The Lessons of Anti-Racist Action

written by Shane Burley | August 24, 2023

While there are volumes of books on political theory trying to parse out the lessons of various social movements, antifascism has a certain simplicity to it. “We Go Where They Go” was the slogan for the antifascist network Anti-Racist Action (ARA), which grew throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s in an effort to stop the growth of white nationalism and other far-right actors who were threatening marginalized communities across North America. While tactics and strategies would change between chapters and locations where their young membership was organizing, one thing would remain constant: If the Nazis arrived somewhere, then antifascists would as well.

A new book on ARA was named after this well-known statement of unity, *We Go Where They Go* (PM Press, 2023), the idea that fighting fascism requires, more than anything, the commitment to intervening whenever fascists show up. ARA emerged from the same youth cultures and neighborhoods where far-right groups like the White Knights, White Aryan Resistance, or even the Ku Klux Klan were organizing, vying after disaffected white teenagers. ARA began as an effort to defend music venues and hangouts against the street violence of neo-Nazi gangs, evolving into a more politicized project that got an entire generation of radicals involved in organizing. For those watching the explosion of “antifa”-styled militant antifascist groups near the birth of Trumpism and the alt-right, ARA can be seen as an ancestor in that lineage, holding lessons for those building a new antifascist methodology today.

The authors of *We Go Where They Go*, Shannon Clay, Lady, Kristin Schwartz, and Michael Staudenmeier, built a sprawling history that quotes dozens of former members and utilizes zines, articles, flyers, and other primary sources in an effort to demystify what made ARA special and its impact. These conversations about ARA are ongoing, which is why I spoke with three of the authors, Shannon Clay, Lady, and Kristin Schwartz, as well as artist and organizer Gord Hill, who wrote the book’s Foreword, about what this history meant to them, what lessons we can take from ARA’s experience, and how that model of community self-defense is perhaps even more relevant today.

Shane Burley: How would you describe ARA to those who are less initiated?

Kristin Schwartz: It was a network of grassroots youth groups that confronted neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and the extreme right across mainly the U.S. and Canada in the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, and even today. It emerged from the fight over the presence of the far-right in the subcultures of the time and was originally based among people in those subcultures and then became broader. As it became more formalized, it was bound together by the four points of unity, which laid out the general principles of general affiliation to ARA. Those being, we go where they go. Whenever Nazis or racists are in public, we’re there. We don’t believe in ignoring them or staying

away from them. Never let the Nazis have the streets. The principles of ARA included direct action and confrontation and a non-reliance on the state, the cops, or the courts; solidarity with other antifascists; and a broad anti-oppression statement, which became more focused through the 1990s to be explicit about supporting reproductive freedom.

SB: For those who were in ARA, how did you get involved in ARA and organizing in general?

KS: I had just finished university and came home to Toronto and had had a taste of organizing at school with a focus on challenging racism, whether it was racism in education or foreign policy (the first Gulf War). I wanted to do something locally, so I called all the anti-racist groups in town, and it ended up being ARA that had a role for a young white person with not a lot of organizing experience.

Lady: It was the late 1990s, and I ran into Columbus ARA members doing Copwatch. Growing up I was never taught to trust the police. Where I lived, I only saw police in SWAT gear doing home raids. The idea of concerned folks monitoring and recording police actions to make them accountable got me interested. I participated in Copwatch first, and that was my entry into the ARA Columbus chapter.

Gord Hill: I began antifascist organizing in the late eighties in Vancouver, Canada. At the time we were dealing with remnants of the KKK and then neo-Nazi boneheads going into the early nineties, mostly under the banner of the Aryan Nations and Aryan Resistance Movement. From this emerged a bonehead organizer, Tony McAleer, who set up a phone line called the Canadian Liberty Net. In 1993, McAleer attempted to host an event with Tom Metzger of the White Aryan Resistance, but working in a large coalition we were able to mobilize several thousand anti-racists. We also learned the location of the planned event and were able to shut it down. That was the last public event fascists tried organizing for several years, and following this there was a decrease in fascist organizing overall in the city.

SB: What kind of campaigns would you do in your local chapters? What did the organizing look like?

KS: The reason this all started was the far-right was actively trying to recruit young people from the skinhead scene. They were going to the subcultures, the far-right was, and trying to pluck people out and recruit them. The people in those subcultures said no, they didn't want their scenes taken over by these goons.

Unfortunately, the racist skinheads got a huge boost in the mainstream media. It was an enormous publicity boost for them, so journalists have to be aware of not giving them more of a platform, because it really amplified their importance. It served as a recruiting tool for them that they were on Oprah and Phil Donahue and were punching out Geraldo.

