

# Going to places that scare me: Personal reflections on challenging male supremacy

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## Part I: "How can I be sexist? I'm an anarchist!"

"What do you mean I'm sexist?" I was shocked. I wasn't a jock, I didn't hate women, I wasn't an evil person. "But how can I be a sexist, I'm an anarchist?" I was anxious, nervous, and my defenses were up. I believed in liberation, for fighting against capitalism and the state. There were those who defended and benefited from injustice and then there's us, right? I was 19 and it was 1993, four years after I got into politics.

Nilou, holding my hand, patiently explained, "I'm not saying you're an evil person, I'm saying that you're sexist and sexism happens in a lot of subtle and blatant ways. You cut me off when I'm talking. You pay more attention to what men say. The other day when I was sitting at the coffee shop with you and Mike, it was like the two of you were having a conversation and I was just there to watch. I tried to jump in and say something, but you both just looked at me and then went back to your conversation. Men in the group make eye contact with each other and act like women aren't even there. The study group has become a forum for men in the group to go on and on about this book and that book, like they know everything and just need to teach the rest of us. For a long time I thought maybe it was just me, maybe what I had to say wasn't as useful or exciting. Maybe I needed to change my approach, maybe I was just overreacting, maybe it's just in my head and I need to get over it. But then I saw how the same thing was happening to other women in the group, over and over again. I'm not blaming you for all of this, but you're a big part of this group and you're part of this dynamic." This conversation changed my life and its challenge is one I continue to struggle with in this essay.

This is an essay for other white, middle class, raised male who identify themselves as male, left/anarchist organizers struggling to build movements for liberation. I want to focus on my own experience of dealing with issues of sexism and anti-sexism from an emotional and psychological centered perspective. I'm choosing this focus because it is personally challenging, it has proved effective in working with men against sexism and because of consistent feedback from women who I organize with not to ignore these aspects of the work. Rona Fernandez of the Youth Empowerment Center in Oakland writes, "Encourage men/gender privileged folks to examine the role of emotions (or lack thereof) in their experience of privilege. I'm saying this because I think men/gender privileged folks also suffer under the system of patriarchy and one of the most dehumanizing ways they suffer is in their inability/difficulty in expressing feelings." Clare Bayard of Anti-Racism for Global Justice puts it pointedly in addressing gender privileged activist men, "It took years of study and hard work to develop your political analysis, why do you think emotional understanding should just come to you, it requires work as well."

This essay looks to the leadership of women, women of color in particular, who write about and organize against patriarchy in society and sexism in the movement. The work of Barbara Smith, Gloria Anzaldua, Ella Baker, Patricia Hill Collins, Elizabeth 'Betita' Martinez, bell hooks and so many others who provide the political foundations, visions and strategies for the work gender privileged white men need to do. Additionally, there are more and more gender privileged men in the movement working to challenge male supremacy. There are thousands of us who recognize that patriarchy exists, that we have privileges as a result, that sexism undermines movement, that women, transgendered folks and genderqueer people have explained it over and over again and said "you all need to talk with each other, challenge each other and figure out what you're all going to do." And yet there are far more white men in the movement who

agree sexism exists in society, perhaps in the movement, but deny their personal involvement in it.

Lisa Sousa, who is part of the San Francisco Independent Media Center and AK Press, told me that in recent discussions she's had in groups about sexism and gender, she's heard the following responses from men: "we are all oppressed", "we should be talking about class", "you are just using gender as a way to attack such and such". When she raised the issue that women leave the majority male group soon after joining, the responses included: "men leave our group too, women are not leaving more, people leave it's a fact in volunteer organizations", "we just need to recruit more women, if women leave, there's more where they came from".

These comments are so familiar and while it is tempting to distance myself from the men who made them, it's important that I remember when I made those comments. As a person who believes in movement building and collective liberation, it's important for me to connect with the people I'm organizing with. As a person with privilege organizing others with privilege, that means learning to love myself enough to be able to see myself in people who I would much rather denounce and distance myself from. It also means being honest about my own experiences.

