

Puppets, Pageantry and Protest Politics

White People and the Anti-War Movement

by Tiffany King

Reflecting on my own participation as a person of color in the 2003 protest marches of the anti-war movement, I am now aware my presence is being manipulated and abused. I have been rendered a puppet for white liberal pageantry. Any time I have attended a march I find I subject myself to objectification, marginalization and exploitation. Beyond the personal offenses I have incurred, I now truly believe the presence of people of color in anti-war and other so called "global justice" protest marches led and organized by whites legitimizes tactics that undermine a true pursuit for justice.

On February 15, 2003 grappling with my own frustration, anger and feelings of impotency as our country charged towards war; I attended a protest march. The march was organized by the usual suspects, A.N.S.W.E.R, Not in Our Name, Unite for Peace and Justice and the other white led coalitions here in Philly. As the Bush Administration moved closer and closer to dropping the first bombs on Iraq, I caved in and decided I had to go regardless of who organized this thing. I thought to myself, that if there was ever a time to momentarily get over the racism of the white left and past scars from previous interactions, it was now.

My justification for my attendance was we were facing war, and at least the

illusion of a collective and unified voice would be "more powerful" than the efforts of isolated communities of color or my own for that matter. In that moment, I had just given into white supremacist systems of domination. White supremacy asserts its own agenda by absorbing, subverting and negating any dissent and resistance to its domination. The structures of white supremacy demand submission by professing to be both the norm and alternative.

In the book, *Black Anti-Ballistic Missives*, activist, author and poet Ewuare Osayande argues white supremacy is the critical component that the anti-war movement fails to address, thus rendering it irrelevant. The racist anti-war movement is devoid of any self-critical process to acknowledge or address how white supremacy contributes to the oppression of people of color within the movement, so how could it possibly have an analysis of how white supremacy oppresses people of color around the world?

Given the reality the anti-war movement does not address white supremacy, it is to be expected that people of color would be objectified and exploited at one of its protest marches. On February 15, the people of color contingency I attended the march with decided to create a feeder march that would join the larger march on Broad Street. I assume this was an attempt to empower the POC who would be participating that day. We would temporarily march on our own terms, citing white supremacist imperialism as the true evil. Momentarily, I had the feeling that we would reclaim the political act of protest as a relevant and meaningful tool used by self-determining people of color around the world who have and continue to resist white supremacist imperialism. Yet I realized once I got to the march that this would not be possible.

We would chant Black, Latino, Muslim, Asian and... so forth to evoke a feeling of camaraderie and equal partnership. Yet the unequal distribution of power and privilege amongst people of color, which played a part in determining the convening groups ability to organize this very effort, staved

us in the face and was left unaddressed. Still, we feigned a content and empowered united front and proceeded to Broad Street to meet up with the rest of the protestors.

As soon as we approached the sea of white folks and they became aware of our presence we became a sideshow. White people started to clap and cheer as if we were the long awaited people of color parade float they could awe and point at. They appreciated our presence and danced to our drumming as long as we were their entertainment. However, as soon as members of the contingency started to pick up our bullhorns and speak to the white supremacist imperialism that murdered people of color they became offended. We were suddenly the recipients of annoyed stares, shushes and interruptions because we were talking over the "slated" speakers.

We kept on speaking, however our attempts to define and adhere to our own agenda did nothing. We did not create self-determining space that would allow our particular analysis of the war and white supremacy, as the global terrorist, to challenge the shallow, racist analysis of the white activists and organizers. We were not even able to make the white folks aware of their own racism at the protest itself. We became a pawn, a mere prop, one of those larger than life puppets (often rendered to depict oppressed people of color) that white groups make for "protests."

I don't know how many times I saw and heard white people look at us and say... "It's sooo good to finally see some color here." I could see them patting themselves on the back for the good work they had done to reach out to people of color and educate us or make us feel welcome to join them.

Our presence only legitimized the work of whites, which is to stay in positions of power and control the discourse, action and direction of so called progressive politics. By participating we allow them to delude themselves that, 1) their particular analysis of the war and imperialism is a legitimate one and 2) the power and resources at their disposal to lead "social change" movements are legitimately earned. Our presence at the march made the

statement that we support the white supremacy of the left.

