Not Just When We're Dying

White Dominance and the Erasure of the Global South's Anarchist Discourse

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Introduction

What follows is not a reading list, but a passive provocation. It's a way to call attention to a broader and recurring failure within many anarchist spaces and people's analyses, especially those in the Global North. I am referring to the refusal to meaningfully engage with the political, material, and anti-colonial anarchist and liberation struggles of the Global South. This is not about geography, but instead about power, history, and the global division of violence and suffering. This is about how anarchist theory, while claiming to be about universal liberation from capital and the state, reproduces the same global hierarchies it claims to fight by amplifying whiteness. Too often, struggles of people in the Global South only enter northern anarchist conversations at moments of genocide, famines, or civil wars. They are often seen by anarchists, usually white ones, as distant tragedies with no real context, as if people living under occupation or sanctions are simply passive victims rather than agents of resistance with their own radical histories and traditions. Anarchist thought, both historically and today, is still dominated by white authors, most of them white men, whose voices are treated as foundational, while all others are consistently sidelined, ignored, and overlooked. There is an understandable material limit to what people in the north can physically do in solidarity with struggles happening continents away. However, there is no excuse for the ongoing intellectual and analytical erasure of the Global South's anarchist discourse. In totality, I'm talking about the limitations of anarchist representation, whiteness, and the spread of culturally-competent anarchist literature. At its core, I am talking about erasure, and why it weakens both theory and practice for anyone thinking and spreading ideas about dismantling empire and state violence on a global scale.

The Color of Canon: Whiteness as a Limitation of Western Anarchism

Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) states that whiteness is the "default" of North American and European cultures. This status of existence translates to white people often not being aware of the ways in which their whiteness can permeate society, politics, and culture. This dominance of culture, knowledge, and social structures by whiteness is known as white supremacy. In anarchist spaces shaped by the Global North, this translates into a narrow vision of anarchism that centers these white and white European experiences, aesthetics, and theoretical priorities. In our case, anarchism as a historical movement originated in Europe. In the case of this piece, I am arguing that its lingering focus on whiteness has persisted despite generations of anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements in non-white countries. Whiteness, in this context, is not only about who is present in these spaces, but about what struggles are seen as legitimately anarchistic. White supremacy does not have to be violent to be considered white supremacy. When institutions, political discourses, and spaces center whiteness and treat it as the standard, the result is a white supremacy not in the form of hate groups or racial slurs, but a curated system of structural advantage and non-white erasure.

Black and Brown individuals from low-income neighborhoods are likely to be abolitionists for a multitude of reasons, possibly for reasons different from their white counterparts. They may have seen or experienced incarceration firsthand as a result of heavy police presence in their neighborhoods or the disproportionately high incarceration rates of people of color. After all,

the largest gang in America is the police. White officers display dominance and superiority first with their skin color and then with their uniforms. Adjacently throughout history, these populations have been racially and systemically oppressed from accumulating generational wealth, attending school, and being empowered to liberate themselves. Yet when these same communities resist through protests, student walkouts, or community defense, their actions are dismissed by white people as chaotic and violent. This translates directly to how whiteness in anarchist spaces continues to set the terms for what counts as radical and legitimate. It is also worth noting that abolitionists of color often refuse to consider themselves anarchists (despite being the closest possible thing to labeled anarchism) due to the whiteness associated with it. It is not enough to simply include people of color in anarchist organizing. Whiteness must first be acknowledged as a dominating presence in radical spaces and then subsequently dismantled within the theory itself. Otherwise, anarchism risks becoming a curated identity space for white radicals and not a pathway toward collective liberation. Throughout this piece, I am not referring to the lack nor presence of racial analyses within known anarchist authors. Instead, I am pointing to the way whiteness determines who is canonized, who is cited, and whose ideas are circulated as representative of anarchist thought. Even now in the 21st century, the first anarchist authors recommended to new readers are European men who were alive more than a hundred years ago. While various European ideas and theorists do still inform the foundational nature of various ethnic anarchisms due to the movement originating out of Europe, culturally-informed literature is and always has been the path to liberation.