When I think back to that conversation with Nilou and her explaining how sexism operated. I remember trying not to shutdown and I tried to listen. The word "But" repeated over and over again in my mind, followed by "it was a misunderstanding, I didn't mean it that way, I didn't know you felt like that, I wasn't trying to do that, I would love to see you participate more, I don't understand, no one said they didn't want to hear what you have to say, we all believe in equality, I love you and would never do anything to hurt you, it was circumstances not sexism, I don't know what to do." Looking back ten years later, it's amazing to me how often that same list of "buts" comes running to mind. I'm more like those 'other' men that I'd like to admit.

Nilou spent hours and hours talking with me about sexism. It was tremendously difficult. My politics were shaped by a clearly defined dualistic framework of good and bad. If it was true that I was sexist, then my previous sense of self was in question and my framework needed to shift. Looking back, this was a profoundly important moment in my growth, at the time it felt like shit.

Two weeks later, at our anarchist study group meeting, Nilou raised her hand. "Sexism is happening in this group." She listed the examples she had told me. The defensive reaction that I experienced was now amplified by the 5 other men in the room. Other women started speaking up. They too had experienced these dynamics and they were tired of taking it. The men were shocked and defensive; we began listing all the reasons why claims of sexism were simply misunderstandings, misperceptions. With genuine sincerity we said, "But we all want revolution."

After the meeting, the woman who had been in the group the longest sat me down. April had been part of the United Anarchist Front for well over a year and she too gave me example after example of sexist behavior. Men in the group didn't trust her to handle responsibilities, even if they were newer. She wasn't looked to for information about the group, nor were her opinions asked for on political questions. Others joined our conversation and men continued to challenge the assertion of sexism. April put forward an example that she had just clearly explained to me and men denied it as a misunderstanding. A few minutes later, I restated the exact same example given by April and this time it was met with begrudging agreement from other men that perhaps in this case it was sexist. April called it out immediately, I hadn't even fully realized what happened. I looked at April as she broke it down. April's words coming from my mouth were heard and taken seriously. There it is. I didn't really want to believe that sexism was happening, but now I saw it. I felt horrible, like a kick to the stomach. Nilou and April

desperately trying to get us to agree that there was a problem. How could this be happening when I hadn't intended it to? I was scared to say anything.

Two months later, I was sitting in a men's caucus silently. We didn't know what to talk about. More specifically, we were scared, nervous, dismissive and didn't put energy into creating a useful discussion about sexism. Nilou and April had suggested we spend a day talking about sexism and we'd start with caucuses. "What are the women talking about", we asked ourselves. When the group re-united the discussion quickly turned into women defending themselves, defending their understandings of their own experiences. I felt horrible and struggled to believe what I was hearing. I felt completely clueless about how to move in a useful way. Several people of all genders left early in tears, disillusioned and overwhelmed by powerlessness. My Mom had observed part of our discussion and asked to speak. "You're all taking on enormous issues and these issues are hard. It makes me happy to see you all at such young ages seriously talk about it. It shows that you really believe in what you're fighting for and it's a conversation that doesn't happen in one day." I could feel the heaviness in the room as we looked at each other, many with tears in their eyes. It was clear that challenging sexism was far more than learning how to make eye contact with women in group discussions, it was challenging a system of power that operates on the political, economic, social, cultural, psychological level and my internalized superiority was but the tip of an iceberg built on exploitation and oppression.

## **Part II: "What historical class am I in?"**

"Do you know what class you're in?" Being a white, middle class, male taking Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies classes for all seven years that I was in school, I was asked that question a lot. In a Black Women's history class, someone offered to help me figure out where I needed to go. I understood why people asked me and I understood that the question wasn't just about class as in a room, but class as in a social category in a white supremacist, patriarchal, heterosexist, capitalist society hell bent on maintaining control. I knew what class I was coming from and I knew that my relationship to Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies was complicated. I knew some people didn't want me in those classes and I knew that my very presence made others feel uncomfortable. And many of the teachers and some of the students told me that they were glad I was there. It helped me see how complex these struggles are and that there aren't easy answers.