Shannon Clay: The one ex-Nazi I spoke to who was from Pennsylvania said those appearances were the "fucking marketing of the year."

That's when the word skinhead became synonymous with racist. So the people who were in the non-racist skinhead culture were pissed. Which is why when I write articles, I make sure to put racist skinhead in quotes, or to say that they are a racist.

Lady: So the campaigns in Columbus were Copwatch, and those were pro-active. This is something we struggled with a lot locally, talking about how to not just be reactive. We wanted to be proactive, too, so Copwatch was a big campaign for us.

Some of the reactive things were like flyering a neighborhood after we'd find out somebody's name who was a white power person, who maybe had put out racist music or published on a Nazi blog.

We'd go door to door and ask businesses to put up signs if there was a hate crime in the neighborhood. We would also counter neo-Nazi and police messaging through wheatpasting, graffiti, zines and other print, like local newspaper op-eds, and door knocking.

Nazis would announce a rally and we would show up at their spot to directly confront them, which was the exact opposite of what the liberals were saying was best to do. They wanted to not give the racists attention and hold a peace rally on the other side of town. We were bouncing around: they announce, we go, they announce, we go. We also had campaigns of tabling at music shows and subculture events. We also went into high schools to talk. In the nineties, you'd have a school teacher (maybe history), they might invite someone from the KKK and someone not from the KKK. So we would be the "not KKK" people.

McNamera (who's quoted in the book) was the person in Columbus who set it up. He would argue that we weren't actually debating them. We would be on a different day, we'd ask to be after the Klansman. The education with the high school students we considered a campaign.

KS: Toronto came together because there was one particular group that was vying for mainstream credibility, the Heritage Front. They were trying to get their phone number out everywhere and were trying to build a membership. They wanted to run for elections and shift the political debate. It was at a point when the mainstream Conservative Party had imploded for other reasons, so there was an opportunity. So we had one big group we were addressing.

We had our own points of unity before the network existed, which was "we will expose, oppose, and confront organized racism and the far-right agenda through education, mass action, and support of broader anti-racist struggles." In the beginning, it was a lot about exposing the Heritage Front. One of our big slogans was "the Heritage Front is a Nazi Front." They were pitching themselves as mainstream, just standing up for white people. All of this sounds very familiar—at that point they were following the David Duke model. They were all extreme right; it was a former KKK organizer who was an admirer of Hitler. They were soft-peddling their hate and trying to pitch themselves as advocates for white people, as if they were a discriminated-against group.

Our initial campaign was to say that the Heritage Front were fascists and that they shouldn't have a platform. My conclusion out of it is that the way we won was by making their more militant side more obvious and showing them to be fascists by provoking them. All their leadership ended up arrested because we ended up pulling them into fights. And I don't even know if that would be relevant today. Back then, by showing them to be that way, that made them unsuccessful in their mission to mainstream their ideas. I don't know if that would work today in the U.S.

SC: That reminds me of an extremely relevant parallel today with the Proud Boys. The Proud Boys don't exactly soft-peddle themselves, but they do, for example, have the occasional member of color and confuse people with their politics. But their real politics become obvious to liberal observers when the Proud Boys are getting caught in street fights with antifascists.

Lady: You used to be able to go to an anti-Nazi rally and a local might come up and say they like what those white nationalists are saying, and I would do a calculation based on their age and say, "Hey, your dad or grandad fought these Nazis in World War II!" But we are now generations removed from that.

SB: Gord, I know you were in a separate antifascist group during this period. What was your relationship to ARA?

GH: We worked closely with ARA Toronto and would visit Toronto somewhat frequently during these

years, but we didn't face the same level of fascist organizing as Toronto was experiencing at the time, so we never set up an ARA chapter and most of our antifa work was pretty informal. I produced numerous images and posters for ARA Toronto as well as their newsletter, *On the Prowl*.

SB: How did ARA relate to the larger organized left? Did you have much of a relationship with antifascist groups coming out of the 1980s, like the John Brown Anti-Klan Committee or ideological groups? Did you organize in coalitions with other groups?

Lady: In the book we talk about how SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) in Cincinnati formed a relationship with John Brown. I distinctly think about the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and how Columbus ARA didn't get along with any authoritarian communist groups. The Ohio State campus was one of the largest in the nation, and you'd have a ton of these groups pop up. We wanted to steer clear of these authoritarian communist groups because I didn't want to be confused for them, in part because I had a much easier time selling ARA to regular Ohio folks.

