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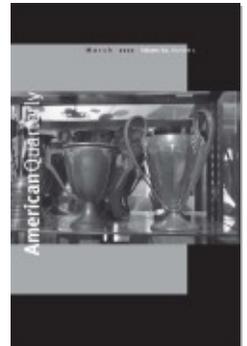
## **The Ballot Box and Beyond: The (Im)Possibilities of White Antiracist Organizing**

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# The Ballot Box and Beyond: The (Im)Possibilities of White Antiracist Organizing

*Jeb Aram Middlebrook*

It must be offered that white people who desire change in this country should go where that problem (racism) is most manifest . . . white people should go into white communities.

—Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, 1966

There is NO SUCH THING AS A WHITE ANTI-RACIST.

—Tamara Nopper, “The White Anti-Racist Is an Oxymoron,” 2003

The Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere—yes it’s real—tackles the notion of white privilege and white people’s responsibility to challenge racism.

—Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere, covered in the *LA Times*, 2008

**O**n the eve of the 2008 presidential election, a volunteer grassroots organization of self-described white antiracists convened a multi-racial day of dialogue on race in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> While many in the media considered the election a referendum on white racism, this group of organizers in L.A. began to prepare to counter individual and institutional white supremacy regardless of the outcome of the election. The event, *The Ballot Box and Beyond: Race, Elections, and the Making of History*, received media coverage from the *LA Times*,<sup>2</sup> Pacifica affiliate KPFK, and a variety of local media outlets. The event represented a culmination of five years of work by the Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere—Los Angeles (AWARE—LA) to recruit, politicize, and mobilize white people to “work toward the abolition of the white supremacist system.”<sup>3</sup>

The event mattered, not necessarily for whom it reached—eighty-some attendees and a few hundred newspaper readers and radio listeners—but for what it represented in terms of antiracist organizing and multiracial alliance in the contemporary moment. *The Ballot Box and Beyond* emerged from a long, but relatively unknown, history of white people organizing other white people against racism in the United States as part of a larger, multiracial movement to topple the white supremacist system. The event occurred despite long-standing

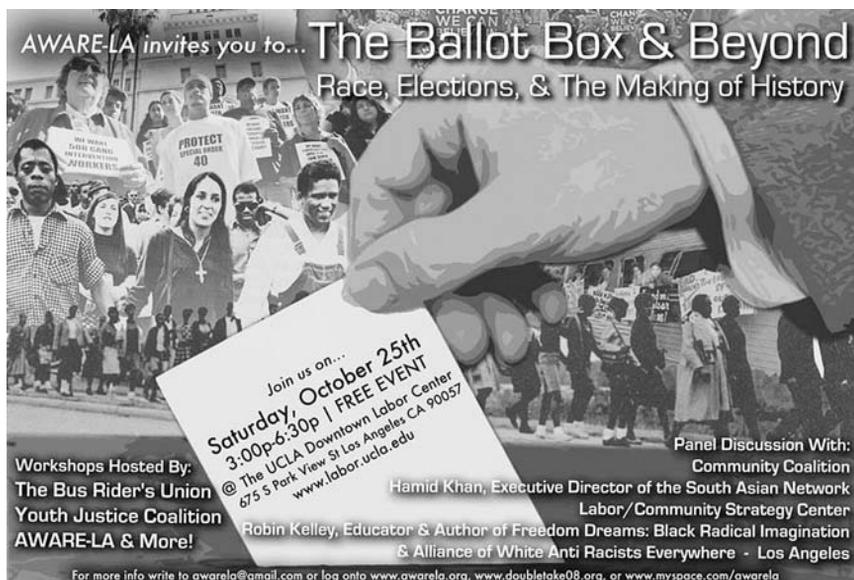
scholarly and activist claims that white people should not or could not organize other white people effectively against racism because, in sum, “there is no such thing as a white anti-racist.”<sup>4</sup> The Ballot Box and Beyond demonstrated that the practice of whites organizing whites toward antiracist action, in alliance with people of color, can produce viable models of racialization, coalition, and social change. Drawing from ethnographic, historical, and textual research and analysis, this article offers a way to think through the unique roles of white people and people of color in mass-based movements for social justice, and to envision a world beyond racism through race.

### The White Question

Saturday, October 25, 2008, 5 p.m., UCLA Downtown Labor Center. The community panel for the Ballot Box and Beyond event began with AWARE–LA organizer Joshua Busch framing the discussion. He centered Barack Obama’s candidacy for president and the way it “has shed the national spotlight on race that this country has not seen for a generation-plus.” Busch observed that millions of white voters had been moved by Obama’s message of unity and hope and “millions more seemed poised at this moment [in 2008] to set aside racist prejudices to vote based on their own economic and social interests.” Despite the rush to embrace Obama as a “postracial candidate,” Busch pointed out that systemic racism, white privilege, and serious inequalities and opportunity between white people and people of color in terms of access to quality education, healthcare, housing, jobs, and healthy and safe communities continue to exist.

