john a. powell, *Racing To Justice: Transforming our Conceptions of Self and Other to Build an Inclusive Society* (Indiana University Press, 2003)
Summary and quotations selected by Bob Gluck for *T'ruah*

Summary: John Powell offers a fresh perspective on racism as well as a useful language for speaking with our constituents who may not view themselves as complicit with racism and may react defensively to feel labeled as racist.

Major points:

1. white supremacy draws upon the Enlightenment conception of the individual self which requires protection from "others" societally defined as dangerous;
2. "race" is best understood as a verb rather than a noun; human traits and qualities are "raced," that is, assigned to different racial groups, which are accorded differing levels of social capital and access to resources, belonging, and security
3. our participation in white supremacy is largely unconscious and unfolds largely through our unaware attitudes;
4. racism is systemic, constantly morphing to adapt to societal changes;
5. since race is socially constructed and privilege is bestowed upon us from above, we cannot individually renounce it;
6. white supremacy must be dismantled institutionally and we can make use of our privilege in this effort;
7. White people experience loss and confusion (often expressed as anger) adjusting to a racially evolving society; this perceived loss must be addressed in an empathetic way;
8. we should work towards "beloved community," affirming our interconnections and interdependency;
9. working against racism should be understood as a spiritual endeavor from which everyone will gain.

Quotations, thematically organized:

1. white supremacy draws upon the Enlightenment conception of the individual self which requires protection from "others" societally defined as dangerous;

(xvii) "The Western self, especially the American self, is particularly isolated and separate. This conception of the self has a history, a large part of which is its construction in conjunction with ideals that assert a radical individualism: rationality, objectivity, private property, market capitalism, and race… at the core of the American dream of liberty and opportunity for all, of pure meritocracy, but also of exclusion and domination… The liberal worldview, however, is based on the same isolated and autonomous self [as Conservatism], especially in its dogmatic adherence to secularism, rationality, and a strict separation of church and state."

(xvii-xviii) "… This [white] self is all too easily controlled by fears in part because it was born of fear-whether of declining property values, the 'predatory' black man, the other's 'culture of poverty,' or any of a range of similar racialized images. Beyond these distortions, however, lies a more fundamental fear: self-annihilation… to ask people to give up whiteness is to ask them to give up their sense of self. We cannot expect people to expose themselves to ontological death or worse. Instead, we must provide space—institutional space, political space, social space, and conceptual space-for the emergence of new relationships and a new way of being that exists beyond isolation and separation."

(198) "The very existence of a separate self or self-consciousness causes a split and suffering that is difficult to heal. All of us are subject to existential suffering. Social suffering, unlike ontological suffering, is not inherent in self-consciousness or being but is largely the result of our social arrangements. It is visited upon different people to varying degrees… social suffering can be thought of not just as secular but also as surplus suffering… the result of social arrangements and norms, it is surplus to the inherent suffering of life and can be made better or worse."

2. "race" is best understood as a verb rather than a noun; human traits and qualities are "raced," that is, assigned to different racial groups, which are accorded differing levels of social capital and access to resources, belonging, and security;

(54) "… before someone can be said to possess a racial characteristic or identity, there first must be a process of 'racing'. This requires the social creation of racial categories, the assignment to categories, and the determination of the meanings associated with each category… Racing is largely a top-down process in which the more powerful group first denudes the racial other of self-definition… by denying the other its language and culture, then assigning a set of characteristics that are beneath those of the more powerful group. The dominant group thus becomes the invisible standard by which all others are (unfavorably) measured…. It also defines the racially privileged; they are not the other."

(51): "Regardless of what we say, think, or feel about race as a physical reality, however, it undeniably plays a central role in our everyday understanding of and interactions with one another and in our lived experience… Although not susceptible to such measurements, race nevertheless shapes our social world in the same way that experience shapes our perceptions of self and reality... It becomes clear that the assertion that race is irrelevant because of its weak scientific basis is not just fiction; it is a dangerous fiction… Because we perceive the world through a lens shaped by individual and collective experiences; our science is necessarily subjective or intersubjective."

