

Whose ally?

Thinking critically about anti-oppression ally organizing

Michelle O'Brien, Winter 2002-2003

In the last couple weeks, we witnessed the largest single day of social action the world has ever seen. Tens of millions of people across the globe marched against the impending U.S. imperial assault on Iraq. Here in the U.S., antiwar organizing comes in the midst of an upsurge of popular mobilization against the globalization of capital, the mass criminalization of the poor, a rapidly deteriorating economy, intensified state assaults on immigrant communities, vanishing civil liberties and a broad range of other social injustices.

These movements are broad, heterogeneous and complex. The most important organizing is coming directly out of communities of color - people most hit by poverty, state violence and the costs of war. Much of this work is wonderful, transformative and offers hope in a time of intensified fascist domination. In some cases, these movements draw together broad antiracist, cross-racial coalitions in building effective and strategic challenges to white supremacist capitalism. More rarely, white people have become a part of these efforts in ways that resist white supremacy and substantively support the struggles of people of color.

Far more often, however, the political organizing by white activists reflects deep, unexamined white arrogance, racism and privilege. Here in Philadelphia, two major multiracial coalitions in recent years have ended in deteriorated relationships. Both have left many people of color vocally critical and distrustful of white activists. Activists of color cite racist actions by white activists in the course of organizing, and a general refusal to cede authority to people of color. In far more cases, no such coalitions are ever even attempted - resulting in racially segregated campaigns, with visibility and many resources hoarded by white, racist activists unaccountable to anyone else. "Where was the color in Seattle?" is a widely reprinted article on the over dominance of white activists in the Nov 99 mobilization against the World Trade Organization. More recently, I received "Open Letter To Activists Concerning Racism In The Anti-War Movement - from NY" outlining recent incidents of racism structuring cross-racial organizing efforts.

In my own organizing, I spent most of the last several years involved in white-dominated political campaigns and organizations. After a couple of years working on ancient forest defense issues in Oregon, I lived in the Twin Cities in Minnesota. There I was active in a number of white-dominated student groups and community organizations. We organized against imperialist wars, environmental destruction, globalization and college policies. These organizations were not all white. There were people of color actively involved. Too often, however, their contribution was ignored or actively tokenized. Only rarely did I become a part of substantively cross-racial projects. The campaign against the reroute of Highway 55 in South Minneapolis was perhaps the most striking example. While much good came out of the organizing, the arrogance and racism of white activists was an ongoing issue that severely damaged the work. Eventually I moved away from Minneapolis, becoming a part of a heavily white-dominated community of anarchists and queer punks in Portland, Oregon. More recently, I moved to Philadelphia about a year and a half ago.

Throughout all this work I actively and deliberately identified myself as a white person seriously concerned with race issues. I saw myself as different from many other white activists I worked with. Not so much because I wasn't racist, in fact I frequently asserted the opposite, but because I took the need for antiracist organizing seriously. I often pushed white activists to have conversations about race. Drawing from my experiences with an antiracist youth group as a teenager, I worked consistently on trying to organize antiracist workshops on how white privilege and white supremacy effected our organizing. Through the years, I was part of the organizing of at least six such workshops in a variety of circumstances.

In doing this work, I found myself part of a growing culture of self-identified white, antiracist allies. There are many collectives around the country organizing similar workshops. Perhaps the best respected is Challenging White Supremacy .

Obviously this work is incredibly crucial. White activists aren't much good to anyone besides other white folks until we take privilege and racism a lot more seriously. The racism of white activists does tremendous damage to our ability to be a part of revolutionary, transformative struggle. But increasingly I am critical of the culture I helped reproduce. Examining my own participation in this work, I have growing concerns, critiques and reservations of about the effectiveness, motivations and results of the approach to antiracism I have participated in.

One of the major influences of in my life in rethinking this work has been my growing involvement in trans liberation organizing. I've found myself these days organizing a workshop on transgender issues every couple of months. As a trans person, a number of dynamics have become increasingly visible in the course of this work. In turn, my shifting perception of 'allies' - now around a very different form of oppression, one where I am not privileged - pushes me to rethink and examine how I understood antiracism.

I think a specific political culture has sprung up around the notions of white antiracist allies and non-trans allies to trans people. This culture, I argue, is self-perpetuating, having a tremendous, consuming internal logic. There are some deep flaws in this logic -- sucking in the energies of many people, without actually doing a decent job of transforming hearts, opening up relationships of real respect or altering how power and domination work in our society. Certain activists have built a whole culture of anti-oppression workshops that do very little to actually make a new world. Worst of all, there is very little writing out there on the limitations, failures and structural problems of this culture of anti-oppression allies.

Just to make it clear: I absolutely, strongly support white people being committed to revolutionary anti-white supremacist work, including the ongoing struggles of personal decolonization. Further, I recognize the legitimate possibility of non-trans people being substantive supporters of trans liberation and trans people. I believe such struggle is real and possible in each and every moment for all people. I am just critical of a particular configuration of discourse and practices currently being propagated as the way to be an antioppressive ally.

This essay is meant for people who are committed to antiracist and antitransphobic struggle. I mean it especially people who are organizing along the models I outline here, in promoting a particular culture of antioppressive ally work. It's meant as a call to shift how we think about the work that we do. If you don't care about challenging white supremacy and transphobia, this essay doesn't try to argue you should.

The first piece is an essay I wrote for my online personal journal on critically challenging antiracist workshops. I mix in a few other writing pieces, also mostly from my journal, around this topic. In the second section, I focus in the issue of white guilt. In the last section, I discuss

other means of thinking through these issues, including a strange route into my Buddhist practice.

Ideally, I'd like to collaborate with other writers around these themes, putting together something that combines multiple perspectives and analyses. If you know anyone who might be interested, let me know.

PART I: Questioning Workshops

getting involved

I first became involved in organizing antiracism workshops in high school in the mid-90s. I started working with a social justice youth organizing group. We had a parent left community organization who stuck us in many trainings. I learned how to facilitate meetings, talk at length about my white privilege and other community organizing skills.

