

Interview with Ernesto Aguilar of the Anarchist People of Color (APOC)

The Female Species

28 June 2003

TFS: Who were the founders of the APOC? When was it started?

EA: The anarchist people of color movement has been around for a long time. Martin Sostre is one of the best-known people of color in contemporary history to articulate anarchist politics, as was Kuwasi Balagoon. Today, Ashanti Alston and Lorenzo Komboa Ervin are two of the most visible anti-authoritarians of color, but this movement is decentralized and diverse.

There is no formal APOC organization at this point. In 2001, I founded an email list and website called Anarchist People of Color, and much activity — including the conference — has developed out of them. Getting to that point owes a lot to the past, though.

My involvement was borne out of a few things. Back in the early 1990s, I was part of a Houston anarchist collective called Black Fist, which was active around issues of self-determination, anarchism and race. And I talked with so many other people of color who were, in essence, invisible in the movement. There was a lot of disillusionment out there, and many people I dialogued with just left the anarchist movement completely. By the time Black Fist folded, I had many of the same doubts. Somewhere along the line, I said ‘fuck it’ and tried to link up with other people of color who were fed up, essentially.

TFS: Is the American Anarchist community welcoming to people of color?

EA: My perception is that there are a few different responses to people of color who join up with white-led groups or scenes — whether they’re anarchist or otherwise, they’re pretty much the same.

There are, of course, people who are opponents of anarchist people of color movements and have lots of justifications. These go from totally bananas — ‘you are a bunch of racists’ and such — to very intellectualized nationalism rants. Both are, to me, of such little consequence that they’re not worth the time.

Also, there are people who genuinely respect what we’re doing as organizers. Not a lot, but enough to be memorable. Those are the people who offer solidarity without strings — not to say it is, to use a popular anarchist phrase. ‘uncritical support,’ but is, in reality, backup for the long haul.

The majority of it, I think, is conflicted. Some like the idea because it seems diverse or down, but aren’t digging the sharing of power in scenes. That is a much deeper problem, because it’s

more than race, but people who aren't trying to unlearn the competitive, egocentric relations of the dominant society. They simply like being able to do a protest or meeting or whatever with and among their little subculture of friends and groupies and thinking outside that is too much work. This happens with men and women and in-cliques and out-cliques in white-only circles.

Inserting people of color in the mix brings another dimension most white people battle because 99.9 percent haven't dealt with internalized racism. In essence, equal power is talked about, but many white people aren't actually prepared to share it with the world majority. Why should they? Giving up intoxicating power and influence over others and history is not easy.

Also essential to factor into the internalized racism of whites is the fact that people of color are working through their own internalized racism, although it's completely different. Organizations rarely have a formal space to deconstruct racism and its impact, and the internalized racism for people of color feeds that same issue for whites.

Many white people can't fathom how profoundly white supremacy functions in the lives of people of color because how they are raised to see it is dramatically different.

Consider living in a society where a colonial culture of which you are not a beneficiary is the standard for judging values and behavior. Or that such a society's dominant culture defines reality as white, and convincing said people that it is their reality, the culture of white supremacy, is portrayed as universal, applying to all humankind. Think of education, labor, sport, entertainment, law, economics, politics, war and a host of things you, if you are white, take for granted but know, with some certainty, that treatment will favor you.

Consider being part of a movement that claims to have everyone's interests and true liberation as its prize. Now consider how that movement would make you feel as it adopted comparisons between two sets of experiences — comparing sexism to racism, alienation of whites and bigotry against people of color, or the rights of animals and the right of people to live free of racism, for example — that emphasized similarities and blotted out their unique aspects. Think of how you'd feel as that movement claimed to speak for all people, but in reality, spoke only for some; if that movement said it was "the anti-war movement," but involved, had its meetings, was based in or reached out primarily to those beneficiaries of the colonial culture. Think of how that movement might bother you by justifying its exclusivity by implying non-colonial cultures could not relate to the dominant movement's work, that it was degenerate (sexist/patriarchal, multilingual, etc.) or that they didn't share the dominant's values.

