There is not now, and perhaps has never been, a BIPOC experience or a BIPOC community. Many will continue to inhabit communities defined by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines in the wake of Race. Many others already live in far more promiscuous relationships, in non-normative communities that defy easy classifications of identity. Regardless of where we find ourselves, *we will need a shared ethics of conviviality and conspiracy: of how to live well with each other and how to fight together.*

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Follow the Fires

Insurgency Against Identity

By Haraami

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1 Bergman, Carla and Nick Montgomery. " Beyond the Sad Comforts & Stale Air of Radicalism" Ill Will, 2018.

2 Táíwò, Olúfémi O. “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference.” *The Philosopher,* vol. 108, no. 4. 2020.

Follow the Fires

Insurgency Against Identity

By Haraami

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Cover photo by Anonymous, Tucson, Arizona.

The following essay was adapted from a talk that has been given in slightly different forms at three gatherings in three different regions of the U.S. in the last six months. It emerges from the broader efforts of some nonwhite revolutionaries based in and around the Southwest who are using talks, workshops, and discussions in an attempt to combat liberal and otherwise counter-revolutionary forms of identity politics which present themselves as militant and anarchist.

Here, Haraami offers a diagnosis of how counter-insurgent forms of identity politics leverage scenes and milieus as incubators of insular and fickle social competition and calls upon revolutionaries to focus instead on fidelity to uprisings and practical questions of revolution.

—*Living & Fighting*

This is a doing, not a being—or a doing being totally out of control. We cannot stop thinking about the composition of our movements and how to bring new sectors of society into this insurgent process–of how to generalize insurgency particularly among the colonized. But we cannot be solely obsessed with who is doing something at the exclusion of what they are doing. Such an insurgent process will not reinforce the identitarian lines we have inherited, but will blow them apart and enable new, unimagined forms of relation, affinity, and communal life unbound by the violent fictions of identity we have inherited from the colonial world. In this crumbling world there are still possibilities to be found wherever people are experimenting with this process, regardless of their particular identities.

There is not now, and perhaps has never been, a BIPOC experience or a BIPOC community. Many will continue to inhabit communities defined by ethnic, linguistic, and cultural lines in the wake of Race. Many others already live in far more promiscuous relationships, in non-normative communities that defy easy classifications of identity. Regardless of where we find ourselves, we will need a shared ethics of conviviality and conspiracy: of how to live well with each other and how to fight together.

Everywhere people are building fires—fires for burning down the infrastructures of this world and the identities ascribed to them, fires for gathering around in new forms of communal life with shared sustenance, story, and song. To follow the horizon of insurgent anti-colonialism, follow the fires.

make possible. Each step we take in this process will be terrifyingly exhilarating and painfully transformative. Moving in a mass crowd, clashing with the police, destroying property, deliberating in mass assemblies, growing and preparing food at scale, distributing guerrilla medicine–after every experience that pushes us closer towards this horizon, we will find our ideas, passions, and habits fundamentally altered.

This process requires us to step into our own power—the power which we fear and resent in others and ourselves. We cannot know what we will become at the outset. We must embrace this radical uncertainty, this risk, to dive headfirst into the unknown without the comfortable guarantees that the Activists™ would offer us. We do so because we know that what we will find is far more joyful, powerful, survivable than anything this world and the milieus parasitically dependent upon it have to offer. If we are serious about this, we could make white people irrelevant to what we are doing.

We feel new capacities growing in ourselves, and the growth of these capacities connect us to friends and co-conspirators the world over. By rediscovering our own resources, traditions, and skills to bring to the war against this world, we escape the pits of our resentment of what the white radicals have. We become a force capable of organizing our own needs, building our own material base, no longer dependent on others. We lose ourselves in the swell of the mass and rediscover other ways of being. Echoing Assata—echoing Marx—we have nothing to lose but our chains.

c

To follow this horizon will blow apart the identities we have inherited, enabling new forms of relation, affinity, and communal life unbound by the violent fictions of identity we have inherited from the colonial world. Abolishing not just our identities, but a world that could produce such identities, would mean the communization of all things, the seizure of the means of our collective life, and the reforging of the social relations we will need to animate them. This process proceeds in slow, molecular forms in daily life and explodes rapidly during ruptures and crises. We must turn our attention away from the question of identity and leadership towards the question of our practices, infrastructures, movements, and how they can further the insurrections against the global reign of racial capitalism.

