

The Final Straw Radio: Interview with Mutt on the (Incomplete) Black Autonomy Reader

Reflection Questions:

- How does tokenization of Black comrades show up in your spaces? How do you respond to this / engage in it / think about it?
- How do you talk about racial identity / "racial politics"? Who do you talk about it with, and when?

TFSR: Can you talk a bit about the definition of Black anarchism or Black autonomy that you're working with, in choosing the pieces for this reader, and who some of the thinkers are that listeners may be familiar with in this genealogy?

Mutt: Okay. So the definition I've been using myself is, I really like Ashanti Alston's one. It's part of why I shoved it in the front of the book. The way he points out that Black culture has always been oppositional and is always trying to find new, creative ways to resist oppression. When he talks about Black anarchism, he's not tying it to his race, because he's a Black man. He's talking about how he behaves with who he is as a person. I really like that. I really like the idea of a Black anarchism that isn't just anarchists who happen to be Black. It's to do with anarchists who are consciously Black, and they're choosing to take on racial politics. A lot of my time as an activist, I refused to talk about race. I feel strange to admit this on recording, but for a lot of the time I was kind of anxious that I'd upset people, that I'd have really uncomfortable conversations through that, that I'd end up dominating space by being really loud, vocal, you know, like disrupting the sort of very white ecosystem I was involved with.

TFSR: The angry Black person trope?

Mutt: That's literally it. And that's the thing. I was involved in a very short lived Black anarchist project and the way it came to be was this awkward hostile takeover of a Facebook group. Which was kind of embarrassing. At the same time it's a thing where, because of how de-racialized British anarchist politics can be, people are often scared to critique people who are different races than them, or to engage with their politics at all. You can notice it. I've noticed things where I've mentioned something about race and all my white friends, just stop talking and look at me funny. And I'm like "Guys, you're allowed to have opinions." It is really odd, and I think it stems from both people's fear of stepping on toes and offending people, but also people's unwillingness to engage with their own whiteness, and engage with the world around them. We're all acting in solidarity with refugees and immigrants, most of whom aren't white and the idea that we can't talk about race is very strange. It means that a lot of people who do talk about these things, get the added pressure of having to become the representative voice of their entire culture. I've been to post-demonstration debriefings, and I've been

personally asked “Why didn’t BLM turn up?” as if I’d have the answer. It’s awkward. A lot of people, because of that, they drop out, or they just stop talking race completely, which is what I did for a long time.

[...]

Mutt: "For me, anti-fascism, I take after JoNina Ervin’s way of looking at it, where she says, I’ve got the quote written here: “Anti-fascism has to deal with the impact of State authoritarianism on people’s everyday lives. It can’t be centered around just going out on a particular day to counter-demonstrate against the neo-Nazis or the Klan. You have to have an ongoing program to deal with the impact of this kind of authoritarian control on people’s lives, and in terms of police terror and State repression.”

June Jordan on Israel and Lebanon: A Response to Adrienne Rich
and
Moving Towards Life

Reflection Questions

- What does Jordan's concept of taking responsibility for the people that you claim look like, for you?
- How do you think about accountability for impact that you have by nature of identities you didn't choose?

I now respond: I claim responsibility for the Israeli crimes against humanity, because I am an American and American monies made these atrocities possible. I claim responsibility for Sabra and Shatila, because, clearly, I have not done enough to halt heinous episodes of holocaust and genocide around the globe. I accept this responsibility, and I work for the day when I may help to save any one other life, in fact.

I believe that you cannot claim a people and not assume responsibility for what that people do or don't do. You cannot claim to be human and not assume responsibility for the value of all human life.

LARB

However, many people do not know that Lorde's critique of the Israeli occupation and her brief assertion of Palestinian rights in this speech were not a constant feature of her life and activism.

Lorde's journey to a pro-Palestine stance was slow and halting. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Lorde describes her youthful optimism about the creation of Israel: "[T]he state of Israel represented a newly born hope for human dignity." That youthful optimism shouldn't be surprising: in 1948, Lorde was only 14 and a student at Hunter College High School, where she was surrounded by young, eager, newly formed Zionists. It was, in fact, her friendships that shaped the way she thought about the issue for the rest of her life. By 1982, she was being pushed by a conflicting set of forces. Strongly on the Palestinian side was Lorde's fellow poet June Jordan. Lorde and Jordan had a lot in common: both women were Black queer feminists born to West Indian immigrants in New York, and both were former professors in the City University of New York system. Both would eventually die of breast cancer. Until 1982, Jordan and Lorde were warm acquaintances, as well as colleagues and interlocutors; they shared political

alignment on many issues relating to race and gender. But Jordan's last written words to Lorde, after an extensive epistolary disagreement over Zionism, were "You have behaved in a wrong and cowardly fashion. That is your responsibility. May you [...] live well with that."

Selma James, Sex, Race, and Class

Reflection Questions

- How do you think about integrating the personal and political layers of struggling against state power, authoritarianism, and violent structures like white supremacy & anti-Blackness in your daily life and in your political projects?
- What are some patterns of radical scene culture that go unnamed but influence projects for the worse?

"Let's put the relation of caste to class another way. The word "culture" is often used to show that class concepts are narrow, philistine, inhuman. Exactly the opposite is the case. A national culture which has evolved over decades or centuries may appear to deny that society's relation to international capitalism. It is a subject too wide to go into deeply here but one basic point can be quickly clarified.

The life-style unique to themselves which a people develop once they are enmeshed by capitalism, in response to and in rebellion against it, cannot be understood at all except as the totality of their capitalist lives. To delimit culture is to reduce it to a decoration of daily life. Culture is plays and poetry about the exploited; ceasing to wear mini-skirts and taking to trousers instead; the clash between the soul of Black Baptism and the guilt and sin of white Protestantism. Culture is also the shrill of the alarm clock that rings at 6a.m. when a Black woman in London wakes her children to get them ready for the baby minder. Culture is how cold she feels at the bus stop and then how hot in the crowded bus. Culture is how you feel on Monday morning at eight when you clock in, wishing it was Friday, wishing your life away. Culture is the speed of the line or the weight and smell of dirty hospital sheets, and you meanwhile thinking what to make for tea that night. Culture is making the tea while your man watches the news on the telly.

And culture is an "irrational woman" walking out of the kitchen into the sitting room and without a word turning off the telly "for no reason at all."

From where does this culture spring which is so different from a man's if you are a woman and different too from a white woman's if you are a Black woman? Is it auxiliary to the class struggle (as the white Left has it) or is it more fundamental to the class struggle (as Black nationalists and radical feminists have it) because it is special to your sex, your race, your age, your nationality and the moment in time when you are these things?"

[...]

"The parallels that are drawn between the Black and women's movements can always turn into an 11-plus: who is more exploited? Our purpose here is not parallels. We are seeking to describe that complex interweaving of forces which is the working class; we are seeking to break down the power relations among us on which is based the hierarchical rule of international capital. For no man can represent us as women any more than whites can speak about and themselves end the Black experience. Nor do we seek to convince men of our feminism. Ultimately they will be "convinced" by our power. We offer them what we offer the most privileged women: power over their enemies. The price is an end to their privilege over us."

[...]

"How the working class will ultimately unite organizationally, we don't know. We do know that up to now many of us have been told to forget our own needs in some wider interest which was never wide enough to include us. And so we have learnt by bitter experience that nothing unified and revolutionary will be formed until each section of the exploited will have made its own autonomous power felt."