(225) "… the central issue in our nation's political and spiritual life: Who do we as a nation consider to be part of our political community? Racism is a useful model in looking at this question, because it is a systematic denial of a mutual human relationship with the other, except for the purpose of personal exploitation or ego gratification. In giving in to its demands, we not only deny the other person's humanity and interconnectedness but also cut ourselves off from a large part of our own humanity. This problem extends to nationhood as well. Are those who are not inside the national boundaries rightfully outside of our human connection?"

3. our participation in white supremacy is largely unconscious and unfolds not only through institutions but also our unaware attitudes;

(21-22) "… inconsistencies between our conscious attitudes and our behavior.... most of us are completely unaware of their influence on our subconscious, these biases affect how we perceive, interpret, and understand one another… even in the absence of blatant prejudice, ill will, or animus." "The tendency [of the mind] is... toward framing information to match strongly held concepts and refusing to believe facts that tend to disprove them."

(70): "Conventional wisdom seems to ignore that both whites and non-whites occupy racial categories—instead assuming that only non-whites have a racial identity. Whiteness thus takes on the property of invisibility in the everyday experiences of whites."

(52): "Failure to recognize that race is a function, that 'racing' is something we do to one another, strengthens uninformed popular racial discourses by causing them to seem natural or accurate…. Unlike a daydream, the experience of which is entirely individual, race functions in collective [and intersubjective] ways that we cannot alter solely through individual will."

4. racism is systemic, constantly morphing to adapt to societal changes;

(155) "… the history of whiteness has been overwhelmingly concerned with providing a space where exclusion, exploitation, conquest, and violence could be rationalized and normalized."

(147) "White identity and black subordination were reconstructed [repeatedly, after the end of slavery, Reconstruction, and following the Civil Rights movement] through the rearrangement of metropolitan space, policies, and governance… especially through persistent segregation… distributing benefits and burdens and provides the necessary space and boundaries for whiteness to continue to flourish." "… suburbs where rights are localized in part a response to Blacks moving to the suburbs, to maintain and control white spaces that are privatized…"

(61) "…the whiteness of the flight to the suburbs was maintained by an endless array of governmental and non-governmental tactics, including steering by real-estate brokers, exclusionary zoning laws enacted by municipalities, mortgage lending discrimination, and refusal to regulate predatory lending targeted at low-income communities of color."

(xxv) "Can we stop focusing simply on transactional moves we see as winnable and start working for the transformation of the institutions that perpetuate suffering? Can we speak to people's deepest needs-to feel a sense of connection, to feel love? Can we realize that working for the elimination of social suffering is an integral part of any spiritual project?"

(67) "Because of the centrality of race in ordering individual and collective experience, destabilizing race must entail the destabilization of entire systems of belief, a very uncertain and daunting undertaking. This task is nevertheless a necessary one, given that racial identities are, to some extent, products of common, racialized experiences as well as of white racial projects."

5. since race is socially constructed and privilege is bestowed upon us from above, we cannot individually renounce it;

(70) "Accepting whiteness as the American norm without addressing the underlying privilege is a particular problem given our tradition of Western liberal thought… Attempting to address racial hierarchy without addressing this backdrop of whiteness achieves the 'assimilationist ideal' while devaluing the positive aspects of race."

(95) "Our personal relationships are mediated through power and institutional structures; privilege therefore cannot be adequately addressed at the personal level…"

(98) Steve Martinot (*The Rule of Racialization: Class, Identity, Governance*, 2003): "white people cannot individually abandon whiteness in order to abjure their white skin privilege because

they do not produce that whiteness; it is bestowed upon them by social institutedness in white society."