I went to community college for four years and then San Francisco State for three. The majority of my teachers were women and people of color. I had grown up in a generally segregated community and had few role models, authority figures, mentors or teachers who were people of color. What I read and studied in college - women of color feminism, Black liberation struggle, Chicano/a history, colonialism from the perspective of American Indian history, labor history and organizing, queer theory, anti-racism from the perspective of immigrant and refugee women - had a profound impact on me. However, having people of color and women of color in particular grade me, instruct me and guide me was incredibly important to my development on psychological levels that I wasn't necessarily aware of at the time. Having people of color and women with progressive/left/radical politics leading my educational development was a subversive shifting of the power relationships that wasn't mentioned on the syllabus but was central to my studies. Learning in majority women and people of color settings also had a deep impact, because it was the first time that I had ever been in situations where I was a numerical minority on the basis of race or gender. Suddenly race and gender weren't just issues amongst many, they were central aspects of how others experienced, viewed and understood the world. The question I sometimes thought silently to myself, "why do you always have to talk about race and gender", was flipped on its head; "how can you not think about race and gender all the time?"

Over time I developed a strategy for school. I'd stay pretty quiet for the first month or so of class, pushing myself to really listen. In the first week of class I'd say something to clearly identify myself as opposed to white supremacy and patriarchy (sometimes capitalism) as systems of oppressions that I benefit from, so people knew where I was coming from. This was generally met with shock, excitement and a sign of relief. I participated in dialogue more as I tried to develop trust through listening and being open to the information, histories and stories. While this strategy incorporated anti-sexist goals, it was also about presenting myself in a certain way.

The other part of the strategy was to participate and raise questions and other perspectives in my Western Civics, Political Science and other white, male dominated classes. People of color and women I worked with were clear that this was something they felt I had a responsibility to do. "They expect it from us and dismiss us as angry, emotional, stuck in victim mode. You need to use your privilege to get heard by white people and men." The goal wasn't to necessarily change the perspective of the Professor but to open up space for critical dialogue about race, class and gender with the other students who were mostly white and often mostly male. This was extremely useful learning as well, because frequently I came across as cold, angry, self-righteous or unsure of myself, none of which were particularly helpful. If my goal is to yell at men and white people to alleviate my own guilt and shame for being white and male, then perhaps that's a useful tactic. If my goal is to actually work with folks to embrace anti-racism and feminism, then I needed to be more complex and real with myself.

I grew up believing that I was a lone individual on a linear path of progression with no past. History was a set of dates and events that, while interesting to learn, had little or no relationship to my life. I was just a person, doing my own thing. Then I started to learn that being white, male, middle class, able-bodied, mostly heterosexual and a citizen of the United States meant that not only did I have privileges, but that I was rooted in history. I was a part of social categories - white, male, hetero, middle class. These are all groups that have history and are shaped by history. Part of being in those groups means being deemed normal, the standard which all others are judged. My images of just being "my own person" were now joined by images of slave ships, indigenous communities burned to the ground, families destroyed, violence against women, white ruling class men using white poor men to colonize white women, peoples of color and the Earth.

I remember sitting in an African American women's history class, one of two white people, one of two men, the other 15 people Black women and I'm the only white man. We were studying slavery, Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching campaign and the systematic raping of enslaved African women by white male slave owners - millions of rapes, sanctioned and protected by law. Simultaneously hundreds of Black men were lynched by white men who claimed to be protecting white women from Black male rapists. I sat there with my head down and I could feel history in my nauseated stomach and in my eyes filling with tears. Who were those white men and how did they feel about themselves? I was scared to look into the faces of the Black women in that room. "While there is mixing of races because of love," the Professor said, "our people are so many shades of Black because of generation after generation of institutionalized rape." Who am I and how do I feel about myself?