The event was timely and attempted to reorient a mainstream discussion on the role of white voters. The Ballot Box and Beyond occurred ten days before a historic U.S. election that seemed to hinge as much on the question of whether the white working class would vote for a black man for president as it did on the qualifications of either of the presidential candidates. In many ways, mainstream media treated the 2008 presidential election as a referendum on white racism: “Obama reaching out to white working class,”<sup>5</sup> “Will gun-toting, churchgoing white guys pull the lever for Obama?”<sup>6</sup> “White support for Obama at historic level.”<sup>7</sup> The Ballot Box and Beyond event, however small, interrupted a media white out in the days leading up to the election that framed white people as either the impediment to or the source of racial justice in the United States.

The event represented a significant point of development for AWARE–LA, as well as for what has come to be termed in various academic and activist



**Figure 1.**

Flyer with invited presenters for AWARE-LA's Ballot Box and Beyond event. Courtesy of AWARE-LA.

circles the “white antiracist movement.” The event directly foregrounded the “white question” or, in other words, the question of white people’s role in challenging white supremacy, by attempting to organize the general white population in Los Angeles to support antiracism in theory and practice. The “white question” is nothing new, however. The history of slavery abolition and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century set a precedent for what could be accomplished when white people directly challenged individual and institutional white supremacy—from playing key organizing roles against oppressive systems to building political relationships and alliances across race. Communist organizers, at least since 1930, argued that “the struggle for equal rights for the Negroes is in fact, one of the most important parts of the proletarian class struggle of the United States.”<sup>8</sup> They recognized the “Negro problem” as a problem of “white superiority” and argued that “the struggle for the equal rights for the Negroes must certainly take the form of common struggle by the white and black workers.”<sup>9</sup> The abolition, women’s rights, and communist movements were not without flaws, however. The possibilities of multiracial alliances in these efforts often broke down as a result of white radicals internalizing white superiority and white privilege, patronizing people of color, and subordinating issues of race to class. Hence W. E. B. Du Bois focused on the question of the

white worker as a lever for both slavery and democracy in *Black Reconstruction in the U.S* (1935). Du Bois's summary of chapter 2, titled "The White Worker," read as follows: "How America became the laborer's Promised Land; and flocking here from all the world the white workers competed with black slaves, with new floods of foreigners, and with growing exploitation, until they fought slavery to save democracy and then lost democracy in a new and vaster slavery."<sup>10</sup> The "problem of the color-line,"<sup>11</sup> as Du Bois put it thirty years earlier, was and is certainly influenced by which side of the line whites choose to stand.

Some grassroots organizations from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s took seriously "the white question" and worked to organize whites to both challenge white supremacy and to ally with people of color in building antiracist and anti-capitalist power in the United States. Off the radar of most social movement scholars is the historical lineage that connects the following otherwise disparate white-led organizations in alliance with people of color-led organizations:

- Southern Conference Education Fund and the Southern Student Organizing Committee in alliance with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the South from 1960 to 1969;
- Young Patriots in alliance with the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords Organization, the American Indian Movement, and the Red Guard (otherwise known as the original "Rainbow Coalition") in Chicago from 1969 to 1970;
- Motor City Labor League in alliance with the League of Black Revolutionary Workers in Detroit from 1969 to 1970;
- Prairie Fire Organizing Committee in alliance with the American Indian Movement, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and the Republic of New Africa from 1974 to 2006; and
- Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere—Los Angeles in alliance with the Labor/Strategy Community Center, South Asian Network, and Community Coalition in 2008.

All of these white-led groups built white antiracist membership organizations in alliance with radical people of color membership organizations to challenge the white supremacist system. They enacted the theory and practice of "affiliate . . . autonomous" organizing,<sup>12</sup> or the development of racially separate but allied organizations dedicated to supporting self-determination in communities of color, and to fostering white responsibility for ending white supremacy in the United States. This organizing model, articulated by white antiracist organizer Anne Braden in 1964, emerged from her reflections on the organizational relationship between the white-led Southern Student Organizing Committee and SNCC at the time.<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with the notion of affiliate-autonomous organizing, the panelists for the Ballot Box and Beyond included speakers from different people of color

organizations, as well as AWARE–LA. The panelists reflected on multiracial alliance building, as well as the possibilities and limitations of antiracist organizing. Manuel Criollo, a lead organizer with the Labor Community Strategy Center’s Bus Riders Movement, argued that “the United States is a white settler country, and so white supremacy, white privilege, racism, and empire is a way of life. It permeates everything—democratic rights, elections.” Criollo argued that the denial of democratic rights, particularly in relation to black and Latino people in the United States, is commonplace, and that an Obama victory in 2008 would be a “blow against racism . . . and against white privilege,” but would not be their end. “What’s your organizing plan if Obama wins?” he said. “It’s our jobs as leftists, as progressives, as antiracists, as revolutionaries to have a real plan.” This sentiment echoed throughout the day’s dialogue.