(99) "any particular focus on privilege as something that can be separated from whiteness is likely to leave the structure of whiteness in place, with the re-inscribing of a new arrangement of privileges… transgression is much more complicated than deciding 'not to be white.' Instead, transforming the terms, assumptions, and arrangements that arbitrarily and unfairly diminish the life changes of disfavored groups requires that we name, engage, and challenge those aspects of our society and the claims associated with them."

6. white supremacy must be dismantled institutionally and we can make use of our privilege in this effort;

(159) "Those of us with privilege must therefore use the privileges we cannot reject to better understand, expose, and destabilize the structures and cultural norms that support and re-inscribe whiteness. We must raise the cost of maintaining whiteness by seeking strategic interventions that reduce racialized disparities across multiple areas – but still seek to better understand and challenge whiteness. We must begin to work for a new set of arrangements that will support a new way of relating, a new way of being. Part of the answer, then, is in the material world…"

7. White people experience loss and confusion (often expressed as anger) adjusting to a racially evolving society; this perceived loss must be addressed in an empathetic way

"… whites in the twenty-first century are increasingly experiencing a sense of loss, not privilege (100-101) "… some of the status and benefits that have been a part of being white are changing. Indeed, they should and must change. But this does not take away from the anxiety, fear, and sense of loss that can be experienced during the transition… Without re-centering whiteness, we must pay attention to this aspect of needed change …"

(100-101) "This requires a project that gives birth to a new meaning and space for whiteness that is not based on exclusion, internal and external separation, and disaffiliation or power over others... In short, in transforming whiteness and privilege, whites would get the chance to be humane beings."

(26): "... resentment does not simply represent racist attitudes; it also represents ambivalence and confusion.... A more sophisticated understanding of implicit bias as well as of our common yearnings for fairness and connectedness can help us learn how to communicate in ways that greatly increase our potential to build a society we can all be proud to call home."

(xvii) "… we must provide space [for people who have defined themselves through their whiteness]—institutional space, political space, social space, and conceptual space-for the emergence of new relationships and a new way of being that exists beyond isolation and separation."

8. we should work towards "beloved community," affirming our interconnections and interdependency;

(xvii) "Justice involves claiming a shared, mutual humanity. It is about interrelationships."

(xviii- xix) "There is a need for an alternative vision, a beloved community where being connected to the other is seen as the foundation of a healthy self, not its destruction, and where the racial other is seen not as a the infinite other, but rather as the other that is always and already a part of us."

(xviii) "The liberation from the separate egoist self is one of the grand goals of most religious traditions, whether through union with God or through realization of our inherent interconnectedness…. The idea is unity, and separation is recognized as the path that leads to suffering."

9. striving to end white supremacy is thus a spiritual endeavor;

(161) "Moving beyond a view of the self as separate and unconnected is a profoundly spiritual subject. It is the urge and yearning for connection that lies within us all. Often we are not comfortable mixing our spiritual yearnings and our secular work for social justice, but this is a false and problematic separation. Perhaps, then, we must end by talking about love. We must draw on love's power to free us from separation and its accompanying sense of loss. Who are we when we are from the (162) illusions of a separate self? I am talking about bringing something new into being, but I do not know exactly how this space can be created... Can we imagine a self beyond isolation and whiteness? Can we imagine Dr. King's beloved community? Perhaps we can start this imaginative process in our dreams."

(208) "Spirituality is the practice of addressing ontological suffering by relating to something more authentic or larger than the egoistic self. It is informed by suffering on one hand - particularly but not exclusively ontological suffering – and love on the other."

(199) "We deny one another's humanity because of our flawed spiritual understandings. If we correct these understandings, we could do less social harm. Spirituality requires that we engage in something larger than ourselves."

(200) "If we recognize ourselves in others or the divine in others, it is inconceivable that we should be indifferent to suffering just because it is called secular. Indeed, there is possibly a greater indictment to be leveled against accepting surplus suffering, because it is unnecessary and something we inflict upon one another either directly or through our institutions."