

grumpywarriorcool
what makes our movements white?

amory starr

*igniting a revolution:
voices in defense of mother earth*

ed. anthony j. nocella & steven best

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i worked a little less than a year on a project on gender, starting in april 2001. i just kept sputtering clumps of words. “courage, humility, sacrifice”...“weakness, fear, triviality”. That project never really went anywhere. i’m not sure if it was a waste of time or if i became a feminist in the process of writing this agonizing poem about the movement. *we have come to recognize ourselves by the glint of riot helmets.*

Meanwhile i’d been working on a project on anti-racism in the movement since the dnc in 2000, which is about how the fuck can it be possible that an anti-imperialist project could fail to be anti-racist? It’s kind of embarrassing, but as an activist and a woman and a writer i’ve learned that the stuff that really needs to be shared is often the stuff that i must have been the last person to figure out.

It took me 4 years to actually see and begin to articulate that it’s affecting communities of color both at home and abroad, we confront racist imperialism, we make connections between distant global institutions and our neighborhoods, we build community, and work to empower marginalized people. It’s *how* we do it that is often very white and doesn’t work for people of color we’d like to work with and who would like to be working with us.

What this chapter does is explore the *how* of white organizing, in a way that tries to hold on to both the scholarship and the poetic insight that occasionally work in helping folks see what is invisible. White activists have better and worse moments in struggle with whiteness, so i’m not generalizing about white activists, but seeking to describe the problems with what i will call ‘white organizing’ — organizing which manifests problematic whiteness.¹

so i was hanging out with my friend jane, who is a feminist scholar and active in multiracial queer communities and she’s white.² She’s radical but not an activist. Anyway so she cleared her throat and said “you all spend so much time dealing with your fear of the cops and like jostling

¹ Much of the analysis that follows was performed jointly by Amory Starr and Rachel Luft. The method of analysis used was an intense distillation of perspectives. The version of anti-racism which was used to perform this distillation was not the anti-racism articulated from within the anti-globalization movement, but instead one from outside it, best represented by the influential People’s Institute [<http://www.thepeoplesinstitute.org/>], whose analyses were often present in (but not at all completely encompassing of) the anti-racist-anti-globalization discourse. Readers should be aware that references to “anti-racist perspective” below *are not* descriptive of anti-racist-anti-globalization practice. For a comprehensive view of anti-racist pedagogy, see Rachel Luft, *Race Training: Antiracist Workshops in a Post-Civil Rights Era* Dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of California — Santa Barbara, September 2004. Also see my “how can anti-imperialism not be anti-racist?: a critical impasse in the anti-globalization movement” in *Journal of World Systems Research* 10.1. Winter 2004.

² Jane Ward: need her preferred id ???

each other to be more brave. Why is pushing yourself around those issues really important but it's not important to push yourself around dancing – i mean as long as you're wearing a tutu and all?" And aimee was listening and said "oh! that's sexism. Dancing is wimpy and girly. cops are macho." *we don't recognize warriors as macho when they're women* What i was calling "courage humility sacrifice" is the internalized piece of masculinity, which is difficult to discuss because it's just an issue of "difference", diverse feminisms. What's at stake in fearlessness? Artist Dan Cohen starts to get at it:

The culture of the barricade, of opposition, needs to celebrate its own lucid rage...but what about that internal world behind the barricades? What happens to the doubts, fears, questions whispered in the silences between confrontations? Those voices of intimate reflection are an enormous archive of knowledge, but remain hidden behind profound doubt and fear.³

Audre Lorde pointed out that anger is loaded with information and energy.⁴ Cohen is suggesting that fear may be similar.⁵

Recognizing internalized oppression as it affects women helped me start to see what's up with whiteness... **discourses of "cultural diversity" make it difficult to identify and address internalized oppression in white countercultures.**

not so counter-cultural... White organizing often includes several "alternative" subcultures which experience themselves as countercultural. While these alternatives do, in many ways, explicitly counteract and displace oppressive hierarchies, including racism, they also often carry aspects of white culture as assumptions which are reproduced unquestioned and even invisible to the cultural frontiersmen. Insistent blindness to the whiteness often undermines the subculture's language of outreach, inclusion, and revolutionary change.