Panelist and professor of political science at the University of Southern California, Dr. Ange-Marie Hancock agreed, arguing that all the commitments Obama made in the primaries will “be on the table for changing when [he] gets inaugurated” and that scholars and activists should “use hope and trust [in Obama] strategically rather than as a blanket strategy.” Many of the panelists argued that exclusively focusing on electoral politics as the remedy for social inequality was a mistake. Some now declare, as Criollo did, that if not pushed to the Left, an Obama presidency could be a continuation of the white supremacist system, just under different leadership. Many of the panelists argued that community organizing, within and beyond electoral politics, is necessary to help guarantee people’s basic needs, as well as to check government power. Their comments suggested that any approach to ending white supremacy must be multifaceted in order to counter the multifaceted nature of white supremacy itself. White antiracist scholarship, in this regard, has the potential to play an important role against white supremacy.

### **The Whiteness Studies Question**

Contemporary scholars, many of whom were involved in antiracist organizing and multiracial alliance work in the 1960s and ’70s, such as Robert and Pamela Allen, David Roediger, Theodore Allen, and George Lipsitz, have interrogated the ways that the white working class has supported white supremacist policies and actions on the basis of white privilege, often against whites’ own social and economic interests.<sup>14</sup> The work of these scholar activists led to a burgeoning academic and professional field called whiteness studies in the 1990s, which continues today. As whiteness studies developed, however, the focus of earlier writing—on white supremacy in relation to capitalism, and antiracism in

relation to multiracial and anti-capitalist organizing—was put to the side in favor of an increasing interest in white privilege and white identity formation. Books such as the following became common: *Becoming and Unbecoming White*, *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, *Not Quite White*, *Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness*, *After Whiteness*, *Out of Whiteness*, *Working Through Whiteness*. However well-intentioned, this form of whiteness studies encouraged white scholars interested in race studies to sideline multiracial or ethnic studies projects or disciplines in favor of professional work that was effectively “whites only,” with a focus on accommodating whiteness to capitalism rather than abolishing both.

There were also those scholars who were anti-capitalist but believed that class, not race, should be the focus when theorizing or enacting multiracial alliances.<sup>15</sup> Views such as these assumed that issues of race divided an otherwise consolidated working class. Social movement history, as in Robert Allen’s *Reluctant Reformers*, however, revealed that it is often the racism of the white Left that has made class-based alliances across race impossible.<sup>16</sup> Reluctance to see white supremacy as a means of dividing and conquering the nonelite, both white and of color, and hesitancy to prioritize issues that disproportionately affect people of color created and maintains a broken and fractured radical Left. Scholars such as Stuart Hall remind us that class relations and race relations are “inseparable” and that in many ways, “race is the modality in which class is lived.”<sup>17</sup> Holding this complexity in regard to white antiracist work is something scholars and activists have yet to take up on a wide scale.

In 2010, writing, lecturing, and attending workshops and conferences have dominated white antiracist work against white supremacy,<sup>18</sup> in many cases replacing organizing as a viable strategy for social change. The theory and practice of building white-led antiracist organizations to recruit and mobilize whites for coordinated antiracist action with people of color effectively disappeared among the white Left in the 1970s, presumably as a result of government repression that hobbled radical organizing across race, as well as what scholar Noel Ignatiev called the “academic industry” of whiteness studies. Ignatiev continued, “Scarcely a week goes by that does not see a new book on ‘the construction of whiteness.’ There are at least five college Readers on the subject. At least three universities have sponsored conferences on whiteness, and more are planned.”<sup>19</sup> Since the 1990s, white people can be *paid* to be antiracist.

This move in whiteness studies away from a multiracial and activist-oriented position prompted a response from a group of scholars at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006. They developed an extensive document called “Towards a Bibliography of Critical Whiteness Studies” in an

effort to push studies of whiteness in a more multiracial and activist direction. David Roediger, one of the key organizers of the Critical Whiteness Studies Group (CWS) that developed the bibliography, wrote of the importance of the project:

At a time when some initiatives for the study of whiteness begin as a conversation solely and deliberately among whites only, CWS has been interracial from its inception and has centrally involved faculty and students from the university's ethnic studies programs. . . . Not surprisingly, this knowledge developed most quickly and systematically among racialized, enslaved, conquered and colonized peoples for whom white power and white pretense were urgent problems. Both this long sweep of the study of whiteness and the key role of people of color in undertaking such study are represented in the bibliography published here.<sup>20</sup>

Taking cues from Roediger's characterization of the CWS bibliography, I argue for a whiteness studies that is allied to ethnic studies—similar to the ways African American studies, Chicano studies, and Asian American studies have come to typify projects on individual racialized communities but also inform, and are increasingly in conversation with, a larger ethnic studies project. Considering whiteness studies in this way does not necessitate that projects always be interracial but does push such scholarship to be in dialogue with ethnic studies scholars and projects, and multiracial alliances. The question of antiracist organizing is another matter. The fact that only one article in the 143-page CWS bibliography mentioned *organizing*—William Aal's "Moving from Guilt to Action: Antiracist Organizing and the Concept of 'Whiteness' for Activism and the Academy"<sup>21</sup>—suggests that there is much scholarly and activist work to be done to translate the theory of an interracial whiteness studies into actual interracial or multiracial alliances, antiracist organizations, and movement making in the United States. An allied whiteness studies would perhaps make these connections clearer, pushing scholars to frame with whom, with what projects or organizations, and to what ends is a particular study in alliance.