With time, I started helping out in organizing the antiracism workshops. Eventually I incorporated antiracism workshops into much of my organizing -- doing them in various forms at Earth First! gatherings, for anarcho-communist cells, demonstration affinity groups and at punk community festivals. Meanwhile, at my college, a whole scene flourished around antiracism workshops organized by folks from People's Institute for Survival people -- leading to the formation of a multiracial group committed to creating institutional changes at my college.

These workshops brought with them a culture of what it meant to be antiracist. They offered a culture of antiracism in their language and form. This mode of thinking inspired countless, repeated arguments about race and white privilege in many, many organizing contexts I passed through. Others involved in organizing such workshops and I took on an extremely specific analysis and mode of speaking about race, privilege and oppression and saw it as politically urgent to convince other white people of this analysis. We measured our success, in part, by how widespread, constant and proper (all according to the specific criteria as circulating in the culture of these workshops) discussions about racism among white people were.

The need for serious changes in the racial politics of my organizing circles has been fairly evident to me for a long time. The vast majority of my political organizing has been in intensely white-dominated organizations, networks and scenes. In these circles, the handful of people of color

present are routinely disrespected, dismissed, ignored, treated simply as white or blatantly tokenized. The white-dominated political groups I've worked with are mostly uninterested in forming cross-racial coalitions, and when they attempt them we fail miserably, deeply alienating organizations led by people of color. We spend all our time working on issues in manners deeply alienating for the ongoing needs and struggles of communities of color. In short, I've spent years as part of organizing that directly reflected and supported the white-supremacy of our broader imperialist capitalist society.

Within this environment, antiracism workshops made a lot of sense. They still do, in so far as I continue to work in such communities. There are a lot of white people around not dealing with our racism. We can't be a part of antiracist work, clearly, until we stop and understand how racism is impacting our organizing, our assumptions, the basic ways we go about our work. It's certainly not the job of people of color to show us the way - - and many people of color involved in such movements long since tired of trying to educate clueless white people.

So I became increasingly wrapped up in a specific model of transforming racism in radical, white-dominated movements. We -- here 'we' refers to anyone who participated in this highly specific modality of political practice, who were mostly white people; the people of color in these groups often employed a far more diverse set of strategies in challenging white supremacy -- anyhow, we would start bringing up how racism and white privilege were major problems for the organizing. Occasionally we would get galvanized around specific incidents; more often we saw ourselves trying to grapple with deep structural and cultural problems in the political work we were a part of. Eventually, we would try to organize some sort of antiracist workshop. We would push all the white people to attend. Then we -- at this point it would pretty much be only white people involved - would hold a several hour workshop. We would lay out definitions of racism and white privilege, trying to get people to talk about how white privilege had affected and structured their lives; we would have a discussion about how racism worked within our movements, then move into trying to envision ways for addressing and dealing with these problems. Then, in the weeks or months after a workshop, we would speak in the particular languages of the workshop, returning frequently to the insights we saw generated there. We tried, more or less, to impose a new culture onto the work happening, pushing it to take on the codes and mores of this particular understanding of what constituted anti-racist white allies.

I could get more into the specifics of this code. There is a lot to it that's fairly right on and insightful. It also varies from context to context. But a lot of you would have had some exposure to it. And it's not what I want to talk about here. I want to instead focus on the limitations of working with a code in the first place.

For a long time, I really saw this as the most important political work I could be doing. White anarchists (or white queers, or white trannies, as it became with time) make up a large part of my friendships and political relationships. We worked together, and racism is a central part of our organizing. So we needed to address the racism in our circle as a first step to getting outside of it. Sometimes we would have a more successful workshop -- feeling excited about how much people seemed engaged and open to change. Other times we would feel like it went badly -- when people who be very resistant to what we were presenting. With time the specific content of the workshops I organized also changed, although not in very dramatic ways.

Along with participation in these workshops, I spent a lot of time trying to internalize the values these workshops presented in my own life. I thought a lot about how white privilege structured and informed many aspects of my life. I obsessively and neurotically analyzed the intricate details of my day to day relationships; thinking about dynamics with neighbors, coworkers, random strangers. I tried to carefully analyze and judge my own thoughts and actions to bring my life in line with my values as someone opposed to white supremacy.

With time I was called on, more and more, to articulate what I expected as a trans person from non-trans allies. I've been a part of a few projects around defining non-trans allies that are closely modeled after this antiracist white ally work. I've helped, among other things, in writing up lists on how to be a good ally to trans people. Right now, I'm organizing a few workshops around this topic.

diversity and capital

Before I get too deeply into my frustrations with the form of antioppression workshops I've worked in, it's worth taking a sideline to distinguishing them a bit from the far more depoliticized and common model of diversity workshops. This, too, is a crucial and related issue. Luckily, it's a far easier critique to make.

In corporate america and government these days, diversity workshops are a growing part of institutional organization. A corporation gets sued for discrimination; a police department gets in trouble for murdering too many people. Often, settlements involve some sort of diversity training. The employees are called into a room, where they participate in a series of workshops about how great people are of other races are, and how we can all get along in a magical utopia where diversity is respected as giving us strength.

These workshops and the rhetoric that accompanies them are devoid of any analysis of power. There is usually no discussion of issues of authority, oppression or privilege. They totally fail to recognize the systemic violence of institutional domination, the ways identities of race, gender and sexuality are inseparable from the structural regimes of oppression we might call white supremacy, patriarchy and heterosexism.

By depoliticizing identities, these workshops successfully create an analysis central to the ideology of contemporary capitalism. How does a multinational corporation successfully create marketing strategies to draw in consumers in twenty countries simultaneously? How does management of such a corporation effectively maintain production factories across three continents? How does the contemporary ruling class relate to its economic peers of other skin colors and national origins? How do advertisers satiate first-world consumers ever hungry for new, exotic, appropriated icons from third world cultures? Even within a single mid-west American town, how does a police force manage an immigrant workforce speaking four different languages? Contemporary, transnational capitalism demands complex means of accounting for cultural difference. The old models of crude cultural homogenization and rigid hierarchization of racial difference are inadequate for the needs of the new empire.

Luckily, diversity workshops have sprung up to deal with this changing neocolonial terrain. Diversity workshops teach us we can all get along. They demonstrate that cultural difference is not a threat; instead it can strengthen and improve a white-supremacist, authoritarian, capitalist institution. We all belong in the new empire; contemporary capitalism thrives on cultural difference. All people belong, all people are welcome, as long as they swear their undying allegiance to white supremacist capitalism.

