Recognizing and Overcoming Bias

Ways to Make Your Workplace
More Successful & Welcoming

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USENIX LISA 2013

Introductions - Leslie

- Community Manager, Elasticsearch
- Worked in high tech field for 10+ years
- Interests include helping newbies and humanitarian open source software

Why it is important to me to give this workshop: Mom was a UNIX programmer, saw what she went through and am keenly aware of how her struggles made my life as a woman in tech easier. Fortunate to have friends from all walks of life and want to share the benefit of that type of experience with everyone.

Introductions - Sheeri

- Volunteer activist in a previous life
- Fulltime as a sysadmin, DBA since 2001
- Encourages learning cooperatively, not competitively

Introduce self with brief bio points that are of interest to you. Why was hosting this workshop important to you?

The Ground Rules

We'll be discussing some difficult and contentious topics for the next three hours.

- Create a safe environment
  - Listen without judgement
  - Disclose without fear
  - Disagree respectfully
- If we cannot be candid with and amongst ourselves, we cannot improve our situation

Around the Room

Please take a moment to
- Introduce yourself
- Tell us why you chose to come to this workshop
- Let everyone know what you learn by participating

Agenda

9:00 - 9:20 AM: Introductions - all

9:20 - 10:30 AM: Exploring Bias + Ways to Overcome It - Sheeri and Leslie

10:30 - 10:45 AM: Break

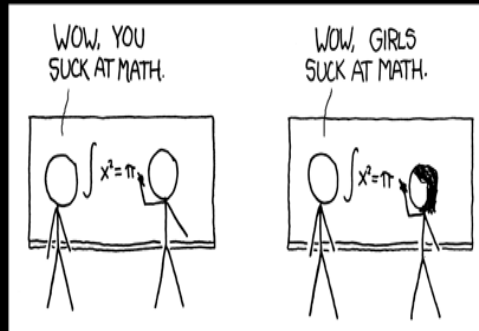**10:45 - 11:30 AM:** Small Group Discussions - all

11:30 - 11:45 AM: Report Back from Breakouts - all

11:45 AM - 12 Noon: Break

12 Noon - 12:30 PM: Leveling Up - Sheeri and Leslie

Understanding Bias

Exploring the "-isms"

http://xkcd.com/385/
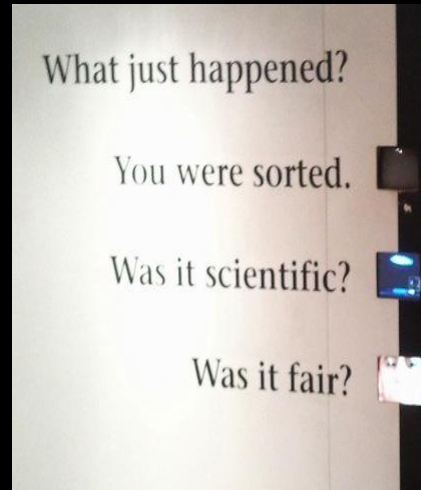
The Myth of the Meritocracy

- our assumed baseline of interaction

- not actually welcoming to newcomers

- obfuscates the operation of inherent bias

Meritocracy is typical description for open source communities, but we have participation of less than 5% women (last FLOSSPOLS statistic is really old - Free/Libre/Open Source Software: Policy Support) and it is even more pronounced for people of color. Meritocracies that rank you on your work only aren't actually meritocratic. Who is able to overcome the barriers to entry to provide work for evaluation? Meritocracies in what is usually a solitary area like tech breeds competition (though it CAN foster cooperation). Does it matter if you do good work if it's not seen? How do you bootstrap people using your code if you're not already famous? Saying it's a meritocracy is only partially true…..who gets encouraged, and how, is BIG.

Exploring the -isms

- What is intersectionality?
- Why is this topic so difficult?
  - Bias does not affect everyone equally
  - Good 'scientific' explanations for bias
  - Many of us *benefit* from bias
  - We are all good people

What just happened?

You were sorted.

Was it scientific?

Was it fair?

http://www.flickr.com/photos/60206297@N00/7436071468/

We frequently benefit from types of bias - I am a well educated white woman who grew up in an affluent area where I have always had access to a school computer lab, and this was ~25 years ago.
Awesome photo from Ontario Science Center meant to help people confront their own biases….

