

Edited by Dan Berger, Chesá Bonán, and Kanyon Farrow

LETTERS FROM YOUNG ACTIVISTS

"[An] inspiring,
compassionate,
and soulful book."
— ALICE WALKER

TODAY'S REBELS
SPEAK OUT
PREFACE BY BERNARDINE DOHRN

A Letter to the Beautiful People Holding Hands on the Day Nothing Went Down in a Big Way,

I saw you there on the Great Lawn of Central Park, after the Big Day of protest against the Republican National Convention, the "RNC" to those of us in the know. There was a group of you, holding hands. You were white, like me; from the middle class, like me. You were celebrating. I was there trying to ruin the mood. I remember hearing you chant: "We are beautiful! We are beautiful!"

It was a calm and comfortable night. The park was full of revelers, with hardly a cop in sight. The towers of Manhattan stood in dignified repose along the skyline, police helicopters hovering on guard between them. Somewhere to the south, Republican Party delegates arrived at hotels, restaurants, clubs, escort services—apparently you and all the other protestors who had gathered to celebrate had forgotten them already. We never spoke, but I remember you well, because your professions of beauty, frankly, made me sick. You were not unique; on the contrary, I found you memorable because of how well you exemplified a general trend in our ineffective yet self-congratulatory portion of the movement.

After the RNC, we weren't any closer to building accountable and sustaining relationships with other communities in resistance; we hadn't challenged ourselves or confronted our sense of privilege within the movement; we didn't win ground or empower anybody in any meaningful sense; we didn't illustrate the necessity for struggle, or define the struggle as being against anything larger than the Republican Party; we didn't improve our tactical competence vis-à-vis the police (and didn't even injure that many of them); and George W. Bush was still in power—undefeated, neither dethroned nor defenestrated. Other than joining the rough statistic that tomorrow's newspapers would interpret and characterize in whatever way they chose to, exactly what did we accomplish? The RNC protest, and the long line of mass mobilizations to which it is heir, was just voting in the streets.

Admittedly, protesting is a lot more fun than voting. Maybe that's why you were there. To tell the truth, that's why I went to my first protest. That and a healthy but inarticulate desire to see shit go up in flames. It is this desire that we white, middle-class wannabe revolutionaries need to understand and utilize. We do not become active to survive, to soften the crushing weight of oppression, to liberate ourselves from slavery. As privileged people we are on the other side of those societal forces. Rather, I think we see that the privileges being offered to us are poison. Perhaps our entrance into this world coincided with our parents achieving the American Dream, yet the nightmare we awoke to included, for ourselves or our friends, being raped and abused, seeing our fathers beat our mothers, starving ourselves to conform, getting beaten as "faggots" if we didn't fit in, becoming addicted to a hollow televised culture that filled us with insecurities, getting forced into a narrow range of unfulfilling career tracks so we could reenact the hypocrisies of our parents. The nightmare did not include healthy communication and loving relationships, a sense of home or identity stronger than real estate markets or advertising schemes, the freedom to develop our minds and explore our world in the way we see fit, or a community to sustain us.

Our rejection, as wannabe revolutionaries, of the moral depravity of our society's Haves accompanied a growing awareness of the deprivations suffered by the Have-Nots—people of color, poor people, and the colonized peoples of the world. Eventually we made the connection that the wealth and power of the privileged was stolen from the oppressed. Roughly at this point, we became activists working toward revolution. But we can't leave our pasts behind so easily, especially when the conditions of that past continue unobstructed into the present.

Imagine for a moment that activists from privileged backgrounds weren't actually interested in destroying the system that gives them privilege, but simply wanted to amend it (to make the privileges more enjoyable); or at best they sincerely wanted to tear the whole fucking

thing down, but had never taken the time to consider what sacrifices would then be required of them. What would these people look like? They would vocalize their activism without ever backing words up with actions, they would isolate themselves in subcultures to create the appearance that they had rejected their privileges, they would be sure to maintain a privileged sense of comfort in all their activist spaces, and throughout the whole process they would congratulate themselves on their moral superiority. In short, I think they would look like you. Not very beautiful at all, is it?

