

Anything But White

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This essay grew like Tennessee weeds out of the animated discussions the Fifth Estate collective members have been having about the topics related to our issue’s theme. Part memoir, part meditation, part rant—the following concerns itself primarily with two threads within a much larger debate (one that I speculate mirrors similar exchanges in other radical communities). I begin by discussing my personal struggle with and against identity, particularly as it relates to the debates around cultural appropriation. In the second section, I address the larger question of race itself within radical movements and further explain why I choose not to identify as white. While I’ve written this essay with other Euro-American activists in mind, I trust that the content has implications for all.

From wannabe to revolutionary?

Where do white radicals draw the line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation? To explain my relationship with this controversy, I turn to the roots of my rebellion in racially diverse communities in the 1970s and 80s. Because I went to school in integrated communities, exposure to African-American culture compelled me to identify outside the mainstream of white, capitalist culture.

Put bluntly, I longed to be black; I was a wannabe engaging in cultural appropriation before I learned the concept. Romanticizing cultural imperialism did not occur to me as a preteen: I was not trying to steal another’s identity but rather forge my own in a spirit of friendship. At a time when some of my white friends were discovering popular music through stadium rock and carnivalesque metal, I was drawn to black culture by its sounds, spirit, and poetry. Funk and disco fueled me. Later, it would be hip hop, reggae, and gospel. Alongside my immersion in black music, I studied history through the lens of liberation from slavery and racism with an emphasis on the theory, oratory, and legacy of civil rights leaders and black nationalists.

Nurturing revolutionary inclinations, exploring the boundaries of cultural identity, enjoying diverse influences—this work became political in nature and found expression while I protested against various manifestations of apartheid systems. Thanks to the influence of thinkers like James Baldwin, I began to understand the insurrectionary nexus where race, class, sexuality, and spirit intersect. Painfully, I learned that most white people did not share my sympathies and solidarities.

As a teenager, I did not yet see how racism worked hand-in-hand with capitalism to maintain a caste system a century after slavery. Moving to inner-city Detroit at age twenty, my theory of solidarity got a cold gust of reality in abandoned buildings, soup-lines, and urine-soaked alleys.

Today, cultural appropriation generally refers to theft of elements such as art, ritual, and ways of knowledge from a distinct culture that is not one’s own. Usually, it refers to theft from indigenous communities and communities of color by members of the white or dominant culture. Most often, activists use the concept to point out cultural insensitivity on the part of white people who engage in “native American ritual” or who sell books, crystals, and ritual objects in New Age boutiques; sometimes, this critique extends to white kids with dreads and baggy pants

who play African drums and listen to lots of reggae, dub, and hip-hop. While I grasp the political problem, cultural appropriation always has a personal edge for me since I gravitate towards lots of ideas outside white European culture. In reading American history, if I identify with any of my settler ancestors, it's the ones who abandoned the imperialist project and made common cause with slaves and servants, pirates and natives.

The most blatant forms of mockery can be seen in the sham of the plastic shaman, the new age medicine man, the postmodern pipe carrier. Even worse are the pharmaceutical gangsters stealing medicine from the rainforest and the predatory tourists pillaging art from indigenous people to make obscene profits.

But how does this debate play out within radical subcultures where relationships by definition should be more horizontal? To supersede the difference between cultural contempt and consensual commingling, creative rebels should endorse a visionary ideal of sharing and solidarity and resist when this notion is crudely co-opted by corporations and charlatans. In this, it's imperative to distinguish between blatant forms of insensitive folly and sensitive passions for variety and diversity.

For many, the process gets problematic. If white people rightly refuse to identify with bland, white-bread, suburban blab and the whole cultural project of European colonialism, to where should we 'turn'? Is it possible to participate in non-white cultures and subcultures without taking or diluting? Should we advocate an anarchist subculture that merges, blends, and learns in solidarity with other communities, movements, milieus?

For one thing, it's too soon to stop educating each other about the legacies of American slavery and genocide, to stop learning the stories of people who endured the humiliation of servitude or who walked the trails of tears and broken treaties. It's too soon to overlook the race and class wars that contain whole communities from the neighborhood to the reservation to the prison industrial complex. Rather than erase or ignore, white radicals should replace guilt with responsibility and radical consciousness.

Cultural appropriation reminds us of the bitter legacy of conquest and its discussion can make us uncomfortable and defensive. Historically, it's the very people who lived communally on the land and without property who have had their community destroyed, their land raped, and their "property" stolen. To acknowledge this past and prevent its perpetuation requires studying the roots of the gift economy that for centuries preceded the commodity economy.

Ironically, some of the arguments against cultural appropriation follow the same logic of property that created the category of offense. Basically, this comes in the form of victimized groups using the legal system and capitalist logic to get some form of literal payback for past (or present) cultural theft. It's one thing to demand reparations from states and corporations (who doesn't want them to go broke?); it's another entirely to locate the problem in alternative communities filled with alienated seekers after a truth deeper than that found in the United Church of Wal-Mart.