The event at the center of this study, the Ballot Box and Beyond, suggested that whiteness studies and white antiracist activism have missed the mark in recent years, and with potentially dire consequences. White antiracist organizing, the theory and practice which informed AWARE–LA's efforts,<sup>22</sup> has existed largely without a complement in academic scholarship, professional writing, or community organization.<sup>23</sup> A document from AWARE–LA titled "Characteristics of (Some) Community Organizing" (figure 2) attempted to center organizing within white antiracist work. It drew from a long history of social justice organizing in white communities and communities of color, in particular

AWARE-LA's experiences with long-standing racial justice organizations led by people of color in the Los Angeles area, including the Labor Community Strategy Center, South Asian Network, Community Coalition, Inner City Struggle, and Youth Justice Coalition. The document defined "community organizing" as a practice that involves building an "active membership base which carries out the work of the group."<sup>24</sup> From this base, the organization develops members as leaders to move the group's work forward, which might include building alliances with local and national groups, organizing supporters in the larger community, engaging in issue campaigns, and working toward systemic change while enlarging the membership base. The "White Antiracist Community Organizing Model" (figure 3) is built on "Characteristics of (Some) Community Organizing" to envision a five-prong strategy particular to white people organizing white people toward antiracist thought and action. This strategy involves an organizational workgroup structure that carries the work of educating, organizing, mobilizing, alliance building, and movement building simultaneously—with a focus on antiracist consciousness and leadership development, and organizational alliances with people of color and other white antiracist organizations. These documents by AWARE-LA underscore the importance of the role of organizing in white antiracist and racial justice work, and function historically as one answer to the call by people of color for whites to organize other whites against racism.<sup>25</sup>

### The Organizing Question

AWARE-LA emerged from an effective thirty-year silence on the theory and practice of building organizational infrastructure that could systematically recruit, develop, and mobilize large numbers of white people toward antiracist action. In his talk at the 2008 American Studies Association conference, Mark Rudd, cofounder of the Weather Underground, argued that "the organizing model has been lost" in recent years,<sup>26</sup> basing his remarks on his discussions with and observations of student and activist groups across the United States. Certainly, Rudd wasn't talking about the kind of organizing that was taking place as he spoke to win a presidential election for Barack Obama, but rather antiracist organizing against the white supremacist system endemic to U.S. institutions, from immigration to incarceration to banking to housing to war. The Ballot Box and Beyond event was an attempt to revive white antiracist organizing as a legitimate theoretical and political strategy toward building a multiracial social justice movement.<sup>27</sup>

# CHARACTERISTICS OF (SOME) COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

BUILDS ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP BASE WHICH CARRIES OUT THE WORK OF THE GROUP.

**AWARE-LA**

BUILDS ALLIANCES WITH LOCAL AND NATIONAL GROUPS WORKING FOR RACIAL, SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

ORGANIZES A BASE OF SUPPORTERS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY.

TRAINS MEMBERS TO DEVELOP LEADERSHIP CAPACITY TO MOVE THE GROUP FORWARD.

WORKS TOWARDS SYSTEMIC CHANGE GOALS WHILE ENGAGING IN SHORT TERM ISSUE CAMPAIGNS AND DAY TO DAY WORK OF BASE BUILDING.

## AWARE-LA's WHITE ANTI RACIST COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODEL



Figures 2 and 3.

Above: AWARE-LA’s “Characteristics of (Some) Community Organizing.” Below: AWARE-LA’s “White Antiracist Community Organizing Model.” Courtesy of AWARE-LA.