### **Part III: "this struggle is my struggle"**

"I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power." - Robin Morgan from the introduction of *Sisterhood is Powerful*

"Face your fear/ the fear is you/ you cannot run/ you cannot hide/ the fear is you/ in the end, what have you done/ can it be true that the damage you bring is greater than the good you

make/ face your fear/ embrace your fear/ the pain inside is the truth inside/ let it out/ let it out/  
when the socialization is gone/ what is left/ the fear is more real than the hope you create/  
where will you go/ what will you do/ let it all go cuz it's already you/ can I move forward/ can I  
move forward/ open it all up/ you know it's all true/ the hope is you" -white boy emo-hardcore

I have and do go through periods of hating myself, feeling guilty, afraid. I know in my heart that I had a role in liberation struggle and I know through practice that there was useful work that I could do, but still the question haunts me, "Am I just fooling myself?" That is, am I fooling myself to believe that I am more useful than problematic? To be clear, I think Robin Morgan's quote is useful to struggle with, but not to get stuck on. I grew up believing that I was entitled to everything. I could go anywhere and do anything and wherever I went I would be wanted/ needed. Patriarchy and heterosexism also taught me, in subtle and blatant ways, that I was entitled to women's bodies, that I was entitled to take up space and put my ideas and thoughts out there whenever I wanted to, without consideration for others. This is a very different process of socialization than most other people in this society who are told to shut up, keep it to themselves, hide who they really are, get out of the way and to never forget how lucky they are to be allowed here to begin with. I think it's healthy to not assume you're always needed, to learn to share space and power and to work with others to realize the role that you in fact can and should play. What is unhealthy is how rare it is for gender privileged men to talk with each other about these issues and support each other through the process.

Laura Close, an organizer with Students for Unity in Portland, discussed this in her essay, "Men in the Movement". She writes, "Every day young men wake up and decide to get involved in activism. Often they encounter language and discussions about their male privilege that alienate and silence them without anyone actually supporting them to decolonize their minds. Consider what it would be like for ally men to take our younger/newer guys out to coffee and talk about his own experiences as a guy in the movement. Talk about what you've learned! Consider what it would mean for men to cheer on other men who are making progress towards becoming allies." She put out a challenge for men to mentor other men engaging in anti-sexist work.

I knew she was right, but the idea of really doing it made me nervous. Sure, I had plenty of close gender privileged friends, but to make a political commitment to develop relationships with other men and open up with them about my own struggles with sexism seemed terrifying. Terrifying because I could handle denouncing patriarchy and calling out other men from time to time, but to be honest about my own sexism, to connect political analysis/practice to my own emotional/psychological process, to be vulnerable?

Pause. Vulnerable to what? Remember when I said that in Women's Studies classes I would identify myself as opposed to patriarchy, white supremacy and sometimes capitalism? The level of consciousness of feminism, let alone political commitment to it amongst most gender privileged men in college was so low that just reading one feminist book and saying "I recognize that sexism exists" meant I was way advanced. While the level of consciousness and commitment is generally higher in activist circles, it's not that much higher. I have had two major struggles going on most of my political life - genuinely wanting to be down for the cause and feeling a deep level of fear that I wasn't coming anywhere close to that commitment. It's far easier for me to make declarations against patriarchy in classrooms, political meetings and in writing than it is to practice feminist politics in my personal relationships with friends, family and partners. This is particularly difficult when political men, like myself, make so little time to talk with each other about this.

What am I afraid to admit? That I struggle everyday to really listen to voices I identify as women's. I know my mind wanders quicker. I know that my instant reaction is take men's opinions more seriously. I know that when I walk into rooms full of activists I instantly scan the room and divide people into hierarchies of status (how long they've been active, what groups