Maybe now you can better understand my revulsion. Set the scene: the government is pushing ahead with a genocidal war in Iraq, providing continued support for the bloody occupation in Palestine, intervening in Colombia, Haiti, Korea, and a hundred other countries. The normal functioning of our economy utilizes starvation, disease, and genocide as market pressures; calls ecocide productivity; and consigns everyone on the planet to varying degrees of subjugation. White supremacy on the home front flourishes in the form of income gaps, impoverished ghettos, police violence, insatiable prisons, and co-opted cultures. The Religious Right and Hollywood are coming from different sides to bolster patriarchal social relationships that play out in pervasive sexual and domestic violence. Enter the activists. The confrontation billed by the white, middle-class portion of the movement as the big event of the summer ends in a large turnout, political capital to be misused by the Democratic Party, and no measurable headway against any of the aforementioned problems. This is cause for celebration?

For me, it's cause for scrutiny. I think activists from privileged backgrounds need to start asking ourselves some critical questions.

What are we doing to build relationships of integrity across barriers of race, class, and cultural background?

How are we owning up to the problems within our own communities?

How will our actions contribute to changing society in a way that destroys oppression and authority?

What level of commitment is required to be in true solidarity with oppressed peoples?

These four questions are important, to me at least, for a number of reasons. I think it's our responsibility, as middle-class white people, to find out why so many of us are missing from the frontlines of the struggle. There aren't enough of us volunteering at AIDS clinics, organizing fundraisers for battered women's shelters, bombing banks, redistributing stolen groceries in poor communities, tutoring disadvantaged students, enlisting in the military to shoot our officers and encourage mutiny. Instead we gather in the streets every few months in response to the symbolic meeting of some powerful institution, and ask "why is our movement so white?" When we do engage in real organizing, it is typically on our own terms, in organizations we control. We expect oppressed peoples to come to us and follow our lead. How can we expect to even notice all the racism and privilege we have internalized if we never step outside our white, middle-class bubbles? Too many of us who want to change the world can't even leave our comfort zones and build relationships with people from different backgrounds.

A strong movement, if it's not going to be built on party ideologies or institutional hierarchies, has to be built on strong personal relationships, and I don't think we've been very successful on this front. There is too much dishonesty, too much ego, ultimately too much insecurity. Often, activist spaces feel like high school all over again, with everyone trying to get in the cool crowd. It's even hard to talk about these problems, and it certainly doesn't help if we think we have to exemplify beauty and righteousness. I don't think it's beautiful that we're recreating traditional gender roles of domination and control in our activist spaces, or that people who criticize this are characterized as "oversensitive." I don't think it's beautiful that activist men are still raping other activists, and we don't even talk about it that much. With

this level of distrust and alienation, the government doesn't even need to sic some COINTELPRO on us. We will be self-defeating.

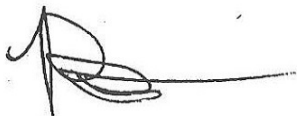
Our idea of action reflects this alienation, along with a fear of giving up our comfort. I don't see many of us white, middle-class activists seriously attempting to either build autonomous social relationships or destroy the existing power structures. Instead, it's protest, protest, protest, and eventually "the people" will rise up, or the state will crumble, or something like that. I guess we're not used to thinking strategically about how to get from Point A to revolution because a real revolution means we lose our comfort. So protesting becomes an end in its own right, and we keep waiting for that magical day when everybody comes out to protest, the cops all quit their jobs, and Bush and Kerry have to admit that they're wrong, apologize, and give up their power. Often, such questions of strategy are circumvented with a moral insistence on nonviolence. But what is violence? Is paying taxes or driving a car really nonviolent? How about demanding rigid adherence to an ethical code that makes us avoid numerous opportunities to stop the war machine? Isn't it a good deal easier to appear nonviolent when we're not the ones facing bombs or billy clubs?

