

# Why Misogynists Make Great Informants



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Courtney Desiree Morris

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# Introduction

*The state has already understood a fact that the Left has struggled to accept: misogynists make great informants.*

In January 2009, activists in Austin, Texas, learned that one of their own, a white activist named Brandon Darby, had infiltrated groups protesting the Republican National Convention (RNC) as an FBI informant. Darby later admitted to wearing recording devices at planning meetings and during the convention.

He testified on behalf of the government in the February 2009 trial of two Texas activists who were arrested at the RNC on charges of making and possessing Molotov cocktails, after Darby encouraged them to do so. The two young men, David McKay and Bradley Crowder, each faced up to fifteen years in prison. Crowder accepted a plea bargain to serve three years in a federal prison; under pressure from federal prosecutors, McKay also pled guilty to being in possession of “unregistered Molotov cocktails” and was sentenced to four years in prison. Information gathered by Darby may also have contributed to the case against the RNC 8, activists from around the country charged with “conspiracy to riot and conspiracy to damage property in the furtherance of terrorism.” Austin activists were particularly stunned by the revelation that Darby had served as an informant because he had been a part of various leftist projects and was a leader at Common Ground Relief, a New Orleans-based organization committed to meeting the short-term needs of community members displaced by natural disasters in the Gulf Coast region and dedicated to rebuilding the region and ensuring Katrina evacuees' right to return.

I was surprised but not shocked by this news. I had learned as an undergrad at the University of Texas that the campus police department routinely placed plainclothes police officers in the meetings of radical student groups—you know, just to keep an eye on them. That was in fall 2001. We saw the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, watched a cowboy president wage war on terror, and, in the middle of it all, tried to figure out what we could do to challenge the fascist State transformations taking place before our eyes. At the time, however, it seemed silly that there were cops in our meetings—we weren't the Panthers or the Brown Berets

or even some of the rowdier direct-action anti-globalization activists on campus (although we admired them all); we were just young people who didn't believe war was the best response to the 9/11 attacks. But it wasn't silly; the FBI does not dismiss political work. Any organization, be it large or small, can provoke the scrutiny of the State. Perhaps your organization poses a large threat, or maybe you're small now but one day you'll grow up and be too big to rein in. The State usually opts to kill the movement before it grows.

And informants and provocateurs are the State's hired gunmen. Government agencies pick people that no one will notice. Often it's impossible to prove that they're informants because they appear to be completely dedicated to social justice. They establish intimate relationships with activists, becoming friends and lovers, often serving in leadership roles in organizations. A cursory reading of the literature on social movements and organizations in the 1960s and 1970s reveals this fact. The leadership of the American Indian Movement was rife with informants; it is suspected that informants were also largely responsible for the downfall of the Black Panther Party, and the same can be surmised about the antiwar movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Not surprisingly, these movements that were toppled by informants and provocateurs were also sites where women and queer activists often experienced intense gender violence, as the autobiographies of activists such as Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz demonstrate.

Maybe it isn't that informants are difficult to spot but rather that we have collectively ignored the signs that give them away. To save our movements, we need to come to terms with the connections between gender violence, male privilege, and the strategies that informants (and people who just act like them) use to destabilize radical movements. Time and again heterosexual men in radical movements have been allowed to assert their privilege and subordinate others. Despite all that we say to the contrary, the fact is that radical social movements and organizations in the United States have refused to seriously address gender violence<sup>1</sup> as a threat to

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<sup>1</sup>I use the term gender violence to refer to the ways in which homophobia and misogyny are rooted in heteronormative understandings of gender identity and gender roles. Heterosexism not only polices non-normative sexualities but also reproduces

the survival of our struggles. We've treated misogyny, homophobia, and heterosexism as lesser evils—secondary issues—that will eventually take care of themselves or fade into the background once the “real” issues—racism, the police, class inequality, U.S. wars of aggression—are resolved. There are serious consequences for choosing ignorance. Misogyny and homophobia are central to the reproduction of violence in radical activist communities. Scratch a misogynist and you'll find a homophobe. Scratch a little deeper and you might find the makings of a future informant (or someone who just destabilizes movements like informants do).

