

Escalating Identity

Who is Oakland

**anti-oppression activism, the politics
of safety, and state co-optation**

April 2012

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Synopsis

This pamphlet – written collaboratively by a group of people of color, women, and queers – is offered in deep solidarity and in the spirit of conversation with anyone committed to ending oppression and exploitation materially. It is a critique of how privilege theory and cultural essentialism have incapacitated antiracist, feminist, and queer organizing in this country by confusing identity categories with culture, and culture with solidarity. This conflation, we go on to argue, minimizes and misrepresents the severity and structural character of the violence and material deprivation faced by marginalized demographics.

According to this politics, white supremacy is primarily a psychological attitude which individuals can simply choose to discard instead of a material infrastructure which reproduces race at key sites across society – from racially segmented labor markets to the militarization of the border. Even when this material infrastructure is named, more confrontational tactics which might involve the risk of arrest are deemed “white” and “privileged,” while the focus turns back to reforming the behavior and beliefs of individuals. Privilege politics is ultimately rooted in an idealist theory of power which maintains that psychological attitudes are the root cause of oppression and exploitation, and that vague alterations in consciousness will somehow remake oppressive structures.

This dominant form of anti-oppression politics also assumes that demographic categories are coherent, homogeneous “communities” or “cultures.” This pamphlet argues that identity categories do not indicate political unity or agreement. Identity is not solidarity. The violent domination and subordination we face on the basis of our race, gender, and sexuality do not immediately create a shared political vision. But the uneven impact of oppression across society creates the conditions for the diffuse emergence of autonomous groups organizing on the basis of common experiences, analysis, and tactics. There is a difference between a politics which places shared cultural identity at the center of its analysis of oppression, and autonomous organizing against forms of oppression which impact members of marginalized groups unevenly.

This pamphlet argues that demands for increased cultural sensitivity and recognition has utterly failed to stop a rising tide of bigotry and violence in an age of deep austerity. Anti-oppression, civil rights, and decolonization struggles repeatedly demonstrate that if resistance is even slightly effective, the people who struggle are in danger. The choice is not between danger and safety, but between the uncertain dangers of revolt and the certainty of continued violence, deprivation, and death. There is no middle ground.

I. The Non-Negotiable Necessity of Autonomous Organizing

As a group of people of color, women, queers, and poor people coming together to attack a complex matrix of oppression and exploitation, we believe in the absolute necessity of autonomous organizing. By “autonomous” we mean the formation of independent groups of people who face specific forms of exploitation and oppression – including but not limited to people of color, women, queers, trans* people, gender nonconforming people, QPOC. We also believe in the political value of organizing in ways which try to cross racial, gender, and sexual divisions. We are neither spokespersons for Occupy Oakland nor do we think a single group can possibly speak to the variety of challenges facing different constituencies.

We hope for the diffuse emergence of widespread autonomous organizing. We believe that a future beyond capital’s 500 year emergence through enclosures of common land, and the enslavement, colonization, and genocide of non-European populations – and beyond the 7000 or more years of violent patriarchal structuring of society along hierarchized and increasingly binary gender lines – will require revolutions within revolutions. Capitalism’s ecocidal destiny, and its relentless global production of poverty, misery, abuse, and disposable and enslavable populations, will force catastrophic social change within most of our lifetimes – whether the public actively pursues it or not.

No demographic category of people could possibly share an identical set of political beliefs, cultural identities, or personal values. Accounts of racial, gender, and sexual oppression as “intersectional” continue to treat identity categories as coherent communities with shared values and ways of knowing the world. No individual or organization can speak for people of color, women, the world’s colonized populations, workers, or any demographic category as a whole – although activists of color, female and queer activists, and labor activists from the Global North routinely and arrogantly claim this right. These “representatives” and institutions speak on behalf of social categories which are not, in fact, communities of shared opinion. This representational politics tends to eradicate any space for political disagreement between individuals subsumed under *the same* identity categories.

We are interested in exploring the question of the relationship between identity-based oppression and capitalism, and conscious of the fact that the few existing attempts to synthesize these two vastly different political discourses leave us with far more questions than answers. More recent attempts to come to terms with this split between anti-oppression and anticapitalist politics, in insurrectionary

anarchism for example, typically rely on simplistic forms of race and gender critique which typically begin and end with the police. According to this political current, the street is a place where deep and entrenched social differences can be momentarily overcome. We think this analysis deeply underestimates the qualitative differences between specific forms and sites of oppression and the variety of tactics needed to address these different situations.

