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Accountability and White Anti-racist Organizing

Stories from Our Work

Foreword by
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Chapter Two

Rhyme and Reason: The Making of a White Antiracist Rap Group

Jeb Aram Middlebrook

Mic Check

*I choose to be an ally / we cruise the sidelines / recruiting
white guys / school 'em to fight lies.*

Jus Rhyme, "Million Allies"

Real recognize revolution.

Raw Potential

I was not always committed to antiracist principles, and I definitely was not always touring the United States as a white antiracist scholar, organizer, and rapper. I came to be who I am through a political process, through "study and struggle," as my friends at the Catalyst Project would say. This is a story about the process which made me, and also which made a rap group called AntiRacist 15 (AR-15).

AR-15 was a collection of fifteen antiracist principles that guided me and my rap partner, Trevor Wysling aka Raw Potential,

in our work as rappers and activists. Some called it a rap group, others called it an organization. We called it a way of life. These principles were largely inspired by the work we did with the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop and the Center for Third World Organizing at the time of the rap group's inception. My story is organized around these principles, as was the work of AR-15.

The seeds of the group were planted in the fall of 2000 at Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota through my attempts to politically organize friends on campus. **Principle 1: Practice Non-violence** was also formulated during this time. Non-violent social change, I understood, could come about through community organizing, and I intended to do just that.

Asking questions about social change at Macalester led me to friends who asked similar questions. They were student organizers on campus fighting for justice on issues ranging from sweatshop-free college apparel to gay visibility to representation by and for students of color. They were women, people of color, GLBT people, and international students. I wondered what my cause was as a straight white guy of economic privilege. Out of my desire to know, I called a formal meeting of my organizer friends in November 2000.

Thinking back to this now, I wonder about this search outside of myself for answers about race, gender, sexuality, and class. I lived race (whiteness), gender (maleness), class (upper-middle), and sexuality (straight), but these identities were invisible to me, normalized by racist, sexist, homophobic, and classist institutions in the United States. **Principle 2: Learn Antiracist History** led me to learn the history of the United States with regard to race, oppression, and privilege, and my role in it. I carried the answer to what my cause was and how I could contribute to social change, but I did not know that then.

During that first meeting at Macalester, I sat looking at my friends, some of the most committed activists and organizers on campus. They represented working-class and elite class backgrounds, gay and straight sexualities, and a multitude of different

racism and nationalities. I wanted to know their histories — their ways of resisting, organizing, and surviving systems of oppression that were not designed for their well-being. Without knowing it, I had begun to practice what would become **Principle 3: Study Legacies of Resistance**.

Looking around the room, I realized that I was the only white guy.

“What are we here for?” my friend Melissa asked.

“We’re here to talk about what we do on campus,” I said. “To figure out how we can support one another’s causes.”

Overwhelmed with school work, part-time jobs, student organizing, and life itself, my friends stared back at me bleary-eyed. Silence. I tried to kick off the discussion. Silence. The meeting ended. The following week, I called another meeting. This time, fewer people showed up: “I’m busy,” “I have too much homework,” “I can’t miss sports practice,” the people I invited told me. This meeting played out the same way as the first one. Melissa: “What are we here for?” Me: “To support each other’s causes.” Blank stares.

I called another meeting for the next week, but couldn’t make it due to my own busy schedule. Another white friend of mine, Scott, who had similar interests to mine in finding his cause attended in my place. I don’t know what happened at the meeting, but from what my friends told me, Scott said some inappropriate things that were borderline racist, sexist, and homophobic. I confronted Scott one evening in the dorms and told him he wasn’t allowed to come anymore—he’d messed up.

“Where’s Scott?” Melissa asked me at the next meeting.

“I told him not to come anymore. He messed up,” I said.

My friends looked at me, stunned. “You should’ve talked to us about it,” they said.

“I handled it,” I said.

But by the look of growing distrust in their eyes, I clearly hadn’t “handled it.” I’d messed up myself, in more ways than one. My friends stopped coming to the meetings. I couldn’t figure out what had happened and mulled this over with Scott into winter break.