## **The Makings of an Informant: Brandon Darby and Common Ground**

On *Democracy Now!* Malik Rahim, former Black Panther and cofounder of Common Ground in New Orleans, spoke about how devastated he was by Darby's revelation that he was an FBI informant. Several times he stated that his heart had been broken. He especially lamented all of the “young ladies” who left Common Ground as a result of Darby's domineering, aggressive style of organizing. And when those “young ladies” complained? Well, their concerns likely fell on sympathetic but ultimately unresponsive ears—everything may have been true, and after the fact everyone admits how disruptive Darby was, quick to suggest violent, ill-conceived direct-action schemes that endangered everyone he worked with. There were even claims of Darby sexually assaulting female organizers at Common Ground and in general being dismissive of women working in the organization.<sup>2</sup> Darby created conflict in all of the organizations he worked with, yet people were hesitant to hold him accountable because of his history and reputation as an organizer and his “dedication” to “the work.” People continued to defend him until he outed himself as an FBI informant. Even Rahim, for all of his guilt and angst, chose to leave Darby

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normative gender roles and identities that reinforce the logic of patriarchy and male privilege.

<sup>2</sup>I learned this from informal conversations with women who had organized with Darby in Austin and New Orleans while participating in the Austin Informants Working Group, which was formed by people who had worked with Darby and were stunned by his revelation that he was an FBI informant.

in charge of Common Ground although every time there was conflict in the organization it seemed to involve Darby.

Maybe if organizers made collective accountability around gender violence a central part of our practices we could neutralize people who are working on behalf of the State to undermine our struggles. I'm not talking about witch hunts; I'm talking about organizing in such a way that we nip a potential Brandon Darby in the bud before he can hurt more people. Informants are hard to spot, but my guess is that where there is smoke there is fire, and someone who creates chaos wherever he goes is either an informant or an irresponsible, unaccountable time bomb who can be unintentionally as effective at undermining social-justice organizing as an informant. Ultimately they both do the work of the State and need to be held accountable.

## **A Brief Historical Reflection on Gender Violence in Radical Movements**

Reflecting on the radical organizations and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s provides an important historical context for this discussion. Memoirs by women who were actively involved in these struggles reveal the pervasiveness of tolerance (and in some cases advocacy) of gender violence. Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, and Elaine Brown, each at different points in their experiences organizing with the Black Panther Party (BPP), cited sexism and the exploitation of women (and their organizing labor) in the BPP as one of their primary reasons for either leaving the group (in the cases of Brown and Shakur) or refusing to ever formally join (in Davis's case). Although women were often expected to make significant personal sacrifices to support the movement, when women found themselves victimized by male comrades there was no support for them or channels to seek redress. Whether it was BPP organizers ignoring the fact that Eldridge Cleaver beat his wife, noted activist Kathleen Cleaver, men coercing women into sex, or just men treating women organizers as subordinated sexual playthings, the BPP and similar organizations tended not to take seriously the corrosive effects of gender violence on liberation struggle. In many ways, Elaine Brown's autobiography, *A Taste of Power: A*

Black Woman's Story, has gone the furthest in laying bare the ugly realities of misogyny in the movement and the various ways in which both men and women reproduced and reinforced male privilege and gender violence in these organizations. Her experience as the only woman to ever lead the BPP did not exempt her from the brutal misogyny of the organization. She recounts being assaulted by various male comrades (including Huey Newton) as well as being beaten and terrorized by Eldridge Cleaver, who threatened to “bury her in Algeria” during a delegation to China. Her biography demonstrates more explicitly than either Davis's or Shakur's how the masculinist posturing of the BPP (and by extension many radical organizations at the time) created a culture of violence and misogyny that ultimately proved to be the organization's undoing.