Finally, we completely reject a vulgar “class first” politics which argues that racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia are simply “secondary to” or “derivative of” economic exploitation. The prevalence of racism in the US is not a clever conspiracy hatched by a handful of ruling elites but from the start has been a durable racial contract between two unequal parties. The US is a white supremacist nation indelibly marked by the legal construction of the “white race” in the 1600s through the formation of a cross-class alliance between a wealthy planter class and poor white indentured servants. W.E.B. Du Bois called the legal privileges accorded to poor whites a “psychological wage”: “It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown to them.”

We live in the shadow of this choice and this history. A history which is far from over.

II. Institutional Struggles Over the Meaning of Anti- Oppression Politics

a. On the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC), Again

Nonprofits exist to maintain society as we know it. Nonprofits often provide vital social services in the spaces left by the state’s retreat from postwar welfare provisions, services which keep women, queers, and trans people, particularly those who are poor and of color, alive. Post-WWII welfare provisions themselves were provided primarily to white families – through redlining or the racially

exclusive postwar GI Bill for example. Social justice nonprofits in particular exist to co-opt and quell anger, preempt racial conflict, and validate a racist, patriarchal state. These organizations are often funded by business monopolies which have profited from and campaigned for the privatization of public social services. This has been argued extensively by many who have experienced the limits of nonprofit work firsthand, most recently by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

Indeed, the exponential growth of NGOs and nonprofits could be understood as the 21st century public face of counterinsurgency, except this time speaking the language of civil, women's, and gay rights, charged with preempting political conflict, and spiritually committed to promoting one-sided "dialogue" with armed state bureaucracies. Over the last four decades, a massive nonprofit infrastructure has evolved in order to prevent, whether through force or persuasion, another outbreak of the urban riots and rebellions which spread through northern ghettos in the mid to late 1960s. Both liberal and conservative think tanks and service providers have arisen primarily in response to previous generations of radical Black, Native American, Asian American, and Chican@ Third World Liberation movements. In the 21st century, social justice activism has become a professional career path. Racial justice nonprofits, and an entire institutionally funded activist infrastructure, partner with the state to echo the rhetoric of past movements for liberation while implicitly or explicitly condemning their militant tactics.

The material infrastructure promoting these ideas is massive, enabling their extensive dissemination and adoption. Largely funded by philanthropic organizations like the Ford Foundation (\$13.7 billion), Rockefeller Foundation (\$3.1 billion), or the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (\$37.1 billion), the US nonprofit sector has grown exponentially, often through the direct privatization of the remnants of America's New Deal-era social safety net. This funding structure ties liberal organizations charged with representing and serving communities of color to businesses interested primarily in tax exemptions and charity, and completely hostile to radical social transformation despite their rhetoric. In 2009 nonprofits accounted for 9% of all wages and salaries paid in the United States, generated \$1.41 trillion in total revenues, and reported \$2.56 trillion in total assets. One need only hear the names of these philanthropic organizations to realize that they are or were some of the largest business monopolies in the world, whose foundations are required to donate 5% of their endowment each year, while 95% of the remaining funds remain invested in financial markets. The public is asked to thank these organizations for their generosity for solving problems which they are literally invested in maintaining.

"With increasing frequency," Filipino prison abolitionist and professor Dylan Rodriguez argues, "we are party (or participant) to a white liberal 'multicultural'/"

‘people of color’ liberal imagination which venerates and even fetishizes the iconography and rhetoric of contemporary Black and Third World liberation movements, and then proceeds to incorporate these images and vernaculars into the public presentation of foundation-funded liberal or progressive organizations. . . . [T]hese organizations, in order to protect their nonprofit status and marketability to liberal foundations, actively self-police against members’ deviations from their essentially reformist agendas, while continuing to appropriate the language and imagery of historical revolutionaries. Having lived in the San Francisco Bay Area from 1995–2001, which is in many ways the national hub of the progressive ‘wing’ of the NPIC, I would name some of the organizations . . . here, but the list would be too long. Suffice it to say that the nonprofit groups often exhibit(ed) a political practice that is, to appropriate and corrupt a phrase from . . . Ruth Wilson Gilmore, radical in form, but liberal in content.”

b. Politicians and Police Who Are “Just Like Us”

In California some of the most racist policies and “reforms” in recent history have been advanced by politicians of color. We are not interested in increasing racial, gender, and sexual diversity within existing hierarchies of power – within government, police forces, or in the boardrooms of corporate America. When police departments and municipal governments can boast of their diversity and multicultural credentials, we know that there needs to be a radical alternative to this politics of “inclusion.” Oakland is perhaps one of the most glaring examples of how people of color have not just participated in but in many instances led – as mayors, police chiefs, and city council members – the assault on poor and working class black and brown populations. Oakland Mayor Jean Quan speaks the language of social justice activism and civil rights but her political career in city government clearly depends upon satisfying right-wing downtown business interests, corrupt real estate speculators, and a bloated and notoriously brutal police force.