> They [white people] want to be in a movement where they don't have to challenge their privilege, in a movement where they can just speak for animals or liberate animals because animals can speak for themselves. I believe as an Indigenous person, as a Chicano, the ecology is deeply rooted in our liberation. The land question is deeply rooted in our liberation because of how the capitalist system is destroying our planet and it's destroying us at the same time. That has to be connected with the liberation of Chicano people and all people because if we're liberated, we have the ability to have technology that's not going to destroy this planet, a system that's not going to subjugate animals, not going to have animals of burden. We're going to have harmony with the earth and other living things. I think all these white anarchists; their common denominator is just that-animal liberalism, earth liberation. It's not in their interest to get rid of capitalism or white supremacy. — Joaquin Cienfuegos, Chicano anarchist

At all times, white radicals must be hyperconscious of their identities in radical spaces. Becoming this requires ongoing self-reflection to avoid replicating the exact hierarchies anarchism aims to dismantle, creating space for marginalized voices and perspectives. Fortunately, this should not be a new practice for anarchists. The pathway to anarchism for many came through self-reflection and sitting with oneself to see how they truly wish to identify. Ideally, white anarchists must hold their white identities accountable just as they held their apolitical, liberal, or conservative views accountable. Anarchism on paper does not cater itself to a specific race the way right-wing ideologies do, such as nazism, fascism, or identitarianism. These ideologies explicitly center and idealize whiteness with aims to make it the political or cultural norm. Aside from that, liberalism is still the dominant ideology in the world, which is an indirect way of

saying that radicalism or far-leftism is still unique in all global cultures, including within white people. This is not to dismiss the work of revolutionary white literaries, but to question why the anarchist "canon" remains so racially homogenous despite centuries of resistance, theory, and praxis emerging from racialized and colonized communities worldwide. Anarchist organizations are dangerous if they are predominately white.

Doors of Erasure: How Whiteness Filters Anarchist Thought

How is white dominance related to anarchist conversations and analyses? Upon viewing ethnic anarchist/anti-authoritarian movements and state treatment of minorities, I have isolated three distinct points where whiteness permeates anarchist theory. The first reason is historical erasure mixed with selective recognition. Large examples under this include the famous Haitian Revolution along with the current happenings of the Zapatistas in the state of Chiapas in Mexico. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was a successful insurrection of the enslaved against French colonial rule, resulting in the erection of the nation state of Haiti. This famous revolution, being the largest enslaved uprising since that of Spartacus against the Roman Republic, is rarely treated as anarchistic. It is blatantly anti-authoritarian and successfully rejected the European empire, so why is this the case? I believe that since it did not emerge from white political theory, which has absolutely no analysis for non-white liberation movements, its status as an anarchist action is nonexistent. On top of that, its status even as a foundational rebellion is constantly rivaled by the French Revolution, which again prioritized white class conflict. Another example of selective recognition is that of the Zapatistas' ideologies and structures. Their frameworks of horizontalism, rotational leadership, and emancipation of women is heralded as a successful method of keeping hierarchies and authoritarianism at bay. However, what is not seen as anarchistic is their Mayan cosmology, land-based spirituality, and communal autonomy. My goal here is not to shove Indigenous frameworks and belief systems into a European political framework. However, their ideology of *Neozapatismo* is rooted in land-based spirituality and stewardship as much as it is based in (labelistically identifiable) libertarian/agrarian socialism. It is impossible to take one and keep the other; they both work hand in hand.

The second reason is a sort of gatekeeping, which for a lack of a possibly more accurate term, I'll call Western epistemic bias. No one is ignoring that the anarchist movement originated in Europe. However, with the movement beginning more than a hundred years ago, now is not the time for its development to stagnate and die within its borders. Europeans Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin are well known and understood. However, if the ideology is to liberate the world, and not just Europe, from the violent apparatus of the state and racial capitalism, it must be transformed to meet the needs of people ignored. Ubuntu, sumak kawsay (*suma qamaña)*, the gaada system, the nagari system, panchayats, and many more systems all have anarchistic elements. If a system doesn't emerge from enlightenment rationalism, socialist labor analysis, or European revolutionary tradition, it is seen as cultural and spiritual, but never not political.

The third reason is tactical or aesthetic bias. White anarchists support Indigenous resistance only when it aligns with their own frameworks, such as being anti-police or anti-pipeline, but completely disengage when the movement focuses on ancestor remembrance, kinship with land, and ceremonial obligations. Western anarchist movements seem to put confrontational tactics

on a pedestal. Unless you are actively slashing police tires or even calling emergency services on ICE officers with "police" patches, white theory will not deem it to be anarchistic. However, slow resistance is extremely anarchistic. I am not justifying incrementalism nor absorbing it into the anarchist body of analysis. My intention is to bring in processes such as intergenerational knowledge, Indigenous and cultural knowledge, and relational land defense as anarchistic. The state at all points in time has been harmful against minority populations and cultural knowledge. The preservation of Indigenous recipes, clothing, folklore, and languages are all an act of defiance against a state that wishes to eradicate it all to establish and perpetuate itself. I do not believe anarchism should dilute itself into a vague cultural appreciation project, but it must make space for practices that are ancestral, ecological, and spiritual, and not just confrontational or strategic. It must learn from communities whose very survival is resistance, and whose existence outside of state structures has always been criminalized, monitored, and repressed.

