

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



The White Anti-Racist is an Oxymoron

An Open Letter to "White Anti-Racists"

Kil Ja Kim

February 24, 2003

I received an annoying e-mail about white people and their struggle to do anti-racist work. I keep reading and hearing white people talk about their struggle to do anti-racist organizing, and frankly it gets on my nerves. So I am writing this open letter to white people who engage in any activist work that involves or affects non-whites. Given that the US social structure is founded on white supremacy, and that there is a global order in which white supremacy and European domination are at large, I would challenge any white person to figure out what movement or action they can get involved in that will not involve or affect non-white people.

That said, I want to begin with what has become a realization for me through the help of different politically conscious friends. There is NO SUCH THING AS A WHITE ANTI-RACIST. The term itself, "white anti-racist" is an oxymoron. In the following, I will explain why. Then, I will begin to detail how this impacts non-white people in organizing work specifically, along with how it affects non-white people generally.

Kil Ja Kim

The White Anti-Racist is an Oxymoron
An Open Letter to "White Anti-Racists"

February 24, 2003

Retrieved on 2003-06-19 from
nathanielturner.com/whiteantiracistsopenletter.htm
Originally published under the name Kil Ja Kim

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

First, one must realize that whiteness is a structure of domination. As such, there is nothing redeemable or reformed about whiteness. Intellectuals, scholars and activists, especially those who are non-white, have drawn our attention to this for years. For example, people such as Malcolm X, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, Barbara Smith, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Frank Wilderson, Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, and many, many others who are perhaps less famous, have articulated the relationship between whiteness and domination.

Further, early on people such as Douglass and DuBois began to outline how whiteness is a social and political construct that emphasizes the domination, authority, and perceived humanity of those who are racialized as white. They, along with many other non-white writers and orators, have pointed to the fact that it was the bodies who were able to be racialized as “white” were viewed as rational, authoritative, and deserving. Additionally, and believe me, this is no small thing, white people are viewed as human. What this means is that when white people suffer, as some who are poor/female/queer do, they nevertheless are able to have some measure of sympathy for their plight simply because they are white and their marginalization is considered an emergency, crisis or an issue to be concerned about.

Moreover, even when white people have been oppressed by various dimensions of classism, homophobia and heterosexism, they have been able to opt for what DuBois, in his monograph *Black Reconstruction* brilliantly called “the psychological wage of whiteness.” That is, whites who are marginalized could find comfort, even if psychological, in the fact that they were not non-white. They could revel in the fact that they could be taken as white in opposition to non-white groups. The desire for this wage of whiteness was also what drove many white people, albeit marginalized, to engage in organized violence against non-whites.

whiteness, white supremacy and domination became seen as abstract and not rooted in the everyday concrete reality that we experience?

Of course, legal cases such as the Dred Scott Decision along with many different naturalization cases involving Asian individuals, has helped to encode a state-sanctioned definition of whiteness. But there are other ways in which white people are racialized as white by the state. They are not stopped while driving as much as non-white people. Their homes and businesses are not raided and searched as much by police officers, INS or License and Inspections (L&I). White people's bodies are not tracked and locked up in prisons, detention centers, juvenile systems, detention halls in classrooms, and "special education" classes as much as those of non-white people. White people's bodies are generally not the site of fear, repulsion, violent desire, or hatred.

Now some might point out to me that white people are followed, tracked and harassed by the police. This is true. White women experience state-sanctioned discrimination. Queer whites are the subject of homophobia, whether by individuals or by the state through laws and police violence. Some activist whites are harassed by the police. White people who play rap music and wear gear are stopped by cops. Poor whites can be criminalized by the state, especially around welfare issues. What I want to point out is that, while I do not condone police violence and harassment, there is a way in which white people will not be viewed as inherently criminal or suspect unless they are perceived as doing something that breaks particular norms. Further, the breaking of particular class and sexuality "norms" is highly racialized, meaning that it is generally when white people engage in acts that appear to the state not appropriately "white" that they are subject to state violence. In other words, white people experience state violence when their bodies engage in acts normally considered deviant and inherent in non-white people.