Activist countercultures often emphasize "prefigurative" practices which embody revolutionary vision as if it were already achieved, thereby calling it into being. One manifestation of prefigurative politics is responsible consumption. Many activists make an effort to be aware of how much they depend on third world resources and to reduce that dependency. hence some

³ Dan Baron Cohen, "Beyond the barricade" *New Internationalist* 338 (September 2001). <http://www.newint.org/issue338/beyond.htm>

⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches*. 1984: Crossing Press.

⁵ also see Frances Moore Lappé & Jeffrey Perkins, *You are the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear*. 2004: Penguin)

spend their leisure time re-learning how to grow and preserve food and to make basic items like soap, candles, and clothes. Some people have worked on creating alternative forms of identity and celebration ('look what I found in the dumpster!') to go along with their attempt to take responsibility for the racist effects of first world consumption.⁶ Even activists who feel that consumption politics are inadequate in themselves often practice responsible consumption as a "practice of commitment"⁷ to global justice.

Activists might be surprised that these practices are not perceived as anti-racist. Even though these activities are intensely *local* (unlike mass actions and international campaigns), often involve building community, and are empowering for marginalized people, this doesn't make them anti-racist.

Prefigurative politics don't only make for bad anti-racist campaigns, they have another set of effects. White radical organizing culture is prefigurative participatory democracy in a space that functions much like a squat (meaning that people can meet their daily needs there). Anti-racist organizing, on the other hand, emphasizes that meetings need to be controlled by well-known, familiar, preferably local activists of color in a dignified, tidy space to which people can feel comfortable "bringing their parents".

A common aspect of white countercultures is the sense of individualistic self-creation in which oppressive childhood values and institutions are cast off in favor of a personal embrace of political compassion for what might best be theorized as "imagined community".⁸ Since white activists often face ridicule, threats, or abuse from parents for participating in activism, it's hard to imagine parents participating in radical political action. People with parents who are supportive or might even participate in marches are considered "lucky" in white activist communities. It is partly because of the isolation that accompanies politicization that experiences of critical mass, such as large protests, are so crucial.

Meanwhile, activists of color envision resistance struggles in intimate terms; the struggle is for their families and is based on principles learned at home. Their developing political principles and work need to make sense in the context of their histories, their families, and the spiritual/religious traditions of their communities. While this pressure also exists for white activists,

⁶ see Jürgen Habermas, "New Social Movements". *Telos* 49 (1981): 33., George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*. 1997: Humanities Press, New Jersey: 265. Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen & Maria Mies, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*, 1999: Zed Books, London.

⁷ Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. 1985: UC Press.

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 1991: Verso, London.

overcoming it is made possible by white traditions valorizing defiant and expressive individualism.⁹

It is individualism in white culture that enables white radicals to reject their birth families, their churches, their home towns, and the values they were raised with and to define themselves anew. Radicals of color cannot relate to this behavior, the lack of love it indicates for family, and its lack of respect for history and community. Whites who have apparently abandoned their families are unaccountable free agents who seem untrustworthy to radicals of color.

excessive individualism isn't cultural diversity, it's internalized white privilege. Anti-globalization activists believe that diversity of tactics can provide space for every possible radical ideology and tactic, including anti-racism. Within this framework people have the right to participate as they wish, and stylistic differences are subsumed under a framework of cultural diversity. after Miami and Cancún,¹⁰ i wrote this:

i'm going to stink, i'm going in there even though i'm contagious, i'm going to bring my barking dog, i have the right to do whatever the fuck i want and people just have to deal with it and i'm going to call this "cultural diversity" or "class issues" or "activist dogs". meanwhile other folks around are feeling like another white guy is doing whatever the fuck he wants, which is [again] downright unpleasant for [us folks] who seem to be always subject to some white guy [cop, schoolteacher, boss, landlord...] doing whatever the fuck he wants at our expense even though it's obviously no way to treat other human beings and we don't know anyone in [our group] who would treat people that way nor would [people in our group] let people be treated that way if we had any influence over the situation, which must mean that all these other people in here think that what he's doing is a perfectly fine way to mis/treat (inconvenience/offend) other people...