This weekend I was a part of a systematically depoliticized diversity training at a gay community center in town. It brought home how effortless it was for privileged assholes to talk about issues of difference in ways that systematically maintained their comfort, security and authority. The whole thing was appalling, and I had spent weeks helping to organize it.

There is a lot more to say about this particular racist, capitalist model of diversity trainings. Their problems are extensive and clear. Instead, though, I want to shift back to talking about antioppression workshops. Within my anarchist political organizing circles, we'd all agree that diversity trainings are absurd and vapid. Instead, we've prided ourselves on pushing forward workshops that systematically foregrounded issues of power - with lengthy, central attention paid to white privilege and institutionalized white supremacy. By doing so we clearly marked our difference with contemporary capitalism's celebratory inclusion of difference, arguing instead for a revolutionary politics of personal and social decolonization.

Unfortunately, things are not so easy or simple. In the course of this section, I'm going to try to argue that these more politicized versions of antioppression workshops can too easily replay all the same problems of diversity trainings - validating and obscuring privilege, power and oppression. Obviously, such a trick requires significantly more sophisticated means of deception than corporate america has yet developed. White anarchists are way ahead of the game in the degree of sophistication of our racism.

growing frustrations

With time, my faith in such a culture of antioppression workshops began to shake. I slowly began to realize that, as far as I could tell, they weren't working. Two years ago I was living in Portland. After years and years of being a part of this work, my friendships were overwhelmingly with white people, the political organizations I worked with were overwhelmingly white and racist. I continued to be personally uncomfortable in spaces dominated by people of color, and rarely ever found myself in such environments. Almost none of the groups I'd worked with had ever successfully worked on a cross-racial campaign without inviting major disaster and irreversible fuck-ups. Looking around, I saw many other white activists who had been raised through years of a very similar culture of talking about white privilege equally unable to make any

concrete changes in their lives and work.

Living in Portland, I tried to launch similar antiracist projects along this workshop model. At one point I was working with a small collective to plan an antiracism workshop. There was one person of color, five white folks. Almost all of us were women, almost all anarchists who had been doing this work for a long time. For a few months we talked -- more than anything we talked about the many, many fucked up problems we had encountered in white-ally antiracism workshops. One by one, we identified fucked-up dynamics within these workshops, and set out to organize a different kind of workshop. These are some of the problems we talked about:

- authoritarian workshop organization, built up on forcing everyone to adopt the same definitions, insisting that there was only one way of thinking, and arriving at a unified common ground
- emotionally manipulative workshop activities designed to produce intense out pouring of strong emotions by people involved, often tied up with white guilt. this link is particularly important and explored more in Part II.
- a central focus on drawing on white guilt, with a systematic attempt to use that white guilt to push white people to admit difficult things and take on new languages (but often with the tacked-on statement that guilt wasn't helpful)
- racially segregating the group, often creating, among other things, difficulties for cross-racial people with white ancestry or cross-racial adoptees
- in workshops without racial segregation, people of color were often placed in positions of having to be experts, to put energy into educating white people
- discussing white privilege in ways that assumed that everyone in our circles was white, erasing the people of color that are actually involved
- using terms and concepts like 'people of color' as if all non-white people are the same, or even prefer such phrases
- discussing cross-racial coalition building in ways that relied on crude

stereotypes and extensive false assumptions of how non-white communities organized

- encouraging a highly-neurotic internal self-policing of white people's thoughts, behaviors and actions according to some standards. I'll talk about this more later on, it ends up being key to my thinking now.
- all discussions being totally centrally obsessed around the thoughts, experiences and transformation of white people themselves in ways that continued to exclude the presence of people of color

So we put together a workshop that focused on identifying structural problems in the scene and generating solutions, without all the baggage of individual guilt. We tried not to fall into any of the above mentioned problems. The planning meetings were really good. We had a positive, supportive and challenging communication between us. I grew to respect the people in that planning collective a great deal.

Then we did the workshop to a large group of punks who had come together around issues of police brutality. There were several groups, and mixed reactions. My group, I felt, was a disaster. People that had been involved in organizing a long time talked at length about their individual opinions and thoughts on race (all white people), then these more seasoned activists argued out their various thoughts. Meanwhile, the folks who hadn't been involved so long didn't speak at all. After that I really didn't want to be involved in antiracism workshops quite so much.

Before I get much further into this critique, though, I'm going to sideline slightly. Recently I've been organizing trans 101 workshops. I found many of the same problems come up as I've listed above. But I've also seen new things arise. Possibly this difference is because of the major differences between racism and transphobia, possibly because of my different positioning with respect to each structure. In any case, I'll outline briefly the three major difficulties in content I've encountered in my trans 101 workshops.

- definitions: most trans 101 workshops include some list of definitions of words like 'trans' 'assigned gender', 'transgender', etc. obviously this is necessary - many people don't have any idea what I'm talking about. Unfortunately, this can have a hidden oppressive cost. all trans people have spent parts or all of our lives grossly misdefined, mislabeled, misrecognized. we are an especially sensitive lot to the violence of

defining. I know that as transsexual is mostly defined, I wouldn't qualify -- and I know the pain of that translating into questioning *(being used to question? This phrasing is awkward) my legitimacy, my worth, my right to healthcare. So it's really crucial to both define these words, and recognize everyone's right to self-definition. I've come up with some vague solutions: having all the trans people present self-label themselves as they see fit, and then give their own definitions to each word, for example. But I'm still struggling with it.

- freaky curiosity. I think trans people primarily function in our society as freaky spectacle. everyone is curious what trans people's genitals look like, what sort of sex we have, how we could possibly have gotten this weird. mostly, I think such curiosity functions as a violent form of transphobia, a constant assault on the bodies, privacy and lives of trans people. some trans people, in doing such workshops, choose to show their genitals (!) and answer very personal questions. I respect this as their choice. I also think something is very wrong with the context that would ever ask them to do so. the main way that I deal with this is to call on people to be honest about their questions, but also to think about appropriateness. it isn't okay to ask trans people questions about their bodies you wouldn't ask of a non-trans person.

