

Back Where I Come From:
How a Basically Nice White Girl from Texas Became an Anti-racist Activist

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I was born to activism. The oldest of nine, my parents were anti-racist Catholic labor organizers in Texas in the 1940s. Union organizing was both their work and the center of their political life, but my parents were involved in racial justice organizing as far back as I can remember. They had been anti-racist activists in college in St. Louis in the 1930s and moved to Dallas in 1940 to organize for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. They were always conscious that we were white people in the South and that we had to be explicitly anti-racist. One of our canonical family stories is my dad getting beat up by racist white guys at a factory he was organizing because he was registering black voters. My folks belonged to the NAACP in Dallas in the 1950s, not the usual thing for white people to do. We talked politics at the dinner table, politics and history and current events. My folks taught us not only that racism was wrong but that it was stupid and that it held back everybody, black, brown and white.

Friends of my parents organized Mexican women pecan shellers in San Antonio while my folks were organizing white women garment workers. Whatever the limitations of my early political life, I was never a person who "didn't see color." Life in the South (and Texas in particular) is so permeated with questions of race, color and nationality that no one would ever have said such a nonsensical thing.

I tried to be personally anti-racist as a child (what we might think of as an ally today). I had black playmates (the son of our cleaning lady and his cousin; they lived in the alley. The irony of that escaped me for a few decades) and got into a memorable fight on the playground with kids who called me a n-----lover because they'd seen black people coming in the front door of our house. I remember my mother telling me that sometimes all you can do is let people know there are people who think like you-- a kind of anti-racist witness.

By 1955 the neighborhood around my high school had changed from poor and working class white people to mostly black families. The school board decided to make it a black school and to send the remaining white kids to Tech, an even worse school, a trade school, and our traditional rivals. I had the idea of organizing people to pressure the school board to integrate the school so we could keep going to it, but couldn't/didn't build support among my schoolmates or their families.

I think this was the issue that first landed me in a black church feeling the heady rush of self-congratulation that comes from being amen'd and God blessed by a congregation of Black grownups when you're a 14-year-old white girl. I think of that feeling from time to time: it's very powerful, very seductive, very corrupting.

Emmett Till was murdered that summer; I remember staring at his mutilated face on TV and in the pages of Jet Magazine in fascinated horror. I was the same age as he was and I too had a fresh mouth. I could imagine him taking the dare to talk to a white woman and it really hit me how wrong it was what had happened to him.

I went to college at the University of Texas in Austin starting in the fall of 1958. I joined the Independent Student Association (that is, not fraternity or sorority) and hung out with some liberation theology types (although I don't think they called it that in 1958) called the Christian Faith and Life community.

Then in 1959 came the sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. We were electrified. Within weeks an Austin coalition had formed: students from Huston-Tillotson college (the black college), Christian Faith and Life and some other groups. We began to sit in at the Woolworth's store. The H-T students led the sit-ins and we followed their leadership (at least as I remember now). The only part I remember that I'm sure came from them is that we dressed up for the sit-ins; even then I would never have worn a skirt, pumps and nylon stockings unless someone I respected had told me to. We didn't get attacked and we didn't get arrested; but we didn't get served, either.

Woolworth's responded to the sit-ins as they did throughout the South, taking out the lunch counters altogether and making all food orders takeout (there may have been a standup counter, but for some reason it was OK to stand up and eat next to black people, but not to sit down next to them).

My first experience of successful racial justice organizing was our stand-in at the Varsity movie theater. The Varsity was on the Drag across the street from the main entrance to the campus, and it was what passed for an art house in Austin Texas 1959. Instructors sometimes assigned students to see films that were showing there (Shakespeare, that sort of thing). The black students weren't allowed in the theater except for the balcony and that only on certain days.

Our action strategy was simple. Two by two, in racially mixed pairs (I can't remember whether we decided against racially mixed couples or whether it was so unthinkable it didn't even cross our minds), we went to the ticket counter and asked for two tickets. The clerk offered to sell one ticket, to the white member of the team. We declined politely and went to the back of the line to repeat the process.

This incredibly mild-mannered action (we dressed up for it, too, I recall) was met with hostile disbelief by the manager, the employees and the other patrons. I remember one Saturday night when my friend Anna and I were in line as usual and a cowboy, obviously several Lone Stars to the wind, came weaving up to us. He ignored Anna altogether, stuck his beer breath face in mine and said, "Why don't you go back where you come from, you New York Communist Jew." I think back on that experience partly because it was funny/sad, partly because I let him define me as other and experienced myself that way. I had friends who were clear that they were Southerners and who were in some ways much more militant than I was, I think now perhaps because they were more wedded to where we lived. I wasn't a carpetbagger, but my parents were, and I felt somewhat apart from/superior to the South. Only in the last while have I come to understand how important it is to own my roots.

We may have leafleted the movie patrons, although I think our action was basically an advanced form of the same kind of non-violent witness I'd practiced as a child: see what I am doing rather than go and do likewise. I do remember deep one on one arguments with other students, particularly those who told me they just couldn't help it, it was how they were raised.