But the times that I did actively mingle with groups like the ISO was on the front lines defending abortion clinics. As far as interacting with pro-choice groups, we had my local ARA chapter who actively said we were a pro-choice group and worked with clinic escort folks who organized autonomously from the clinics themselves. Those were the pro-choice groups that we interacted with to build that larger mobilization, this one cause, this single issue. So it was much easier then to identify who we weren't, and we were fixated on that piece of differentiating ourselves from authoritarian communists. We were billed as a working-class youth movement with help and guidance from our older peers.

KS: At the beginning of ARA in Toronto, those socialists were all in ARA. I guess they had reasonable experiences with the more anarchist-oriented people who were the leading group, but it didn't last that long. The International Socialists got voted out by a two-thirds majority, and the other left groups left at the same time. We continued to work with them, but they had a different orientation than us. They wanted to organize in a style that much of the general public would feel immediately comfortable with, so as not to be too militant looking. They believed the solution would be a working-class labor movement, and ARA was more oriented towards the subcultures we came out of.

When I really look back, ARA worked a lot, in Toronto, with other groups as things were happening—a lot of work on racist policing and police violence, and we were there for the coalitions. We even got invited by the city's anti-racism committee, and we would go to the meetings and participate. We had some credibility in them because we knew what was happening on the streets.

Lady: We would go to those too, but we were uninvited.

KS: For me personally, I really prioritized outreach to build relationships with the Black community. There were other people who had strong relationships with different indigenous initiatives. We were very above ground. Toronto ARA was embedded in the activist world.

Lady: Kristin, you reminded me of some of the Black-led groups that we participated with. In Columbus, there is a lot of energy against police brutality and to protest Columbus Day. There were members of the American Indian Movement in Columbus at the time, so we would organize with AIM, but it was just on their coattails. No leading role, we just supported whatever they were planning. We worked with the October 22nd Coalition, the national day against police abuse, doing Copwatch. And there were local groups led by folks of color, but we were much more supporting and taking a backseat role unless it was a Rock Against Racism show or an art event.

SB: How did ARA approach clinic defense and pro-choice work, both locally and as the network?

Lady: In the book we explain that there was a debate about abortion in the network. It's insulting that it was even a debate, but it wasn't a large one. So we added a point of unity. Some chapters were heavier in organizing the pro-choice stuff than others, but you couldn't be in ARA if you didn't believe in reproductive justice and freedom.

We had a lot of far-right groups to combat where I was in the Midwest, and my pro-choice work was directly clinic defense. We would find anti-choicers that were harassing clinics. We learned about it either because we needed an abortion ourselves, someone we know did, or an escort from the clinic would contact us. So we were used as a team of people because the police wouldn't or couldn't do anything. There are laws today that draw a line on the ground for protesters to be in. At the time there were far-right groups protesting clinics—and I don't mean holding signs, I mean throwing things at people and physically assaulting them. People were getting hurt. So not only were they not able to get medical care, but they were getting hurt. So we were called in by escorts to work with them to stop these goons from standing around and peppering the streets with their violence against the patients going in. It wasn't a campaign so much as it's a point of unity and we believe in it, so we were asking our ARA chapter how we can do community defense around this point of unity.

KS: We had two incidents where extreme anti-choice U.S.-based organizations were doing things in Canada. Missionaries to the Preborn was organizing a speaking tour of multiple cities around Ontario, and it was our network that made sure they got challenged. They were pissed. They said this was terrible, that they had never seen anything like this. I don't think that they came back. Their hosts were the Campaign Life Coalition; they are far-right, too, but they put out a more mainstream anti-abortion message.

The other was Human Life International, the Catholic anti-abortion organization. They had been protested by a radical coalition in Montreal in the early 1990s and then in Minneapolis when they had their conference there, and later they were having one in Toronto. So we had a tussle with them and, in that case, that got a lot of mainstream attention because they had a lot of quite extreme people involved with them—people who were really linked to a guy who was suspected of being a sniper who was shooting abortion doctors.

The 1990s was the peak of violence against abortion providers. They were so frustrated—the political context is they weren't making any headway legislatively—so they turned towards more extreme measures.

SC: From a more zoomed out view, my understanding is that some of the early anti-racist skinheads who were fighting the Nazi skinheads and also the Klan were also occasionally involved in clinic defense. It then got introduced to ARA at the network level by Minneapolis. Katrina spoke to us about how, basically, after having kicked out the Nazi skinheads, they looked around their city and the people who really fit the definition of fascism to them were these radical anti-choice people. Because, of course, there is a lot of overlap between white supremacists and radical anti-choice people, not only in worldview, but literally in the same networks.

And so it was Minneapolis who looked around and saw this reality and started doing reproductive justice work as a continuation of their existing antifascist politics. And then they introduced the resolution at the network level in 1996 or 1997, saying that if we are going to oppose fascism then we should care about reproductive justice. The people trying to restrict reproductive justice are fascists, basically.