- tokenization. There are so few of us out in a public view, and our society is so transphobic, that I think every trans person faces this intense pressure to be a visible token, a representative of all trans people and the experiences of trans people. Many notable trans writers, artists and intellectuals fall into this trap - using their own experience as a way of forging a whole politics of gender identity. These dynamics of trans people standing in for other trans people get especially horrific when one looks more closely at issues of race and class. Black, working class trans women in Philadelphia, for example, are publicly visible only after they are dead. I think this is true of many poor trans people of color. Meanwhile white, privileged trans people end up in jobs like mine or writing books, visible public representatives. Such colonization of people's experiences in the interests of white supremacy is totally not okay on any level. Again, I've found small ways of trying to at least explicitly recognize this in workshops, but mostly think it's a central impasse in the structure.

All of the critiques above - of both antiracist and trans 101 workshops - are conceivably resolvable. In many cases it feels fairly inherent to the workshop structure, but one could imagine altering the structure dramatically enough to deal with each issue. Next I want to move into a

critique of the basic form of workshops as a primary site of antioppressive transformation.

Eventually I moved out of Portland. It seemed clear that my racism was far, far from being challenged in Portland -- an overwhelming white and racist city, where the racism goes deep into the punk scene. After visiting Philly and seeing a number of striking multi-racial, trans-inclusive organizing projects, I decided to give the city a shot.

On my way to moving to Philly, I stopped at an anarchist bookfair in western Mass. One discussion there was particularly revealing. It was a mostly white group. a few people of color in the room started talking. What the people of color said was fairly complex and subtle, and included a few criticisms. All the white people in the room start freaking out inside. None of us know what to say. Then a white person, clearly remembering some antiracism workshop of some sort, starts bringing up how we should focus on our white privilege, dealing with the racism in our movements. A few other white people perked up, recognizing the language involved, and launch into a lengthy discussion that seems straight out of a white-ally meeting. The statements of the people of color in the room got boxed into the narrow confines of this workshop rhetoric, and the people of color get erased completely. A dozen utterances of 'our racism' later and all the white people started actually believing the room had only white people in it. The people of color got totally ignored, now totally excluded from the discussion. Whatever challenge or threat they might have posed to white people's arrogance was thoroughly contained, managed and diffused. They were reduced to just the crude caricature of workshop rhetoric. And all the white people, clearly, were feeling great about being so on the ball about racism.

Reflecting on witnessing this event became central to my new reflections on this culture of white allies. I began to realize that all these workshops didn't necessarily challenge anyone. What they did, and did fairly well, is to provide to white people a particular language for discussing white privilege, and encourage a particular mode of analyzing and judging one's behavior. It called on white people to look at themselves and others around them, carefully monitoring each action and word, to see if it fit into a particular idea of racism. These workshops and the culture accompanying them counterposed such racism to speaking the correct language and behaving in the correct ways, a forever difficult task requiring an endless attempt at adherence to the ways of thinking and speaking advocated by these workshops. But crucially, as this event

reveals, is all this isn't the same as actually being respectful to real people of color.

This discussion at the bookfair was very revealing. It crystallized something I had begun to think. Rhetoric on white privilege, like any words or thoughts white people could come up with, could easily be used to gloss over and deflect attention away from racism. That all these workshops were equipping white people with a mode of speaking that we could, at any time, marshal to silence and redirect any potential criticisms. These workshops helped us establish a particular way of thinking about ourselves as antiracist, or committed to an antiracist politics, that worked to contain and manage any threats to our egos and arrogance around race. All these words helped create the illusion that we were doing something, while continuing to completely center the discussion around the needs, interests and concerns of white people.

White ally antiracist organizing, as I have participated in it, provided white people with even more sophisticated strategies to obscure, enforce, evade and perpetuate our own racism. In antiracist white ally organizing, white people get to stay the heroes of the story. The discussion is still dominated by white people, still centered on the needs, interests and thoughts of white people, and still directed to locating the issue in the choices and actions of white people. So white people remain the center of our own thoughts, remain locked in terms and concepts we generated, remain the central actor in the fantasy in our own heads. And now, we get the added delusional bonus of thinking we are somehow an antiracist actor in all this.

The problem wasn't in a lack of rhetoric. A simple improvement to the workshop wouldn't have changed any of this substantially. Above I mentioned many specific problems to how these workshops were organized. But the problem is deeper than that -- the problem is the very idea, to begin with, that the solution lies in finding the right rhetoric. No amount of talking about it, thinking about it, worrying about it will push a white person into a substantively antiracist space. No, just learning and saying the words, no matter at what length, won't get anyone there. The problem, in part, is misrecognizing how power and privilege operate -- mistaking the words for the arrogance, the words for the love. How we actually relate to each other depends, fundamentally, on what lies outside our words -- by how we are motivated and moved in our unconscious, in real ways. If I don't respect you, no amount of talking about how I respect or should respect you or how to respect you is going

to change that. Because respect depends on something else that is just outside of whatever we say about it. Perhaps respect is based on letting go, for a moment, all my preoccupation with whatever I might say about it.

I'm not sure how white people actually move into a substantively antiracist space. But, reflecting on it now I really don't think the whole culture of antiracist white ally events work that well. This culture is too preoccupied with egos -- with what people say about themselves, with the notion that we can find solutions in talking about what we think and finding new languages, with judging behavior like we judge words, with thinking that imitating respect is respect.

Many aspects of the left I am a part of are dedicated to building a culture where everyone is neurotically concerned with modeling our behavior to the standards in our heads of what correct anti-oppressive action is. We have a political culture that leaves very little room to talking about the unconscious -- for recognizing that you can spend your entire life pretending like you are right on and thinking that you are right on **and never actually be right on**. Spending forever trying to model something, no matter how dedicated and careful you are, is different than actually being in that space. Trying to copy what I might think the proper antiracist behavior is fundamentally bullshit, if that respect isn't coming, genuinely and truly, from a real space within myself. If that real respect is lacking, it will always show through eventually. Like in the above example, this rhetoric can be used as a tool for silencing people of color. These workshops focused all on what we modeled, without ever really addressing what was really going on in anyone. They pushed a kind of self-transformation that was fundamentally shallow.