Deciding to formalize our thinking, Scott and I put together a proposal for an independent study project. Our research questions focused on two themes: “What didn’t work in our attempt to organize students across race, class, gender, and sexual lines on campus?” and “What can two white guys do to challenge oppression?”

We called our study “Synthsys,” an intentional—and we thought cooler spelling—than *synthesis*, a term gleaned from our reading of the philosophy of Karl Marx. We understood synthesis, as Marx used it, to mean what happens when two opposite ideas (*thesis* and *anti-thesis*) come together to make something new. We meant to write a paper. We ended up building an organization.

After weeks of debate and writing we came to the realization that it wasn’t the job of two white guys to organize women, people of color, GLBT folks, and international students to support each other’s causes. These students were already doing what they could when they could. Also, in many ways, we hadn’t challenged our *own* racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, so perhaps we weren’t even ready to come to the table and strategize with our friends. Indeed, it was a table *we* had set up, and to which *we* had invited *ourselves*.

We learned the next two principles back to back, **Principle 4: Research Your Family History** and **Principle 5: Respect Leadership of Color**. Scott and I did not know our family histories. We did not know what it had meant or did mean to be white in America. As a result, we played out personally destructive dynamics with our friends of color. We learned **Principle 5: Respect Leadership of Color** the hard way. We did not respect our friends’ experiences with racism in the United States. We did not honor their direct experience and expertise in dealing with their own oppression. And we certainly were not showing leadership in the white community in challenging our own racism.

What we demonstrated was not solidarity, it was two white guys running the show. What else was new? We realized that if we wanted to support women, people of color, GLBT folks, and international students on campus, then we should educate ourselves

— and other white people — to be the best allies we could be. We would do what became AR-15's next principle — **Principle 6: Stand in Solidarity**. We decided that we could best stand in solidarity with people of color by taking responsibility for our own and other white people's racism, men's sexism, straight people's homophobia, and wealthy people's classism. In this way, we imagined ourselves to be in alliance with both antiracist organizers across racial lines and with people of color who experienced systemic racism most directly.

Scott and I felt our job was to fulfill what became **Principle 7: Challenge Oppression** by acting within our spheres of influence, to make changes where we could. We began reaching out to other white guys on campus to talk about race. What we found when we broached the topic with other white friends was the same bleary-eyed look we'd seen in the eyes of students of color when we tried organizing them. Whatever their race, people were already too busy, too tired, too stressed out. So we asked ourselves, "What are white guys already doing on issues of race that we could connect with them on?"

The answer? Watching movies! So we organized movie nights, complete with suitable college drinks, and screened Spike Lee's classics. Our plan: to watch movies in which race was an undeniable theme and then use the movies as jumping-off points to get white guys on campus to talk about race. We attempted what we later learned was a tried-and-true organizing strategy: **Principle 8: Listen Actively**. We hoped to meet other white guys where they were at in terms of their thinking, talking, and acting with regard to race. In this way, we hoped to move them toward antiracist consciousness and action. We screened, *Do the Right Thing* and *Malcolm X*. But before we could screen *Bamboozled*, I dropped out of college.

I was becoming bleary-eyed myself. I needed some time to think. My world had been turned upside down by the question Scott and I had asked: "What can two white guys do?" The prospect of the amount of work that white people, including me, would have

to take on to fix our own racist behavior and institutions overwhelmed me. I needed a break.

Only later did I recognize that the fact that I could take time out to *think about* oppression, rather than *survive it*, was in itself a privilege — made possible by the complexities of race and class advantage. I couldn't go to class at Macalester, let alone eat in the cafeteria, without the constant realization that my white skin got me things in this world that some people of color would never have. In this, I recognized the need for a revolution in the United States and realized that I — and white people in general — stood in the way of it happening. But in order to face racism, I first had to face myself.