Lady: We would do some of the same things people do now, but it was low-tech. We had one

camcorder in the chapter, and it was huge! You could not hide that fucking thing. So you'd film them. You'd figure out their names. And then you'd find dirt on them—for example, that they had an anti-gay camp they sent queer kids to.

So we would out them for this stuff, just the same way as you would Nazis. This period was the rise of the fake clinics, which is what we would call it, these "crisis pregnancy centers." They started putting them on billboards. We were freaking out and trying to expose these fake clinics for what they were. So we would stand in front of these places with leaflets for people thinking about going in. We would say, "Hey, do you know what this place is? We just want you to know, it's your choice, but this is not going to provide you health care and there is no doctor here." So we were definitely exposing that. They would put these fake clinics into buildings right next to Planned Parenthood. They could outright buy these buildings because they had a ton of funding.

SC: There was also, importantly, an overlap with the tactics ARA could do. Because both in their existing Nazi and Klan work, and clinic defense, they are both a street-level politics. You are physically there and physically opposing the other side. It was already in their wheelhouse.

SB: I am really interested in the negotiation between becoming a mass organization or building a mass movement and then the sort of closed-shop and security-minded model of many antifascist groups. How did you balance the need for building a mass movement and the safety concerns, and requirements, of the group?

Lady: That's a super good question and I think there is a big difference today that you might need to carve out in people's minds. Unlike now, most ARA chapters were semi-public. Security culture was encouraged and some of us insisted on it, and there were plenty of folks that were just plain bad at it. We're talking about word of mouth, emails, hanging flyers, and no discrete cell phone photos. So if you are snapping photos you had a big ass camcorder, like I mentioned. Today, I think there are some trappings of social media where personal information is much more widely available. We didn't debate the whole mass movement versus closed cell dynamic in ARA that much, but as I got older and helped form more politically focused groups, this is a question we had. You can't call for mass action if you're not willing to accept a diversity of tactics and a diversity of ideologies. That's really hard, and I don't have an answer to it. This didn't come up for a lot of us then but as I grew politically and got older it did. Because you need to think about getting the masses into this. The media also were not our friends, and we weren't good at talking to the media.

KS: Our chapter was different in that respect. We did talk to the media. We always had a media crew that were actively strategizing about it; we sent press releases and everything. I think we shot for a bigger profile, and if more people who are hearing about us are hearing from us directly, that's going to help us make our case.

Lady: Toronto was good at controlling your own narrative. You were telling your own story. We looked up to the North as a role model for us on that.

KS: The reason is that the anarchists who started the chapter were all involved in publications. So telling the story to the mainstream media was not crazy different from telling it to yourself. I heard about ARA from people who were on a community radio station and I called in afterward. We had a community radio show, community radio. It was something that a young person coming into the group might do as one of their first things, they go and participate in the radio show. So that's addressing the public. People are doing that now on social media, so the message is not getting out to everyone in the same way.

SC: To a certain extent, ARA had a strong enough base in cultures where a certain amount of

physicality could be acceptable; they could get into a street fight without alienating the mass base they were realistically recruiting from, such as youth scenes. The other thing I am reminded of was a person from Detroit I spoke with. I asked him if they wore masks, but he said that no, they didn't mask up, but they didn't really have to because they didn't have to not have their identities known, because you aren't going to get caught on a record. So, he said, even without masking up or taking proactive measures, they were able to be much more anonymous than you're able to be today.

Lady: Your question is about mass orientation and mass movement. I don't know that we spent so much time talking about the need for it, but we participated in it. In Cincinnati, Ohio, when Timothy Thomas was killed in 2001, we all rushed to participate in what we felt was a mass movement. Kind of like the Breonna Taylor protests more recently. We would participate in these rise-up moments locally. But from a subculture that was very much about rejecting the mainstream, that's a hard question to answer, because at that age I was not worried about getting everyone to do this or we would lose. Instead, it was like the moment is now and we need to do this now with as many people as we have.

I believe a major factor in the shift to a "closed-shop," "security-minded" model had to do with post-9/11 Patriot Act laws. People went to jail for longer stints. We moved from there into a period where the fascists were more underground. So it was like small cells worked against each other, ours and theirs. During this time where you have smaller closed groups, unfortunately, toxic personalities were able to dominate. We need to get back to the public tactics of door knocking, flier hanging, alerting the community to fascist groups' activities and whereabouts, and thwarting their efforts—and I mean real-life boots on the ground action, not just a Twitter echo chamber. Everyone who opposes fascism has a place in our movement. Does that mean that you openly talk about physically fighting or doing illegal things? Hell no. Today, as it was back then, those types of actions and decisions are best left up to individuals and I can neither condemn nor condone such actions. This should not hinder a larger group's efforts to kick Nazis out of our spaces.