This critique isn't about antiracist workshops being too analytical or cerebral. Many workshops I've been through, as I mention above, are highly emotionally manipulative, engineering moments of intense catharsis. Workshops are often designed to either convince someone to talk a certain way, or to express strong emotional outbursts. While these two goals are seemingly dissimilar, I argue they are really the same. Both call on participants to model certain kinds of behavior, and define transformation in terms of someone's abilities to simulate certain experiences that are defined in a top-down, authoritarian fashion. Neither actually moves white people out of a frame of reference that centralizes white people as the major figures. The limitations of such emotional outbursts are especially clear when they pivot around forcing white guilt -

discussed more Part II. But the basic limitations of this shallow transformation are equally suspect when it happens across emotions as it does across words.

In Part III, I discuss how I understand the possibilities of antiracist change.

bullshit trans allies

Another big influence on how I think about what it means to be an antiracist white ally is thinking more and more about trans issues.

To make a side point before I go further -- there are extensive interconnections, theoretically, structurally, tactically, between the developing notions of ally-work around both race and trans issues. However, I think it's incredibly problematic for white trans people to draw analogies between white supremacy and transphobia. They are very different structures of domination, and operate in very different ways. White trans people draw such analogies a lot. More often than not, crude parallels end up just revealing the racism and ignorance of white trans people, without really laying any groundwork for building actual coalitions between different racial and gendered communities. Finding the links between racism and transphobia needs to be done in a way that draws leadership from the experiences of trans people of color to explore the complex terrain of privilege, identity and power that criss-cross across all these identities.

So I'll try to be careful and responsible in how I draw this parallel.

A lot of people, all people in most places, just have tons of transphobia and don't see anything wrong with that. In a few major cities and colleges, though, there is a culture of young queer people that are particularly fascinated with trans people.

In some, specific, young queer circles and academic queer theory settings, trans people are really hip. Tons of people are talking about trans people, are intensely curious about our bodies, are fascinated with genderqueerness as exciting and radical. We are intensely exoticized. They might spout off all they know about trans issues, feeling enthusiastic about chatting about other people's bodies and identities to mark their own badge of coolness. These people exoticizing us, fascinated with our bodies and our lives, are often into fashioning

themselves allies to trans people politically. You give these people a workshop on how to be a trans ally, they love it, using whatever definitions or personal experiences you give them to go around announcing all they know about trans issues to sound cool and hip and radical.

It's intensely and painfully obvious to me what total fucking bullshit most trans allies are. It doesn't matter how much someone knows about trans issues, or what terms they've learned, or how interested they are or how much they think they care. If they can't treat me like a real fucking person deserving of real respect, I'd just assume they never even bothered. I've met many folks who I felt like are genuinely respectful, and half of them don't know the first thing about trans politics -- they just know that people have a right to figure out themselves, and they are really open to listening to what I have to say about myself and being humble and real about it. Queer hipsters or academic theorists who think trans people are cool and they can be cool by being around trans people should rot in hell. My life is complicated and painful and scary and beautiful, all in ways they totally don't understand and shouldn't bother pretending like they do.

Most queer places I go these people are mixed in with the far larger numbers of non-trans people that just don't care at all about trans issues, who are just transphobes. At any given antitransphobia workshop, these two factions would probably argue with each other, particularly if the hipsters think it earns them political points to continue such arguments. Both think I'm a freak, one group just thinks that's cool and one doesn't. These people that think they are my ally aren't. They think they understand me, and they don't. They think I'm cool, and it's bullshit. Nothing I tell them, beyond rage-filled insults, is really going to change that. So long as they are locked in their preconceived ideas of what it means for them to be an ally to me, they are never going to be. Because what's missing, fundamentally, is an openness and respect that is never reducible to language. the respect is real or it's not, and it's pretty obvious to me which is going on.

I will also add, though, that any non-trans person is capable, in each and every moment, of letting go of all their transphobic exoticizing bullshit. Capable of just showing me genuine respect, listening to what I have to say, and changing something profound in themselves.

closing words in defense of workshops

So I've laid out here a critique of antiracist and antitransphobic ally organizing culture. You can take or leave it as you please. To try to diffuse some of the worst hostility I might face, I'll spend a paragraph or two talking about the many obvious advantages of such workshops. The issues of racism and transphobia are clearly really, really important. The structures of domination and their colonization of our heads does tremendous damage to our day to day lives and to our movements. We clearly need to be doing something. And, equally clearly, such workshops can be a part of the solution. When white activists are seriously struggling, seriously transforming, antiracist white ally discussion groups can provide a supportive environment to process these difficult issues without inappropriately consuming the time and energy of people of color. In some institutions, such workshops can be a part of a multidimensional strategy of people of color and trans people to organize to actually change power dynamics and the organization of authority. These workshops can be one tactic in pressuring privileged groups in ceding their real authority.

I also strongly agree with the content of most antioppression workshops. I concur with the common analyses of white privilege and white supremacy I've encountered in these settings. Almost all the definitions, points, and concepts they present are ways of thinking I find helpful, accurate and radical. This point could easily be lost in my critique above. My objections to these workshops, at least those that include a decent power analysis, is not on the level of content. I'm glad I learned these conceptual tools, and encourage everyone else to do the same.

Anyone organizing such workshops is probably very aware of the their potential for good, for contributing to positive movement and transformation. I'm not intending to sweepingly invalidate or disrespect that. At times and places, such tactics work well for helping to make serious change happen. I'm not discouraging anyone from doing such work when the circumstances call for it.

But too many of us have gotten sucked in to mistaking hollow rhetoric for real change. Here I'm just laying out a critique of a particular way that too many people relate to antioppression organizing. Anyone is welcome to take or leave this critique as is useful in your work.

And, in closing, none of this means anything if someone isn't already committed to a revolutionary antiracist and antitransphobic project. I can't

keep someone from going out and use this critique to enforce white supremacist or transphobic policies by preventing antioppression discussions from happening at all. That's my whole point to begin with - no tactic, no conversation, no argument, can substitute for people being serious about being a part of making a different kind of world.

PART II: White Guilt

I don't have any sort of analysis or awareness about non-trans people experiencing guilt. Sometimes people make an unusually big deal out of apologizing for messing up my pronouns. I always find such spectacle to be annoying, self-centered and kind of offensive. It's obviously tied up with a totally unhelpful kind of bizarre guilt complex. But mostly I've just avoided noticing such things in people. I have better and more validating things to do with my time than speculate on the internal drama of transphobes. I don't want to have any more impulses to hurt people than I already do. So in this section I'm going to dispense with the trans side of my argument.