This disregard and contempt for other people is not a way of being in diversity. Instead it's using the language of cultural diversity to say "i don't want to change no matter what the implications are for the thing that i supposedly want more than anything else – the revolution."

Assuming space and action is culturally neutral is an act of indifference. somebody schooled me on how totally offensive it is to Latino people to have a meeting without having food first, or to eat your own lunch that you brought without offering it to other people in the room.

so i'm sitting on the floor, i'm eating my food, i don't even notice any more if there's cops parked across the street, i'm tired, someone just came in the room i don't know i'm not

⁹ Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. 1985: UC Press.

¹⁰ WTO 5th ministerial, Cancún México, 10-14 September 2003. FTAA negotiations, Miami FL, 19-21 November 2003.

*paying attention...all that to me feels like **nothing is going on.** to a person of color who walks into that space and to any person new to activism, they are experiencing a lot of things that are going on: there are no chairs and the floor looks too dirty to sit on, people are rude, and there is a frightening army of police across the street.*

And if you are irresponsible towards the ‘other’ in your community, then think twice, because the world we are fighting against is based precisely on this persistent indifference to the other...

Massimo de Angelis explains that the struggle against globalization requires both local struggles, where “our desires and aspirations take shape” and the increasingly global context of struggle, which is fundamentally the “discovery of the other”. As we become a global community of activists, we develop solidarity through a “creative process of discovery, not a presumption.”¹¹

This discovery means not only getting to know each other, but also interrogating the structural contents of political concepts and space we take for granted which have a huge impact on the shape of our political work. Take, for example, dignity. For privileged activists, dignity is about washing the blood off their hands by dis-identifying with professionalism, managerialism, and status symbols. For people who wear uniforms to work and don’t get to be clean there, dignity, particularly in political space, involves having the aspects of self that capitalism and racism withhold.

If i’m willing to be super uncomfortable and not shower for a week so that i can fight for change. Maybe i need to understand that spending our precious organizing money on some chairs will enable a whole bunch of really cool people to feel like our meeting is a place they can be comfortable at, who just can’t sit on the floor because their legs or back hurts, or have come straight from work, or can’t afford to get their clothes dirty, or just find that really fucking weird and there isn’t really a way to explain it to them before they are going to feel like this space isn’t a space for them.

imagining empowerment White organizing has specific assessments of what is “empowering” for strangers. seeing new activists as isolated individuals, an “empowering space” is one that provides “something for everyone” (individuals) through “diversity of tactics”. In contrast, anti-racist organizing sees new activists as people embedded in oppressed communities. an “empowering space” is dignified and welcoming for people normally marginalized, and *safe* from daily experiences of racism and violence, a space that acknowledges and is committed to transforming the experience of the

¹¹ Massimo de Angelis, “from movement to society” 109-124 in *On Fire: The battle of Genoa and the anti-capitalist movement*. 2001: One-off Press: 118-119,124.

group.¹² These most important aspects of anti-racist organizing are not guaranteed by a commitment to protect diversity of tactics.

*i was standing in line at the taco stand near my house, at lunch time, and there were a lot of latino men there wearing various uniforms, so probably on their lunch break. there were a few moments of negotiating the order of the line. as usual, these men were very deferential and polite to me. and i was aware that my orientation to each little conversation of smiles and re-ordering the line was oriented to fairness. i wouldn't accept going before someone who was there first. i affirmed that i was before people who thought i was before them. and then it hit me. for me it was about fairness. that was enough. **but when life is abjectly, incessantly, unfair, fairness loses its meaning. instead, generosity, kindness, yielding, compassion, and joy are the only comfort, the balm, the sanctuary, and the alternative.***

When activists focus energy on clever communications and/or disruptions which even the mainstream media will cover, they imagine that the cleverness and surprising courage of these actions will excite people to participate in various capacities or, if they missed out, hearing about these actions or seeing them on TV will inspire people to participate in the next one. White organizing sees a “good” (smart and visible) action *as organizing* because **joining a movement is understood as an intellectual, not a social, act.** Individualism pre-dates politics, community follows them.

