

Unraveling Violence . . . On Revolutionary Terms:

An Interview with INCITE!'s Andrea J. Ritchie

By Celina R. De Leon

Andrea J. Ritchie has been a member of the INCITE! collective since 2003. INCITE! is a national activist organization of U.S.-based feminists of color working to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, dialogue, and grassroots organizing. A progressive lesbian feminist of African Caribbean descent who has worked as an advocate and researcher in the women's movement for fifteen years, Ritchie learned about INCITE! while researching law-enforcement violence against women of color.

"INCITE! was the only organization that I found in my research that actually had an analysis of state violence against women of color in the context of responses to interpersonal violence, communities, and on the streets," said Ritchie in a spring 2007 interview, during which we spoke about INCITE!'s latest anthologies: *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* and *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex* (both published by South End Press).

CDL: Your chapter in *Color of Violence*, "Law-Enforcement Violence Against Women of Color," proves with extensive evidence that U.S. law enforcement has a history of physically and sexually assaulting women and transgender people of color. Yet it is straight men of color who are often perceived to be the only targets of law enforcement. Why do you think this perception is so prevalent?

AR: I put forward a few suggestions as to why we consistently erase or subsume the experiences of women of color in racial-justice movements, one of which is that in order to confront state violence against women of color we would have to confront violence against women of color by members of our own communities. If we start talking about police raping people, then we might actually start talking about members of the community raping people. That's something that happened, for instance, in Bushwick [Brooklyn], as described by Sista II Sista in their piece in the anthology—when they started talking about sexual harassment of young women on the street by law-enforcement officers, it led to a deeper conversation about sexual harassment and violence against young women in the community. It was a really good way for young women to start that conversation in their community because people were already wanting to resist police brutality and were outraged by the sexual harassment of young women of color by the police in their community. It provided an entry point for young women to say, "It's not just the cops that are doing this to us. You do it to us when we walk down the street."

I think that women of color's experiences with violence also appear sometimes to be a seamless web. It starts out in the morning when you go put out your garbage—you get sexually harassed, and then it can go on throughout the day by family, community members, and state actors in various forms. For many of us in racial-justice movements, violence by state actors doesn't stand out from all the violence women of color experience. But I think state violence is an important one to focus on, and [we need] to look at the links between that and interpersonal and community violence. If an officer is committing violence against women of color, then it clearly sends a mes-

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sage to that community that it's okay, that she will not be protected by the state, and thereby increases her vulnerability to community interpersonal violence.

Where do you think the feminist movement lies in the treatment of violence against women of color?

There's quite a bit of discussion on that in *Color of Violence*. It particularly traces how the movement's professionalization, medicalization, and reliance on law enforcement-based responses has really failed to take into account the experiences of women of color or to really create safety for women of color.

I think the feminist movement has also in *many* ways failed to even perceive state violence against women of color as a form of violence against women. Often when I ask people what's the first image that comes to mind when you say "violence against women," they say a woman being beaten by her partner/spouse/husband. When I describe some of the instances of law-enforcement violence against women that I come across, and say, "Well, isn't this violence against women?"—their initial responses are, "Of course." But why isn't it then something we address in our antiviolence organizing? I think there's a *huge* gap in antiviolence organizing, and a *huge* failure to women of color who face both kinds of violence.

The anthology's introduction states: "As the antiviolence movement has attempted to become more inclusive, attempts at multicultural interventions against domestic violence have unwittingly strengthened white supremacy within the movement." Can you talk more about how this occurs on an everyday level?

I think when you assume that the model for addressing violence against women that was developed by [and] for and centered originally on white middle-class women's experiences of domestic violence [is] the only and best model, and then you try to tack on cultural-competency components to it, you're really assuming that

white women's experiences are the primary experience and are therefore furthering white supremacy.

There's also often a notion that culturally specific services really end up pathologizing communities of color in ways that further enforce white supremacy. [For instance, the ideas] that certain communities are inherently more violent, are inherently more oppressive to women, engage in practices that are more barbaric than other forms of gender-based violence. In that respect, it furthers white supremacy instead of challenging the ways in which white supremacy has actually contributed to the creation of violence within communities of color.

I think the chapter in Andrea Smith's book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* where she talks about the boarding-school healing project that INCITE! has been involved with really highlights this. It looks at how Native peoples' being forced to attend state- and church-run boarding schools where they were subjected to incredible physical, sexual, emotional, cultural, and in many ways genocidal abuse created patterns that have gone across generations of abuse within families and communities that are directly linked to state violence. But instead of recognizing that, Native communities are just pathologized.

Similar understandings have been advanced around African American folks' experiences of slavery—how that kind of violence replicates itself in the communities, and then the communities are turned around and pathologized by the state and by mainstream white society as inherently more violent and more prone to gender-based violence, when in fact that was imposed, learned, perpetuated through white supremacy in colonialism and chattel slavery.

What can readers do to help stop the many forms and cycles of violence against women of color?

The purpose of the anthology is to bring some of the discussion that centers around the experiences of women of color with many different forms of violence to the center of our organizing analysis. It asks us to step outside of models and responses that have been based primarily on the experiences of middle-class white women of the mainstream antiviolence movement, and to really start over and put women of color at the center. Because at that point, we will really be thinking of all women—women of color, low-income women, queer women, trans women, young women—who are most vulnerable to the types of violence that we're talking about. So, if we're able to increase safety for those groups of women, we're more likely to create safety for all women.

People working in the mainstream antiviolence movement could start understanding state violence in their work [by] looking toward non-law-enforcement-based responses to violence against women and supporting women who are subject to law-enforcement violence in the context of responses to interpersonal and community violence. That's something that many folks in the mainstream antiviolence movement haven't even thought about doing or are resistant to doing. I think if the average shelter or hotline got a call saying, instead of, "I was beaten by my partner," that "I was beaten by the police," they would have no response other than, "Let's call the police." I think

that it's important for us to start thinking about other ways of increasing women's safety and to also start documenting, recognizing, and addressing the state violence that women of color experience.