AWARE–LA recognized a crucial need for whites to organize against racism in the contemporary moment. Other white people, not just antiracists, are already organizing around race. Consider the report from the Southern Poverty Law Center that documented 932 active hate groups in the United States in 2009, an increase that caps a decade in which the number of hate groups grew by 55 percent.<sup>28</sup> Consider the book *Blood and Politics: The History of the White Nationalist Movement from the Margins to the Mainstream* (2009) by Leonard Zeskin and the documentary *White Power USA* (2010), which identified 30,000 white people in the United States as members of white supremacist organizations, such as the National Socialist Movement. With more than 250,000 active sympathizers, according to watchdog groups, white supremacists are working to build alliances with anti-immigrant and Tea Party membership organizations and have set their sights on lobbying, policy change, and electing representatives to Congress (figure 4).<sup>29</sup> Consider the headline from the *Wall Street Journal* at the end of 2009, “Wall Street Journal/NBC Poll: Tea Party Tops Democrats and Republicans,”<sup>30</sup> which showed a larger approval rating among likely voters for a right-wing, anti-immigrant, anti-people of color organization than for either established political party. Not to mention that the extreme racist right often provides ideological cover for a less extreme right-wing populism that has devastating effects on poor and working people across race, as seen from the aftermath of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush’s presidential runs. Now count the number of white antiracist organizations you know.

The question of white people’s response to white supremacy was of particular interest to AWARE–LA organizer Clare Fox, who also participated in the Ballot Box and Beyond panel. She offered a November 5 scenario, forecasting what white supremacist hate groups might do to expand their membership and outreach if and when Obama was elected: “We need to be as organized or more [than white supremacists], specifically as white antiracists,” she said. “We need to be organized as white antiracists reaching out to the white community first, and creating that strategic wedge in the white community. The more visible we are, then the more white folks have to ask, ‘Where do I stand on the issues?’” The key is organization, Fox argued, and being in alliance with community organizations of color. Naming Obama’s possible election victory, she said, “We don’t want to give any opportunity to hate groups to use that to their advantage.” The rise in hate crimes and organizing by the racist and radical right since 2008 suggests the white Left is behind in terms of organizing on race issues.

It is within this context that the Ballot Box and Beyond event represented an important contemporary example, first, of white people organizing other white



**Figure 4.** Members of the National Socialist Movement march in Phoenix, AZ with United States' flags and swastikas chanting "USA!" From the documentary *White Power USA* (2010), courtesy of Big Noise Films.

people toward antiracist consciousness and action, and second, multiracial alliance building against the white supremacist system. Participating groups included some of the oldest and most

radical people of color membership organizations in Los Angeles, all of which contributed speakers to the community panel and discussion at the conclusion of the event. Represented were the Labor Community Strategy Center, Community Coalition, and South Asian Network. The Labor Community Strategy Center's Bus Riders Union and the anti-prison, youth-of-color organization, Youth Justice Coalition, also offered workshops along with AWARE-LA at the event.

Participating organizations focused on multiracial organizing as a primary strategy for social change—that is, on increasing and mobilizing the memberships of antiracist and racial justice organizations across race to overturn the existing structure of white supremacy and, some believed, capitalism in the United States. As the Labor Community Strategy Center declared:

We build consciousness, leadership, and organization among those who face discrimination and societal attack—people of color, women, immigrants, workers, LGBT people, youth, all of whom comprise our membership. Linking mass struggles to the need for radical, structural change, we develop campaigns and demands that help build a revitalized world united front that can stop the rising tides of war, racism and imperialism, the ecological crisis and the growing police state. Our work often challenges both major political parties and takes on the organized Right. We fight to win.<sup>31</sup>

Another participating group, Community Coalition, stated: “We Believe In: Community Involvement. South LA is primarily an African American and Latino community. A core value of the Coalition is to promote the active involvement and unity of all South LA residents. The Coalition serves as a vehicle for community activism in South LA.” The organization brought together multiple approaches to social change, including leadership development, education, training, and advocacy. In terms of building a social movement, “the Coalition does not believe one organization alone is capable of improving the quality of life in our community and throughout the City of Los Angeles. We believe many organizations are needed; therefore the Coalition works in alliance with other organizations dedicated to social and economic justice.”<sup>32</sup> Executive director of Community Coalition, Marqueece Harris-Dawson, declared at the Ballot Box and Beyond event that “as progressives we always see poll results or voting results, and we go, ‘Where are the white organizers? Will someone go and talk to these people?’ And I really appreciate that AWARE has taken an attempt to begin to do that—to begin to speak to racism directly to white people from white people.”<sup>33</sup> South Asian Network, also present at the event, described itself as,

a grassroots, community based organization dedicated to advancing the health, empowerment and solidarity of persons of South Asian origin in Southern California. Together, volunteers and staff have created multilingual, culturally appropriate approaches to community organizing encompassing community outreach and education, direct service, and policy advocacy in five focus areas: immigration, public health, violence prevention, hate crime/discrimination and civil liberties.<sup>34</sup>

Hamid Khan, the group’s executive director, was a partner in developing AWARE—LA’s Racial Justice Alliance, a multiracial workgroup for strategizing about organizing and building alliances across race in Los Angeles. Most notable about this effort was a revision of the traditional notion of “accountability,” or responsibility of white people to people of color in social movement work. The workgroup argued for a notion of “transformative alliance,” or mutual accountability between white people and people of color for the ways privilege and oppression play out within, across, and among various racialized communities.<sup>35</sup> The transformative alliance model argued that white people should step up in shared leadership with people of color in organizing against white supremacy, and that political partnerships could be built on mutual individual and organizational trust across race. This idea had its roots in revolutionary multiracial organizing from alliances like the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Student Organizing Committee, and

the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and Young Patriots. Lessons distilled from AWARE–LA’s Racial Justice Alliance were collected in a paper titled “Powerful Partnerships: Transformative Alliance Building.”<sup>36</sup>