These narratives demystify the legacy of gender violence of the very organizations that many of us look up to. They demonstrate how misogyny was normalized in these spaces, dismissed as “personal” or not as important as the more serious struggles against racism or class inequality. Gender violence has historically been deeply entrenched in the political practices of the Left and constituted one of the greatest (if largely unacknowledged) threats to the survival of these organizations. However, if we pay attention to the work of Davis, Shakur, Brown, and others, we can avoid the mistakes of the past and create different kinds of political community.

## **The Racial Politics of Gender Violence**

Race further complicates the ways in which gender violence unfolds in our communities. In “Looking for Common Ground: Relief Work in Post-Katrina New Orleans as an American Parable of Race and Gender Violence,” Rachel Luft explores the disturbing pattern of sexual assault against white female volunteers by white male volunteers doing rebuilding work in the Upper Ninth Ward in 2006. She points out how Common Ground failed to address white men's assaults on their co-organizers and instead shifted the blame to the surrounding Black community, warning white women activists that they needed to be careful because New Orleans was a dangerous place. Ultimately it proved easier to criminalize Black men from the neighborhood than to acknowledge that white women and transgender organizers were most likely to be assaulted by white men

they worked with. In one case, a white male volunteer was turned over to the police only after he sexually assaulted at least three women in one week. The privilege that white men enjoyed in Common Ground, an organization ostensibly committed to racial justice, meant that they could be violent toward women and queer activists, enact destructive behaviors that undermined the organization's work, and know that the movement would not hold them accountable in the same way that it did Black men in the community where they worked.

Of course, male privilege is not uniform—white men and men of color are unequal participants in and beneficiaries of patriarchy although they both can and do reproduce gender violence. This disparity in the distribution of patriarchy's benefits is not lost on women and queer organizers when we attempt to confront men of color who enact gender violence in our communities. We often worry about reproducing particular kinds of racist violence that disproportionately target men of color. We are understandably loath to call the police, involve the State in any way, or place men of color at the mercy of a historically racist criminal (in)justice system; yet our communities (political and otherwise) often do not step up to demand justice on our behalf. We don't feel comfortable talking to therapists who just reaffirm stereotypes about how fucked-up and exceptionally violent our home communities are. The Left often offers even less support. Our victimization is unfortunate, problematic, but ultimately less important to “the work” than the men of all races who reproduce gender violence in our communities.

## **Encountering Misogyny on the Left: A Personal Reflection**

In the first community group I was actively involved in, I encountered a level of misogyny that I would never have imagined existed in what was supposed to be a radical-people-of-color organization. I was sexually/romantically involved with an older Chicano activist in the group. I was nineteen, an inexperienced young Black activist; he was thirty. He asked me to keep our relationship a secret, and I reluctantly agreed. Later, after he ended the relationship and I was reeling from depression, I discovered

that he had been sleeping with at least two other women while we were together. One of them was a friend of mine, another young woman we organized with. Unaware of the nature of our relationship, which he had failed to disclose to her, she slept with him until he disappeared, refusing to answer her calls or explain the abrupt end of their relationship. She and I, after sharing our experiences, began to trade stories with other women who knew and had organized with this man.

We heard of the women who had left a Chicana/o student group and never came back after his lies and secrets blew up while the group was participating in a Zapatista action in Mexico City. The queer, radical, white organizer who left Austin to get away from his abuse. Another white woman, a social worker who thought they might get married only to come to his apartment one evening and find me there. And then there were the ones that came after me. I always wondered if they knew who he really was. The women he dated were amazing, beautiful, kick-ass, radical women that he used as shields to get himself into places he knew would never be open to such a misogynist. I mean, if that cool woman who worked in Chiapas, spoke Spanish, and worked with undocumented immigrants was dating him, he must be down, right? Wrong.