People Before Profit

*I drop the topic properly / rich folks got O.P.P. /
other people's property.*

Jus Rhyme, "People Tell Me"

I had read in a book in college that the true test of any nation is how it treats its lowest resident. Given what I'd learned about race, class, gender, and sexuality, I figured that person in the United States would be homeless, black, a lesbian, and a recent immigrant. I wanted to test my theory through personal experience, but I wasn't black, nor was I a lesbian or a recent immigrant. Well-read but undereducated, I thought, "I could be homeless." I hopped the first plane I could find to San Diego (a city I knew because I'd lived there after high school in AmeriCorps, plus it was warm) with one change of clothes and a toothbrush, looking forward to all the great insights I'd gain from being homeless in the United States.

Instead of learning about oppression, I learned about privilege. I had *decided* to be homeless — an act seeped in ignorance. Instead of listening to what poor people and people of color said, I wanted to *be* them, to take their place, to speak for them. Plus, my

ranking system for determining who was most oppressed in the United States ignored the complexity of how oppression actually works. In reality, I realized later, oppression operates through a complicated web of systems of inclusion and exclusion that privileges and oppresses all of us in different ways. I had a lot to learn.

Despite my best intentions to be homeless, I had a place to stay the night I landed in San Diego. I had a shared room within a week, and a library card and job within a week-and-a-half. I quickly realized that I couldn't escape privilege. The United States wouldn't let me, a white guy from money, slip through the cracks. So I returned to Minnesota, stayed with friends until I could get my own place, and dedicated myself to *using* my privilege to end oppression.

I spent the next three months, however, staring at the ceiling of my bedroom trying to figure out how use privilege to end oppression. I worked odd jobs to pay my rent and buy groceries, but basically, I thought. *Use privilege*. Not knowing what to do, I applied for college, again, this time at the University of Minnesota (U of M). I was accepted and would start in the fall of 2001. *Use privilege*. I kept thinking. Sometime around June 2001, I discovered what would later become **Principle 9: Create Antiracist Culture**. I had the desire to create a community around my developing principles. I called Scott and a friend from AmeriCorps, Trevor, and pitched them the idea. The organization, to be called Synthsys, would merge art, education, and activism. Its main purpose would be to make space for discussions, realizations, and mobilizations around issues of race and privilege. Hip-hop would be the vehicle; it was the first thing I'd seen unite people of different backgrounds in a real way. I found out about community organizing later.

I made it official by building a website for Synthsys and incorporating it as a non-profit. I made flyers. But Synthsys never did anything. It existed as an idea, a space in my mind where people of all backgrounds would come together to make revolution. I talked about Synthsys with everyone I met. People were inspired: "Sounds cool." "Where do I sign up?" "How do I get involved?"

I had an org, but no organization. I was Synthsys—the site of opposing ideas (oppression and privilege) coming together and working themselves out to become something new. Instead, I was becoming something new.

My life became a microcosm of what I imagined the revolution would look like: rallies, protests, concerts, conferences, house parties—all multiracial, intergenerational, multi-class, diverse in gender and sexuality. I knew, perhaps, what revolution looked like at a house party, but on a societal level I had no clue. And what was my contribution?

"What does Synthsys do?" people asked. I didn't know.

I scrapped Synthsys. **Principle 9: Create Antiracist Culture**, echoed in my mind, however. It was time to get organized. I looked at what I already had: a website, a non-profit, and three recipe-card boxes full of contacts—artists, educators, and activists. I flipped through my contacts and stopped at Donald aka Rhyme Chyld. We'd freestyled together for several months at Macalester and later, while I was at the University of Minnesota. He'd heard me work out my thinking and my identity through hip-hop, as I evolved from Jeb Middlebrook to Lonely Poet to Privilege (eventually I'd become Jus Rhyme). I thought he'd get what I was trying to do.

We decided to meet at a pizza place on the West Bank of the U of M. He told me he had a good friend, Denario, who he thought would like my idea, so he brought him along. I gave them my pitch: "The Hip-Hop Co-op: Get Free. Make Change." "Get Free" was a call to all hip-hop artists who wanted free stage time and promotion for their work in the community. It was also a call to community organizations that wanted free performances to draw people to their meetings and protests. "Make Change" was a call to the same groups. Hip-hoppers could sell their merchandise in a cooperative fashion through the organization and donate a portion of their profits to our work. Community organizations could receive money from concert fundraisers that the co-op would put on and split the profits among themselves to support their work. Donald, Denario, and I started the organization.