Instead, I'm shifting back to race. In the last few months, I have been thinking a great deal about my own white guilt. These thoughts are fairly new. From my first antiracism workshops as a teenager, I've had it repeated asserted that white guilt was unhelpful and racist. An accurate fact I've been correctly parroting since. During that time, I haven't thought about my own immersion in white guilt, nor have I really developed a decent analysis of how it functions in conversations I'm around. But lately it's been coming up more for me.

Because this analysis is new and developing, it doesn't have quite the same rigor and edge of Part I. But I think it's related, and worth putting in.

Recently I was confronted with a difficult ethical dilemma at my job at an AIDS social service agency. I was pushing for changes in the program that I thought would benefit the communities of African-American trans women in Philadelphia. At some point, my bosses threatened to fire me for being critical of their decisions. I spent a lot of time struggling with a course of action. Back down on something that felt important and cover my ass, or push ahead and end up desperate and unemployed? Use my white privilege to help others, or be strategic and careful? Live with myself as someone who wasn't willing to do what was right, or recognize the basic limitations imposed by power in my situation? It wasn't an easy decision.

One thing that I realized with time, though, is that a lot of my ideas about being committed to ethical action was not really about real compassion or awareness - it was about trying to reconcile my guilt around race, privilege and white supremacy. As I recognized this, it became more clear that pushing these points and getting fired wouldn't really benefit anyone except making me more comfortable with myself. So I backed down, and I frequently feel guilty about it.

i don't care which house you buy

Thinking through this situation brought up my intensifying impatience with so-called antiracist white punks about, say, gentrification. White punks in West Philly (a category I am definitely included within) have actively contributed to the white supremacist, capitalist assault on our neighborhood. The presence of white faces has helped make an environment that wealthy white university students and faculty are more comfortable moving into. Rents have more than doubled in the last few years, as large numbers of working people of color have been displaced from their homes. Gentrification is destroying working class communities of color in many cities throughout the country. Displacing families, forcing people into cramped living conditions and tearing apart vibrant historic neighborhoods, gentrification is a major force in urban race and class politics. Gentrification is often accompanied by even clearer forms of racist and classist violence: at some point police roll in, targeting, arresting and imprisoning poor men of color demonized as vagrants, drug dealers or dangers to the community.

This is obviously something worth talking about as white punk kids. Unfortunately, I've long since totally avoided talking about this issue at all. Very quickly it becomes clear that the antiracism of most white punks is rooted in white guilt, not in a serious understanding of structural, white supremacist capitalism or any real commitment to the well-being of low income people of color in our neighborhood. They debate at length how to deal with gentrification in terms of their individual consumer decisions: buy this house or that one? Rent at this price or that price? Hassle these white neighbors or those for the rent they paid? All the while framing the issue exclusively around the actions of individual white people.

Simply bring up the equally destructive event of white flight affecting many Philly neighborhoods and the shallowness of their analysis becomes clear. White punks rarely see anything wrong with white flight, a process

that destroys a tax base, facilitates racist denial of loans to local businesses and can easily lead to the deterioration of schools and services in the neighborhood for poor black people. The most common argument white punks end up making - that yuppies shouldn't move into the neighborhood - misses completely the horror of yuppies moving out of a neighborhood.

Meanwhile these same kids don't bother to know or listen to any of our black neighbors. There is no grounding in actually knowing anything about the experiences of real, displaced people. Nor are these questions rooted in a serious structural analysis. It would clear quickly through such a lens that the idea that individual white people can act alone to halt or even slow white supremacist capitalism through consumer decisions is a utopian delusion that is avoidance at best. Very few of the white punks I talk to are interested in actually being a part of relationships or movements that could begin to really change things - movements of real self-determination by poor people of color. Both gentrification and white flight are deeply destructive processes. Both are fundamentally rooted in a system of property and wealth controlled by white, privileged people. The specific, individual decisions made by such white people are ultimately beside the point, either way we win and everyone else loses.

The purpose of endlessly discussing gentrification among white punks, then, has very little to do with challenging white supremacy. It is instead, I feel, an elaborate means of coping with white guilt. By obsessing over individual consumer decisions, white punks create the deceptive screen of addressing these issues. A substantive commitment to antiracism, I would argue, would necessitate instead building real personal relationships of respect with people of color, and being a part of challenging white supremacy on a structural level - neither is something white punks have shown any real interest in doing.

This example of gentrification, or my dilemma at my job, could as easily be extended to a huge range of conversations and topics that serve as a major part of the discourse that circulates between me and my fellow white anarchist friends. With minimal difficulty, I'm sure I could find many examples here at work at an AIDS social service agency.

The signs of white guilt are clear. Often white people are searching for some individual activity they can do that they rationalize will ameliorate the structural violence of the situation, without actually being willing to address the overall complexities or the real lived realities of all of us

within that violence. Often this is linked to an overvaluation of the effect of the actions of individual white people, believing a great deal hinges on every action. Rather than basing antiracist action on the real needs or experiences of people of color or any understanding of white supremacy, it's based on the internal barometer of guilt maintained by white people.

Equally common, unfortunately, are white people denying our complicity and participation in white supremacy. Rather than feel guilty, white people feel like we are doing great, that white supremacy isn't a problem that we are a part of. This too is clearly a horrible place to start. After five hundred years of continuous genocide and colonization, in the midst of a massive white supremacist system that structures every aspect of our lives, there is no escape. Every white person, in every moment, benefits in one way or another with the ongoing terror and violence of white supremacy. White supremacy conditions every aspect of our lives. And white people are never free of this.

What's not so obvious is an identical desire to deny complicity underscores white guilt as well. Action out of guilt is first and foremost about trying to feel good about ourselves, searching out some way of getting off the hook.

We desperately need some ways of thinking through complicity that are neither about guilt nor innocence; that recognize and meaningfully face complicity; strategies that offer real means of being open to recognizing the complexity of circumstances, as they are. I don't know how to do this, but I touch on it briefly in Part III.