But his misogyny didn't end there; it was also reflected in his style of organizing. In meetings he always spoke the loudest and longest, using academic jargon that made any discussion excruciatingly more complex than necessary. The academic-speak intimidated people less educated than him because he seemed to know more about radical politics than anyone else. He would talk down to other men in the group, especially those he perceived to be less intelligent than him, which was basically everybody. Then he'd switch gears, apologize for dominating the space, and acknowledge his need to check his male privilege. Ironically, when people did attempt to call him out on his shit, he would feign ignorance—what could they mean, saying that his behavior was masculinist and sexist? He'd complain of being infantilized, refusing to see how he infantilized people all the time. The fact that he was a man of color who could talk a good game about racism and racial-justice struggles masked his abusive behaviors in both radical organizations and his personal relationships. As one of his former partners shared with me, “His radical race analysis

allowed people (mostly men but occasionally women as well) to forgive him for being dominating and abusive in his relationships. Womyn had to check their critique of his behavior at the door, lest we lose a man of color in the movement.” One of the reasons it is so difficult to hold men of color accountable for reproducing gender violence is that women of color and white activists continue to be invested in the idea that men of color have it harder than anyone else. How do you hold someone accountable when you believe he is target number one for the State?

Unfortunately he wasn't the only man like this I encountered in radical spaces—just one of the smarter ones. Reviewing old e-mails, I am shocked at the number of e-mails from men I organized with that were abusive in tone and content, how easily they would talk down to others for minor mistakes. I am more surprised at my meek, diplomatic responses—like an abuse survivor—as I attempted to placate compañeros who saw nothing wrong with yelling at their partners, friends, and other organizers. There were men like this in various organizations I worked with. The one who called his girlfriend a bitch in front of a group of youth of color during a summer encuentro we were hosting. The one who sexually harassed a queer Chicana couple during a trip to México, trying to pressure them into a threesome. The guys who said they would complete a task, didn't do it, brushed off their compañeras' demands for accountability, let those women take over the task, and when it was finished took all the credit for someone else's hard work. The graduate student who hit his partner—and everyone knew he'd done it, but whenever anyone asked, people would just look ashamed and embarrassed and mumble, “It's complicated.” The ones who constantly demeaned queer folks, even people they organized with. Especially the one who thought it would be a revolutionary act to “kill all these faggots, these niggas on the down low, who are fucking up our children, fucking up our homes, fucking up our world, and fucking up our lives!” The one who would shout you down in a meeting or tell you that you couldn't be a feminist because you were too pretty. Or the one who thought homosexuality was a disease from Europe.

Yeah, that guy.

Most of those guys probably weren't informants. Which is a pity because it means they are not getting paid a dime for all the destructive work

they do. We might think of these misogynists as inadvertent agents of the State. Regardless of whether they are actually informants or not, the work that they do supports the State's ongoing campaign of terror against social movements and the people who create them. When queer organizers are humiliated and their political struggles sidelined, that is part of an ongoing State project of violence against radicals. When women are knowingly given STIs, physically abused, dismissed in meetings, pushed aside, and forced out of radical organizing spaces while our allies defend known misogynists, organizers collude in the State's efforts to destroy us.

The State has already understood a fact that the Left has struggled to accept: misogynists make great informants. Before or regardless of whether they are ever recruited by the State to disrupt a movement or destabilize an organization, they've likely become well versed in practices of disruptive behavior. They require almost no training and can start the work immediately. What's more paralyzing to our work than when women and/or queer folks leave our movements because they have been repeatedly lied to, humiliated, physically/verbally/emotionally/sexually abused? Or when you have to postpone conversations about the work so that you can devote group meetings to addressing an individual member's most recent offense? Or when that person spreads misinformation, creating confusion and friction among radical groups? Nothing slows down movement building like a misogynist.

What the FBI gets is that when there are people in activist spaces who are committed to taking power and who understand power as domination, our movements will never realize their potential to remake this world. If our energies are absorbed recuperating from the messes that informants (and people who just act like them) create, we will never be able to focus on the real work of getting free and building the kinds of life-affirming, people-centered communities that we want to live in. To paraphrase bell hooks, where there is a will to dominate there can be no justice, because we will inevitably continue reproducing the same kinds of injustice we claim to be struggling against. It is time for our movements to undergo a radical change from the inside out.