Other racial groups, particularly Blacks and Native Americans, are considered inherently criminal no matter what they do, what their sexual identity is or what they wear. Further, it

has always struck me as interesting that there are white people who will attempt to wear what will signify “Blackness,” whether it is dreadlocks (which, in my opinion, should be cut off from every white person’s head), “gear,” or Black masks at rallies. There is a sick way in which white people want to emulate that which is considered “badass” about a certain existential position of Blackness at the same time they do not want the burden of living as a non-white person. Further, it really strikes me as fucked up the way in which white people will go to rallies and taunt the police with Black masks in order to bring on police pressure. What does it mean when whites strategically use Blackness to bring on police violence? Now I know that somewhere there is a dreadlocked, smelly white anarchist who is reading this message and who is angry at me for not understanding the logic of the Black masks and its roots in anarchism. But I would challenge these people to consider how they are reproducing violence towards Blackness in their attempts to taunt and challenge the police in their efforts.

Now back to my point that white anti-racism is an oxymoron. Whiteness is a social and political construct rooted in white supremacy. Drawing from the work of Frank Wilderson, I understand white supremacy as a structure and system of beliefs rooted in European and US imperialism in which certain racialized bodies (non-white) are selected for premature negation whether through cultural, physical, psychological genocide, containment or other forms of social death. White supremacy is at the heart of the US social system and civil society. In short, white supremacy is not just a series of practices or privilege, but a larger social structure and system of domination that overly-values and rewards those who are racialized as white. The rest of us are constructed as undeserving to be considered human, although there is significant variation within non-white populations of how our bodies are encoded, treated and (de)valued.

white bodies can make people feel, as Wilderson brilliantly asks, “squatters in somebody else’s project?”

So what does this mean for the future of white anti-racists? This might mean to figure out ways in which whiteness needs to die as a social structure and as an identity in which you organize your anti-racist work. What this looks like in practice may not be so clear but I will attempt to give some suggestions here. First, don’t call us, we’ll call you. If we need your resources, we will contact you. But don’t show up, flaunt your power in our faces and then get angry when we resent the fact that you have so many resources we don’t and that we are not grateful for this arrangement. And don’t get mad because you can’t make decisions in the process. Why do you need to? Second, stop speaking for us. We can talk for ourselves. Third, stop trying to point out internal contradictions in our communities, we know what they are, we are struggling around them, and I really don’t know how white people can be helpful to non-whites to clear these up. Fourth, don’t ever say some shit to me about how you feel silenced, marginalized, discriminated against, or put in your place as a white person. Period. Fifth, stop calling me sister. I will tell you when you are family. Finally, start thinking of what it would mean, in terms of actual structured social arrangements, for whiteness and white identity—even the white antiracist kind (because there really is no redeemable or reformed white identity)—to be destroyed.

In conclusion, I want to say to anyone who thinks that this is too academic or abstract, I write as a non-white person, meaning that from my body, my person, I experience white supremacy. I draw from the analyses of non-white people, many who were or are engaged in various struggles of activism, but most importantly who tried/are trying to speak out and stay alive. They did not or do not get accolades from many for speaking out but instead experience(d) constant threats to their lives for just existing and doing the work that they did or do. Finally, I want to know when a discussion of

the “sensible” non-white person who condones your behavior that this does not infuriate me. Because all of these things remind me of how powerless non-white people are in relation to white people. All of these gestures that you do reminds me of how grateful we are supposed to be towards you because you actually (or supposedly) care about what is happening to us. I am a bit resentful of economies of gratitude.

Moreover, this structure of white supremacy known as white anti-racism also impacts the larger social world because it still makes white people the most valued people. Non-white people are forced to feel dependent and grateful to white people who will actually interact with us. We are made to feel that we are inferior, incapable, and that we really do need white people. And the sad thing is, that given all of the resources that whiteness has and that white people get and control through white supremacy, there is an element of material truth in all of this, I am afraid. But white people need to think of how their activism reproduces the actual structure of white supremacy some—not all whites activists—profess to be about challenging. This structure of white supremacy is not just in activist spaces, it actually touches upon and impinges on the lives of non-white people who may not be activists (in your sense) or who do not interact with you in activist worlds.

But consider what your presence means in a community that you decide to set up your community garden in, or your bookstore in, or your meeting space in, or have your march in. What does it mean when you decide that you want to be “with” the oppressed and you end up displacing them? Just because you walk around with your dreadlocks, or decide that you will not wear expensive clothes, or that you want to march in someone’s neighborhood does not mean that your whiteness doesn’t displace people in the spaces you decide to put yourself in. How do you help to bring more forms of authority and control in a neighborhood, whether through increased rent and housing costs, more policing, or just the ways in which your

Now, for one to claim whiteness, one also is invested in white supremacy. Whiteness itself is a political term that emerged among European white ethnics in the US. Some who used the term white were those who were part of the dominant social structure, such as the slave owning class, which included many of the US “founding fathers.” Others were European ethnics, many of them reviled, who chose to cast their lot with whiteness rather than that with those who had been determined as non-white. In short, anyone who claims to be white, even a white anti-racist, is identifying with a history of European imperialism and racism transported and further developed into the US.