Unlearn the identity and ally politics you learned at colleges and non-profits, or from people who work at colleges and nonprofits. They are tools of counterinsurgency and make you really fucking annoying.

—Wendy Trevino

1

BIPOC radicalism is an imprecise name for a number of slippery dynamics and tendencies that foster repressive habits, discourses, and patterns of acting in our movements. It does not name a coherent political identity or bloc, some external force or conspiracy to be countered, but is an element of the social landscape of counterinsurgency that can flow through all of us in different forms and combinations across time and place. Where it emerges, it suffocates and snuffs out the fires that sustain militant culture.

BIPOC radicalism is not synonymous with any non-white radicalism, radicalisms that take seriously the question of race at political, strategic, personal, and communal levels, or radicalisms drawing on non-Western ways of being and lineages of resistance. It names a particular mix of elements of identitarian politics–essentialism, a rhetoric of safety and vulnerability, and a politics of deference–with tendencies of more rigid radicalisms[1]–moralism, destructive critique, internal policing, and the formation of enclosed milieus bound by an insular shared language. BIPOC radicalism shares many characteristics with previous waves of radicalism emerging out of queer and feminist subcultures, and often overlaps with them, though the specificity of racial identity fosters unique dynamics and obstacles. While it is most often concerned and speaks for the category of "BIPOC," it can also speak for any related subcategory at any given moment–Black, Brown, Indigenous, Palestinian, immigrant, and so on.

It might otherwise be recognized as "BIPOC radical liberalism," "identitarian or racial authoritarianism," "radical racial essentialism," or "racial identitarian counterinsurgency" (even when enacted by genuine participants of a movement). While each name emphasizes different aspects of this tendency, and each has its own limitations, I use "BIPOC radicalism" to emphasize two things: first, how this politics coalesces around a particular set of identities under the umbrella of "BIPOC" and the taxonomic view of racial identity this relies on. Second, how it claims to represent genuine radical politics, perhaps even the most radical, in ways that make it harder to confront than its more ideologically liberal counterparts. At the intersection of "BIPOC" and "radicalism" emerges a set of ideas that claims to represent the most radical faction of non-white political actors, and thus to represent anti-colonial insurgency itself.

Whether these tendencies manifest as internalized policing of other participants in a movement or our self-cannibalizing impulses towards conflict and critique, they act as force multipliers for the actively repressive maneuvers of our enemies in the state and ruling classes. In the name of liberation they smuggle back in the very framework of racial identity, one of the originary moves of counterinsurgency that inaugurated the modern/colonial world, that turned life-worlds and relations into populations and bodies, subjects or objects of power and violence. Disguised in the mask of radicalism, these tendencies exploit real contradictions and fault lines in our movements in self-repressive ways. Most importantly, BIPOC radicalism is repressive of those of us named as "BIPOC," locking us in a cycle of impotence that stifles the growth of autonomous anti-colonial insurgency.

2

BIPOC radicalism has not overcome the fatal limitations of (white) radicalisms, and often intensifies or replays the same dramas. It is not a movement connected to the autonomous self organization of the colonized, but a scene within a scene. It is defined by impotent rage against the existing scene and resentment of others for things that we do not feel capable of

Dis-Orienting Ourselves

BIPOC radicalism does not have a true hegemony over the identities it claims to represent. Throughout previous strains of radicalism and waves of insurgency, we find currents that actually undermine this identitarianism with a politics of affinity, complicity, and autonomous militant action at the strategic levels necessary to end the colonial world. We must find our ways back into these currents to push past the limits we currently face. Some preliminary proposals on how we might do so:

a

Follow the horizon of insurgent anti-colonialism, not identities and leaders. Anti-colonialism is a loose, imperfect term, but one I want to salvage from the wreckage of the twentieth century. Tearing away the baggage of representation, nationalism, and leadership that steered the anti-colonial movements into authoritarian post-colonial capitalism, we can see the living thread of anti-colonialism in the actual self-organization of the colonized and globally oppressed. This thread runs back through the aborted, partial revolutions of national liberation, tapping into the legacies of masses of colonized and oppressed people remaking their lives and transforming themselves in the process. The growing sequence of insurrections against the state and capital, the toppling of elites local and transnational, is where this force continues to live.