Classism

Culturally, we're taught to value those in better economic circumstances *more* than those who are worse off financially.

MULLET

It's always nice to know you're better than someone.

Classism manifests itself in many ways: vocal expression and vocabulary (do you sound like an academic or a gutter punk?), goods we have or at least display that we have (fancy gadgets to expensive cars), tend to group with those in our social class which reinforces our view that our ways is 'common' and other folks are not like us (smart, hard working, careful with money, etc.) System of noblesse oblige is in many ways attractive to us as a meta-narrative: we too can be rich, so we value those with wealth more. Remember that this also goes for tools of the trade. Do you have to go to the library or a shared computer to code? are you not online 24x7? The caveat here….unless you're in grad school. In open source, time is a currency too.

Racism

"Racism is a powerful form of social inertia that unfairly perpetuates social, economic and political advantage for one racial group, while unfairly maintaining a system of social, economic and political barriers against another racial group. advantage for one racial group, while unfairly maintaining a system of social, economic and political barriers against another racial group."

- Finding the I in Racism

When we think of racism, we often think of the most extreme examples that have nothing to do with us as individuals, e.g. neo-Nazis (which happens to be what this lady is staring at, off camera). None of us thinks of ourselves as racist, because that's what other, bad people are. Still, I can recount my own trained biases just by looking at this photograph: large/gaudy jewelery is a sterotype of around black women, also "low class" women. Hair extensions and 'slovenly' appearance is attributed to lower classes but that's a thinly veiled racist remark. Etc.

Racism "Unpacked"

Six levels of racism:

- societal
- systemic
- institutional
- intergroup
- interpersonal
- personal

-ism

=

Prejudice

+

Power

We rarely tend to think of ourselves as in the personal/interpersonal group. When we think of societal and systemic, it can be hard to understand and easy to dismiss it when we are not affected by it. Consider case of Marissa Alexander, http://www. ebony.com/news-views/31formarissa-justice-for-one-justice-for-all-304#axzz2ipm2KL2T Racism playing a part in jury verdict against woman in a stand your ground law state. Consider the impact of these forces on our "level playing field" and in our myth of meritocracy, then consider the impact of holding up certain role models as proof points racism does not exist, e.g. Tiger Woods, Beyonce, etc. "Obama is so well-spoken" implying he's not. "White trash" because "black trash" is seen as redundant.

Racism: I am Not a Racist

We all participate in racist, sexist, ageist, nationalistic, etc. systems because they are societal and systemic.

The key is to recognize these biases and work to overcome them on the individual level.

We can feel defensive when discussing our own "isms" because we do not see ourselves as active participants in racist, sexist, etc., systems - we judge ourselves by our individual experiences. This fails to recognize our own conditioning/socialized biases that come from participation in these systems. As individuals, if we are going to be effective we must examine our own place is societal and systemic systems that disenfranchise others as a part of our efforts to overcome bias on the individual level.

Ageism

'Positive' ageism

'Negative' ageism

Positive ageism - oder white man in academic setting = authority. Negative - old neckbeard, doesn't get it, isn't on the "Bleeding edge". Some useful stats on employment for those over 50: http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2012/09/28/how-to-get-a-job-when-youre-over-50-2/
Another chance to unpack our hidden assumptions in the 'positive' area - old academic, tenured professor type of environment. How often do we assume our elders are simply cranky and anti-progress rather than have words of useful caution to share? Get off my lawn vs. voice of experience

Physical Ability

We are infrequently called upon to consider questions of equal access.

Extraordinary effort is required by many with different physical abilities to effectively participate in systems that works well for us and that we take for granted.

Encountering people who are differently physically abled often causes us emotional discomfort - how should we treat this person? We immediately visually recognize them as different than we are. Easier for us to avoid the question than to understand their circumstances and what it takes for them to succeed. Tell the spoons story.

Nationality and Ethnicity

'Positive' perceptions:
- German trains always run on time
- Asians are great at math

Negative perceptions:
- Unable to understand a 'thick' accent
- French people are lazy and only work 36 hours per week.

Even positive sterotypes are harmful - what does it mean if you are a part of the group but don't fit the stereotype? Why are you expected to live into said stereotype? How we judge people based on how they talk (this is your accents at conferences statement)? How are we failing to understand a person's culture based on stereotypes (French culture values family, one day off per week for kids to be kids, etc.)

