

Towards Anti-Racist Politics and Practice: a racial autobiography

by Chris Crass

part one: "Don't you know what color you are?"

As I walked that picket line, in front of the administration office, I could feel the anxiety and tension growing. I knew that it would be unpopular to protest for Chicano Studies at Fullerton College in Orange County, California. But I wasn't prepared. I didn't know what to expect. I had been to countless protests and actions over the years. Politicized at 15, I went to protests against McDonald's and factory farming, Shell Oil and apartheid, the Gulf War and militarism. But this was different and I wasn't entirely sure why.

Let me give you some background. The protest for Chicano Studies was the latest action of a student coalition that had formed a semester earlier, in 1993. When the student coalition first formed, the main priority was fighting back against student fee increases. The State of California was cutting the budget for higher education, as the prison budget swelled, and the cut was being transferred to students as fee increases. The coalition was largely made up of Chicano/a nationalists from MECHA and white anarchists from the United Anarchist Front. We linked the fee hikes and the cuts in education to the growing prison population. We put out flyers, put together a couple of actions and we held a mass rally that was overwhelmingly successful. In fact the rally was so successful that it prompted some retaliation from the administration. During the rally, the majority of speakers were people of color, which reflected who was in the coalition. I was one of two white people who spoke at the rally and actively participated in the coalition. A week or so after the rally, both of us white students were called into the Dean of Students office.

I walked into the office, completely unaware of the reason why I was summoned. When I sat down, there were two security guards sitting on both sides of me. A secretary took notes of the meeting verbatim on a type writer. The Dean of Students informed me that I had been spotted vandalizing the school late at night with this other white student from the coalition, who I honestly didn't really know. A custodian identified us from pictures taken during the rally. We had supposedly been seen wheatpasting huge posters of Governor Pete Wilson wearing Mickey Mouse ears. I liked the poster, but had truthfully never put one up. The Dean told me that as a result of this vandalism, I would be fined and expelled. My class units made non-transferable, and I would be arrested at some point during the week while I was in class. I couldn't believe it. I left that meeting full of fear. When word spread in the coalition about what had happened, David Rojas - one of the most amazing organizers I've even met - told me that we were going to fight this. "They are trying to divide us," he said. The administration targeted us for two reasons, I believe. They assumed that it was the two white people who were leading the coalition and they were afraid of multiracial organizing.

We put flyers out everywhere. We started up an underground newspaper called the Molotov Cocktail - "serving one up for authority everywhere". The school newspaper, the Hornet, loved us and every week printed articles about us along with guest editorials and letters to the editor that we wrote. Our demand to stop all fee hikes was widely supported by the

students. The Dean of Students eventually apologized for his accusations and nothing happened to us. The semester was coming to an end. We had done some great work.

Towards the end of the semester, more and more ads began appearing in the school newspapers about how fee hikes were the result of illegal immigration. There were also student actions on other campuses calling for more Ethnic Studies programs. At UCLA students had occupied an administration building and then launched a successful hunger strike.

Over the summer a group of about 15 of us started a study group reading Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States". Although the study group itself didn't last very long, reading Zinn was a powerful experience that opened my eyes to histories of race, class and gender oppression and resistance. Over the summer, the coalition decided that our focus for the next term was going to be Ethnic Studies and Women Studies generally and Chicano Studies in particular. I had already taken the only Black Studies class and Women Studies class at that point and was currently enrolled in Chicano Studies. Eventually I majored in Race, Class, Gender and Power Studies at San Francisco State University (a hybrid of Ethnic Studies, Women Studies and Political Science), so Ethnic Studies was both personally and politically significant for me. When thinking about this change in priorities, it didn't occur to me that the response on campus would be different. We were going from one important demand to another and I thought people would continue supporting us. I was really naive about how big of a decision it was to go from student fee hikes to Ethnic Studies, but I would learn.