But we won. We found out that the Varsity was owned by some eastern company and segregated the theater only to observe local custom. We wrote letters, to them and to the editors of the local and campus papers. The black churches supported us (actually they supported the H-T students, but we didn't quite get that then). The campus Y and a few of the more progressive white churches came around. Finally the pastor of St. Austin's, the campus Catholic church, came out for us from the pulpit. And the Varsity changed its policy! We were ecstatic and convinced that we were just moments away from justice and equality for all.

By the spring of 1964 I was a graduate student at UC Berkeley and the Friends of SNCC were organizing people to go south. They didn't recruit me, no ma'am. I was just three years out of Texas and was scared to death of Mississippi. I thought those yankee white kids were crazy. But I felt guilty about it.

That fall Freedom Summer veterans like Mario Savio and Jack Weinberg were staffing tables for Friends of SNCC and CORE (the Congress of Racial Equality) when the university banned political tables from the campus. It was a CORE table that Jack Weinberg was setting up/sitting at when the campus police drove into the middle of the lunchtime crowd on Sproul Plaza to arrest him. Someone shouted "Sit down," and we did, thousands of us. There's a picture that's always shown of the sea of students surrounding the police car. I remember just where I was and can pick myself out by the left rear fender.

I finally went home. My husband was teaching at UC Davis and had been home for some time when I finally got there. "Where have you been?" he asked. "I've been at the revolution," I answered. And, bless my heart, I meant it.

We called it the Free Speech Movement. But it was not really about the right to free speech; it was about using the university as a place to organize against injustice. And we won that right, although it would be tested by the University over and over.

We weren't solidarity activists in the FSM; we were profoundly uninterested in what anyone else had to say, and were no more receptive to the advice of activists of color than to people who had been radicals in/since the 30s. (I try to think of that when I'm tempted to tell stories from the 60s; but you asked.)

Emboldened by our victories on campus, UC students (me included) got involved in civil rights struggles off campus, sitting in for fair employment at the Oakland Tribune, the car dealerships on San Francisco's Auto Row, the Sheraton Palace Hotel, the Lucky grocery stores. Off in the south SNCC was talking about Black power, which freaked out a lot of people I knew. Some of my friends who tutored high school students were talking about a new group called the Black Panthers organizing in Oakland. Malcolm X was an increasingly outspoken advocate of a new revolutionary Black nationalism. The anti-war movement was starting to take shape; at that point I was against US intervention but I hadn't yet concluded that I was on the other side, the side of the Vietnamese people.

Like the rest of my generation, I was profoundly affected by the US intervention in Vietnam. My anti-racism made me disposed to be anti-imperialist, and the leadership of Black radicals helped me understand that the dreams of the National Liberation Front for self-determination were a face of my somewhat vague dream of justice. "No Vietnamese Ever Called me a N-----" (we think Mohammed Ali was the first person to say this) was the slogan that put the pieces together for me, and got me ready to look at Black people in the US as colonized like the Vietnamese.

I spent the next few years as a radical academic, first in Buffalo, then Toronto. We stopped in Chicago in July 1969 on our way back to California and went to what turned out to be the last SDS convention. Listening to the radio we heard J. Edgar Hoover proclaim the Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society as two of the greatest dangers to internal security in the US. At this convention the people who would become the Weather Underground and the people who would become the Revolutionary Communist Party kicked the Progressive Labor Party out of SDS. One of the splitting issues was the question of Black nationalism. PL held the view that all nationalism was reactionary, from the Black Panthers to the Vietnamese. This was the first time I had ever actually heard any Black

people call themselves an internal colony, an oppressed nation, not to mention seen/heard white people applauding them for that view.

Back in San Francisco I worked with small groups doing propaganda, becoming a printer in the process so as to produce the propaganda we were writing. In the early 1970s I worked with People's Press, which produced some wonderful books we called primers, one on the Black Panthers, one on Puerto Rico, one on Palestine, one on women, one on the ecology movement, one on fixing your car.

I got involved with more organized politics through a study group in about 1974. Study groups were all the rage in the early/middle 70s. The Feds were assaulting the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. There were still hundreds of thousands of troops in Vietnam. I had worked with a group of women on an analysis of the role of working women in the economy (called You Can't Go Home Again). Based on that (I think) I ran a class at the Liberation School, an amazing 1970s institution that brought together (mostly white) radicals of many stripes. One of the women in that class invited me to join a study group of white radicals including Sharon Martinas.

The study group entertained the standard menu of BIIOT (Burning Issues of our Time), 1970s style: building the vanguard party; the woman question (yes we did call it that); and the question of the black nation. And no, we didn't discuss gay liberation or the environment.

I had always supported Black people's right to decide their strategy for themselves. Coming from the south that was just common sense; how could white people tell Black people how to win their freedom since white people had taken it away? I supported SNCC when they told white anti-racists to go home and organize their mamas. I supported the Vietnamese and their right to liberate their nation by any means necessary. I supported independence for Puerto Rico. But the question of whether Black people in the United States are also a colonized nation with the right to independence, that was a highly controversial debate in the movement at the time.