> There's certainly a real challenge for anyone who's not Lakota or Native to understand the nuance and the history between the Indian Re-Organization Act, Tribal Councils versus the Traditional Treaty Councils. It's important especially for outsiders to err on the side of listening to the folks who are directly hosting them in these situations and not be overtly disrespectful to local communities. Now that doesn't mean that local communities are unified in their response, and that's not really our place as outsiders to really dive right into the middle of it and stir it up. I have been working with some folks who were out there for several years. So those were the folks I took my lead from because they are traditional Lakota and Dakota Matriarchs. — *Anarchist Tactics at Standing Rock*, The Final Straw Radio

Canon or Cannon? Anarchism's White Firepower

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Errico Malatesta were all prominent anarchist writers who trailblazed the literary branch of anarchism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Recent names include Noam Chomsky, David Graeber, Murray Bookchin, Colin Ward, Todd May, and more. What all of these writers have in common is their whiteness, not to mention Goldman being the only woman of them all. It is often said that the revolution of our times will be led by a queer Black woman because they hold several marginalized identities, all of which are oppressed by the state. Living in a system that amplifies the opposite, straight white men; what can social, racial, and political analyses look like? Are these individuals using their privilege to write? Are POC anarchist authors suffering from racial battle fatigue resulting in a severe lack of anarchist scholarship? It may be a credible argument to say that anarchism as a movement developed in Europe, which would explain why many anarchist narratives are about the white Europeans themselves. However, anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical actions are not unique to Europe, for it was not Europe that was pillaged by waves of colonization that decimated its cultures and languages. People outside of Europe were racialized by the Europeans, and if anarchism is to liberate the colonized, their anarchisms must reflect their own native cultures. Any and all individuals who led protests, assassinations, and embodied anti-colonialism are anarchists in every right because they were against settler colonial hierarchies that sought to exploit them. Their anarchism is not academic, it is survival. To suggest that someone must align with Western anarchist theory to be considered part of the

anarchist tradition is racist beyond measure, along with it being a colonial impulse that erases the legitimacy of resistance simply because it does not speak in the language of the Western left. Whiteness becomes a gatekeeper deciding who and what gets to be called radical, who gets remembered, and whose struggle is worthy of analysis. If anarchism is truly about liberation, it must decenter the whiteness that defines who it sees and who it can learn from.

It does not take much analysis to recognize that a seminal "anarchist canon," or as I like to refer to it, the "anarchist *cannon*," would feature almost all white European authors. The existence of Black anarchism, Indigenous anarchism, and all other ethnic anarchist frameworks are proof that vanilla "anarchism" is neglecting the racial and ethnic discourse the others discuss. Anarchistic frameworks are overwhelmingly dominated with conversations on politics and economics. While this may seem like a strange argument considering anarchism is a political and economic theory, it is not only these two things that would undergo a radical change after a societal shift. Theoretically, if there is no police state, would neglected neighborhoods still be impoverished? Anarchism needs to be bent, molded, and formed through each person it goes through, especially people of color. We need more anarchist-minded educators in the same way we need more anti-empire therapists. The values these individuals have greatly impacted the way in which they do their work, approach their practices, and work in community. For social and cultural workers in communities of color, anarchism offers a liberatory framework that is not hesitant to point fingers at the state and police for creating stressful situations. The Black Panther Party were revolutionary when it came to feeding children, raising each others' consciousnesses, and challenging medical racism at a time where all doctors were white. When anarchists describe engaging in acts of mutual aid, it tends to be a lot like what the Black Panthers were doing. However, since the Panthers closely aligned with Marxist-Leninist ideologies, they exist in a strange flux zone in anarchism where they are only brought up if relevant, which is my problem. When the Black Panthers were patrolling the streets of Oakland, the way they armed themselves mirrors the ways anarchist movements arm themselves. Since they didn't claim the label, are they completely wiped out of the tradition of anarchistic organizations? Are we only concerning ourselves with organization aesthetics or actionable items? Do political ideologies of organizations matter if they're feeding kids?