*in white organizing, smartness (not friendliness, comfort, or personal connection) is the political *sine qua non*. as such it is the internalization of class.* In white organizing radicalism is a fundamental axis around which politics revolve. Radicalism refers to ideology and analysis. Invoking the term ‘radicalism’ almost always implies two things: First, a commitment to radical principles and theories of social relations and alternatives, such as anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, racial and gender liberation, etc; and second,

¹² This fundamental difference leads anti-racist organizers to say “If we’re going to keep escalating the tactics, we’re going to keep turning people off to them.” [Dominick, *ibid.*] But this interpretation of anti-racism is not without its critics. Ward Churchill argues that pacifism sometimes indicates a pathological commitment to pacifism rather than justice (similar to activists more committed to radicalism than organizing). [*Pacifism as Pathology* 1986 (1998): Arbeiter Ring, Winnipeg.] As noted by a recent collective commentary, tactical moderation may actually normalize white middle class perspectives. “But to realize our potential for building a mass movement requires, first and foremost, clarity as to who actually constitutes the ‘mainstream’ and why. The right, the corporate media and elite policy makers persist in painting ‘mainstream America’ as white and middle class. Even many white liberals cling to the notion that building a mass movement against war necessitates the use of techniques and rhetoric that ‘don’t scare away’ middle class whites.” [Numerous Authors, “Open Letter On Movement Building” www.Znet.org February 21, 2003]

correct interpretation, reasoning, and application of principles in a given situation. Correct theory and application is that which is understood to be the most likely to be *effective* in eliminating oppression. For a position or an action to be correctly radical (as opposed to fetishized, compromised, or misapplied radicalism) is the highest value accorded within radical circles. meanwhile antiracist organizing does not invoke the term “radical.” Quite simply, radical is not the standard or goal of political practice, antiracist is, with the goals and principles it holds.

Some antiracists, such as Bernice Johnson Reagon, seek to recenter debates about radicalism by reorienting the terms, showing that Black survival and anything that prioritizes it, is in and of itself already radical. The sociology of race reveals that the radical/reformist distinction is too dualistic and does not take into account the wily ways of both racism and antiracist resistance which require, for example, both state intervention and autonomy from the state, militant action and slow, creeping transformation, etc. Some antiracists have pointed out that the very word “radical” is symptomatic of what they call white culture, an abstract, exclusive, either/or standard that is more distracting or divisive than it is galvanizing, empowering, or productive.¹⁵

White organizing assumes that activists arrive at meetings having decided already to be committed and to do inconvenient, uncomfortable things in service of their convictions. It’s not necessary to make meetings themselves comfortable or empowering. Participants who are committed will not be daunted by discomfort. If people aren’t willing to be uncomfortable, they’re not ready for activism. In contrast, anti-racist organizing endeavors to establish legitimacy, comfort, and confidence by affirming values, traditions, culture, ideas, and leadership of people of color and ensuring that the space is non-dominated by white culture, procedures, and ideas (although white people and ideas may be present).

Once people have gathered to participate, a major activity of white organizing is securing the radicalism of the group, which consists of identifying and vilifying any “reformists” or reformist proposals. This activity often results in some people feeling they are not wanted in the group, or even being excluded, shrinking the group. The performative requirements of satisfying the radicals often becomes a preoccupation of remaining members.