This insurgency appears as hydras, as Acephale, as masses and crowds, camps and riots, assemblies and networks. Everywhere there appears a leader, a spokesperson, a representative, a center, we can see the creep of counterinsurgency. Those dedicated to this insurgency must participate in its self-defense from these forces and frustrate the attempts of those who would recapture the insurgency in the terrain of identity, legibility, visibility.

b

Insurgent anti-colonialism must hollow out and de-center the center, and decenter ourselves. It is a process that is not about us and our individual selves, but a total remaking of the world and our subjectivity. Anti-colonialism will require us to think, feel, desire, and be differently. We should not confuse our current selves for the selves that revolutionary processes

ourselves. Limited to a critique of others, BIPOC radicalism avoids the task of tracing a positive vision of what a revolutionary process looks like, of how to overcome the limits that each cycle of struggles and uprisings hit.

This tendency implicitly or explicitly adopts language—"directly impacted," "centering," "safety," "allyship"—coming from university and nonprofit lineages, from politics meant to protect the middle class (including the BIPOC middle class or class-aspirational). BIPOC radicalism has inherited a political language that is a product of the limits and defeats of the revolutionary possibilities of the twentieth century—the counterinsurgency doctrines that dismembered revolutionary movements globally and the diversion of the revolutionary self-organization of the colonized into the designs of national bourgeoisies that built the current era of multi-national capital and authoritarian states. While these political frameworks previously belonged more exclusively to liberals, the post-2020 explosion of the Instagram-Infographic-Industrial-Complex has produced a new wave of BIPOC radicals who mix this more liberal identitarian framework with more anarchistic political positions on non-profits, the state, and mutual aid.

Just like other radical scenes, this scene produces an insular language and framework for acceptable activity that actually closes it off to the unruly messiness of autonomy and self-organization. The foreclosure of a revolutionary horizon, the erasure of the real insurgent practices animating previous cycles of struggle, and an inability to overcome the limits faced by these struggles, have led to a retreat to the interpersonal at the expense of all else. Anti-racism becomes a self-help politics for trauma-obsessed BIPOC and guilty white people alike.

Individual people of color conflate their own desires, opinions, and fears with those of all BIPOC. They then conflate those assumptions with political positions, with the milieu giving the false impression that these feelings are generally felt. Conflicts which are fundamentally about the ethics by which we relate to each other or the strategies we pursue in our conspiracies are misrepresented as simple identitarian divides. BIPOC radicals become absolved of their own complicity or missteps in these dynamics and

weaponize authenticity politics to erase or undermine other "BIPOC" who take contradicting positions that undermine their representational claims. In its most destructive forms, the strongest proponents of such politics cause the self-destruction of the movements they engage in through the imposition of their rigid political doctrine and their habits of conflict and call-out, smothering any of the possibilities that they overlooked in their narrow analysis.

3

BIPOC radicalism produces a shared unhappy community of critique that is ultimately unsustainable. It erases and represses the inherent heterogeneity and dissent that lurk within each political identity, which eventually resurface as fault lines and sources of further disappointment.

Many BIPOC spaces are defined almost in their entirety by critiquing or distinguishing themselves from white people, white leftists, white anarchists. This shared critique produces a false sense of shared politics and safety. While BIPOC caucuses present themselves as representing some shared experience or identity, their framing already self-selects who shows up—those who already align with an identitarian frame show up, and those of us interested in something different stay at a distance, stay quiet, or are acting elsewhere.

Defining oneself by critique is an easy cop-out, because critique is an easy muscle. We are trained in it by a spectacular and social network-mediated society that teaches us to experience our agency through the very fact of expressing correct ideas–the practice of critique itself as power in a world where we are separated from our collective agency. Critique is easy because it reinforces our distance from the messiness of a situation where we are challenged to experiment within a set of practical limits. Critique enables us to easily judge and categorize people and events in a moral framework of good or bad.

The cruelest irony is that, once the easy target of the white person is removed from the picture, these spaces usually devour themselves in vicious cycles of critique and conflict. The conflicts range in content: fights over classifying if someone is white or "white-passing" frequently rehash the

If we understand race as a modality of governance that imposes social roles, distributions of labor, and categories of being and non-being, then BIPOC radicalism is a managerial inverse of this form of governance. Using guilt, control and suppression of unruly affinities, and the purging of dissident desires, it manipulates the terrain of a movement. That this gesture is a response to a sense of powerlessness in the face of the colonial world does not make it liberatory.