Let's assume my complicity and participation in white supremacy is, to some extent for all white people, unavoidable. I don't get off scot-free, I never get to feel just good about myself, and that's not the fucking point. Being antiracist isn't the same as carefully avoiding ever doing or saying the wrong thing; it's about actually caring about real people and actually helping to make a different kind of world.

White people always think the point of antiracism is to feel good about ourselves, and that's just totally bullshit. The point is to actually help make a situation where people of color and working class people can take real, direct control over their lives, where all of us can practice real self-determination. And that probably wouldn't always be comfortable for the white person involved.

In rejecting white guilt, I certainly don't want to fall into the hard white supremacist line of advocating for white pride. No, no, no. I'm trying to figure out what genuine antiracism means, what will actually build a world free of white supremacy -- and I believe guilt is a trap of white people not really recognizing or caring about such a vision, and instead being consumed with our own internal drama.

confession as screen

Guilt is a backlash strategy, a particular way of recentralizing white identity and white experience, reentrenching dynamics in the needs and preoccupations of white people, of thoroughly evading and diffusing the potential threat of actual people of color and anti-white supremacist struggle.

Many antiracist workshops pivot around declarations of guilt. Such declarations are known of course, in the fields of law and catholic theology, as confessions. Explicitly stating oneself as guilty of racism can constitute its own form of evasion. I can readily assert that I am racist; with minimal prompting I can expound on lengthy, detailed, highly-nuanced analyses of the ins and outs of my own colonization.

This isn't a new trick, I learned it some years back and have been working on it since. But a trick it is, a brilliant slight of hand, hiding oneself behind words. Jacques Lacan comments on the peculiarly human ability to deceive by telling the truth. The key part of the trick, like all tricks, is what is clearly visible but never quite seen, the screen is the form itself - in this case, the very issue of guilt. The many outpourings of guilt provide the illusion of addressing an issue, even an elaborate calculus of degrees of guilt and the convincing persuasion of the confession.

So long as guilt, and the confession, provide the frame of a self-critique, the crucial piece is never quite addressed. The slight of hand, the turn of light, and nothing changes. The confession masks not further guilt, but the very possibility of honesty, openness and transformation. It precludes the very chance of ever recognizing what is happening in a real, grounded, substantive way, shutting down whatever chance existed to really hear what people have to say, to really be open to change, to really take this shit seriously.

PART III: Anti-Racist Boddhisatvas

People have to change in a much deeper way -- change in the soul, in the, unconscious, in the Real, there are many names for this piece, this piece that is just outside of whatever we say about it. We have to find ways of being genuinely respectful, open, and loving to people, to actually let go of the bullshit that keeps us from doing that.

struggling alongside the unconscious

Actually figuring out how people really change -- not just model that change, not just talk about it or properly perform it -- is really hard. In some ways, it calls on the simplest things in the world - just listening to people, being open to what people actually have to say, looking honestly at whatever is going on, acting from a space of compassion and respect. But how do you get there, if talking about it (or writing about it in an essay) isn't enough?

I don't know.

Of course, my whole point here is stating what a white ally should be is not antiracist. So I'm hesitant to say anything about how I'm thinking about what antiracism means to me these days. But a few basic things are clear in my own priorities. I want to be a part of political organizing where working-class people of color are in real leadership positions, defining the work that is happening. I try to be genuinely open and listen to whatever people around me are actually saying in ways that are not tokenizing. I try to see clearly and honestly how white supremacy and white arrogance operate in my life and around me. I try to dedicate myself to doing whatever I can to disrupt and resist that. I try, however I can, to stay true to commitment to a world where we actually end structural racism. And I try to be humble. That last one I think I seriously flunk out on.

There are a few things I'm particularly aware have had an impact on me that feels deeper than antiracism workshops. One, I think, was actually reading a lot of amazing writing by people of color. The books of bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Gloria Anzaldúa, Kobena Mercer, Chrystos and many others had a deep and lasting impact on how I understand myself and the world around me. The beauty, power, spirit and soul of their words has tremendous power to transform hearts and minds, to open new ways of being in the world that are full and real. I feel these authors lent me strength and clarity that was far too often lacking in the discussion I had about race in my organizing circles.

The (appallingly) rare times I actually listened to people of color around me also had a pretty major impact. These times, I hope, are becoming more common recently in my life as I've developed more close, loving, cross racial friendships. I think I often boxed the words of non-white people in my life, shoving their thoughts into pre-formed molds I had about what they might say. I had already, before they open their mouths, laid all my own assumptions and arrogance over the conversation, ready to fit whatever I hear into it. And if I can't, I would just write off their comments, ignoring them or dismissing them. But sometimes, and maybe now more often, I really just listen. Actually notice specifically and precisely what people are actually saying, noticing what I can about the emotional, psychic and experiential truth to people's words. When I think I actually listen, that can be very powerful. Often, of course, what people of color might actually say doesn't resemble my preformed idea of antiracism given to me by workshops. Real people are complicated. Respecting folks, in part, is about paying attention and having patience for this complexity.

In the last couple of years here in Philly, I've tried to put myself in circumstances where my racism doesn't fly as easily. I've been spending time in many more multiracial political and social environments, some of them dominated by people of color. I think my own tendencies to feel good about this, to derive validation from being in these spaces, is racist bullshit, fucked up and totally not the point. But, if I'm paying attention, I have a lot to learn there. My racism becomes much, much more apparent to me -- it leads to concrete break-downs of relationships and interactions in ways that are inescapable. In an all-white racist context, my racism is never called out. Today, more and more, my life is such that my racism seems more clear to me. Partially by just being with people for whom it's blatant to them as well, and learning slowly from my mistakes.

All this helps out a lot, pushing me to recognize my own racism, and finding tremendous insight on antiracist ways of being in the world. Absolutely central to any serious antiracist politics is a serious understanding of power, domination and the nature of colonization and decolonizing struggle. I appreciate all my teachers who have helped me in trying to forge such an understanding.

But thinking more about guilt, I've been going in another direction.

staring at walls

Recently I've been trying to help out a friend whose deeply consumed with guilt. She sees herself as incapable of loving others. She is intensely self-critical and self-depreciating. Helping her out has helped me reflect on the extent to which fierce self-criticism can be rooted in a really unproductive self-hatred. As cheesy as it sounds, providing serious support to other people also depends on having a space of self love in ourselves. How can I find that self-love in a way that is rooted and fully aware of my complicity in white supremacist genocide?