Moving to your other anthology, what does INCITE! mean by the term *nonprofit industrial complex* as it is used in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*?

I think the term was coined to help people understand that the nonprofit model that exists in the U.S. is not benign. It's actually about enforcing the very system that we're trying to fight. It has financial, economic, social, and political interests that are perhaps not visible at first glance, that need to be examined.

It was a take on the [term] *military industrial complex*, which ironically Eisenhower came up with [as] a way of getting the American public to understand that the war in Vietnam was not fueled by the desire to bring democracy and to fight the "evils" of communism, but was actually fueled by economic, political, imperialist, and class concerns in the U.S., and particularly by economic interests in the military industry, and that the links between those policies and the actions of the U.S. really needed to be examined. I think the same analysis is required when we look at the nonprofit model in the U.S. in terms of how it's being used to co-opt movements for social change. It's being used to stifle, suppress, direct, challenge, funnel, divert movements for social change in the U.S. in the economic, political, and social interests of particular classes and races of people.

The anthology breaks down the many ways this "nonprofit industrial complex" functions. Can you describe this a bit?

The mechanics of the nonprofit industrial complex are really complicated. For instance, foundations provide tax shelters for wealthy families and thereby take away tax income that could be used for social programs and entitlements, and then [the foundations] dole out little bits of money for nonprofits to replace the services that the government no longer funds. There should be socially available entitlements for everyone, right?

Supposedly, we can't have universal healthcare right now because we don't have the money. Meanwhile, people who should be paying mad amounts of taxes are putting their money into foundations and then doling out little grants to patchwork community-health initiatives which are chronically under-resourced and can't meet the level of need out there.

[And] many foundations employ members of wealthy families who have money in the foundation and therefore get income from money they haven't paid taxes on, and they only have to give out a certain small percentage of the money that's in a foundation's endowment each year. Meanwhile, they can live off the interest of the [foundation] money. So, [by not paying taxes], they're taking out way more from our economy, from our collective resources to create services and entitlements, and then [they] give us the tiny crumbs to fill the gaps and make us feel like we're not in the state that we're in because there's a little organization over there that can feed people sometimes.

How does the current nonprofit funding model affect organizing by women of color in particular?

There's something fundamentally flawed in trying to achieve mass social change through a model that says this small number of people [nonprofit staffers] is responsible for changing society fundamentally. History has shown us that *masses* of people are required to make *mass* significant change. So, delegating that to a small group of people for whom it's a *career* really limits our ability to actually effect and perpetuate change. In the meantime, it creates a group of people for whom social change is a career, and along with it comes individual self-interest, opportunism, and career building—really limiting their accountability to larger political visions and to larger communities.

Also, foundations just don't give out money for revolutionary activities. They have very specific agendas about what types of activities they will fund. What many women-of-color organizations are finding is that they've spent more of their energy being accountable to funders than being accountable to members of their communities. It becomes very difficult to evaluate [whether] you're really achieving the goal you set out to achieve or . . . the goals the foundations are imposing on you.

What spurred the conference¹ and this anthology is that these are really thoughts and conversations people were having about their work—trying to figure out why people were burning out, or why nonprofits were treating their own employees in ways that were inconsistent with the vision that they were putting out there. Well, because they're adopting a corporate model to meet their funders' requirements and therefore acting like corporations [*Laughs*], which is a very capitalist, exploitative model.

People are frustrated by not being able to carry out the long-term, daily, grinding work of organizing and changing people's minds and hearts and changing the ways we relate to each other because that's not a project with a benchmark, a timeline that you can report back to a funder. So, people's visions are often inconsistent with the work that they actually end up doing in order to get the funding.

So, that's what the anthology's title, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, refers to?

It's another play on words, the original being [Gil Scott-Heron's song] "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Scott-Heron challenged us to understand that we've all become isolated by watching television and so don't get together to create social movements, and that we're not going to see revolutionary change that way. It is important for us to recognize that the revolution will not be funded by the Ford Foundation. [*Laughs*]

Once we realize that the revolution will not be funded, then we have to figure out how we're going to make it happen with the resources, skills, and abilities that we do have. Otherwise, it's either in the control of state-sponsored funding, or funded by interests that are contrary to ours.

What are some alternatives? Should we stop doing the whole nonprofit thing?

Many organizations have stopped doing the nonprofit thing, including some INCITE! affiliates. It's definitely challenging. There's many more raise-the-rent parties, many more strains on existing community resources, and it's challenging to be trying to resource a movement for social change from the very people who are suffering the most economically and socially right now. However, when we do it that way, everyone is far more invested and feels far more ownership than when we do it the way we've been doing it.

Some INCITE! affiliates, organizations, and individuals in New York set up a bartering network so that people can exchange skills between organizations and among each other without relying on a monetary economy. That enables, for example, organizations to receive bookkeeping skills in exchange for lending out their space for an evening. All the things we usually put in funding proposals, let's sit down and think about other ways that we can access those things.

Also, let's think about the process by which we do social-change work. It should be integrated in our daily lives. Each of us should do a little bit every day, instead of one person having to do it all and get paid for it. Basically, the notion is that people who are part of social movements, who need social movements, who want social movements, [should] invest in them any way they can with time and energy and resources and money and collective efforts that get things done without having to rely on Rockefeller.

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1. In 2004, INCITE! and the women's studies department at UC Santa Barbara hosted a conference called "The Revolution Will Not Be Funded," which led to the later publication of the book by the same title.