The unfortunate truth is: the BIPOC radical who is in the room may not have good ideas about strategy and tactics, and should not necessarily be listened to. They may be projecting their own fears and anxieties onto a situation. Perhaps they don't actually have the same "lived experience" of exploitation or repression as others in the room. Most importantly, they are not the only people we should be developing our politics from. If we only listen to the BIPOC radicals in these insular rooms, we will ignore the actually existing forces of anti-colonial insurrection we can learn the most from.

Do you listen to the anxious BIPOC radical telling people to not act autonomously, or to the Black rioters smashing cars and shooting fireworks at the police? Do you listen to the middle class diasporic protest organizers whose solidarity is restrained by their own class position and anxieties? Do you listen to the anti-colonial militants who may not be in the room who have advocated more insurgent strategies—including those in the global south calling for escalating, militant solidarity? Do you notice when there actually isn't a unified BIPOC voice, a BIPOC leadership, in the room you're in? Who is in most need of your solidarity? How will you choose?

serve them and cater to their needs. Rather than recognizing the unique resources and opportunities at their disposal and forming strategies to actualize their own visions, the BIPOC radicals are reduced to a position of impotent dissatisfaction with what others are doing.

6

BIPOC radicalism's politics of deference[2] runs counter to the necessity of principled co-struggle, critical reflection, and internationalism. The invocations to "center BIPOC," and to "follow BIPOC leadership" are constant in these milieus. In practice, this usually means to take whichever BIPOC are present in the room, are vocalizing a particular critique, as unquestionable authorities. To politically disagree is to invalidate the "lived experience" of others.

Undoubtedly, political spaces must be responsive to the feelings, desires, and needs of the people in them. But this responsiveness should be guided by principles, strategy, and politics in a spirit of collective struggle and mutual critique. It cannot be led by the purely interpersonal response of people-pleasing and uncritically following charismatic leaders—and there are many such charismatic anarcho-influencers and petty identitarian narcissists among the BIPOC radicals and their associated army of white allies.

For the guilt-ridden (whites and BIPOC alike), this response is an easy palliative—it requires one to not develop one's own politics and principles, to not study and experiment with insurgent practices, to not be at risk of political conflict with others. Often "listen to BIPOC" ends up being a shorthand for listening to those who already agree with you or validate your own liberalism, risk aversion, and comfortable activism. Best case, you end up with a sea of passive activists who are unable to take initiative or develop their own strategies for pushing the horizon of revolution. Worst case, you drive masses of new activists into manipulation by self-appointed and self-interested leaders who are practiced at weaponizing this guilt to silence critique, pushing people through an activist meat grinder that leaves people burned out and disillusioned.

logics of race science, with BIPOC reaching for their calipers to guard entrance to their safe space; fragmentation on intra-identity lines of class and class-aspirations, gender, sexuality, disability, create even more insular scenes in an identitarian fractal; conflicts over politics and strategy in the context of specific, real struggles reveal our lack of affinity. Even the framework of BIPOC anarchist is limiting, as even the anarchist identity is full of its own internal fragmentations on personal, theoretical, and strategic questions—social anarchist, insurrectionary, nihilist, autonomous communist.

When the dust settles, the "BIPOC" spaces collapse and the "white anarchist" spaces remain, and we are left with the choice between burnout or finding possibility amidst complexity.

4

BIPOC radicalism converts racial identity into a moralistic category rather than a political one. This identitarian moralism offers a simplistic framework for judging events and organizations on the basis of what they are believed to be and the identities they are composed of rather than what they are doing. The reflexive critique of "this space/tactic/action/ideology is white" in actuality tells us little about the object of its critique. Describing what a body or collection of bodies is, particularly in terms of the social identities inscribed onto it, tells us little about what we desire, what we can do, what we can build or destroy as part of the struggle against the colonial world. Animated by a search for the perfect space with an idealized racial composition, where the "real BIPOC revolutionary subject" will supposedly be present, we are driven away from the messiness of reality: that we make revolution in the conditions we find ourselves in, with the people who show up, not the conditions we wish we had.