However, this does not mean that white people who go around saying dumb things such as “I am not white! I am a human being!” or, “I left whiteness and joined the human race,” or my favorite, “I hate white people! They’re stupid!” are not structurally white. Remember, whiteness is a structure of domination embedded in our social relations, institutions, discourses, and practices. Don’t tell me you’re not white but then when we go out in the street and the police don’t bother you or people don’t ask you if you’re a prostitute, or people don’t follow you and touch you at will, act like that does not make a difference in our lives. Basically, you can’t talk, merely “unlearn” or think through whiteness, as all of these annoying trainings for white people to “unlearn” racism will have you think.

Rather, white people need to be willing to have their very social position, their very relationship of domination, their very authority, their very being...let go, perhaps even destroyed. I know this might sound scary, but that is really not my concern. I am not interested in making white people, even those so-called good-hearted anti-racist whites, comfortable about their position in struggles that shape my life in ways that it will never shape theirs.

Indeed, white people could take another lesson from DuBois. I recently finished the biography of John Brown

written by DuBois. The biography was less of a biography and more of an interpretation by DuBois about the now-legendary white abolitionist. Now while John Brown's practice was problematic in many ways—he still had to be in control and he had fucked-up views that Blacks were still enslaved because they were too “servile” (a white supremacist sentiment)—what I took from Brown's life was that he realized that moral persuasion alone would not solve racial problems. That is, whites cannot talk or just think through whiteness and structures of white supremacy. They must be committed to either picking up arms for other people (and only firing when the people tell them so), dying for other people, or just getting out of the way. In short, they must be willing to do what the people most affected and marginalized by a situation tell them to do.

Now I am sure that right now there are some white people saying that non-white people cannot understand what is going on, that we do not have the critical analysis to figure stuff out, or that we have fucked up ideas. This is just white supremacist bullshit because it is rooted in the idea that non-white people have not interpreted our experiences and cannot run things ourselves. It is also highly elitist because it assumes that only those who have adequate access to institutional and educational resources (whites) are able to understand reality. It also assumes that there are not internal conversations within and between our communities—which I do not think white people need to be privy to or participate in—in which non-white people struggle over these contradictions, debate about our own visions for society and how to go about achieving them. In short, this perspective by whites that non-white people cannot be in control of our own destinies is rooted in a paternally-racist approach to non-white people.

Further, it is also rooted in the idea that white people are not racist or do not benefit from racism. Rather, white people at meetings will often discuss how they feel “silenced” by non-whites, or that they are being “put in their place.” Let me make

one thing clear: it is impossible for a non-white person to put a white person in her place. This is not to say that non-white people cannot have a sexist or homophobic attitude towards a white person. But to say, or even hint at that as a “WHITE” person someone is being put in one's place—whoever says this just needs to shut the fuck up because that is some bull. It is impossible for whiteness to be put in one's place, because that is a part of whiteness, the ability to take up space and feel a prerogative to do so.

In addition, the idea that white people are being put into their place relies on the neo-conservative view of reverse racism that has characterized the backlash against non-whites, especially Blacks, in the post-civil rights era. So when you say these types of things you are actually helping to reproduce a neo-conservative racial rhetoric that relies on the myth of the “threatened” and “displaced” white person.

Additionally, white activism, especially white anti-racism, is predicated on an economy of gratitude. We non-whites are supposed to be grateful that a white person is willing to work with non-white people. We are supposed to be grateful that you actually want to work with us and that you give us your resources. I would like to know why you have those resources and others do not? And don't assume that just because I have to ask you for resources that it does not hurt me, pain me even. Don't assume that when you come into the space, that doesn't bother me. Don't assume that when you talk first, talk the most, and talk the most often, that this doesn't hurt me. Don't assume that when I see you get the attention and accolades and the book deals and the speaking engagements that this does not hurt me (because you profit off of pain). And don't assume that when I see how grateful non-white people are to you for being there, for being a “good white” person that this doesn't hurt me. And don't assume that when non-white people chastise me because I think your presence is unnecessary that it does not hurt me. And don't assume that when I see you attach yourself to