In Latin America the word ‘*specifismo*’ has been developed by anarchists as a framework for interaction with other groups driven by the

¹⁵ Rachel Luft, unpublished. 2003. Bernice Johnson Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters Or On Beginning a Cultural Autobiography" *Feminist Studies* 8.1 (Spring 1982): 81-96.

search for creative, exciting possibilities for joint struggle and building long term relationships without surrendering or compromising political goals. As i understand it, specifismo sees political principles as expressions of the kind of community and society we seek, not as reified absolutes more important than the particulars of any real struggle. In lieu of ideological or tactical absolutism or purism, specifismo means that we express our analysis and ideals strategically in each context. Practicing specifismo might mean avoiding the fun of contemptuous dismissals of reformists, communists, etc. in favor of De Angelis' "discovery of the other". Specifismo recognizes that no one action or leaflet or campaign conveys the totality of a struggle. each action or piece of propaganda makes a strategic move or a pedagogical intervention. Specifismo means evaluating them and considering our participation according to their power as pedagogies, performance arts, cultural ruptures, empowering disruptions, and political confrontations.

then jane says "And another thing..." Oh boy. "You know i've met about ten of these brave new warrior activists from the anti-globalization movement and there's really a pattern of how they hold their faces. They really have a mean, judgmental look on their faces. it's expressionless, but smirky. And it surprises me, because I would think as activists they'd be wanting to be more friendly to people." And i hit the roof. "i'm having a hard enough time trying to convince people that there might be more to crusty punk culture than just cultural diversity. Now you want me to try to talk to them about the looks on their faces? i mean isn't that the very sort of invasion of the person and oppressive, hegemonic pseudo-values that we're *fighting*?"

And she says "*but i thought you all were organizers!*" She says "it's one thing if snotty gay guys have judgmental face at the café because they don't think your shoes match your jacket but you all are *activists* and you act this way *at meetings*."

She said "I've been thinking about all of the radical people of color I know and they are so full of life. These folks seem like they've rejected love of life, rejected too much expression. But folks of color are like love this life, be grateful for what you have, get to work."

And then i said "well i think part of what grumpy is about is like this democratic ethic of not wanting to take up very much space." She said "get over it. You better figure out how to be democratic and still be full of life."

i said "i think what you're asking for is what my friends might call "being fake". i think they would reject that as not the world they want to live in. She said "well if it's fake to be interested in new people then what are you all about?... If you are fundamentally disinterested in other people, then there are bigger issues at stake than a possible risk of fakeness."

i also feel that there's something vulnerable about **unilateral friendliness**. Seems to me that insecurity is now, like eating disorders,¹⁴ a collective phenomenon; it's not a personal pathology or a disorder. Countercultures, alienated by perfect, conventional extrovert tv personalities promote some version of "cool", which seems to be a problem for activists because it gets us into a place where we then feel undignified and vulnerable to smile, to approach someone, to talk to strangers, to be unilaterally *friendly*. All of that is very un-cool. Whether cool a habit or a fragile bulwark for someone who feels they can barely keep it together, the result is very little friendliness, and, ultimately not even what most people would call civility – greeting people when they come into a common space.

many times over the years in my own home, people have come in the door and they don't introduce themselves and i don't introduce myself and my roommates who know this person don't introduce them. it's obviously the right thing to do in that situation and yet none of us do it. there's something all gushy and vulnerable and uncool about it?

There's this book called *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* which is the history of cool, complete with a section entitled "a whiter shade of cool". There's also a video called *The Merchants of Cool*.¹⁵ Cool is the internalized piece of commodity culture, consumerism. We don't even realize cool isn't ours! we think we made it up. They've sold it to us and we think it's who we are! Cool is the reification of self-indulgent insecurity. Which is fine if you really are just an angry kid, but it's not ok if you're actually a revolutionary anarchist. ***cool is the internalization of commodity culture***

jane asks "What do you think the face of a powerful activist looks like?...What is the face of a joyful warrior?" i think it would be a useful practice for white activists to discuss together the kinds of power we believe in, how power manifests and then what is the face and the gesture and the greeting that goes with that?

In order to get past our emphasis on smartness, we might want to collectively remember, precisely, how people became involved in (and left) our groups and what role issues of friendliness and comfort played.

¹⁴ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* 1995: University of California Press.

¹⁵ Dick Pountain & David Robins, *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*. 2000: Reaktion Books. PBS Frontline, "The Merchants of Cool" by Rachel Dretzin at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/>.

And in critically reflecting on our relations with people and groups outside our own, we may want to analyze to what extent we are driven by “discovering the other” in a responsible way, and to what extent are we driven by indifference and contempt masked as politics.