Sexual Orientation

Our cultural, by default, assumes heteronormativity.

Consider the many impacts of living outside this normative.

I scrolled through hundreds of Creative Commons licensed images for "family" and this one is typical.
I especially looked for an image of family because what I commonly hear from queer friends is that they don't experience outright discrimination - the days of calling someone a faggot in the workplace are largely over, or so I would hope (I know they are not) but the expectation that they will fit into a culturally assumed norm - an adult has a "family," "families" are a man and a woman and one or more children, accepted conversation topics include things your spouse and children are doing and talking about one's family, until your family does not map to the dominant social paradigm. Consider also basic forms of discrimination in the workplace / society - if you are not heterosexual, you may not have the right to marry, for your life partner to make decisions about your physical health in case of emergency, etc.

Matters of Faith: Religion and Atheism

- Tech industry is a place where it is largely OK to be overtly atheist
- Tendency to dismiss others beliefs based on own experience
- Working effectively with those who do not share our belief systems can be difficult

Tech industry tends to = scientific minded. Many people view science as inherently atheist exercise, though this does not hold true for all. Consider that it is OK in many Silicon Valley offices - and other places - to quote Richard Dawkins like it is gospel but people will think less of you for openly wearing a cross or other outward markers of religion, such as a turban on the head for those who are Muslims? Etc.

Gender Expression and Transphobia

Transgender is an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression, or behavior does not conform to that typically associated with the sex to which they were assigned at birth.

Transwomen have:

- Double the rate of unemployment. If you are a transwoman of color, you have five times the rate of unemployment.
- 26% have been fired from a job due to their trans status
- 90% have experienced harassment on the job
- 16% work in the underground economy (drugs/sex work)
- about 1/3 live below poverty level

http://hacklikeagirl.wordpress.com/2013/06/23/out-of-the-cage-2/

Gender identity is one of the most difficult topics for many people because it so very much challenges our socialization - one of the first questions ever asked of us is our gender and it is part of our vital record *from birth*. We are then raised to fit into a variety of gender roles almost immediately: pink for girls, blue for boys. Dolls for girls, trucks and legos for boys, etc. There are a variety of medical reasons why someone's gender identity (how they feel about their gender) does not match their gender expression (how they appear physically), everything from chromosomal differences to doctors cutting off micropenises (Sheeri has details).

**Sexism in the Workplace:
The Dress Code**

- Dressing 'sexy'
- Dressing well but
  not 'provocatively'
- Wearing makeup or
  heels
- Pink, pink and more
  pink ….

Expectations around what women are and are not allowed to wear in the workplace are rampant. Consider that our social expectations around female beauty ask women to constantly put themselves at a disadvantage economically and physically: makeup contains a variety of toxins, high heels harm our posture and bodies. Women's clothing and accessories typically come in at a minimum of 2x cost for a man - women cannot wear the same thing every day whilst still being considered successful whereas a man can wear the same suit every day provided it looks good and smells clean.

Also, this what a businesswoman is supposed to look like - note open neckline but traditionally "men's" dress in the form of a suit.

Sexism in the Workplace: The Dress Code Reversed

In the technology field, dressing in this manner can harm rather than help your professional reputation.

'Engineers' wear jeans and t-shirts. Technical women are often told they should "dress down" so as not to make themselves object of desire in the workplace as much as they are told they have to dress for success. If you wear jeans and a t-shirt, you are one of the guys but you are less likely to be taken seriously professionally, look "put together," be considered for promotion, etc.

Sexism in the Workplace:
Working for Female Managers

Women are consistently socialized to fear working for other women while we simultaneously find ourselves lamenting the lack of senior women role models in the tech industry.

**Sexism in the Workplace:
Slut Shaming**

- Acceptable in the workplace for men to express desire, but not for women
- Success means you've "slept your way to the top"

Personal anecdote about noting Christian Bale's attractiveness shutting down all conversation in midst of men discussing beautiful actresses. We also identify successful women with sexuality or using sex as a tool to succeed - you must have slept your way to the top. This is more commonly assumed than that the woman in question is competent, diligent, hard working, etc. when she is socially considered attractive, even if all the other factors are demonstrably true.