This idea that we can claim solidarity with people who are losing everything, without risking anything ourselves, is what bothers me so much. On college campuses, at vigils, in radical bookstores, during safe and entertaining protests, I see proclamations of solidarity with the Zapatistas, the Iraqis, and others fighting imperialism. How can we actually fool ourselves into thinking that we are aiding people engaged in armed struggle—people faced with bombings, genocide, and occupation—with moments of silence or colorful placards? How can we claim to oppose imperialism when our number one priority is quite clearly to remain safe, as we fail to bring the war home or even admit the existence of the war being waged against people of color and poor people in this country? We will have upheld solidarity with the occupied and colonized people of the world when we've reduced the Pentagon to rubble, when Halliburton is sabotaged into bankruptcy,

and when white people incur real risks in the fight against global oppression.

As long as these problems go unaddressed, I think self-congratulation is premature. These are not egotistic comparisons made to suggest I'm the better activist. What I really want is to see us do our part in building a strong, accountable movement—one that fights to win. As a good friend of mine says, "We need to take ourselves less seriously, and our activism more seriously." Given what we're up against, I have a lot to ask of you. I hope you can ask the same of me.

Stumbling in love and rage toward a solidarity worthy of the name,
Peter Gelderloos



Dear friends,

Somewhere in this process of trying to be better people, we got worse. With all the glory and gore of our ancestors, we dedicated our lives to what we thought was the best solution to undo the racism they brought to and perfected in the United States. And we trained. Like Olympic hopefuls, we trained and as soon as we got trained, we were out training more and more white people committed to be better, for better or worse. I have to give it to us for pure dedication, hard work, and persistence. But if a good work ethic were all it took to eradicate white supremacy, patriarchy, and the class hierarchy, then Protestant Texas farmers would be revolutionary heroes.

So here's the deal—I think we've got some damn fine theory. We have built on the strengths and weaknesses of previous movements. We have, with help from others, developed language around

antioppression. We have created study groups. We have listened to (and sometimes heard) critiques from people of color, friends and colleagues. And we've walked across the room so many times, in a particularly popular exercise, that the carpet is striped.

We work to make our theory and educational methods tight, but our practice stinks. This is not to say that we don't throw a great workshop now and again; however, we fail to connect our theory to solid, sustainable practice. In our impatient, overeager—dare I say, white—ways, we have ignored vision. We do not articulate clear goals, specific connection to ongoing work, or long-term vision for the struggle against white supremacy.

Neglecting vision leads to at least three detrimental effects that we must examine to move forward in more productive ways. One effect is that in our well-intentioned efforts to dismantle our racism, we play dangerous status games that tear apart communities and diminish our compassion for people. Antiracist work is not an identity. It is a set of principles to which we should hold ourselves accountable, not add-on trophies that only rebels and freaks get to wear. White folks committed to this work should be expected to integrate antioppression principles and practices into their work whether they be teachers, organizers, health care workers, or mothers. Another effect of our short-sightedness is that liberals have adopted the language of antioppression. Our goals include shifting folks from a personal analysis to an institutional critique, but "politically correct" and overtly un-political trainings sweep the nation and undermine the work we do. Finally, we spend an inordinate amount of time mobilizing and falling apart, mobilizing and falling apart. We need that time, energy, and talent to create real strategies that target white supremacy in meaningful ways. We stand at a significant crossroads where we can integrate antiracist and anti oppression work into a broader movement for justice, or we can continue to spin in circles until the principles themselves become overused and, ultimately, dismissed. Eliminating ego competition, developing clear

goals and vision, and putting ourselves to work beyond the trainings is essential to stay true to the principles and analysis we have bravely put forward.