Staying on topic, does an "anarchist canon" even need to exist at all? Rather than fetishizing Kropotkin, Bakunin, and Goldman's texts, a flexible and malleable anarchist archive could be developed in place of it. This would be a fluid and evolving body of knowledge that not only has texts but has oral histories, protest tactics, and cultural traditions that embody anti-authoritarian, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist values. In this framework, the pedestal these authors' works are on, indirectly creating a hierarchy of what is recognized as "correct," would be destroyed entirely. We must move away from the "scriptural anarchism" that has been created, which touts that "classical anarchism" is all that exists and deemed relevant. Many Marxists will read the core pieces by Marx and Engels and automatically traverse the world assuming they have a deep understanding of all conflicts. Anyone who tells you that racial struggles can be solely seen through the works of Bakunin or Marx need to be challenged, and then subsequently handed books on intersectional approaches to radicalism. This concept of the "canon" assumes that finality has been achieved. By definition, an archive implies ever-growing and expanding accumulation. The ultimate goal of a dynamic archive would be to intentionally hold contradictions. Rigid ideological canons tend to filter out ideas that do not conform to a dominant and cohesive narrative. For starters, not all books on anarchism have the word "anarchism" in it. Anarchism can be found

in kids books about barbecues at the park as well as in any Mexican Studies book discussing *machismo* and/or patriarchy. What would enter the anarchist tradition, instead, would be Indigenous models that are anti-state and anti-colonial, Black/African movements that foster spiritual practices mixed with Afrocentric traditions, and even feminist movements that conflict with each other over tactics and goals. There is absolutely nothing wrong with having contradictory texts because ultimately they are valid contributions into a field that requires your critical thinking. People must see themselves in a struggle. This, if done properly, could potentially prevent the anarchist body of work from becoming flattened into a "correct" version. It must be understood that no single truth or framework can adequately explain all human experience, especially when that framework is shaped by whiteness or Eurocentric rationalism.

The Exhaust Pipe of Capitalism: Anarchist Responsibilities and Education

As stated before, there are material barriers to direct action and engagement across borders. This can include distance, resources, language accessibility, and knowledge of the people/the people affected being in a nearby community. However, anarchist and socialist organizations leapt into action regardless if there was a Palestinian person in their organization or not. These organizations are intentionally made to be groups for people who are anti-racism and anti-oppression, oftentimes also anti-capitalist and anti-empire. However, not all organizations that have condemned the ongoing Palestinian genocide are anti-capitalist and anti-empire. This can include various regional or demographic organizations such as the Young Democrats, who believe that electoralism and the circumstances of American foreign policy, which is to maintain a physical presence in other countries in the form of military bases, will change upon electing a different leader. As it goes, the leader is not the sole problem, it is also the state. These barriers do not justify the lack of intellectual solidarity or analytical engagement. We live in a time where information is spreading faster than ever before, even faster than yesterday. News about wars, bombings, genocides, elections, and technological releases are all over mainstream outlets within minutes of them occurring, given news can get out. At this point, it is extremely important for me to share and acknowledge that consistently viewing violence in the world and in your neighborhood will make your body shut down. For radicals, organizers, thinkers, political philosophers, and the left, whatever it looks like, there must be a balance. However, it is not ethical nor moral to ignore global atrocities while engaging in analysis mixed with political organizing. Leftist political organizing is a tell-tale sign that someone in the organization, possibly the original organizer, broke the curse of forced liberalism and the refusal to create meaningful political criticism. Limited ability to act should not translate to a limited responsibility to engage intellectually or politically. It is a choice to privilege certain knowledge systems over others, which in the case of anarchists of the Global North and white anarchists, are systems that consciously or unconsciously align with whiteness, Western epistemology, and imperial narratives.

The goal of this is not to be a rant without providing any solutions. The solutions will differ by community and context, as anarchism must be adapted to local needs and histories. That goes to show how diverse our anarchist interests, desires, and movements can be. That being said, what is the *wrong* way to do things? The first one that comes immediately to mind is to not sprinkle in references to the Zapatistas, Rojava, Black Lives Matter, or other social/radical

movements and call it a day. That is symbolic inclusion and not intentional engagement. Ask yourself if movements of the South are shaping how anarchists of the North think. Are they changing Northern frameworks and disrupting assumptions? If not, we have a serious case of voyeurism on our hands. Secondly, northern anarchists must take responsibility for learning *from* resistance movements in the Global South, not just *about* them. This means actively reading, citing, and centering their thinkers, organizers, movements, and historians. Historians often are not movement leaders, but they are analyzers to the bone. Thirdly, listen to listen and do not listen to respond. There is no reason to always be on the "offense." People speak their truth when they feel safe to do so, and you do not always have to respond. Once you achieve that, learn to listen without filtering everything through a Western theoretical lenses. This is not solidarity, this translates it all into whiteness.