Then think of how one must fight back against the years of misleading stories and lies, only to hear from people who you thought were your comrades but can do nothing but talk about how they understand, or that they feel for you.

Many people of color struggle with a society which uses code words to present us as inferior, denies us our contributions to this society — partly because to do so is implicitly an admission of guilt and partly because, as the slavemasters of old showed, once you strip people of their pasts and positive feelings about themselves, they are easily controlled.

I'm not really certain how to answer that question. 'No' is the short answer, but it's a very complex problem that speaks to bigger issues.

TFS: For good reason the APOC is for people of color only. For those white Anarchists who are still ignorant on the issue, could you give the basic purpose and reason for making APOC for people of color only?

EA: I'll try to paraphrase something on our website about that. The person who complained about it was saying what such folks usually say — we're being separatist and so on.

The decision to make this a people of color-only space is a collective one. We have a right to determine how we dialogue about our experiences, our ideas and aspirations as anarchists of color. Does that mean there needs to be a white list too? Fine by me. There are plenty of those already.

Many people of color feel isolated and intimidated into silence by a movement and want a space where they can speak and not feel like their loyalty to the movement is being questioned by talking about racism. The anarchist movement is the equivalent to Alabama, 1952, if we're talking a United States of consciousness. Most of the attitudes about race are frankly Neanderthal, and it's no wonder so many of us are sometimes embarrassed to be called anarchists.

One Latino comrade I dealt with was told people of color could not support people of color and not be a racist. And he's not alone. I've heard lots of stories of white anarchists who talk trash, I'm sure, solely because they can. It's almost like a challenge. 'Are your loyalties with us — your white comrades, and thus anarchism as a whole, as if that isn't arrogant as hell — or your people and other oppressed people — and thus the 'dark' forces of nationalism and racism.' Completely intellectually retarded shit, but it happens. If the anarchist movement was dealing with the overt and covert racists, the morons, the hippies who think we're all alike and the overaggressive asshole crackers in its scenes — not to mention the lack of political clarity — instead of tolerating it, we'd have a different ballgame.

One of the reasons APOC as a forum exists is because the anarchist movement is a long way from being egalitarian, anti-racist and honest with itself about its history, our history and a means to make real change in real neighborhoods.

I state all this with the disclaimer that I only bother pointing these things out if asked. I'm not particularly interested in persuading a white anarchist who disagrees to see the perspective being articulated. I'm not here to be their teacher, and would expect them to figure it out. When the shit goes down, I know what side I'm on already.

TFS: What should white Anarchists be doing to support the work of Anarchists of color?

EA: Off the top of my head? Read a real history book before opening your mouth. Be ruthless in deconstructing internalized racism. Drop the pretentious attitudes about people of color. Stop blaming us for everything, especially your problems. Help empower people. Get out of white subcultural scenes. Grasp that because your grandparents weren't slave owners or because you might have friends or lovers who were people of color makes no difference in the benefits you enjoy. And see that not as a guilt thing, but a reality thing. Speaking of reality, it is also necessary to start seeing beyond the box society places you in and look at the worlds others live as a function of how race works. Oh, and stop going to classes where white folks talk with other white folks about racism, and start listening to people of color and where we're coming from, then act upon it.

I'd like to see more white anarchists challenge the anti-authoritarian orthodoxy over anarchism and nationalism, and grasp what it's really about. As a teenager, revolutionary nationalism taught me to be proud of who I was, to understand the history taught in schools is history from the perspective of hunters rather than lions, and to see that my people hold low stations in this society not because we were inferior, but because we had been colonized, lynched and miseducated. To me and others politicized by movements of the oppressed, the whole nationalism critique by anarchists doesn't really say anything. It's like most of what we're fed as people of color already — cops have lots of reasons why our organizations are gangs, politicians have

lots of reasons why their border needs to be respected, and anarchists have lots of reasons why being free on our terms is racist. The anarchist critique is so painfully simplistic, I can't believe it's 2003 and people are still having 1980 debates where 'so-and-so is a nationalist' is used as an argument.