Fat Shaming + Other Body Type Matters

Overweight people are perceived as:

- Lacking self-control
- Less competent
- Less attractive

Contrast with tall people:

- Confident
- Trustworthy
- Capable

http://www.flickr.com/photos/wmjas/51113152/

We make many decisions about people based on their body type and our inherent socialized norms. Consider the very positive associations we have with tallness - this is an inherent, lizard brain bias; consider all US Presidents have been demonstrably taller than average - vs. the negative associations we have with someone being fat - look at all the ruckus around Adele and her weight, with the discussion of her weight threatening to eclipse the discussion of her talent as a singer.

How Bias Works

http://i.imgur.com/jrKmgIA.jpg
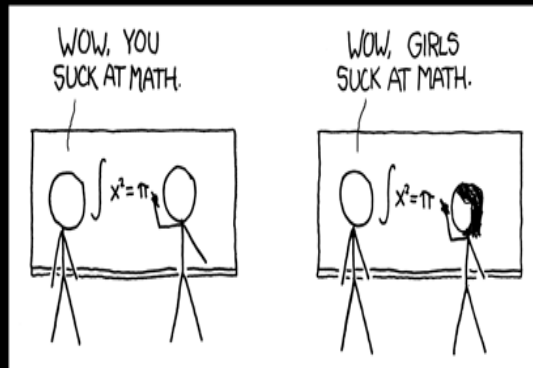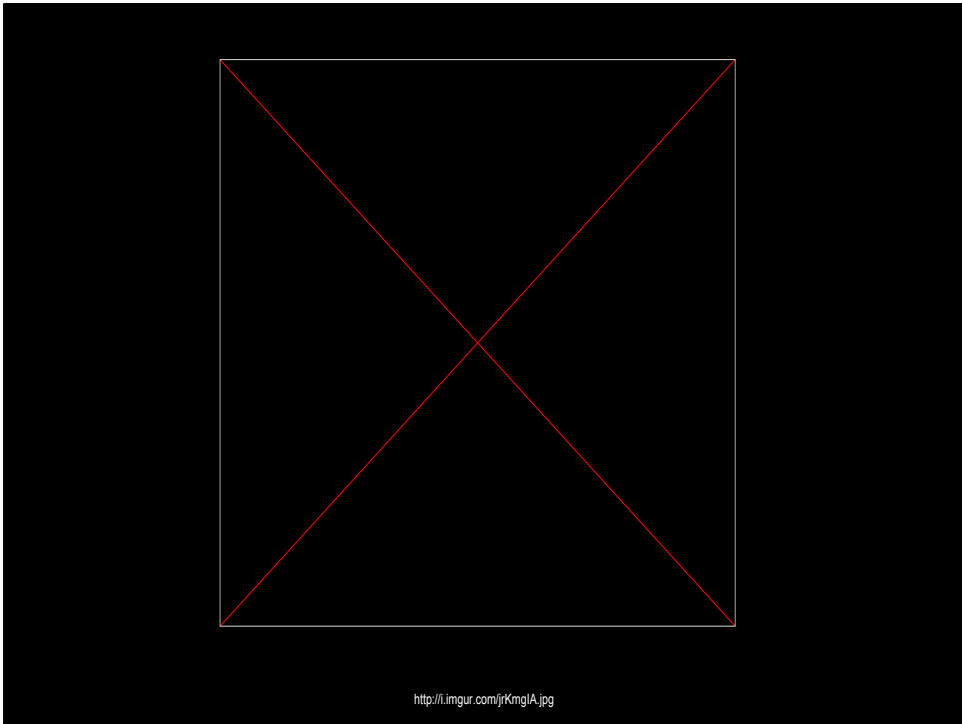
You're going to have to spend more time and effort (more boxes) to overcome your biases so people are the same "height".

Creating the Other

Cognitive bias is part of being a human being:

"A cognitive bias is the human tendency to make systematic decisions in certain circumstances based on cognitive factors rather than evidence."