On September 16th of 1993, a rally had been called for Chicano Studies. Busloads of high school students and college students from other campuses were going to come to Fullerton College for a march. David Rojas and I created a special issue of the Molotov Cocktail together (an 11x14 double sider with 3 articles and graphics). We wrote, "Last semester, much of our focus was directed on the rights of education for all. While we will continue with this struggle, it is also equally important that we fight for a quality education. We, as students, must remember that this is OUR education and that we must have a role in shaping the education process." We continued, "Fullerton College does not meet up to the state and federal affirmative action guidelines and this effects us and our education. If there are classes that are not available to us, then we must demand them. We must reclaim our history! We must reclaim our education!" Of the last 56 people hired, only 6 were people of color. The college population was 57% Anglo, 22% Chicano/a, 12% Asian Pacific Islander, 3% African American and 1% American Indian. There was not one full time African American professor on the entire campus.

The rally happened, hundreds of students showed up and the energy was high. There were Mexican flags and speeches in Spanish. The students began to march into the streets of Orange County. It was energetic and peaceful. Police in full riot gear were everywhere. The police surrounded the students and ordered them to end the march. Shortly thereafter, the police went wild with pepper spray and batons. High schoolers and college students, almost entirely Latina/o, were hit and sprayed as they ran back to the campus.

I missed the march. I had left the rally to go to work. It was a critical mistake on my part to have left – regardless of work. I should have been there. I was naive, and thought of this

march as just one of many marches. But the reality is this: when Latino/a students take to the streets of Orange County, or anywhere in this country, it is different than when mostly white activists do it. The threat of communities of color mobilized is enormous and it scares the police to their bones. I had read about white supremacy and called myself an anti-racist, but there was so much that I just didn't understand.

The reaction on campus to the student march for Chicano Studies was overwhelming negative. The school paper attacked the rally and march as being "anti-white", "angry", "provoking violence" and "counter-productive". The administration, the school paper and the overwhelming majority of white students blamed our student coalition for the violence. Some called for MECHA's funding to be cut, others blamed the Molotov Cocktail for urging young students to use violence.

For weeks there was constant debate about Ethnic Studies. "We're not protesting to have white studies", we were told over and over again. "Chicano Studies is exclusive and narrow", we were informed. I was a white student taking Chicano Studies and I tried to talk with other white students about that. To discuss with them that Chicano Studies, like Western Civilization class, was something for all of us to take. To talk about how the history of Chicana/os was systematically eliminated from most classes – not from conscious decision making necessarily, but because the ideology of white supremacy says that there is nothing of Chicano history worthy of study. This is why many of the white students would say things like, "the books I read are written by white people, because that's who writes and that's not my fault". This is how white supremacy operates – whiteness is universalized as the norm of *what is*. It does not require a conscious decision to have thoughts that are racist, as it is racism that shapes the structure of our thought. "It is not my fault that Black people do not write books." "It is not my fault that most of what is important was done by Europeans and European Americans." "I believe that all people are created equal, but it is not my fault that white people just do more". "We are not studying white people, we are studying the presidents of the United States and it is not my fault that they all happen to be white." White supremacy is the tide that directs the flow of our thoughts. It does not require us to go out of our way to be racist. It just requires that we go with the flow of the status quo.

My job in the coalition was to try and talk with white people about this stuff. I would write articles and identify myself as white, because white students wanted to say that this was just a bunch of "crazy Mexicans". I was white, and I was crazy, too.

This brings us back to the picket line in front of the administration building. I could feel the anxiety and the tension growing. I was the only white person in the picket line. A white friend of mine was coming with me, but when he saw the picket line and all of the angry white students, he left because he was afraid. I was scared too. By this point, our student coalition, which had once enjoyed popular support, was being attacked from all sides. The school paper slammed us for having abandoned "student demands" (fee hikes) and taking on "exclusive and divisive self-interest demands" (Chicano Studies). We had little support for our protest. Our picket line was about 30 people, aside from myself, all Latina/o. We were quickly surrounded by what seemed like hundreds of white students. They were yelling at us – "Go home" and "We're not fighting for white studies". I remember my sense of time changing – like slow motion – and hearing students screaming at me, "what are you

doing with them?”, “don’t you know what color you are?”, “you fucking traitor”. It was surreal. I was really scared, but I knew so strongly that I was on the right side of this picket line.