I spoke last year at the Anarchist Black Cross Network conference on organizing with communities of color, and something a young white woman said stuck with me because I think other white people think this. It bears repeating because it reflects how deeply woven racism is into the very lives of white folks. She said — and I am paraphrasing a bit — that she volunteered at a Native American center and was regularly treated with suspicion and a little disrespect, by being insulted, as a white woman on a reservation. She asked what she could do. My advice was to get some thick skin and get over it. She didn't like my response. 'How much longer do I need to have thick skin,' was the reply. Though I have told no one until now, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

One of my abuelitas was one of those Mexican cleaning ladies everyone looks right past. Did it for over 35 years. She had no choice but to get some thick skin, because she was treated like 'just a stupid Mexican who couldn't speak English.'

Unspoken in that Native American reservation question, but on a deeper level, was the fact that the choices people of color have are far less generous. We get thick skin or we catch a case. We get thick skin or we lose our jobs. We get thick skin or we get killed. That community in question has probably seen their share of white people come to help and go when their consciences were better off or they were done slumming, but those people of color had no such options. Even if they buy into that whole 'if you pull yourself up by your bootstraps' Protestant work ethic bullshit, the chances they'll end up in the kind of privileged position the white woman is in are slim. Yet, despite the fact Native Americans are justified in being suspicious of another white person coming in to help when the track record of helpful white people ain't exactly great — I shouldn't even need to go there about smallpox and blankets — the whole dialogue and potential to learn some lessons about race in the United States pretty much became about how she could feel better. Sad, but that's what racism has taught all of us from birth.

I think about that white woman sometimes, and I hope the more progressive-minded white people out there can really grasp what this is all about. Ashanti Alston once wrote, "white anarchists: deal with being the best anti-racist allies you can. We need you — and you need us — but we will do this shit without you." I couldn't agree more.

TFS: Does the APOC align itself with any particular forms of Anarchism (anarcho-communism, primitivism, etc)?

EA: The APOC movement is a diverse one. There are as many kinds of perspectives as there are anarchists of color, I assure you! It really surprised me, to be honest. I like to say that we don't have the power or privilege to start dividing up by ideology. We all have different views and respect each other for the most part. We have to — our unity is our strength.

TFS: Where does the APOC stand on the issue of Anarchist organization?

EA: I can't speak for everyone, but I believe we all see the value of being organized. States don't topple on their own and, bottom line, if we aren't organized, our enemies of whatever stripes will be.

There are differing views on the kind of organizing that happens, or whether an organization is best. In my perspective, an organization is helpful if for nothing else but to help a tendency develop its voice.

TFS: Do you feel Anarchist groups in the United States (the NEFAC for example) offer equal opportunities for people of color?

EA: To me, most anarchist groups are reflective of the dominant society, and have thus struggled with addressing race. Not one I am aware of is particularly great at involving or working in solidarity with people of color. Not one. I've been involved with several, which I won't name, and still stand by that assertion.

To me, equal opportunity means many things. To be free from appropriation, or from being objectified or romanticized, is key to equal opportunity as well as full personhood. All stripes of anarchism are at fault here. I'm talking about the types who wax poetic about movements of color, but have no active solidarity campaigns with the community, don't dialogue with those movements, or who are hostile or have no position or actions based on the land, independence, self-determination and the problems affecting our communities, particularly asking our communities how we feel. I'm also referring to those who talk about the history of indigenous people, generally inaccurately, but fail to see that the objectification of indigenous culture is no better what is being wrought today. I could also fault the groupings whose theories about race boil it down purely to black and white and talk primarily about 'confronting fascists' or 'treason to whiteness' rather than active resistance and the roots of white supremacy. No hate intended to anyone named, but let's come correct at least.

I have never been involved with NEFAC specifically so I can't really speak on it. I have talked with many sharp folks in it, and have respect for their standing up for what they believe in. That alone takes courage and should be supported. Although I have criticisms of many movements, I am supportive of people willing to fight this system from the belly of the beast.