Before we go on feeling too terribly about ourselves, it is important to recognize that we have an innate tendency towards bias as part of our psychological makeup as human beings. We categorize things in order to survive - this object is non-harmful vs. putting your fingers into a fire causes pain and is detrimental to our survival. This compartmentalizing is applied as much to our fellow humans as it is to objects, but objects have an "objective reality" versus our experience of other people being much more nuanced. It is easy to mix correlation and causation too, here - according to the prison policy initiative, 0.38% of white people in the US are incarcerated, 0.966% of Latinos are incarcerated, 2.207% of black people are in the US. Almost 9% of Blacks in their late 20s — and almost 4% of Latinos of that age — are incarcerated, vs. about 1.5% white men of that age. Does that mean that black men are more dangerous than latino men and white men are safest? or does it reflect who is prosecuted?

How We Subconciously Reinforce Our Own Biases

It is natural for us to spend most of our time with people who:

- Look like us
- Think like us
- Act like us
- Come from the same economic class we do
- Etc.

http://www.flickr.com/photos/anemoneprojectors/10184606036/
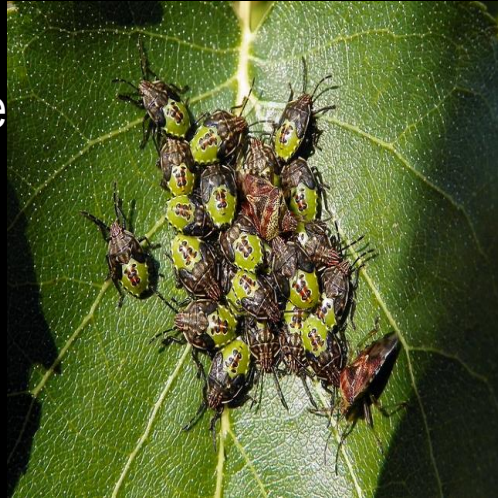
When our experience of reality is dictated by our peer group, we naturally assume that our way is the only way to be and this is continuously reinforced by our experiences. If this idea seems like an overstatement to you, do a quick image search on the word "group" - how many of these photos include racial diversity? Age diversity?

Ways We Group Ourselves

- Republican vs. Democrat
- vi vs. emacs
- Techie vs. Non-Techie, e.g. Jocks vs. Nerds
- East Coast vs. West Coast
- Academic vs. Self-Taught
- Vegan vs. Vegetarian vs. Omnivore
- LISA attendees vs. non

This list is endless …..

Why Do We Group Ourselves?

- Sense of tribalism / belonging is essential for our well-being as humans
- Natural desire to see ourselves as "special" or part of an "elite" group
- Mixing with others like us is inherently easier precisely because it is less challenging

While it seems fairly clear why we might group ourselves together, this concept becomes especially challenging in the workplace since it is the one location where we most likely do not choose our peer group. Consider that one of the ways this challenge is often overcome is through activities meant to strengthen "corporate culture" - the set of ideas all employees should subscribe to as part of their participation in the company structure. Consider also the traditional criticisms of the technology space: women, people of color, etc. are noticeably underrepresented, it is a "white man's world" with the associated pressures of existing in that space when you do not belong to the dominant group.

Overcoming Bias is *Not* Easy

1. You are uncomfortable you have the bias
2. Bias is a part of your identity, so giving it up is giving up a part of who you are
3. Your bias revolves around something you value/want to keep

You may not really be "Giving it up", just recognizing the emotion when it comes up. For example, Sheeri had to re-learn how to argue with someone - don't take cheap shots, try to stay calm. That doesn't mean I don't think of those things, but it does mean I push that thought away because it's not helpful.

Recognizing the Difference:
Being Special and Being Awesome

We all very much want to feel good about ourselves …

What is not required, however, is for someone else to **not** be special in order for us to be an awesome human being.

Discussion of exclusionary nature of elitism or being special - we tend to think that others need to be *not* special in order for us to feel special. This attitude is scarcity mentality and self-limiting. There is no upper bound for awesomeness in the human animal, nor do we need to view others' successes as diminishing our own accomplishments. Looking at the open source world as an example - open source programmers are often considered "133t" or extraordinarily accomplished and there has been backlash against efforts to bring more people into this development millieu, e.g. "The Outreach Program for Women is sexist against men." or "Inviting more women speakers to participate at conferences is Special Olympics since they clearly were not qualified on their own right." This is where meritocracies fall down, because in order to be elite, there has to be a class of folks who are *not* elite.

So What Can We Do About It?

The first step is recognizing our own biases ….