When I say “we,” I am talking about progressive white folks who hold the principles of antiracism and antioppression central to our work. I speak, specifically, from my experience in white queer communities of predominantly twenty-to-thirty-something folks. If pressed, we articulate our politics as anti-capitalist, and we work in a wide variety of issues for the radical transformation of the existing systems. Our work includes organizing against the prison industrial complex and international solidarity work with Palestine and Latin America. We work as teachers on the inside and organizers on the outside of the education system. We have experienced the good, bad, and ugly of the global justice movement. We have organized in affinity group structures and experienced a glimpse of powerful direct democracy and direct action. And we have challenged the lack of reflection and evaluation in antiglobalization efforts, sometimes at the expense of our participation. We work on gender issues from the perspective of the emerging transgender movement. We work as community-based organizers, we stand in solidarity with people of color-led economic and social justice formations, and we struggle with what our role should be within our communities and the movement.

I am talking to folks who appreciate and use the antioppression framework but who feel stuck and don’t know what to do next. I am talking to white folks who take this work seriously and want to find ways to do our work better. I’ve made all the mistakes I mention, and this letter offers some ideas about why we got to this moment in order to see and work our way to a new one.

The kind of questions that I kick around with coworkers, colleagues, and white caucus facilitators: Have you ever felt like you’re not antiracist enough? Have you ever patted yourself on the back for being the best antiracist in the room? Have you ever kicked someone out of a group for not speaking the right language about racism? Have you

ever judged someone as “fucked up” and let everyone know it—maybe even before you’ve met the person?

Status games do not dismantle racism. They do, however, alienate potential allies and discourage people who are working to understand complicated positions in the world. These dangerous dynamics emerge because our practice has not caught up with our theories. At the trainings, we say the work doesn’t end here. We say we need to be flexible and meet people where they’re at. But then we walk around like we wear some badge that separates us from whites who haven’t gone through the right training. We’d like to believe that if we distance ourselves from white people who don’t know the deal, we’ll shed a bit of our skin as our contribution to the movement. Judging each other and hoping to win a medal from an auditorium of people of color advisors is just a different kind of racism that keeps white people at the center of debate and action.

We dismantle our power at the same time as we dismantle our racism. We organize ourselves into working groups, affinity clusters, and align ourselves loosely to networks and coalitions. These alliances and formations often fall apart, for many reasons, one being that we are not building organizations with purposes, constituencies, and visions. We are not building for community power. The formations come together to figure out how to be allies but our privilege allows us to be flippant, mobile, and temporary. We allow internal conflict to dominate because we don’t rely on strategy to move the group forward. I’ve been part of this dynamic and have seen it play out numerous times in different parts of the country. If it’s not an isolated event, then let’s examine the process, call out the flaws, and change the model. If we don’t know how to build long-term power or organize our communities, let’s admit our shortcomings and ask for help. If we join together solely on the basis of being antiracist white people, we will falter unless there is a specific organizing effort that connects to our analysis.

We’ve substituted workshops for work. We did not anticipate the liberal co-opting of antiracist work, and we created a pattern that

does not address the roots of the issues. We started community workshops as a form of damage control. Our groups got called out by communities of color, we got called out by friends or colleagues, or racist comments were made in large group settings. And so a pattern is born: if there's a problem, organize a workshop.

We know we can't solve the problem with a workshop, but we don't often lay out the following steps. That's an easy pattern to duplicate. Having trouble in your office? Racism rearing its predictable head in the panel choices of your conference? Hire a workshop where the "melting pot" metaphor is enthusiastically replaced with the "tossed salad" approach and be done with it. This is not what we intended, but this is what has happened. When folks with broader notions of systemic change don't articulate our goals, then simpler goals dominate. The terrain is set for conference organizers to include antiracism trainings like they have to include snacks at eleven. Damage control, often only the whispered prayer that people of color will not call us out this time, is the beginning and end of a lot of work that is labeled antiracism. We're facing the unintended consequences of antiracist curriculum that has become more about personal healing than identifying and removing the institutional and societal tumor. We've got to develop new curriculum that inherently connects to ongoing work and stimulates innovative solutions.