The picket line has weighed heavy on my mind over the years. It made me realize that I was white and it made me question what being white meant. Why were those students yelling “don’t you know what color you are?” I began to realize that white supremacy is all about creating and maintaining relationships of power based on skin color. White privilege is granted to white people on the basis that they maintain loyalty to this system. It doesn’t require being an active racist per se, but just going with the flow. For standing in solidarity with Latina/o students, I was being called out as a traitor – I felt myself fearing physical attack from those white students. Now I wonder about the other people who were in that picket line. I was being denounced for organizing with Latina/o students, but I still have no way of understanding what it was like for them. For me it was experiencing the reality of racism in my face. David Rojas, my Chicano nationalist mentor, broke the situation down and said, “this is what happens to us all of the time”. That picket line, that experience of struggling for Ethnic Studies, of struggling for racial justice in a white supremacist society was a catalyst that changed my life.

part two: Movement Building and Challenging White Supremacy

“We shut down the WTO!” I could hardly believe it when the news was spread via messengers and mobile phones. Our blockades, our creative resistance, our commitment to the earth and to justice had stopped the World Trade Organization. November 30th, 1999, was also a day that changed my life. I went to Seattle and joined with my affinity group of mostly San Francisco Food Not Bombers. After years of using consensus decision making, practicing civil disobedience and utilizing direct action, it was amazing to see it come together on such a mass scale in Seattle.

Shortly thereafter, I read the essay by Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martinez, “Where was the Color in Seattle: Looking for reasons why the great battle was so white”. Martinez’s essay struck a chord with me. For years I had studied how race, class and gender have played out in social movements throughout history. Racism and sexism have narrowed and undermined the labor movement. White women suffragists of the late 1800’s utilized racism to secure the vote for white women. The sexism of the anti-war student movement catalyzed the feminist movement. This history is vast and full of racism and other forms of oppression undermining movements for social change. When I read this history, I would think about organizing today and how to actively challenge these barriers and obstacles to movement building. When Betita called out the ways that racism operated in Seattle, I was flooded. This is how difficult it is to see and deconstruct racism and the complex way that white privilege operates.

After Seattle, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out where to go. I had spent the previous eight years working primarily with Food Not Bombs. For two years I had been focusing more on developing as a writer. My overall goal with both writing and organizing was to bridge race, class and gender analysis of power with anarchist theory and practice. In the middle of trying to make sense of what direction to move in, I had a dream.

It was a dream about power and the effects of internalized superiority on my mind. The effect that white privilege has on white people is a developed sense of internalized superiority over people of color. It need not be conscious, nor spoken of directly, rather it is the framework of thought that white supremacy develops in people. It is related to the way that male privilege generates a sense of male superiority over women. So guys can argue that men and women are equal, but still define reality through the perspective of male privilege (i.e., it's not my fault that most of the good books out there are written by men and that men do the most radical activism).

My dream was of a party. A party of my friends. I was the only white, male, middle class and (mostly) heterosexual person at the party. There were women of color, transgendered men and women and queers, older people and working class people and me. In the dream there were two lines of thought going through my head. The first was straight up white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism and it was telling me that my friends were not good enough – as people, not as friends. Every imaginable hate word flooded my mind. This calm, yet stern voice just repeated, “you know that these people are inferior, you just can't admit it”.

The other line of thought was that egalitarian relationships of power and respect were both necessary and right, that these were my friends, people who I care about, people who I am lucky to have in my life. When I thought about this, about mutual respect and basic equality, my eyes dulled and my jaw dropped and in my dream I turned into what looked like a zombie. When my thoughts returned to the “inherent deficiencies” of my friends, my eyes became clear and, over and over again, I heard that voice, “now you are facing the truth”. I woke up drenched in sweat, trying to catch my breath.

I spent several days trying to make sense of that dream, of that nightmare. I kept thinking about consciousness and about how race, class and gender oppression create both internalized inferiority and internalized superiority. To oppose racism, one must also work to undermine the impact racism has on one's way of seeing and being in the world. White privilege functions in this way to both conceal and perpetuate racism – “It is not that you are worse than me, it's just that I'm better than you”. My dream was about facing the truth of how domination distorts and disfigures one's humanity. It led me to start writing about and thinking much more about the process of decolonization for those who have been socialized to be in positions of privilege. For years I've looked to the writings of women of color feminists like Barbara Smith, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Patricia Hill Collins, Elizabeth ‘Betita’ Martinez, M. Annette Jaimes, Karin Aguilar-San Juan, Chinosole, Minoo Moallem, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga and Angela Davis to learn from, to gain wisdom and find inspiration and guidance. I began struggling with how to use the concepts, tools, insights, analysis, and perspectives to undermine internalized white superiority, unmask white privilege and walk the paths toward a healing and healthy humanity. The question has been what does anti-racist work look like for white people and how do we do it?