they've been part of, what they've written and where it's been published, who are their friends). I position myself against them and feel the most competitive with men. With those I identify as women, the same status hierarchies are tallied, but sexual desirability enters my hetero mindset. What is healthy sexual attraction and desire and how does it relate to and survive my training to systematically sexualize women around me? This gets amplified by the day-to-day reality that this society presents women as voiceless bodies to serve hetero-male desire, we know that. But what does it mean for how I communicate with my partners who are women and who I organize with? How does it translate into how I make love, want love, express love, conceptualize love? I'm not talking about whether or not I go down on my partner or say I love you, I'm talking about whether or not I truly value equality in our relationships over getting off on a regular basis. The fact that my partners have provided far more emotional and financial support than I have for them. I'm talking about having almost never zoned out on what a gender privileged man is saying because I thought about him sexually. I've repeatedly found myself zoned out thinking about sex while listening to women speak who are organizers, leaders, visionaries, my friends, my comrades. I'm all about crushes, healthy sexual desire and pro-sex politics, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about power, entitlement and women's leadership marginalized by hetero male desire. I wish I didn't get defensive on a regular basis, but I do. I get frustrated and shut down conversations about how power operates between my partner and I. I get defensive about how the world interacts with us and how that influences our dynamics. I know that there are times when I say, "ok, I'll think more about it" when really I'm thinking, "leave me alone".

This isn't a confessional so that I will be forgiven. This is an on-going struggle to be honest about how deeply shaped I am by patriarchy and these systems of oppression. Patriarchy tears me up. I have so many fears about whether or not I'm capable of being in healthy loving relationships. Fears about whether or not I can be genuinely honest and connected with myself so that I can then open up and share with others. Fears about organizing to genuinely build and share power with others. The scars of patriarchy are on every single person I interact with and when I push myself to see it, to really look and take the time to think about it, I'm filled with sadness and rage. bell hooks, in her book *All About Love*, writes that love is impossible where the will to dominate exists. Can I genuinely love? I want to believe. I want to believe in a political practice for gendered privileged men forged in opposition to patriarchy. I do believe that as we struggle against oppression, as we practice our commitments, we actualize and express our humanity. There are moments, experiences and events when I see patriarchy challenged by all genders and it shows what we can do. I believe that this is our lives' work and that at its core it's a fight for our lives. And in this fight we realize that even in the face of these systems of oppression, our love, beauty, creativity, passion, dignity and power grows. We can do this.

### **Post script: "we must walk to make the struggle real"**

While it's necessary to get into the hard emotional and psychological issues, there is also an endless supply of concrete steps we can take to challenge male supremacy.

An organizer working on Palestinian Liberation wrote me saying, "some things gender privileged people can do: offer to take notes in meetings, make phone calls, find meeting locations, do childcare, make copies and other less glamorous work. Encourage women and gender oppressed people in the group to take on roles men often dominate (e.g. tactical, mc-ing and event, media spokespeople). Ask specific women if they want to do it and explain why you think they would be good (don't tokenize). Pay attention to who you listen to and check yourself on power-tripping."

She is one of hundreds of thousands of women and gender oppressed people who have outlined clear, concrete action steps that people with gender privilege can take to challenge

sexism and work for liberation. There is an abundant supply of work to be done. The larger issue for me has been, "what will it take for me to actually do that work, to actually prioritize it and follow through on it?" In addition to men talking with each other as discussed above, we also need to hold each other accountable to follow through. There are a lot of heavy emotional issues that come up in doing this work and it's critical that we help keep each other from getting lost and help each other take concrete steps forward. Asking ourselves, "how does our work support the leadership of women?" "How am I working to share power in my organizing?" "How am I making myself open to hearing feedback from gender oppressed people about my work?" Each of these questions generates next steps to make it happen. Examining and challenging privilege is a necessary aspect of our work, but it's not enough. Men working with other men to challenge male supremacy is just one of many, many strategies needed to develop women-led, multiracial, anti-racist, feminist, queer and trans liberationist, working class based, anti-capitalist movements for collective liberation. We know that sexism will work to undermine movement building. The question is, what work will we do to help build movement and in the process expand our ability to love ourselves and others.

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#### Further Reading

- Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*
- bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*
- Paul Kivel, *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence that Tears Our Lives Apart*
- Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*
- Barbara Smith, *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*