This identitarian moralism locks in identity as a static positionality which one can never engage, destabilize, or escape, trapping white people and BIPOC alike. Judgment of spaces and actions on the basis of the real or perceived racial composition of a space, or assumptions about the "privileged" nature of militancy, closes us off to the possibilities and agency to be found in such spaces—whether mass actions, convergences, infrastructure projects, or militant networks. Hand-wringing about the

supposedly privileged nature of militancy does not negate the necessity of militant activity such as blockades, occupations, riots, sabotage, and more. The self-righteousness of this position participates in the real erasure of principled anti-colonial militants of color who engage in these spaces or actions.

Identitarian moralism threatens to restrain the promiscuous and powerful affinities that flow across positionalities and replace them with a rigidly boxed-in identitarian non-affinity. Expectations around "centering" betray an investment in the logic of visibility, which cannot comprehend something as insurgent if the right identities are not represented in positions believed to be authoritative. This expectation, on the one hand, exposes those precisely misunderstood as "the most vulnerable" to higher risks of visibility and the higher labors of leadership. On the other, it locks us in to speak first as and for the identities scripted on to us, rather than to speak as and for our desires and capabilities. The obsession with our being, with who we are presently in this world, with listing identities and privileges, suppresses our imagination and experimentation with what we can become beyond this world, what we can become in the struggle against this world. Attempts to capture a snapshot of our position misses our movement, our constant motion towards something else. We become so focused on seeing and naming the walls of the cage we are in that we reinforce it, losing focus of the ways we escape, fight, shake, and break the cage.

5

BIPOC radicalism defines identity through victimization and vulnerability instead of agency and action and remains trapped in a negative cycle of powerlessness. When "BIPOC" are invoked it is usually to name some sort of injury or risk: "BIPOC are at higher risk of arrest and face worse repression," "BIPOC don't feel centered or heard in this space." This framing is especially potent in activating the guilt of well-meaning white radicals, who then self-authorize to fight on behalf of their "BIPOC" allies and wreck other spaces they are in in the name of the White Guilt Crusade.

When the category of "BIPOC" is invoked, it is overwhelmingly demobilizing. Fears of vulnerability lead to risk aversion, peace policing, and restricting our activities to purely non-confrontational activities—

romanticized community and mutual aid events without teeth, spectacularized rallies, and the occasional heavily planned non-violent direct action. Anything that breaks out of this rigid mold—spontaneous revolt, autonomous actions at a large march, decentralized activity, unplanned or breakaway marches, the emergent chaos of insurgency—are stigmatized for "putting others at risk." The realities of repression are reduced to simplistic, decontextualized, immaterialist check-boxes of power and privilege mapping onto pre-defined racial identities, regardless of the actual amount of repression experienced—surveillance, door knocks, interrogation, financial instability, incarceration. Strategic conversations about risk, courage, and repression are replaced with blanket statements about safety that smother the fires of resistance; we become afraid of other people exercising an agency and autonomy that we deny ourselves.

BIPOC radicalism declaws its resistance under the framework of victimization and vulnerability, yet offers impotent critique when their organizing is inevitably co-opted by non-profits. The cooptation is no accident, but is built into the limitations of BIPOC radicalism. The milieus steeped in this politics inherit much of their organizing framework not from an anarchic ethos of self-organization, nor the lessons learned in the chaotic mess of the mass revolts of the past decades, but from an Activist™(milieu rooted in specialized frameworks of heavily planned protests, visibility and spectacle, and an abstract notion of community building or mutual aid. All of these forms of activity are easily adopted by non-profits, which often can simply out-organize the BIPOC radicals with their well-resourced networks and media capacities. By exorcising the spectre of unregulated resistance, BIPOC radicalism leaves itself completely open to an endless cycle of cooptation and impotent critique.

Once demobilized, declawed, and co-opted, all BIPOC radicalism has left is a politics of complaint that is perversely dependent upon the white radical milieu it critiques. Critiques of actions, convergences, and events for not meeting the milieu's political standards mask an underlying powerlessness and dependence; BIPOC radicals have given up the the autonomous self-organization that would give them the power to fight and build on their own terms and are reduced to making demands and registering grievances of the white radicals. The white radical milieu ultimately maintains its central position and power as the BIPOC radicals have given up their own power entirely in their expectation that white radical allies