# Looking Forward: Creating Gender Justice in our Movements

Radical movements cannot afford the destruction that gender violence creates. If we underestimate the political implications of patriarchal behaviors in our communities, the work will not survive.

Lately I've been turning to the work of queers/feminists of color to think through how to challenge these behaviors in our movements. I've been reading the autobiographies of women who lived through the chaos of social movements debilitated by machismo. I'm revisiting the work of bell hooks, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Gioconda Belli, Margaret Randall, Elaine Brown, Pearl Cleage, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Anzaldúa to see how other women negotiated gender violence in these spaces and to problematize neat or easy answers about how violence is reproduced in our communities. Newer work by radical feminists of color has also been incredibly helpful, especially the zine "Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Partner Abuse in Activist Communities," edited by Ching-In Chen, Dulani, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha.

But there are many resources for confronting this dilemma beyond books. The simple act of speaking and sharing our truths is one of the most powerful tools we have. I've been speaking to my elders, older women of color in struggle who have experienced the things I'm struggling against, and swapping survival stories with other women. In summer 2008 I began doing workshops on ending misogyny and building collective forms of accountability with Cristina Tzintzún, an Austin-based labor organizer and author of the essay "Killing Misogyny: A Personal Story of Love, Violence, and Strategies for Survival." We have also begun the even more liberating practice of naming our experiences publicly and calling on our communities to address what we and so many others have experienced.

Dismantling misogyny cannot be work that only women do. We all must do the work because the survival of our movements depends on it. Until we make radical feminist and queer political ethics that directly challenge heteropatriarchal forms of organizing central to our political practice, radical movements will continue to be devastated by the antics of Brandon

Darbys (and folks who aren't informants but just act like them). A queer, radical, feminist ethic of accountability would challenge us to recognize how gender violence is reproduced in our communities, relationships, and organizing practices. Although there are many ways to do this, I want to suggest that there are three key steps that we can take to begin. First, we must support women and queer people in our movements who have experienced interpersonal violence and engage in a collective process of healing. Second, we must initiate a collective dialogue about how we want our communities to look and how to make them safe for everyone. Third, we must develop a model for collective accountability that truly treats the personal as political and helps us to begin practicing justice in our communities. When we allow women/queer organizers to leave activist spaces and protect people whose violence provoked their departure, we are saying we value these de facto State agents who disrupt the work more than we value people whose labor builds and sustains movements.

As angry as gender violence on the Left makes me, I am hopeful. I believe we have the capacity to change and create more justice in our movements. We don't have to start witch hunts to reveal misogynists and informants. They out themselves every time they refuse to apologize, take ownership of their actions, start conflicts and refuse to work them out through consensus, mistreat their compañer@s. We don't have to look for them, but when we are presented with their destructive behaviors we have to hold them accountable. Our strategies don't have to be punitive; people are entitled to their mistakes. But we should expect that people will own those actions and not allow them to become a pattern.

We have a right to be angry when the communities we build that are supposed to be the model for a better, more just world harbor the same kinds of antiqueer, antiwoman, racist violence that pervades society. As radical organizers we must hold each other accountable and not enable misogynists to assert so much power in these spaces. Not allow them to be the faces, voices, and leaders of these movements. Not allow them to rape a compañera and then be on the fucking five o' clock news. In Brandon Darby's case, even if no one suspected he was an informant, his domineering and macho behavior should have been all that was needed to call his leadership into question. By not allowing misogyny to take

root in our communities and movements, we not only protect ourselves from the efforts of the State to destroy our work but also create stronger movements that cannot be destroyed from within.

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Depending on your context, possession of certain documents may be criminalized or attract unwanted attention. Be careful about what zines you print and where you store them.