I had been going to an anti-racism study group for about six months. Sharon Martinas, of the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, put the study group together. It was a mostly white study group looking at anti-racism organizing in predominately white communities. My favorite things about the it was that it was multigenerational and that we were of multiple political perspectives – feminist, marxist, anti-imperialist and/or anarchist.

Sharon Martinas has been doing anti-racism workshops and trainings in the Bay Area for ten years. The Challenging White Supremacy Workshop was designed as two fifteen week long sessions. Challenging White Supremacy for activists and then CWS for organizers. One day on the way back from a study group session, Sharon and I started to discuss putting together a workshop series specifically for organizers in the anti-global capitalism movement. Both Sharon and I were deeply inspired by Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez's essay "Where was the color in Seattle" and so we began putting together a workshop called "Beyond the Whiteness in Seattle: challenging white supremacy in the movements against global capitalism."

The workshop would be in four parts. We met on Tuesday nights during the summer, leading up to the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. We utilized role plays, homework, small group exercises, presentations and discussions to look at how white supremacy impacts our work. We broke down white supremacy into both racial oppression against communities of color and white privilege that effects white communities. White privilege and racial oppressions are two sides of the same coin; they both maintain systematic inequality that punishes the majority of the planet and its inhabitants in the service of profit and power. In the workshop we stress the importance of overcoming feelings of guilt around racism and the need for action based on the guideline that non-ruling class whites are both privileged and oppressed.

I was really nervous doing this first session of workshops. Having been one of the few white people in Ethnic Studies courses and often times one of the only men in Women Studies classes. I was used to having people question my motivations and intentions. I was used to people wondering, "what the hell is that white guy doing here?" But I was nervous about how people would react to "what the hell is this white guy doing co-training a course on anti-racism?" I know that people are thinking this and frankly, I'd be kind of worried if no one did. Facing contradictions, facing difficult situations that make you feel awkward and vulnerable is the only way to do this work.

Luckily, I was in the company of two mentors while doing this workshop series: Sharon Martinas, who I was co-training with and who is an incredible educator and organizer and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, whose house we were using for the workshop. Roxanne is a long time radical, historian and author who has spent years doing anti-racist work. She started a group called Cell 16 in the late sixties that helped launch the women's liberation movement. She has been doing solidarity work with indigenous groups resisting the United States and she has been researching and writing about the impact of white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism on white people. I was glad we were meeting at Roxanne's house as it was Roxanne who convinced me to go to Seattle and bought me a plane ticket. She told me that it would change my life, that all of the years of day-to-day organizing would manifest on the streets and that I needed to be there. She was right. So there we were doing an anti-racism training at her house, preparing for the DNC in LA.

Going to the Democratic National Convention in LA was a powerful experience and it reconfirmed for me the importance of white people doing anti-racist work. The workshops that Sharon and I do are directed primarily at other white activists, and activists of color are always welcome to participate. We do this because we believe that white radicals have a responsibility to talk about and work on racism with white people; that it is not the

responsibility of activists of color to school white people. In Los Angeles there was amazing organizing happening that actively combined international issues of global capitalism with local struggles for justice. Many of the local struggles were led by organizations of color. There was a lot of confusion and debate about how the actions in LA went down. Why were there legally permitted marches? Why weren't people doing massive civil disobedience? This brought me back to thinking about the protests for Ethnic Studies in Orange County, that action taken by people of color is different than what white activists generally do. The stakes are higher, and calls for justice in communities of color fundamentally challenge the logic of white supremacy that says that people of color do not deserve justice. I saw how important it was for white anti-racists to talk with other white activists about this in LA and it is one of the reasons why I continue doing the workshops here in San Francisco.

Since the four part workshop series, Sharon and I put together a six part series of "Beyond the Whiteness" and I've done about a half-dozen one timers for schools and conferences. The workshops have been really successful in terms of getting people excited about this work and developing useful skills and analysis. Out of the last workshop series, an on-going discussion group (disco group) formed. The disco group's goals are to form a community of learning, to have a peer group of organizers to look at how to incorporate anti-racism into our projects, groups and campaigns and to train people to do workshops themselves (creating agenda, exercises, timing discussions, creating empowering group dynamics, etc.) The disco group is also helping to develop a community of anti-racist activists.

