

CRITICAL MOMENT

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence

An Interview with co-founders Nadine Naber and Andrea Smith

Max Sussman

Nadine Naber and Andrea Smith are co-founders of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence. As professors at the University of Michigan and activists supporting grassroots organizing, their work demonstrates that the the academic and activist worlds are not mutually exclusive, and can even support one another. In this interview, they discuss the origin and politics of INCITE!, their recent books, the non-profit industrial complex, and how to work towards bulding a more just and equitable society without relying on the state and its institutions.

Max Susman: *Where did the idea for INCITE! come from and why is it necessary in the current context of anti violence and anti racist activism?*

Andrea Smith: INCITE! came out because the anti-violence movement had become very social service oriented. Which was to kind of see violence either through a medical model or a criminal justice model. Either it's a crime and you need to put criminals behind bars, or survivors are ill and they need services. They weren't looking at how violence is politically constructed.

The other problem was that because people were looking at violence against women in this single-issue oriented way, they would come up with strategies that perpetuate other forms of violence. So, by only looking at domestic violence, they would support the prison-industrial complex as a solution to ending domestic violence without looking at how prison is itself an institution of violence.

Then you have women, like the Fund for Feminist Majority, supporting the bombing of Afghanistan, saying that it was going to liberate women from the Taliban, because again, to save women, they would support military violence. Our thought was, instead of our response to the anti-violence movement being 'let's include the voices of women of color,' the issue instead is-if we didn't assume anything and said what would it take to end violence against women of color, what kind of movement would we need.

And when you look at women of color in your center of analysis it's very clear you have to address state violence because women of color live at the intersections of state violence and interpersonal violence. And there are not that many groups that put the two together. You have your racial justice groups that look at prisons or police brutality but then have nothing to say about domestic violence happening in their own communities. And the white-dominated feminist movements are all about pathologizing our communities but not looking at how the economic-political structure is contributing to these kinds of conditions. So we needed an organization that put the two together, looking at violence that's directed at communities at the same time as we look at violence within our communities.

Nadine Naber: I would add that a lot of the work has been transnational—INCITE's analysis looks at how the location of women of color at the intersection of state

violence and interpersonal violence plays out in terms of US-led wars in the countries the US is invading. Some of the dominant women's organizations or feminist organizations in the US like Feminist Majority will talk about violence against women in Afghanistan or Iraq or Palestine in racist terms—by framing violence against women as a consequence of their 'backwards culture' or the 'men over there' and how they treat their women and have supported the Bush Administrations's agenda of going to war "over there" to liberate the women as if bombing is a form of women's liberation.

INCITE!'s analysis calls on us women and communities of color and social justice movements to BE HELD accountable for the privileges we receive as people who live in the us because of us wars abroad. INCITE!'s work against war focuses on how us led war perpetuates violence against women in the countries the US is invading. INCITE!'s approach to movement building against militarism among us women of color takes seriously how interpersonal violence in those countries is also linked to what those conditions these communities are living under—such as an increasingly militarized environment, war, poverty, and the destruction of their infrastructure, including their medical industry, education, and schools. An anti-military recruitment campaign resists military recruitment among working class communities of color and U.S.-led wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. Through this campaign, we highlighted how militarism impacts U.S. women of color and women in the countries the u.s. is invading.

Was it challenging to try to make the INCITE! Anthology a coherent work when you had so many people coming from so many different racial, ethnic, political and other backgrounds?

Nadine Naber: Because INCITE! is about creating an analysis of violence against women that centers state violence and colonialism, our works speaks to all sorts of different issues and communities. Our framework allows us to expand the analysis of violence against women from the limited focus on domestic violence that proliferates in mainstream anti-violence organizations to issues of border control to issues of militarism and war, to reproductive rights, disabilities, and transgender issues.

That was also part of the problem—through the work over the years, we have been dealing as an organization with multiple kinds of state violence, and we wanted the book to reflect INCITE!'s work and that wide-ranging analysis. We wanted to be representative of the different kinds of violence that affect women from different communities of color and indigenous communities, and we ended up with too many pages. The most difficult part of the process was at the very end, when we had to cut the pages down. In some cases, we had to cut out pieces and include some of their writing in the introduction. Some people cut really in-depth pieces to 3 pages long, and we ended up losing a lot of the historical background on some of the pieces.