TFS: Your conference is coming up. What kind of meetings and workshops are going to be held? Are you expecting a good turnout?

EA: A lot of those items are still in the planning stages. I am hoping to see a good turnout, but want to be realistic. Whatever happens, I think this could be the start of great things in the future.

Recently, there have been claims that people have tried to undermine the upcoming APOC conference. Are these claims true and if so, what has the APOC done to make sure these attempts to undermine the conference are unsuccessful?

I'm less worried about people trying to undermine us and more about building a solid event, trust me.

TFS: Are there any particular books or writers that Anarchists should be reading?

EA: Read writings, particularly those by people of color or about our histories, which challenge your political views and prompt you to evaluate them. Read Che. Read Ho Chi Minh. Read thinkers and ideas that you know little about. Look at it with an open mind, and try to apply what you've learned, or how your current ideas relate to or refute them.

I think it is encouraging that so many anarchists have read about the Black Panther Party, but I am always disappointed to see how little anarchists know about the colonization of the Southwest and treatment of organizers in the occupied territories generally. Rodolfo Acuna's *Occupied America* was written many years ago, but is still a classic. There are, in fact, a lot of great Mexicano writers, like Jose Angel Gutierrez, Reies Lopez Tijerina, Jesus Salvador Trevino and others who talk about our history.

Of course, J. Sakai's *Settlers* is educational. There's always a lot of debate about Sakai, and lots of people question Sakai's take on history, but I think he raises some provocative points.

Most importantly, I think Sakai puts the class-politics line on smash by exposing the role of poor and working-class whites in colonization and genocide. When I first read *Settlers* about 10 years back, that was a big question I had, ‘if this is mainly about ruling class against working class and class war, how was this land taken? Did all the rich Europeans-Spaniards charge into the Aztec nation and exterminate a million people on their own?’ Sakai spells out that working-class and poor whites were active, and oftentimes very enthusiastic, collaborators in colonization and the murder of people of color. I’ve never been a buyer of the working class-solidarity crack pipe — if white workers truly believed that, since they are a majority in the United States, we would live a lot different — but Sakai brings the heat major.

Those who haven’t read the Spear and Shield Collective’s Crossroad newsletter are missing out on some great stuff. Big ups to Hondo from Spear and Shield. He’s a righteous cat. People should also check out Ashanti’s Anarchist Panther zine, which is very tight. And, of course, Lorenzo is coming out with a full edition of *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* later in 2003, and people want to peep that. Union Del Barrio’s newspaper *La Verdad* is great, as is *Guerrillos de la Pluma*. That’s a short list. I am probably missing a lot.

TFS: While some Anarchists are satisfied with merely protesting against the WTO, the war, etc, members of the APOC have stressed community organizing. What kinds of action and organizing should Anarchists be doing?

EA: I don’t want to spend lots of time preaching about this, honestly. My answer is pretty simple: understand what your goals are and how you can accomplish them, involving and politicizing the greatest number of people in as many diverse communities as possible. Before engaging in this exercise, obviously, people will have to throw out all their preconceived notions about tactics and strategy, and really tailor solutions for your community. If there are community groups who are doing positive work, don’t hate. Find ways to unite and build solidarity. There are much smarter folks who have better answers to this. People are welcome to hit me up if they really want to get down on this topic. It’s pretty immense.

TFS: Are there any recent examples of successful Anarchist organizing that we can learn from?

EA: Speaking from a personal bias, as I co-founded the local group, I think Copwatch, when done in a broad way, can be very effective. We mix street tactics with media work and actions normally considered reformist, but keep our politics on point, and I think it’s been very innovative. Houston, Texas, where I live, has had many problems with cops beating up people of color, so this is a solution our communities can get with. It’s essential to keep the politics in command, or else you do, in fact, become a reformist exercise.

TFS: What role did the APOC play in organizing and acting against the war?

EA: We’ve been fighting the war for over 500 years.

TFS: What plans does the APOC have for the future?

EA: Hopefully growth and continued success.

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