Besides the Panthers and followers of Malcolm X, other Black revolutionary organizations were making that claim: the Republic of New Africa, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the All-African Peoples Revolutionary Party, and others. On the other side, almost all the traditional socialist/communist left denounced this view as narrow nationalism, dividing the working class movement, etc., etc. Some were not above suggesting that this position was a ploy by the state to divide the movement. (Recall that the FBI's Cointelpro was active in this period. They had already split the Black Panther Party and driven the Black Liberation Army underground. There was a lot of harsh words/suspicious/paranoia.) This debate broke up meetings and organizations; people were denounced; punches were thrown.

Our little study group, abstract as it was, was not immune to these debates. We were divided about what, like most of the white left, we called the Black national question (pompous we were, it's true). I think the 8 or so people in that group ended up in about 4 different cadre organizations. Two people in the study group were members of Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, and recruited me. (The name comes from Mao's epigram that "a single spark can start a prairie fire." It would have been more appropriate to have called ourselves the sparks, but that sounds too much like a girl singing group, so there we were with one of the longest and most obscure names of any of the small anti-imperialist groups that sprang up in that period.)

I spent the next 25 years in and around the political tendency that called itself anti-imperialist centered on Prairie Fire. I worked in Freedom Rising Africa Solidarity

Committee (we did love those long names....) and finally in the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee.

Malcolm X answered some white person who asked him what to do by saying we should follow the example of John Brown. We took up that challenge, at least rhetorically, and honored Brown's willingness to support the liberation of Black people by any means necessary. The first John Brown chapter was organized in New York by people who had been supporters of Black Panther/Black Liberation Army freedom fighter Assata Shakur. They learned from Black political prisoners that there was a Ku Klux Klan chapter that was organizing prison guards at Napanoch State Prison in upstate New York. The campaign to expose organized white supremacy galvanized anti-racist activists in other cities: at its height there were JBAKC chapters in New York, Chicago, the Bay Area, Lexington, Kentucky and Austin, Texas.

In the Bay Area we exposed a Klan-like group called the Cowboys in the Richmond Police Department and were part of the public outcry that forced them to disband. Our most successful campaign in Chicago and the Bay Area was against Nazi skinheads, who were spreading like a cancer in the punk scene. We called it Just Say No to Nazis, and combined analysis (linking the nazi skins or boneheads with their mentors in the White Aryan Resistance and other nazified Klan formations), stickers and stencils to make sloganeering easy, and action campaigns to paint over racist graffiti with our own anti-racist anti-nazi slogans. As part of our anti-nazi skinhead work we got a tip that the boneheads were planning a big concert of racist bands on private property up near Napa. They called it Aryan Woodstock. We mobilized, went before the city council, generally raised a ruckus, including lining the road to the property. We pretty much spoiled their party and enjoyed broad support. A couple of years later we closed down a meeting of a Populist Party leader on Hitler's birthday in Hayward.

JBAKC always believed in militant confrontation and actively opposed the liberal "ignore them and they'll go away" opposition to the Klan and nazi skinheads; we supported the black nation politically and materially (political prisoners Laura Whitehorn, Linda Evans and Marilyn Buck were all members of John Brown at some point in their political lives). We always supported independence for Puerto Rico and a democratic secular state for Palestine.

The Just Say No to Nazis campaign almost turned us into a broader organization, but a combination of our own weaknesses and the times prevented this.

The solidarity strategic model was our strength and our eventual weakness, tied as we were to a section of the Black movement that still exists but has gotten weaker rather than stronger and is regrouping in the south instead of working out a strategy for white solidarity.

Sharon and I had stayed in touch and she recruited me to work with her in an early version of CWS. I was very excited about working to deepen the understanding of white activists about the centrality of white supremacy.

In the 90s our political tendency had to figure out how to continue to support self-determination for communities of color mostly in the absence of leadership from national liberation organizations (except for Puerto Rican independence, where the classical national liberation/solidarity model still applied). At the same time, white reactionaries and their allies of color were looking at the demographics of California and the looming minority status of white people, and waging a massive electoral campaign to mobilize the (still mostly white) electorate to attack people of color, especially immigrants. In 1994, when

Propositions 184 (three strikes) and 187 (anti-immigrant rights) were on the ballot, I helped organize a campaign we called the Immigrant Rights Action Pledge. Prop. 187 called for teachers, social workers, health workers and other gatekeepers to enforce its provisions. So we organized a very successful campaign to mobilize people to promise to refuse to do so, which was a significant factor in educating some white people and was an overt expression of solidarity with immigrant communities.

I've been working as an individual since the 1999 demise of Prairie Fire/Fireworx (its short-lived attempt to transform into something younger and looser), looking for other ways to convey the centrality of white supremacy and the damage it does, including to the souls of white folks. Coming back to a very different and very exciting CWS workshop has been one way. Writing poetry, journalism and fiction is another.