Here in Atlanta, I had the honor of hearing Anne Braden, a Southern white woman who has worked for racial justice since the 1940s, give a short lecture. In her deceptively sweet Kentucky accent, she stated, "Racial justice remains a priority for our movement. However, I do not see an effective counteroffensive against white supremacy in this country." I was ready to be challenged, but I was not prepared to get run over. Counteroffensive? Who talks like that? In all the conversations I've had about racism and white supremacy, we have never framed the discussion in terms of real action campaigns targeting specific power holders and forcing them to loosen their grips on the mechanisms of that power. We often stand in solidarity with struggles

that affect people of color, as does Ms. Braden. But she is calling for a kind of action that is deliberate and strategic. I hear a challenge to organize against institutions and structures of oppression rather than merely responding to oppressive behavior.

I don't think Anne Braden would be that impressed with our razor sharp ability to call people out in meetings. I think she is more interested in the content and focus of the meeting and what we do in between and after them. Is our organizing effort addressing the root causes of white supremacy? Are we building organizations to confront institutions and transform the current patterns? The runaway workshop train is not getting us where we want to go. In the next breath, I must add that we don't know where we want to go. Here's where vision comes in.

Let's imagine tangible work where our position is clear and we are not in constant conflict about whether or not we should be there. We've got to think bigger than we have. Listening and talking to white folks who have struggled in the movement for many years shines a bright light on the limitations of our thinking. All who struggle for liberation face the difficulty of strategy and tactics. Our identities and privileges shape how and where and why we struggle, but it does not confine white people to some dungeon of antioppression trainings for eternity.

Vision work is difficult. The primary questions are: Why are we doing this? What will the world look like in ten years as a result of the work we are doing today? Not like answering a question for a grant application, but real heart-wrenching conversations that unearth the true intentions and concrete realities we are working to create. In my work at Project South, a movement-building organization in Atlanta that uses popular education to strengthen organizing and leadership, we ask people these questions all the time. Project South does not put forward a specific vision, just like I don't have a clear vision to put forward here. I trust us to do this work in groups, to discuss and clarify our ideas and dreams. Letting go of our egos or the need to be the one who came up with the best proposal is a piece of antiracist work. There are models

of work that hold antiracism as a guiding principle and confront white supremacy head on. Let's learn from what we've done and what others are doing in order to forge our own solid paths.

Let's put aside the guilt, paralysis, and policing games and discuss our next steps. Let's create spaces for people to have these larger, comprehensive discussions of purpose, vision and active solidarity. Let's build on our work and our analysis rather than repeat the same ideas over and over. It's about stepping up to leadership and getting out of the way at the same time, so that people of color have the space to lead without additional obstacles. The challenge is to put our principles into practice—we have to toss around a lot of ideas, try a lot of things before we discover tight models that build on the momentum of the current moment. So, let's get started.

I want us to be excited about our work. I have a hunch that all the back-stabbing and social patrolling comes from a deep sense of insecurity that we know that something's wrong and we're not doing the right things to handle it. I think digging a little deeper, listening to all generations, defining a coherent and tangible vision of what we're fighting for, and building long-haul organizations rooted in the community will allow our creativity, passion, and skills to support a broader movement for real justice.

I write this letter because I believe in us. I write because we are a part of the emerging leadership of our generation, and we stand on the edge of a critical moment. Let's be frank and honest, discuss and expose the conflicts within our political perspectives, challenge each other compassionately, and create a stronger, more lasting framework to match our commitment and imagination.

Love,
Steph G.



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LETTERS ON THE WAR ON TERRORISM

Matan Kaminer
"Open Detention"
Tel Hashomer Camp, Israel

August 12, 2003

Dear Stephen,

Is this what they call "globalization"? We live half a world from each other, we have led quite different lives, and yet we are both in the same situation: conscientious objectors to imperial war and occupation, we are both standing military trial this summer. Reading your statement, I couldn't help but smile at the basic sameness of military logic around the world, including its inability to understand how anybody could be enough against a war to resist going to kill and die in it.

In case you aren't familiar with my situation, let me fill you in briefly. I was slated for induction into the Israeli army in December 2002. After a year of volunteer work in a Jewish-Arab youth movement, I had made up my mind to refuse to enlist. Together with other young