The timeliness of the Ballot Box and Beyond was articulated by two panelists at the event. Harris–Dawson noted: “This is an interesting time in the United States because two of the major pillars of this country, white supremacy and capitalism, are getting renegotiated at the same time. It’s really unprecedented. . . . When I say renegotiated, I want to be clear that I’m saying neither of them will go away; they just will change in complexion. . . . What you’ll see and are seeing with Barack Obama is that subtle racism will dramatically increase.” Khan extended Harris–Dawson’s analysis to a global scale, arguing that “the U.S. is a continuation of what was European occupation of the world,” and that in any “postracial” or “postcolonial” society such occupation is *still* in effect. Identifying Barack Obama’s presidential campaign as “historic,” Kahn also argued that “there is a continuation of a history of white supremacy and empire building.” Various U.S.-based economic, social, and military systems are now globalized, Kahn observed, resulting in a worldwide U.S. “occupation of minds and bodies.”

The Ballot Box and Beyond event and its brainchild organization, AWARE–LA, resisted this occupation. They were and are significant in the history of antiracist organizing in the United States, offering a vision of whiteness without white supremacy, and a United States without empire. Three white people in Los Angeles in 2003 picked up this challenge, and after developing a substantial membership base over four years, AWARE–LA went public with the message and organizing in the summer of 2007.

### **How (Not) to Build a Movement**

The theoretical basis for AWARE–LA’s organizing work was laid out in the paper “One Step Forward on the Path to Liberation: White Anti-Racist Organizing and Its Role in the Struggle Against the White Supremacist System,” penned by the AWARE–LA coordination team. The paper argued that “white people are uniquely situated . . . to make choices that can either contribute to or undermine the white supremacist system. It is time . . . for white people to take an *active and visible stand* against the white supremacist system by utilizing anti-racist community organizing strategies to create systemic change.”<sup>37</sup> The dominant paradigm of antiracist work in recent years has been antiracist education through workshop models based on tolerance, multiculturalism, and diversity—not on community organizing. This approach has significantly

hampered the building of a multiracial movement against white supremacy. The first national study of the effectiveness of diversity trainings, published in 2006, showed that educational models alone have not led to institutional change. The paper, published in the *American Sociological Review* by professors from Harvard, the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Minnesota, concluded that efforts to reduce bias in the private sector, where the majority of such workshops occur, have effectively failed. Frank Dobbin, professor of sociology at Harvard said of the report,

For the past 40 years companies have tried to increase diversity, spending millions of dollars a year on any number of programs without actually stopping to determine whether or not their efforts have been worth it. Certainly in the case of diversity training, the answer is no. The only truly effective way to increase the presence of minorities and women in managerial positions is through programs that create organizational responsibility. If no one is specifically charged with the task of increasing diversity, then the buck inevitably gets passed ad infinitum.<sup>38</sup>

The question remains, then, what programs or work can create individual and institutional responsibility for racial justice? AWARE-LA, alongside organizations of color supporting the Ballot Box and Beyond, put their focus, energy, resources, and time into antiracist organizing.

By the end of 2008, AWARE-LA had a mailing list of almost three hundred people from the Los Angeles area,<sup>39</sup> 10 to 15 percent of whom regularly attended organizational events. In the years that I engaged AWARE-LA as an ethnographer and participant-observer, from 2006 to 2008, the membership of the organization grew by 30 percent and its organizational leadership doubled.<sup>40</sup> In 2010, AWARE-LA is preparing for another surge in recruitment and growth with a campaign that seeks to call out the racism and hate of right-wing populism in Los Angeles and beyond in the interest of “driving a wedge in the white community,”<sup>41</sup> and developing a critical mass of white antiracists who are visible, audible, and active in alliance building with people of color organizations and coalitions.

AWARE-LA’s organizational infrastructure today includes five workgroups: 1) a monthly antiracist discussion group for the white membership; 2) a quarterly racial justice alliance group for the white membership and membership of color; 3) a workshop planning group for presenting the politics to local institutions (companies, universities, etc.); 4) a community organizing and campaign visioning group, responsible for the political direction of the organization; and 5) a collective leadership team composed of representatives from the other four workgroups to promote communication and idea shar-

ing among the groups. Most talked-about is AWARE-LA's development of "a white space," wherein white members meet monthly to "discuss issues of identity, community, privilege, and racism in our lives with the intention to strengthen our practice as antiracists in alliances and friendships with people of color."<sup>42</sup> Despite the question of segregation, AWARE-LA stands by its organizing model and its proven effectiveness at moving large numbers of white people toward antiracist action. The organization cites historic calls by revolutionaries of color including Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Huey Newton for whites to organize whites against racism.<sup>43</sup> AWARE-LA's online document "Why is Saturday Dialogue for white anti-racists?" further specifies the reasons for a meeting space geared toward white people:

People of color shouldn't always have to be the ones to educate white people about racism and oppression. We are taking responsibility for learning about racism, our own white privilege, and how to challenge it as white people.