In the fall of 2002, within three months of its inception, the Hip-Hop Co-op boasted over 500 email addresses, thirty regular volunteers, and a small office in the commercial district around the University of Minnesota. We had relationships with most hip-hop promoters in the city and a mobile entourage of six to eight volunteers. We began to purchase cooperatively owned equipment and began to throw our own shows.

We supported a variety of community causes. We wrote a hip-hop play for an organization supporting women in prison. We recruited hip-hop emcees to freestyle call-and-responses as part of a march against police brutality and detentions after 9/11. We set up hip-hop performances and fundraisers for anti-war organizations after the United States invaded Iraq. We performed at the Saint Paul capitol side by side with women of color from the Welfare Rights Coalition, and raised our voices to senators and congressman to support poor people in Minnesota. The Hip-Hop Co-op mattered. We were making change.

Then a phone call came. It was a reporter writing a piece about us for a community newsletter. She asked me, "So don't you think it's weird that a white guy runs a hip-hop organization?" I informed her that I was co-director of the organization and that my partners Donald and Denario were African-American and Latino/African-American and that she should talk to them, too. She did later.

But that call left me wondering if it *was* weird. Was I repeating the same mistake I'd made at Macalester? Was I, once again, the white guy running the show? I realized I needed to stand up and be counted as a white guy against racism. I needed to do what the next principle instructed: **Principle 10: Act on Your Principles**. But I was not sure how. I decided to call Trevor, my friend from AmeriCorps. He was also a white guy into hip-hop. I had learned to freestyle side by side with him and a Filipino guy, Roy, while doing community service projects around the southwestern and western United States. Maybe Trevor would have an answer.

It was now December 2002, four years after another friend of mine in AmeriCorps, Lakiasha, told me that the United States "is

made for white people." After four years of conversations with Trevor and Scott about the meaning of race, whiteness, and white privilege, I was still trying to understand what Lakiasha meant. I was now on the phone with Trevor. "The Hip-Hop Co-op needs to do a training for white guys in hip-hop," I told him. "Whites in Hip-Hop: Roles & Responsibilities." Trev laughed. He already had a reader put together; he just didn't have a title. Perfect. We set the date for the training and began to take responsibility.

The training was a mild success. Only one of the five white hip-hoppers the Co-op invited showed up. But all of the people of color we invited appeared. We came together in a powerful afternoon of multiracial conversation, in which each participant presented their perspective on hip-hop and race based on their own background. There was an African-American male emcee, an East-Asian American female hip-hop activist, an Indian-American female singer, and two white guys in hip-hop who now had an idea of what they could do. When it was our turn to present, Trevor handed out the collection of readings he'd compiled. The room smiled.

Flip the System

*We organize by day, our nights are political/
AntiRacist 15, our lives are our principles.*

Jus Rhyme, "AR-15 Anthem"

I had incorporated the Hip-Hop Co-op as a non-profit because I figured that this was the kind of organization you set up if you want to create change on a community level. A cooperative made sense to me because racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism were hierarchical enough, and the least I could do was create an organizational structure that everyone could benefit from. What you put in, you'd get out. The contribution could be something as simple as donating time.

But money got the best of the organization. Isn't that usually the case? Wanting to show people that what we were doing was working. Wanting to be symbols of hope by showing people what a cooperative, multiracial space looked like, we overspent on office space and sound equipment, and found ourselves in debt. I burned out as well. Tired of managing thirty people a month and a 500+ person newsletter for free for a year, I longed for a break — for someone to mentor *me*, to show *me* what a cooperative, multiracial space looked like. I retired from the Co-op. Donald and Denario didn't want to keep it going without me, so we closed the doors in May 2003. It was a good run, but in the end it wasn't sustainable.