One of the tactics utilized in the workshop that has been extremely useful for myself and others is the "each one, teach one" model. Basically, Sharon and I meet with people one on one and talk about anti-racism, about people's organizing projects and offer feedback and help, when useful. It was used extensively in the Southern Civil Rights movement as a way to not only teach people and bring them into the movement, but also as a process of developing relationships, trust and respect. For me, this is an extremely helpful way for us to grow as a movement and for us to deepen the work that we do. Mass actions and mass mobilizations are necessary, but we also need to do the day-to-day work of sharing skills and building our capacities as organizers and radicals. That's one of the biggest lessons of Seattle, for me. That it's not just about large numbers of people, but that we are all active participants in the movement.

Our strategy, as Challenging White Supremacy (CWS), is to do anti-racist training and organizing specifically with predominately white grassroots social justice activists. We also believe that multiracial, anti-racist alliance building is at the core of doing this work. Our focus on anti-racism with other white people is part of a long strategy of working towards multiracial, anti-racist movement to oppose capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy and heterosexism.

To further this long-term strategy, several people started up a grassroots network called Colours of Resistance (COR). Helen Luu, Pauline Hwang and myself talked for about six months about wanting to see a stronger commitment in the anti-global capitalism movement to anti-racist and multiracial politics. We drafted up a Statement of COR, launched a webpage, started up an email discussion group and we are all involved in local work that reflects our politics. The idea behind COR: organizers of color wanting to work in communities of color around these issues and wanting to know that white anti-racists would

be doing anti-racism work with predominately white groups, with the goal of us all coming together to fight the man. That is the basic strategy of COR, as it is with CWS. COR provides a way for radicals of color and white radicals to share ideas, stories, reflections, resources and build alliances through respect, trust and friendship. While COR is a relatively small group of people (a couple dozen) our goal is not related to numbers, but rather publicizing our strategy and putting anti-racist, multiracial politics out into the broader movement. So while I'm doing workshops and trainings, other COR folks are doing work like teach-ins and educational work on the impact of global capitalism on communities of color and resistance from communities of color to global capitalism. Doing alliance-building work is critical for white anti-racists, as white activists cannot and should not do this work alone.

So why do I do anti-racist work and why is it such a priority? Well, let me tell you one more story. When I was in high school, I worked with a group called the United Anarchist Front. We put out flyers, an underground newspaper and organized actions. We did really cool work and it was fun. But we would always talk about how apathetic the school was and how great it would be to work with other people. Years later, I was looking at a copy of our high school newspaper. I wrote a regular column called Love and Rage (named after the anarchist paper out of New York City) about activism and politics. Right next to my column was a guest editorial written by three Latina women protesting that lack of coverage of the Latino student population. They also called attention to the lack of coverage in the yearbooks, the school videos and the overall disinterest shown by white students in activities organized by the Spanish language club, Expanded Horizons. Here were students that were angry and ready to take action about issues impacting them on the campus.

I don't even remember reading that column in high school, let alone thinking that our group should hook up with them. Their issues of language and culture and representation didn't register for me. Their issues weren't "radical" as I would have defined them in high school. This is an example of how white privilege blinds white people and hurts the ability of white radicals to act. I remember once we thought about translating one of our flyers into Spanish, but we certainly didn't think that we might have something to learn from those students, about conditions in the school, about racism on campus and about what issues to organize around. How radical would that have been if a group of white high schoolers worked in solidarity with a group of Latina/o high schoolers to demand an end to racism on campus! In a state like California, where a majority of voters have passed anti-immigrant rights and anti-bilingual education measures, such solidarity and anti-racist activism is critical.

Doing anti-racist work doesn't mean that we no longer make mistakes, but rather that we are committed to doing this work, even though we will make mistakes. I'm doing anti-racist organizing because I have hope for our abilities to make history and transform this society. I have hope because there is a radical vision of love at the heart of our movement and it is growing. There is a long history of white supremacy undermining movements, but together we can make anti-racism a catalyst for building ours. Our movement is built day by day, with visions of the world we want seven generations down the line.