In order to challenge racism and dismantle white supremacy, white people need to unlearn racism and discover the ways we enact white privilege. . . . Having a community of white anti-racist people gives us hope, helps us grow our practice, and gives us strength to stay in it for the long haul.

A white space serves as a resource to people of color who want to work with white people but don't want to have to spend all their energy dealing with the racism of white people.<sup>44</sup>

Such a white space pushes the white membership and leadership of AWARE-LA to develop and justify their own personal and organizational investments in work against white supremacy. Owning the work of racial justice is what many scholars and organizations of color have been asking white people to do for decades.

The notion of racially separate but allied organizing is not unique to AWARE-LA. A history of affiliate-autonomous organizing in the white antiracist Left in alliance with people of color exists, but has not been documented by social movement historians as any sort of historical lineage. Complicating this story is the overwhelming evidence and documentation of white people acting in support of white supremacy—both within and outside movement work.<sup>45</sup> The Ballot Box and Beyond event and the work of AWARE-LA offer a different story—a story that brings the history of whites organizing against individual and institutional racism into the present moment, as part of a "larger movement for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice."<sup>46</sup> This work, AWARE-LA claims, will create a broad-based, multiracial coalition for racial justice, as well as a transformation of racial consciousness in regards to white



**Figure 5.** Members of AWARE-LA join an immigrants' rights march in Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy of AWARE-LA.

identity, white community, and alliances across race (figure 5).<sup>47</sup>

AWARE-LA's approach is one of many approaches to white antiracism. It is noteworthy, however, that white antiracism has not often focused on organizing. Whiteness studies scholars and practitioners often agree that "whites should work with whites,"<sup>48</sup> but they neglect that this idea originated from *organizing* work by the black-led Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee to build Black Power in the United States. SNCC's notion of coalition politics within this framework was that "black people organize blacks and white people organize whites,"<sup>49</sup> in order to simultaneously practice black self-determination, and white responsibility for individual and structural racism. SNCC did not desire an end to working with whites, despite the way their removal of whites from the organization in 1966 was read by many people at the time, and since.<sup>50</sup> Rather, SNCC desired a coalition in which whites would take responsibility for mobilizing whites against white supremacy while supporting black organizing. SNCC wrote in a memo run by the *New York Times* in 1966 that,

an all-black project is needed in order for the people to free themselves. This has to exist from the beginning. This relates to what can be called "coalition politics." There is no doubt in our minds that some whites are just as disgusted with this system as we are. But it is meaningless to talk about coalition if there is no one to align ourselves with, because of the lack of organization in the white communities. There can be no talk of "hooking up" unless black people organize blacks and white people organize whites. If these conditions are met then

perhaps at some later date—and if we are going in the same direction—talks about exchange of personnel, coalition, and other meaningful alliances can be discussed.<sup>51</sup>

SNCC's relationship to white organizers is a key beginning point in the historical lineage of white antiracist organizing. The fact that the frame for contemporary notions of white antiracism emerged from radical and revolutionary organizing in solidarity with the Black Power movement is a crucial part of understanding where white antiracist organizing has been and where it can go.

Regarding future social movement work, Ballot Box and Beyond panelist Manuel Criollo pointed out that “the movement doesn't want to talk about racism.” He reflected that at times community organizations try to win over what he called “the silent majority . . . white folks” to a fault, avoiding discussions and struggles against individual and “deeply embedded institutional racism” as a central tenet of movement work. Marqueece Harris-Dawson nuanced Criollo's remark, arguing that the movement also “doesn't want to talk about black people . . . the movement has not yet come to grips with the condition of black people in the United States.” AWARE-LA organizer, Clare Fox offered the following:

Racism and white people's denial about racism and white privilege has really harmed social movements, and has really harmed our ability to come together, and be really strong, and achieve our goals of justice and equality for all. As a white person, I want to encourage other white folks who care about these issues to say in response to those “postracial” analysis folks: this [2008 election] is a historic moment; it is a victory. Now we need to continue to build on this legacy.

