroborated that real estate lending and development have upheld the same principles that cause the marginalization the industry leaders verbally condemn. Activism without self-interrogation and -introspection is premature, often performative and superficial, and will perpetuate harm against the people it aims to protect.

The adapted chart⁵ in *Exhibit 2* depicts common racial scenarios and lists the effects they can have on aspects of White identity.

EXHIBIT 2: RACIAL SCENARIOS AND WHITE IDENTITY

RACIAL SCENARIO	EFFECT ON AN ASPECT OF WHITE IDENTITY
Suggesting that a White person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference	Challenge to objectivity
BIPOC talking directly about their own racial perspectives	Challenge to White taboos on talking openly about race
BIPOC choosing not to protect the racial feelings of White people in regards to race	Challenge to White expectations and needs/entitlement to racial comfort
BIPOC not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences	Challenge to White expectations that BIPOC will serve White people
A fellow White person not providing agreement with one's racial perspective	Challenge to White solidarity

RACIAL SCENARIO	EFFECT ON AN ASPECT OF WHITE IDENTITY
Receiving feedback that one's behavior has a racist impact	Challenge to White innocence
Suggesting that group membership is significant	Challenge to individualism
An acknowledgement that access is unequal between racial groups	Challenge to meritocracy
Being presented with a BIPOC in a position of leadership	Challenge to White authority
Being presented with information about BIPOC in which BIPOC drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles	Challenge to White centrality

HOW DO I TAKE THOSE CRITICAL FIRST STEPS TO CONFRONT THE MYTH OF WHITE SUPREMACY?

Sometimes getting started is the hardest part. There are a few questions to consider for initiating the process of humble self-introspection and self-interrogation.

- Why do you want to embark on the journey to confronting the myth of White supremacy?
- What do you believe about White people? What do you believe about BIPOC?
- Who or what informed those beliefs?
- What interventions will you use to uproot beliefs tied to the myth of White superiority or Black inferiority?

Self-interrogation and -introspection for complicity with the myth of White supremacy can reveal some shocking and painful truths. Denial blocks the ability to self-interrogate and introspect. It is paramount to be honest about what is uncovered and critically examine what you find. Apologize if what is uncovered caused harm to others. Perpetually extend grace and mercy to yourself because self-interrogation and -introspection are never-ending processes.

Tackling the systemic issues remains important. Branson notes, “Intentionally or not, [the real estate] industry has played a part in systemic racism. And [. . .] no organization is without bias—but it may be less obvious.” The US needs fewer conspirators and a larger anti-racist majority. Self-interrogation and -introspection are starting points. Leaders in real estate should lead themselves to change first.

They can start with personal accountability and genuine self-discovery and self-development. And eventually, these same efforts should be intentionally linked to organization- and/or industry-wide change efforts, deliberately by people who have the positional power to do so. Leaders in real estate can positively affect the pace and depth of change dramatically, expressly when they look inward first. In her book, *The Purpose of Power*, Alicia Garza says, “Movements are the story of how we come together when we’ve come apart.” How will leaders in real estate come together with others who are actively resisting the myth of White supremacy and causing meaningful change? It is an urgent consideration—and will ultimately determine our collective future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

¹ Gunnar Branson, “A Real Estate Reckoning,” AFIRE, 19 August 2020, afire.org/summit/real-estate-reckoning/

² Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, “Black Lives Matter May Be the Last Movement in US History,” New York Times, [nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html)

³ “Summit Journal: Archive,” AFIRE, Accessed 12 March 2021, afire.org/summit/summitarchive/

⁴ Vanessa Williamson, “When White Supremacy Came to Virginia,” Brookings, 15 August 2017, [brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2017/08/15/when-white-supremacy-came-to-virginia/](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2017/08/15/when-white-supremacy-came-to-virginia/)

⁵ “Diversity and Inclusivity Training,” The Verna Myers Company, Accessed 12 March 2021, [vernamyers.com/](https://www.vernamyers.com/)