I don't think that in any way shape or form we tried to come up with a cohesive argument but I think the analysis of state violence was central to all of the pieces even though the pieces are really diverse. Some of them might be more academic, some of them are literary, some of them are based on personal experience.

Andrea Smith: I thought that the overriding analytic was that we had to look at the intersections of sexual domestic violence and state violence, so to me that's the overriding theme.

So there was some decision, like we didn't accept something that was just only a social service model, like "how would you serve Latinas near a domestic violence shelter?" It had to have a more intersectional analysis, more political organizing model.

How do you take a transnational analysis and adapt it to working locally? Could you give some examples of work that people are doing along these lines?

Andrea Smith: One example would be Sista II Sista [based in Brooklyn, NY]. Their antiwar campaign was called "From Brooklyn to Baghdad: We Want You Out." So basically comparing police violence in Brooklyn to military occupation in Iraq. They organized the "Weapons of Mass Resistance, and they also tied it to military

recruitment and did a counter-military recruitment where you joined the Army of Mass Resistance instead. So that was a way of linking violence that was happening there very locally to bigger issue.

Nadine: Also part of INCITE!'s framework has to do with not only reacting and critiquing, but trying to think about what would an alternative society that you would want to live in actually look like, and to work towards creating that.

With Sista II Sista, one of the things that they've done is create a Violence-Free Zone in their neighborhood in Bushwick in Brooklyn. That means creating an environment where people are not limited by thinking that going to the police is the only solution in cases of domestic violence, but instead create structures for community accountability in their neighborhoods or structures where an entire neighborhood or building or block would be a violence free zone and everyone living there would be mobilized to participate in creating a violence free environment.

Andrea: The issue is why have people been provided with no other alternative but to call the police. So it's about providing alternatives. It's kind of like Angela Davis' prison abolition, it's not like tear down prison walls tomorrow, it's about proliferating alternatives until prisons become unnecessary.

That's kind of the idea behind these autonomous zones. It's not about attacking the state directly, it's about creating alternative societies that proliferate until the state can't work any more because it's just not necessary. It's a different way of contesting state power. They're not trying to tell people not to call the police, because, first of all, they're not calling the police anyways, because they police aren't helping them. But it's more about what are other ways to create community accountability. So the challenge then is to create community accountability when the community itself may be fractured, or when it's sexist and homophobic or otherwise problematic.

Do you think the book itself is accessible to people who aren't in the academic community?

Andrea: One thing I've learned is never underestimate what gets travels. I had a paper in the American Behavioral Scientist, that somehow the people in my ethnography found, and I have no idea how, and they were not too happy. You have this big division, like nobody reads in academic book—this is how I got in trouble with the Department of Justice. I wrote an academic article about sexual assault, and somehow, it ended up in all of the tribal curriculum, which then got to the Department of Justice who then banned me from all their websites. So one thing is never underestimate how much things travel.

But in terms of accessibility, I don't think there's just one accessible way to get things out. The book is one thing, but if you're going to do community organizing, you'd have to put it in different languages. You wouldn't just write, you'd have to make posters, etc. So is this one book going to get to everybody? No, but it's one tool of the hundreds of thousands of other tools we would need to use.

Another example, this is about Conquest. That's an example of a book that people might say is academic, but actually the most positive response I got was from tribal communities. I got in more trouble with the academics over that.

This Cheyenne tribe called and said they were distributing it to all their members. So sometimes I think, thinking about how to be accessible to multiple audiences is important, but sometimes we also underestimate people. As Lakota Harding was pointed out, all the peasants in China who were illiterate had Lenin, Mao, and Marx and read that. I don't think we should underestimate what people will understand.

Can you talk about your new book, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*?

Andrea: That came out because most of the social movements in the US go through non-profit organizations, which have a government status, and then require government regulations to maintain. This then allows people to get foundation money

so the non-profits tend to have their money come from foundations rather than their constituents.

This is distinct from other countries where it's not like there's not non-profits, but the social movements are not really happening through the non-profits. Instead, they are movements of a hundred thousand people that are funded basically by their constituents. That's the problem in the US when you try to do so-called movement building through non-profits and not realizing that there's almost an inherent contradiction of trying to do that rather than figuring out how to build a movement to which non-profits can be made accountable to.