I graduated from the University of Minnesota in August 2003. Trevor had recently moved to Oakland and I had nowhere to be — so Oakland became my destination. I drove west in my dad's car the week after I graduated. Once I arrived, my goal was to learn from organizers who were creating multiracial spaces. After a couple of phone calls, I reached the co-founder of the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop (CWS), Sharon Martinas, who would later become my mentor and friend. I signed up for CWS's fifteen-week training for antiracist organizers, and there learned what antiracist organizing meant. I realized I had already been doing some of this work with the "Whites in Hip-Hop: Roles & Responsibility" workshop I'd put together a year earlier. A couple of weeks later, I met the program director of the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO), a racial justice organization led by people of color, and landed my first job in the Bay Area, doing database entry for this long-standing multiracial organization.

The three biggest realizations from my time with CWS and CTWO were 1) privilege could be used to fight oppression; 2) this work was most effective when done from within white-led antiracist organizations in solidarity with organizations led by radical activists of color, and 3) I should surround myself with people and organizations who would keep me politically accountable. With this grounding, I set my sights on gaining all the privilege I

could in order to further the antiracist movement and effectively "flip the system."

Attempting to walk my talk, I applied for PhD programs in Ethnic Studies around the United States, and Trevor and I started a political rap group. We met with antiracist organizers at CWS and CTWO to discuss what kind of rap group we might be.

"You're mobilizers, not organizers," said Sharon of CWS. "As performers, you guys have the power to get a lot of people in one room at one time. Use that space to do antiracist education and raise money for local, racial justice organizing led by people of color. Twenty-five percent of your income would be a good start for a donation." Sharon had virtually written a mission statement for our rap group. Now, we needed a name.

After a couple days of brainstorming, we had it: AntiRacist 15. AR-15, for short. It was the term used to describe the police issue version of the M-16, the weapon of choice for the US military and one of many guns popularized by gangsta rap. But antiracism would be our weapon. *Our* AR-15 would be fifteen antiracist principles. These principles came from the organizing work of CWS and CTWO — principles passed down through generations of antiracist organizers from the 1960s and decades before. Now it was our time. Our turn. We reserved the last five principles, 11–15, for future generations. I became Jus Rhyme. Trevor became Raw Potential. Together we became AR-15.

It's Bigger than Hip-Hop

*I'm the product of the each one, teach one/
A soldier leaned over and banged on my ear drum.*

Raw Potential, "Soldiers Anthem"

Increasingly conscious about our identity as white antiracists and our role as hip-hop performers, Raw and I looked for white role models that merged the worlds of hip-hop and antiracism. But

we couldn't find any contemporary white artists who were publicly against racism. It seemed that white hip-hop artists and their fans chose to make race an unmentionable, since focusing on it might draw attention to their already precarious individual and collective position in relation to a black-and-brown-run art form. White hip-hoppers would rather attempt to blend in, citing the utopian promise of hip-hop as a space where "color doesn't matter" and "belonging is based on skills," an ironic inversion of the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Raw and I soon realized that the growing white fan base of hip-hop could effectively create majority white hip-hop scenes, from promoters to performers to fans. So where was the accountability structure for white people in hip-hop? Accountability not only to hip-hop culture—which was birthed and nurtured by predominantly Black and Latino artists—but also to the broader society of people of color and white people who were affected and influenced by popular culture. Despite the utopian promise of hip-hop as a space "beyond race" that filled the minds of many hip-hoppers, the fact remained that after a hip-hop show people returned to their respective communities where race still operated, where white privilege and racial oppression still worked to keep neighborhoods of color more segregated, more policed, and more poorly funded than white neighborhoods. As the rap group dead prez said, "It's bigger than hip-hop."