Buddhists have a lot to say about this. In Buddhist philosophy, we are all perfect, wonderful, buddhas, simply in ourselves. We all are intricately bound up with tremendous suffering in the world, as those suffering and those causing suffering. These two, paradoxical, contradictory truths are completely inseparable from each other. Many of my friends acknowledge the latter; very few begin from a space of self-forgiveness the prior calls for.

I'm going to close this essay by taking it in a strange direction - into my Zen Buddhist practice.

Linking Zen practice to antiracism is strange, for several reasons. English speaking Soto Zen Buddhists in the united states are overwhelming middle to upper class and white. (Soto Zen is the particular form of Japanese Zen Buddhism I've been practicing.) I've been consistently appalled with the rare attempts at addressing white supremacy in Soto Zen circles, usually finding them vapid, unhelpful, shallow and offensive. Among other limitations, it is rare for Zen Buddhists to recognize power and domination as issues, or even existing in the first place. I would characterize my Zen groups as among the most racist spaces I spend much time. My drawing from Zen practice in my antiracism is also strange given the neocolonial dynamics of appropriation that surround white interest in Buddhism. The widespread popularity of Buddhism among white people is clearly a function of exoticizing, romanticized projection, a contemporary capitalist form of orientalism. I don't particularly think I escape such racist determinations.

But as strange as this link is, I think it's crucial to include here. My entire critique here emerged out of my readings in Buddhist philosophy, especially Chögyam Trungpa's remarkable book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Trungpa's book is really amazing, and I honestly suggest it for all social justice activists. Drawing from an enormous body of

sophisticated Buddhist psychology, Trungpa is talking about the many deeply fucked up ways people, especially white north americans, get into Buddhist practice. Without actually naming neocolonialism, Trungpa provides a brilliant critique of the ways spirituality is turned into an object of possession and arrogant, ego-based control. Rather than freeing people from our ego bullshit, as Buddhist practice is sort of about doing, people are using Buddhism to enforce their ego bullshit - I'm more enlightened, more special, cooler than you, because I have access to this spiritual path. Much like I lay out here around antiracism workshops, people can spend their whole lives lost in ego games of thinking they are being spiritual and all the while totally missing the point.

My Buddhist practice has transformed many aspects of my political practice. My developing aversion to antiracism workshops was the first and more dramatic result. So I'll talk some about my practice, a little bit about the philosophy that is linked to it, and close with some words about a strange model of antiracism - bodhisatvas.

In Soto Zen the heart of the practice is called zazen. Zazen is the simplest form of meditation. We sit, we stare at a wall, and we just try to stay present in the moment. As I'm a beginning student, I count my breathes to ten to stay focused. If I find myself zoning out, or distracted by thoughts or emotions, I just return to my breath, to this moment as it is. We are practicing, in a very concrete way, simply being present.

With time, zazen can be a space of learning how to let go. This is a piece of Buddhist philosophy, but it is also very concrete in the practice itself. We let go of our need to control situations and dominate things. We let go of our rigid preconceptions about how things should be, about exactly what is right and wrong. We let go of our preoccupations with defining and defending ourselves, with constantly assuring our own comfort and security. Letting go of strong emotions that over determine our ability to appreciate life. Instead, we just practice being in the moment as it is. Practice responding to each situation not according to a predetermined script, but how the situation itself calls forth. Practice opening up a space within ourselves.

The first teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha centered on the suffering of life. For me, bearing witness to suffering is key to all Buddhist practice, key to liberation. The most important form of bearing witness I've struggled with is honestly seeing and recognizing the tremendous suffering, oppression, exploitation and genocide white supremacy and colonialism have torn

across the globe, across our lives. Seeing white supremacy clearly and honestly, is a first step to being able to be there for people.

There is a great deal in Zen philosophy around the notion of 'emptiness' or 'wisdom beyond wisdom'. The essence of Zen, the truth of Zen, can't ever be fixed in words. Meditation is a way of being up against this unspeakable, and just being there with it. And it can't be faked; it has to transform you in ways that are real. This is tied up with my comments above about the need to struggle alongside the unconscious. The key piece of revolutionary struggle isn't ideology or any elaborate set of thoughts or words. It's what just outside everything we have to say, a love that can never be fixed in words, that is different than all imitations.

All this is deeply rooted in extensive Buddhist psychology writings about the ways people form, structure and remain trapped in our egos. We get lost in our whole running drama of feelings and thoughts, our endless interpersonal games, living a life of distracted suffering without ever stopping and just noticing the world as it is. Zen meditation is a practice about beginning to unravel and let go of our overbearing ego, self-centered preoccupations.

In Zen Buddhist practice, when we open up that space in ourselves through sitting, when we get underneath all our bullshit, there all the time is unconditional love. Each one of us, in every moment through our lives, has in the immediate capacity to act out of boundless compassion and love. When we let go of our preconceptions, we can see all things clearly, and do what's necessary in each and every situation. A being who acts from this space, who acts towards the liberation of all beings, is called a bodhisatva.

So for each of us, we can wake up. When we awake, when we are present in this moment as it is, we have the chance to see things clearly. By seeing them clearly, we can perceive what is needed, what each situation calls for. Unconcerned with how we perceive ourselves or how others perceive us, we simply help out however we can. There is no need for guilt or neurosis, strict rules or fear. The only need is for ourselves to be in world in a real and full way. We have a space of tremendous strength, courage, caring and understanding in ourselves, at all times in all places that we can always access, if we are paying attention.

Always, to be full and real, that practice of sitting must return me to the

world. To this world of authoritarian capitalist institutions and white supremacist colonization of our hearts and minds, this world of murderous transphobia and deep-rooted self-hatred, this world where partners rape and abuse each other, and this world where neighbors torture and terrorize each other, this world of dangerous sex and tremendous suffering, this world of touching beauty and unimaginable possibility. This world, right here, right now, where we all feel pain. This world, right here, right now, where we can all find ways of genuinely love and caring for each other.

This text is posted on the author's website, at www.deadletters.biz. The author can be reached through her site.