What are some examples of ways to raise money that don't rely on foundation grants? Or should activists not be so concerned with the idea that you need money to get things done?

Andrea: Well there's many ways you could do this. One person [in the book] argues we really we need our constituents to fund us. Also, you can rethink what you need. In the US we tend to do things the most expensive way possible.

Nadine: One of the most successful campaigns I was part of didn't use any funding from any foundations. If you do grassroots fundraising you're also building a larger base and bringing more people into it. You're bringing in the people who you want to be held accountable to, which are the people you're supposedly representing or working with.

When I worked with the progressive Arab movement in the Bay Area of California in the 1990's, we developed a campaign against the US-led sanctions on Iraq. And the sad part is I look at those brochures now and the cover says, "End the Genocide on Iraq" and that was even before the disaster in Iraq today. We got all these artists together and they put on an event called Artists for Iraq. It was amazing. Artists from every community came out-- rappers, spoken word artists, people from the Arab community. There were people of all ages there. The place was sold out, because it was art and it was music and people loved that. It was a fire hazard there were so many people there. We raised enough money for the campaign to be able to put billboards on the freeways saying "Sanctions are Destroying Our Generation" and had a picture of a four year old Iraqi girl.

We just kept doing these events all year. We did a walk-a-thon where we worked with the local Iraqi refugee community. We raised thousands of dollars doing the walk-a-thon. We did a picnic in the park for the local Iraqi refugee community and people came out to support them. And we ended up raising \$20,000 and we put the billboards. When the billboards went up, the people who were party to the events felt like they were a part of the anti-sanctions movement-- And that they helped to make it happen. It was empowering and it got more people involved at every event. This is why I think building a grassroots movement without foundational support is entirely possible. Especially if you think about and realize how destructive the funding can be to your political work.

Andrea: It's not necessarily that you can never get a grant. I think the issue is again, say in other countries, it's not they don't have non profits, its just that they don't consider the nonprofit to be the movement. There's a more a division of labor. Even in Chiapas, even the most radical revolutionary groups there have front non-profits that they will get grants for a specific purpose. But the non-profit answers to the movement, it's not the movement itself and when its purpose is done, it's gone.

So it doesn't mean we can't be strategic about getting money wherever we are, but it's when we become solely dependent on that and when we think that's the movement rather than something that should be servicing the movement I think is what gets us into trouble.

Can you describe some of the local work that INCITE! or INCITE! members are working on in the Southeast Michigan area?

Andrea: We have our local Ann arbor INCITE! chapter but it's really at the beginning stages. We had an idea of a violence free zone/liberated ground from Sista II Sista. But they did four years of basically just getting to know folks before they actually did

things. So we have that sense that it will be a slow process and we're at the beginning of the slow process so we don't have anything to report on.

Nadine: INCITE!'s analysis and a lot of arab women who were active in INCITE! created the Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (AMWAJ). INCITE!'s work played an important role in bringing the Arab women activists together who created AMWAJ. AMWAJ has its own analysis but also built upon INCITE!'s analysis. AMWAJ has focused on building a Arab women's movement in the US that centers state violence and is anti-imperialist, anti-zionist, anti-racist, and also deals with issues of homophobia and transgender issues in our communities and beyond. We had our first gathering last June in Chicago, national gathering and there was a local Ann Arbor group that organized in Michigan to bring women to the gathering and now there's a new transition committee and local people in ann arbor are part of that in terms of we're sending a group of arab women activists to the social forum in atlanta. And hopefully planning another gathering for another year from now.

Andrea: The goal of all this organizing is to really start to create the world we want to live in. So it's not just a reaction against things, but it's about starting to create well communities that are not constructed through violence. In order to do that, we need to create communities that are different. So it's not about the model of social service programs, it's not about the model of domestic violence shelter, it's about how do we do the organizing that will make people be in a different way which each other.

For more information about INCITE!, visit <http://www.incite-national.org> \ Max Sussman is an editor of Critical Moment. He can be contacted at <mailto:maxsussman@gmail.com> maxsussman@gmail.com. He also has a blog, <http://blix.wordpress.com>.

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