Raw and I felt a need for consciously antiracist whites to pick up the mic. We wanted to hear the stories and rhymes of how white people negotiated the issue of race in hip-hop. We wanted to hear their understanding of and engagement with larger issues of white privilege, white supremacy, and racism in the United States. Instead of criticizing white hip-hop artists who ignored issues of whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy, we decided to be the example. Following the lead of hip-hop artists such as Public Enemy, KRS-One, dead prez, Toni Blackmon, Immortal Technique, and Invincible, we wanted to walk our talk as community activists. We would tell our story as white antiracist

hip-hoppers in our rap songs. We would demonstrate antiracism with intentional and organized strategies, plans, and practices. We would make the music we wanted to hear.

Two main ideas governed AR-15: "people before profit" and "flip the system." For us, "people before profit" meant that we gave higher priority to our relationships with each other and people in local communities than we gave to making money. Having learned from my experience with the Hip-Hop Co-op, I knew that financial independence was crucial to ensuring that a social change project would last, but that money did not solve everything. I also recognized that the federal government often tied the hands of non-profits, trading tax exempt status for the promise that funds would not be used to lobby or elect policymakers.

For these reasons, we intentionally made AR-15 a for-profit organization, with socially conscious goals and guidelines. We performed shows and sold merchandise as a grassroots fundraising strategy. In this way, we functioned as a radical community organization. To us, "people before profit" represented a different kind of money-making strategy. In the words of rapper Talib Kweli, we considered ourselves "revolutionary entrepreneurs." We used capitalism to fund social change efforts. In our case, this meant funding work against racism. Our business moves were simultaneously political moves. We strategized on how to raise money as we raised consciousness. We also strategized on how we could share our resources — money, space, visibility — with antiracist and racial justice organizations. In this way, we hoped to "flip the system" by using privilege to end privilege.

We donated twenty-five percent of our profits to racial justice organizations led by people of color and shared the stage with these organizers as part of a community panel after our performances. In this way we challenged the white privilege and male privilege that benefited us in business and entertainment. We contributed to community organizations led by the people most affected by racism, and we demonstrated solidarity between white antiracists and organizers of color at our public appearances.

Our political business strategy revolved around touring college campuses and communities with a live hip-hop show and panel featuring local, racial justice organizers of color. With this strategy we created a financially sustainable and politically accountable way for us to challenge white supremacy. Our selling points for AR-15 were also our political commitments. "What does it sound like when two white guys raised on rap speak truth to power? It sounds like AR-15," read our one-sheet. Colleges that booked us could expect "a live hip-hop show with danceable beats and conscious rhymes" and "a Q&A panel with local, racial justice and antiracist organizers."

When a gig was booked, we did research on racial justice campaigns in the community surrounding the area where we would be performing. We contacted the organizers directly and explained our mission and political commitments, and offered to share the space in any way that would be useful to the organization, from fundraising to political education to membership recruitment. In this way AR-15 worked as a bridge between college campuses and local community organizations. Through concerts and panels, we helped build relationships between local academic and activist communities, and acted as a catalyst for antiracist student organizing on campuses nationwide.

We also learned to embrace the contradictions inherent in our work, especially as business owners and entertainers. We were comfortable using our privilege to generate more gigs and visibility for our work, knowing that we were simultaneously generating money and visibility for racial justice organizing. We were fortunate to receive advice from organizers of color and white antiracist organizers since the beginning of our work, but also gave ourselves credit for taking the time to listen. "People before profit" meant, in part, that we regularly checked in with our advisors on our political business strategies, and also made sure that our practices were transparent to the general public.

Embracing contradiction led AR-15 to make inroads into popular media and culture on a broad scale. We pursued media cover

age for every performance and successfully received full-page coverage in local newspapers around the United States, opening discussions about antiracism, white privilege, racial justice organizing led by people of color, and white people's investment in antiracist work. We also intentionally engaged in book, film, and television projects in order to widely disseminate our ideas.

AR-15's introduction to film was among friends. Dr. Shakti Butler, filmmaker, workshopper, and friend of AR-15, produced the film *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible*, which profiled white people who were taking on questions of whiteness, white privilege, racism, and antiracism. Dr. Butler approached Raw and me about filming one of our performances for the documentary. Knowing Dr. Butler's intentions and other people involved in her project made it easy for us to do our thing while the cameras rolled. We were the youngest voices, and the only hip-hop artists featured, and served as an important intergenerational and artistic link in the film.