Many non-white critics of white leadership within the "global justice movement" have challenged the analysis of whites who have reframed and distorted issues of justice. Whites conveniently impose an anachronistic time period on imperialism, with a NAFTA obsessed political analysis, that places the start of multinational corporate imperialism in the early 1990s. Whites on the left also relegate the issue of accountability and blame to that of the corruption of a select few corporate executives and their Washington DC cronies. They conveniently ignore their own culpability in reinforcing systems of white supremacist capitalist imperialism.

I actually heard white people saying things like, "We're all French now" and "Long live the French." How can a credible and legitimate global justice movement congratulate a country that actively engages in the white supremacist, imperialist exploitation of people of color all over the globe? French multinational corporate monopolies are currently fueling conflict and repression in the Ivory Coast and West Africa. The French are white supremacist imperialists just like the U.S. The tyranny of France's white supremacist imperialism is a present day political reality people of color all around the world are suffering under and resisting. This lack of analysis of French imperialism and global repression is lost because of the racist analysis of the white leadership that dominates the current "global justice movement."

In the past, like many others, I would be inclined to engage in the ongoing discussions of *Where was the Color in/at...*, in order to try and address the lack of participation/leadership by people of color at anti-globalization marches and other mass mobilizations. So often these discussions lack a sound analysis of the structures of white supremacy and its' impact on why mass mobilizations look the way they look. These arguments frequently end up placing the burden on people of color to explain why they are not present at an event or protest. In her introduction to the essay *Where's the Revolution? Part II*, activist and author, Barbara Smith cri-

tiques the racism of so-called "progressive" movements in general and the LGBT movement specifically. In speaking about the state of progressive movements in general, she states, "Thanks to racism and elitism, progressive people of color are barely allowed to share movement leadership, let alone control it. Rest assured if we did get to decide movement agendas, they would be a lot different from what they are now." (Smith, 1998)

Some people of color are challenging white leadership in the global justice movement by acknowledging people of color need to organize on their own terms without the presence of whites and then bring our own platform from the margins of the global justice movement to the center. People of color are absolutely right that we need to organize ourselves on our own terms without whites. However, when we come back to the table have we done anymore to challenge the power structure that marginalizes us? This strategy was attempted on February 15 at the anti-war demonstration in Philly, but as people of color we still found ourselves marginalized and exploited.

An even better example of how the racist power structure of the white left marginalizes and then kills acts of self-determination is the more recent October 25, 2003 Anti-War March. As early as summer of 2002, Black Voices for Peace, The Black Radical Congress and other people of color led organizations were planning a Black led mobilization in October of 2003 to resist the war in Iraq before the first bombs even dropped. There was no mention of A.N.S.W.E.R. or any other majority white groups playing even a supporting role in the effort. This Black led mobilization which was acknowledged by the White left almost from its inception interestingly enough would be reduced to a feeder march and side show for the larger mass mobilization orchestrated by A.N.S.W.E.R. The Black March for Peace became a mere "feeder" march that ended up feeding into the white supremacy of the White Left.

I am no longer frustrated or disturbed by the often failed attempts to mobilize Black people and people of color in the numbers that white people

are mobilized for protest marches. We need to begin to question the value and relevancy of the protest march for people of color, particularly as they are currently conceived and organized. The protest march has become nothing more than a vapid cultural product of the White Left used solely as a means to attract media attention and funding to sustain its elitism and racism. I struggle less and less with answering the question of "Where are the People of Color?"

Ewuare Osayande, who I have cited earlier, has offered an alternative view on the question of where people of color are in the anti-war and "global justice" movements. "White people will start to see people of color when white people start doing the work that people of color have always been doing. The question people of color ask is: Where are the white people?"

White privilege so often positions whites outside of the very oppression that they speak about resisting. Revolutionary movements do not willingly permit oppressors or collaborators to lead movement struggle. White leadership in the anti-war movement has resulted in the development of an analysis and tactics that are far removed from the daily reality and revolutionary struggles of oppressed people of color. The racist analysis and the misguided tactics of the White left have resulted in exploitative "protest art" inspired by a vicarious objectification of the lives of oppressed people of color and shallow symbolic media events like the protest march/pageant.

Oppressed people of color, on the other hand, are engaged in daily acts of resistance that appropriately place white supremacy at the root of injustice. This work is being done on the margins in communities of color, without the prodding of the white left or in front of the glare of media cameras. This work is rarely ever acknowledged or is more often dismissed by the white left as not being real "social change." People of color who have a clear commitment to resisting all white supremacist systems of domination will not be found organizing protest pageantry and they will definitely not be featured as the premiere puppets of these spectacles.