Despite the obstacles of developing a strong antiracist and multiracial movement beyond November 4, 2008, the Ballot Box and Beyond left attendees hopeful. Moderator Joshua Busch closed with this message: “If we really want to see real change in this country, there has to be work done by activists, there has to be a grassroots movement that develops that pushes change forward.”<sup>52</sup>

Without readily available models of white antiracist organizing, however, white antiracist work often ends at writings, lectures, workshops, conferences, or networks. These approaches are necessary components to any social movement but would never be characterized by scholars or organizers as THE movement. Believing that education is the beginning and end of all antiracism efforts assumes, as mainstream media did with the 2008 presidential election, that ending white racism is simply a matter of consciousness raising—as if structural and institutional white supremacy is not also an impediment to racial justice; as

if the question of white supremacist capitalism is not also a question of power and consent; as if white supremacists aren't *always* organizing.

History shows that social movements cannot be built without organizing—a movement to end the white supremacist system is no exception. Organizers of color have asked white people to build organizational infrastructure to challenge racism since at least 1966. White people have been asked by people of color to develop approaches to systematically politicize, mobilize, support, coordinate, and ally large numbers of white people with the causes and struggles of radical and revolutionary people of color. Will whites heed the call today? They may not have a choice. If white antiracist organizing and multiracial alliance are not taken up readily in scholarship and activism, we will continue to debate whether or not racism still exists, while white supremacists and their sympathizers organize a critical mass of people toward their own ends, and any struggle for social justice will be effectively lost.

#### Notes

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1. Epigraphs are taken from the following sources: "Excerpts from Paper on Which the 'Black Power' Philosophy Is Based," *New York Times*, August 5, 1966, 10, parenthetical reference in original; Kil Ja Kim [Tamara Nopper], "The White Anti-racist Is an Oxymoron: An Open Letter to 'White Anti-racists,'" <http://www.nathanielturner.com/whiteanti-racistsopenletter.htm>, February 24, 2003 (accessed July 29, 2009), emphasis in original; Sandy Banks, "Where Whiteness Meets Race," *LA Times*, November 11, 2008, <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-banks12-2008nov12,0,1810753.column> (accessed February 3, 2010).
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3. Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere, *Who We Are*, <http://www.awarela.org/who> (accessed October 7, 2008).
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5. Kathy Kiely, "Obama Reaching Out to White Working Class," *USA Today*, June 6, 2008, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-06-05-Obama\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-06-05-Obama_N.htm) (accessed January 3, 2010).
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9. *Ibid.*
10. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880* (1935; New York: Free Press, 1998), 17.
11. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 1994), ii.
12. Memo from Anne Braden to SSOC, April 17, 1964, 2. Constance W. Curry papers, Manuscripts Archives and Rare Book Library, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

13. I analyze this model as a historical frame that connects the above organizations, and their alliances with radical people of color organizations, in my dissertation project, *Challenging White Supremacy: Antiracist Organizing and Multiracial Alliance in the United States*.
14. See Robert L. Allen and Pamela P. Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Atlanta, Ga.: Howard University Press, 1974); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1992); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1994); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).
15. There is a similar sentiment among many white activists and organizers.
16. Allen and Allen, *Reluctant Reformers*.
17. Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 1978), 394.
18. The national White Privilege Conference is in its eleventh year as of 2010.
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20. David Roediger, "Introduction," *Towards a Bibliography of Critical Whiteness Studies* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 5.
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23. Despite the scarcity of white antiracist membership organizations in 2010, there are some groups and networks led by antiracist whites that work on racial justice issues. Some of these include: Anti-Racist Action Network (<http://www.antiracistaction.org>), Catalyst Project (<http://www.collectiveliberation.org>), Groundwork (<http://groundworkmadison.wordpress.com>), White Anti-racist Community Action Network (<http://www.wacan.org>), and U.S. for All of Us (<http://www.usforallofus.org>), as well as a variety of local efforts and campus-based student groups around the United States.
24. AWARE–LA, "Characteristics of (Some) Community Organizing," <http://www.awarela.org/models/white-anti-racist-organizing/> (accessed January 13, 2010).
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32. Community Coalition, "About Us," <http://cocosouthla.org/about/ourvalues> (accessed January 15, 2010).
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42. AWARE—LA, "Saturday Dialogues."
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50. "The 2008 documentary film *The Jewish Americans*, after highlighting the extraordinary and numerically disproportionate involvement of Jews in the freedom struggle, recounts the expulsion of whites from SNCC. A fiery speech by Stokely Carmichael is juxtaposed with footage of some middle-aged Jewish women emotionally describing their sadness at being 'asked . . . to leave the movement.' Rabbi Rachel Collin recalls, 'we wanted to be loved in return, and we weren't, and that was painful.' Other SNCC activists remembered being similarly pained. Abbie Hoffman claimed that the expulsion of whites from SNCC made him feel 'like a schmuck.' Casey Hayden recalled that, 'to me [the movement] was everything: home and family, food and work, love and a reason to live. When I was no longer welcome there, and then when it was no longer there and all, it was hard to go on.'" Quoted from Jennifer Jensen Wallach, "Replicating History in a Bad Way? White Activists and Black Power in SNCC's Arkansas Project," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (October 1, 2008): 269–70.
51. "Excerpts from Paper," 10.
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