In 2006, Raw spotted a call for applications for a new show on MTV Network's channel Vh1 called *ego trip's The (White) Rapper Show*. We understood that the concept of *The (White) Rapper Show*, which featured white emcees, was problematic. It carved out a space for white rappers to "make it" in a black-dominated art form, to "make it" in a nation already steeped in material and psychological advantages for white people. But thousands, if not millions, of white kids, hip-hoppers and otherwise, would be watching. The show ended up with three million viewers weekly for eight weeks during its run in early 2007. We hoped to use our appearance on the show to reach and potentially politicize other white hip-hoppers.

Three weeks after I submitted my video application and posted it on the Internet to advertise AR-15, I received a call from one of the executive producers of the show, Sacha Jenkins. He'd seen the video while randomly searching the Internet days before the final casting call in New York.

“We received thousands of applications from white rappers around the nation,” Jenkins told me, “and we want you because of your politics. We don’t have anyone else like you.” I knew Sacha and his crew, *ego trip’s*, work. They were a creative collective of hip-hop writers, editors, and artists — a multiracial group of men of color, including a mix of artists of African-American, Asian-American, Latino, and Jewish descent. They’d written *The Big Book of Racism* and *The Big Book of Rap Lists* and had published a respected underground magazine called *ego trip* in New York in the ‘90s on hip-hop and politics. They had a three-part series on Vh1 called *Race-O-Rama* which dealt with race and hip-hop. It seemed like a perfect fit for AR-15 and I trusted them, if anybody, to represent our brand of antiracist politics.

Vh1 offered to fly me to New York for the final audition call. I would spend two months in a house with nine other white emcees and be tested on my hip-hop skills and knowledge of race, class, and hip-hop culture for the chance to win \$100,000 and the title of the “next great white emcee.” I wasn’t interested in the title or the fame. One hundred thousand dollars would mean a \$25,000 donation to local racial justice organizing, as well as capital to sustain the work of AR-15.

After thousands of auditions and applications for *The (White) Rapper Show*, the casting directors could not come up with a white rapper who wanted to engage issues of race and antiracism the way that I and AR-15 did. I knew that it was not a choice but a responsibility for me to be on the show. I knew my job would be 1) to win the show and 2) to represent antiracism as best I could while on camera. I tried out and I got on.

I didn’t win the show, but I was able to use my air time to bring some attention to antiracist issues and principles. The response that AR-15 received was incredible. Over six thousand people added us as their “friend” on MySpace. Over two hundred people wrote to volunteer to help AR-15 in any way they could. We got hundreds of emails from white people and people of color internationally of all ages, sexualities, classes, and genders

who identified with what we were talking about and encouraged us in our work.

AntiRacist 15 released our debut album, *Stand in Solidarity*, through iTunes in December 2008. We hired a top-level publicist who had worked some of the biggest names in underground and conscious hip-hop. We also began to build the AR-15 team. We hired our first employee, a booking agent, to help grow the AR-15 fan base through touring one venue, one city at a time. We will see what the future holds.

I share this information and this story to show the power of merging popular culture, socially conscious business practices, and antiracism in an accountable and sustainable way, and to testify from firsthand experience about the power of this combination to move people politically. I also share my story and the story of AR-15 to show that the risks involved in putting antiracist ideas and strategies out there, individually and collectively, are worth it.

Let me end by quoting my rap partner, Raw Potential, when I say, “The end of white supremacy is not the end of me / it’s the beginning of we / so come on, let’s get free.”

Resources

- Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere – Los Angeles. <http://www.awarela.org>.
- AntiRacist 15 (AR-15). <http://www.thisisAR15.org>.
- Catalyst Project. <http://www.collectiveliberation.org>.
- Center for Third World Organizing. <http://www.ctwo.org/>.
- Challenging White Supremacy workshop. <http://www.cwsworkshop.org>.
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