The Global South bears the full brunt of capitalism, serving as its exhaust pipe for profit-driven systems upheld by northern nation states and corporations. Rooted in hierarchy, it keeps bosses over workers as much as it keeps richer countries over the underdeveloped. The destruction, dislocation, and dependency imposed on the Global South from the Global North are not accidents, but central features of a capitalism designed to serve the interests of the few. After all, Africa wasn't colonized because it was poor, it was colonized because it was rich. Capitalism cuts the Global South deeper than the Global North. In the South, environments are constantly being torn up by corporations extracting cheap raw materials. Dealing with labor exploitation, debt dependence, and land dispossession, the Global South quite literally runs the world. The North, on the other hand, benefits from overconsumption and hyperconsumerism. If anarchism is set out to do what it wants to do, it must confront this reality head on. Its discourse of dismantling the state and capital must not only exit national borders, but actively disrupt the neocolonial structures that tie the South to the North. There is no anti-capitalism without anti-imperialism, and there is no anarchism without a destruction to global hierarchies.

At a macro scale, there needs to be a fundamental epistemological shift in what anarchism can be. Its values do not need to change, but it must adapt. Marxist professors can be found across a wide range of fields such as history, economics, business, environmentalism, and more. Its critiques of capitalism, history, and power are very malleable within academic discourse due to capitalism's parasitic nature being found everywhere. Marxism has been legitimized through liberal academic institutions from political science or sociology classes to entire programs, such as the University of California Santa Cruz's PhD Program for History of Consciousness. Institutional and academic anarchist education can be difficult for a myriad of different reasons. The most visible reason is that anarchism views institutions as oppressive apparatuses of the state. Social mobility is attained only upon earning degrees, which are conferred upon proving mastery of education that should be accessible to the masses for free. For-profit education, along with the corporatization of, for example, American higher education, has been a rapidly problematic phenomenon since the end of the Cold War. There are classes at a small handful of institutions that, in fact, offer classes on anarchist theory and history, which are taught like any other course with grades, assignments, and a final. However, the required readings for these classes, as I have discovered, feature nearly all white, European authors. Until final lesson plans reach Rojava or the Zapatistas, aforementioned authors Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Goldman are assigned readings for the entire semester regardless of the topic. This perpetuates the notion, and my point, that anarchism remains a field of study that only concerns and amplifies white people. It also means

that these white authors are the "governing authority" (unironically) for all anti-authoritarian movements throughout the world, suggesting anarchists of color are "second-class anarchists."

Conclusion

There is no branch of anarchists calling themselves Bakunites or Proudhonists or anything, and I recognize that. I am well aware that there are generations of Black and Brown literature after the "classical" era of the anarchist movement. However, now after this classical age, the weight of the classical canon massively overshadows contemporary anarchist thought, practice, and identity. What I've discovered is that these European men are not just referenced for historical context but are treated as often starting points. Since they are constantly recommended, published, and republished under new cover art every other decade, it sets the tone for what anarchism is, and not what it can be. The focus on white authors within the realm of anarchism completely flattens the tradition into one that originated and never left Europe, erasing the fact that anti-authoritarian and communal forms of life existed across the globe long before the word "anarchism" was even created. The microphone constantly being handed to predominately white men pushes the notion that anarchism remains a field for and by white people. People of color, who are already targeted by the state before they wake up, have to constantly switch into survival mode even if they have not achieved class consciousness. Whether it's ICE pulling you over for driving while Brown, or shopping in a 7/11 with your hood up, or simply being Palestinian can literally cost you your life. Not to mention the countless brutal shootings of Black people in their own homes while asleep. When these individuals cling to anarchism as a survival method, they are recommended white authors who dominate every conversation ever had, which should not be the case. If anarchism is to stay relevant and truly global, decolonial, and anti-oppressive, it must decenter its own whiteness. It must make room for diverse histories and visions of freedom that have long existed outside of the Western anarchist framework and canon. That does not mean to just add more voices to an already-established tradition, but to sit with oneself and ask "what is anarchism?" However, until then, anarchism will continue being what it has been, a place for white radicals who want revolution but do not want to give up their privilege.

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