GH: Well, it's pretty complex in some ways, and until militant tactics become more common, it will be difficult to build a mass movement that engages in militant direct action. So you can have mass movements, but the militant factions will not necessarily be the dominant ones, and as we've seen throughout history there will always be internal conflicts between more militant groups and those that are more liberal or reformist in nature. But we know the effectiveness of militant direct actions against fascist movements, and so does the state, so we'll always have to deal with state repression, and security and counter-surveillance tactics are vital tools in dealing with both fascists and state repression. I think a mass movement helps antifascist organizing because it mobilizes larger numbers of people which in turn amplifies the types of tactics, strategies, and resources available to the movement, and certainly when confronted with a mass fascist mobilization, the most effective response would be a mass antifascist movement.

SB: What do you think is the legacy of ARA today, and what impact has it had on current antifascism and movement spaces now?

SC: I don't think ARA would have a complete monopoly on it, but it is the first group I know of that did what is now a very familiar model of organizing. It laid the groundwork for what antifascism looks like as far as a confrontational movement with connections to youth counter-culture. Plenty can be said to problematize it as well, but I think it's important that youth counter-culture is a breeding ground for whatever radical politics we still have in North America. It says something that when I go to an inter-city gathering of radical politics, what we still have in common is punk rock. ARA was bigger than punk rock but had those ties to youth culture.

It established a really successful model of grassroots, youth-driven, unfunded, militant organizing

that was based in youth counter-culture. It laid the groundwork for modern antifa with the obvious and important distinction that antifa is so much more closed off and anonymous now, perhaps because we now live in an age of mass surveillance.

GH: It's hard to say what long-term impact ARA had. Certainly in Toronto the group was effective in countering the far-right threat and contributing to the decline of the largest fascist group, the Heritage Front. I think ARA helped build a militant antifascist movement at the time and also contributed to a more widespread militancy throughout the anarchist movement at the time. For example, some of the earliest attempts to form black blocs came from ARA mobilizations. ARA also helped develop better security and counter-surveillance tactics throughout the larger movement, and I think some of the veterans of ARA also helped organize some of the more recent antifa groups.

KS: There were a lot of white folks in ARA. It wasn't a white group, and there were many chapters that were diverse and folks of color helped build the network, but there were still a lot of white folks. But I don't feel like we knew how to address that. But we just tried to do the work we were doing in our corner and make a contribution, as opposed to the larger left that often tries to impose its whole vision on society. And we said our focus would be on being against racism, and later against the Christian right, and it's important to do that as white people. And I think that was a different way for activists to behave.

There are many critiques you could make of ARA, but I think it was part of a transition on the left. Now, that has been formalized in the Showing Up for Racial Justice model, with white people having their own group and focused on moving resources from white people to radical folks of color and a formal accountability culture. The SURJ model is different, but we were kind of a bridge between what was available at the time and those groups now.

I hope people understand this work is worth doing. Knowing your enemy is important and the intelligence work matters. Don't just go after them as individuals, but understand their strategy and what they want to achieve so you can interrupt it.

SC: What I would like the antifascist movement to learn from ARA is that there is more room than we currently allow for public-facing, or less outright anonymous, activism. I really don't want to finger-wave at individuals who feel like they need to protect their anonymity. I think that ARA shows that there is room for some more public-facing work and mass work. It said a lot to me that some of the people who I interviewed, who absolutely threw down, talked about how ARA's biggest success in shutting down the Klan was not from fist fights but from when they brought out ten thousand people into the street to drown out the Klan.

Lady: I hope this book will have an impact and that the pro-choice Chapter 6 we did will have an impact to draw parallels today. There are still clinics, but they are disappearing and we have less and less access. I hope people will learn and see that the same tactics we were using then we can still use today. I think changing people's minds now is going to be key in terms of antifascists wanting to do the work, getting them to see that these anti-choice groups present the largest fascist threat in their lifetime. Also, remembering when Richard Spencer got punched … there's definitely things you can do!

As someone who does need to protect my anonymity in some sense, I am still very active in my neighborhood, even if they know me by a different name. Get away from your screens and go talk to your neighbors, go to communities, and get vocal about what you believe. Learning when to be anonymous and not be anonymous, that takes a lifetime to learn. But you can still do serious work while keeping your family safe. We are going to have to get into the streets to make change happen.

There is a lot of room for everyone.