We'll talk about these together soon.

The very first moment we are taught to other is recognizing ourselves in a mirror. That image is "me". Everything else is "not me." We continue to group our thoughts along these lines throughout our lives. The most important bit is that we understand that and look for workarounds when we feel this thinking creates suboptimal outcomes in our personal and professional lives.

Breaking Down Bias - Empathy

- Spend time with people who are not like you
- Listen and learn
- Ask for more information to challenge your assumptions

Create Empathy + Inclusion

http://www.flickr.com/photos/64519085@N00/4680634219/
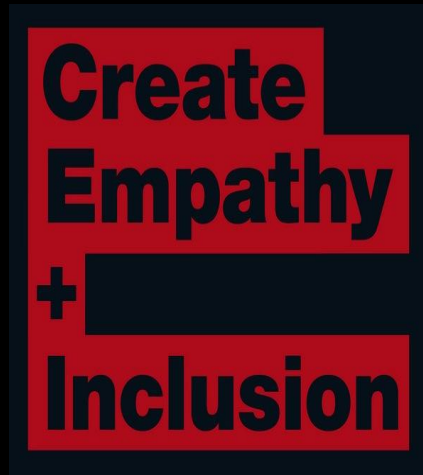
Change your reaction - store all the images in the database example - are you a jerk? "Stupid n00b". What's your reaction to things and how can you change those?

Define interests vs. positions. We all have positions that are important to us - open source software is better than proprietary software, urban life is far preferred to "living in the styx," it's more important to be self-taught than to spend tons of money on an academic degree, etc. Focus on interests - mutual goals and common ground - when interfacing with others. By focusing on goals, we're able to find more ways to win together and to be more effective in our mutual collaboration.

Challenging Systemic Bias

There are many ways to act as an ally in the work place:
- Politely call out sexist/racist/ageist/etc behavior
  - In yourself and others
- Advocate for inclusiveness even when it does not benefit you
  - Domestic partner benefits when employer chooses health plan
  - Volunteering to mentor minority youth as company project
  - Who are you hiring? Who have they worked with?

calling out behavior is most effective when you are a member of the dominant group. LinkedIn profiles of coworkers.
Also, try to recognize when you're *exhibiting* behavior. For example, when I want to say OMG THAT MAKES NO SENSE, I get them to explain it to me by saying "I'm confused". I've also been guilty of saying "Oh, I can't make that decision without talking to my husband" instead of just saying "No, sorry, not interested."

When Faced with Bias

- Biases hurt, whether we are feeling them, displaying them or facing them in someone else
- Take a moment to feel defensive as needed, but answer in a positive way
- Challenge the inherent assumptions in a biased remark

I think it's important to call out that we may *feel* a biased thought but not act on it. Our biases hurt us by cutting off opportunities for us to learn more about how the world operates. Our biases hurt others in ways that we've discussed and in ways that we will never understand because we do not live other people's lives. More often than not, when someone says something that is biased or falls into the category of an "ism" it is not because they are a "bad person," it is because they have been taught to believe that this idea is "the truth." Gently challenge the assumption and consider this a teaching moment: "Wow, you mean you really think that all beautiful women must have had sex with their bosses to get promoted? That seems somewhat unlikely, doesn't it?" etc.

Reality Check

We've been standing up here for about an hour talking about bias ….

We're both also well-educated, well paid white women working in the tech industry.

We have a whole lot to learn about how bias operates in the workplace and our wider world.

Let's not fool ourselves, our experiences are nothing like typical and we are very much aware of that fact. This workshop is also an opportunity to

Let's Learn More Together

Thank you!

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Suggestions for Further Reading

- Works from The Harvard Negotiation Project, http://www.pon.harvard.edu/category/research_projects/harvard-negotiation-project/
- Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack, http://www.nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf
- How to Overcome Unconcious and Hidden Bias, http://www.wikihow.com/Overcome-Unconscious-and-Hidden-Biases
- Overcomingbias.com, especially http://www.overcomingbias.com/2006/11/to_the_barricad.html
- Microaggression and Management, https://medium.com/about-work/65d4740f7a2f
- National Association of White Men and Black Men Together, http://nabwmt.org/
- Project Implicit, https://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html

There are many works that should be here that are not.
Please let us know how we can improve this list!