For decades, I've been learning the anarchist ethic of anti-copyright and the notion that poems, art, 'zines, and songs are to be shared not owned. If the goal of cultural appropriation is enlightenment and pleasure—not profit: If the practitioner doesn't claim indigenous expertise or work for a sleazy corporation, then perhaps it's approaching an ethical appreciation that would extend and defend the desires and demands of oppressed peoples. It should be possible to expand tangible expressions of solidarity and community without abandoning an anti-capitalist, sampled-and-downloaded, free-box, urban pirate, food-not-bombs way of being. Culture as commodity is not a concept to be defended by radicals but rather one we should subvert at every turn.

In writing, thinking, and agitating beyond racism and capitalism, it's possible and necessary to envision a language of solidarity and respect that doesn't endorse a return to essentialism: black is this; white is that. Essentialism can often revert to an ethnic-based neoconservatism. Mix this with capital and see the wheel turn from revolution to reaction. Commerce taints anything it touches, and no radical force can remain radical inside the marketplace.

From privileged white boy to hybrid human

If white people are serious about being revolutionaries, they need to be serious about unlearning, rejecting, and abandoning their whiteness. White people must accept the end of the white race while working to end racism, abolish the construct of race entirely, and forge a free humanity. The abolitionist project of the twenty-first cen-

tury asks white people for unilateral and universal race and class suicide. Since the planet cannot sustain white supremacy or white privilege, people might finally turn to what writer Paul Gilroy, calls a “planetary humanism.”

Over the last decade’s, thinkers, writers, and innovators have repeatedly reminded us that race is a fiction, a construct, a cultural invention created by those in power to maintain power. Biologically fallacious and intellectually in flux, race functions as a political tool of the elite to maintain the racist power structure that at the same time benefits from the perceived invisibility of race.

Recognizing the fallacy of race itself does not mean people should endorse the conservative crusade for color-blindness currently attempting to ravage modest gains for racial justice fought for by the civil rights movement. The right-wing movement is not abolitionist but revisionist, taking the revolutionary kernel out of Dr. King’s dream to feed slippery rhetoric to the preservation of the current nightmare. Charges of “reverse racism” disparage those who battle against institutional racism everyday.

One should not extend the critique of race and the rejection of whiteness to include the end of blackness. Identity politics for people of color are often political (as much as ethnic) and embraced as part of a larger resistance movement. However, at the extremes, explicitly racial ideologies rest on conservative and reactionary logic. Learning from the failures of nationalism, many radical people of color continue to articulate anti-authoritarian, internationalist, and humanist visions for the future. (FE note: Please see Ashanti Alston’s “One Journey into and out of the Anarchist...BLACK” and the other articles in this issue about the Anarchist People of Color movement.)

The deconstruction of whiteness should be a voluntary act for revolutionary persons of European descent. In this process, white people will still be perceived as privileged. Even if I reject some benefits of being white, refuse climbing the ladder with my privilege, and embrace a lower-impact lifestyle, I—am still a white man in America.

Rather than argue that “I am oppressed, too,” I will share my resources with others and use what privilege remains to fight for justice: Specifically for me, that translates into living communally, sharing my income with comrades, and speaking out against inequality wherever I am. Becoming aware of the advantages others afford me because of my gender and race should be about taking responsibility as opposed to wallowing in stereotypically white guilt.

On this journey, people can embrace genuine solidarity, horizontal multiculturalism, hopeful theory, transcultural counterculture, and bold activism. What does that look like? To me, it begins with an emerging and percolating precision of unique songs, narratives, and insurrections grafted from the grit of the city and remembered from the mysteries of the wild, a panculturalism that looks beyond the fantasies of global capitalism. Can I live with and without culture, inside a polyglot patois, a hybrid human, refusing the melting pot and hastening the imperial meltdown?

Tangible tastes of this momentum are tentative, fierce, and hardly universal. While identity politics surfaced strongly in the last century to reject any notion of a mythic proletariat rising up against the monolithic Man, getting past identity politics does not necessarily mean reviving hardened leftisms that ignore gender, race, and difference to romanticize a heroic, singular, and neutered struggle.

With all the race treason and post-racial theorizing of the last decade, one thing the rhetoric lacks is a variety of tangible examples of how post-white race traitors might live day-to-day. For the liberal and leftist white activists of the late 50s and early 60s who gave their lives in solidarity with civil rights campaigns, being a race traitor was born in struggle, with some of our mentors paying the highest price. Today, the daily activities of race traitors vary widely, and for some, claiming to be a race traitor has no overt, tangible manifestation. Anyone ready to ditch whiteness for a life as a person might make her own list of what to do.

However, this is just the beginning; it’s not, like, “Hey man, I gave up my white privilege, so what are you bitchin’ about?” Oppressed peoples still have plenty of valid complaints.

Peoples everywhere stand to gain from the end of whiteness and the beginning of humanity.

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