There is no more depressing cautionary tale of the fate of 1960s-era politics of “changing the state from within” than the career of Oakland Mayor Quan. Quan fought for the creation of an Ethnic Studies program at UC Berkeley in 1969, and in 2011 penned a letter to Occupy Oakland listing an array of state-approved social justice nonprofits in order to justify mass arrests and a police crackdown on protesters attempting to establish a community center and free clinic in a long abandoned city owned property.¹ In response to a season of strikes, anti-police

¹ <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca/groups/cityadministrator/documents/pressrelease/oak033073.pdf>

brutality marches, and repeated port shutdowns in response to police assaults, the state offered two choices: either the nonprofits, or the police.

Quan and other municipal politicians are part of a state apparatus that is rapidly increasing its reliance upon militarized policing to control an unruly population, especially poor people of color in urban areas. Policing is fast becoming the paradigm for government in general. A white supremacist decades-long “war on drugs” has culminated in a 21st century imperial “war on terror.” The equipment and tactics of “urban pacification” are now being turned on American cities and on the citizens and non-citizens who are targeted by austerity measures which have for decades been applied to the Global South.

This is as much the case in the liberal Bay Area as it is anywhere else. Recently “Urban Shield 2011,” a series of urban military training exercises for Bay Area police forces, was held on the campus of UC Berkeley in anticipation of raids on the Occupy Oakland encampment and other local occupied public parks. Israeli Border Police and military police from Bahrain, fresh from suppressing an Arab Spring uprising in their own country, took part in these exercises beside Alameda County Sheriffs and Oakland Police Department officers.

We see clearly that in an era of deepening budget cuts and America’s global decline, the white liberal consensus about racial inclusion is quickly becoming economically unaffordable, and in its place we see increasingly widespread public support for mainstream, openly white supremacist social movements. Armed paramilitary white nationalist organizations like the Minutemen patrol the US border, white supremacist media figures spout genocidal fantasies on the radio and television, and police killings of young black men and women have become so frequent that even the mainstream media has begun to report on it. At the same time, policing is fast becoming the paradigm for government in general.

As Jared Sexton and Steve Martinot argue,

“Under conventional definitions of the government, we seem to be restricted to calling upon it for protection from its own agents. But what are we doing when we demonstrate against police brutality, and find ourselves tacitly calling upon the government to help us do so? These notions of the state as the arbiter of justice and the police as the unaccountable arbiters of lethal violence are two sides of the same coin. Narrow understandings of mere racism are proving themselves impoverished because they cannot see this fundamental relationship. What is needed is the development of a radical critique of the structure of the coin.

[The police] prowl, categorising and profiling, often turning those profiles into murderous violence without (serious) fear of being called to account,

all the while claiming impunity. What jars the imagination is not the fact of impunity itself, but the realisation that they are simply people working a job, a job they secured by making an application at the personnel office. In events such as the shooting of Amadou Diallo, the true excessiveness is not in the massiveness of the shooting, but in the fact that these cops were there on the street looking for this event in the first place, as a matter of routine business. This spectacular evil is encased in a more inarticulate evil of banality, namely, that the state assigns certain individuals to (well-paying) jobs as hunters of human beings, a furtive protocol for which this shooting is simply the effect.”

c. Capitalism and the Material Reproduction of “Race” and “Gender”

Establishing community mutual aid and self-defense against the violence of emergent mainstream racist movements, against the systematic rape and exploitation of women, and against the systematic murder and/or economic ostracization of transgender, transsexual, and gender-nonconforming people; attacking ICE and police-enforced austerity policies which have historically targeted communities of color, naming and resisting the rollbacks of reproductive rights and access to healthcare as the patriarchal, racist attacks that they truly are; these are some of the major challenges facing all of us who understand that oppression is inextricable from global capitalist crisis. We cannot separate what’s happening in Oakland from a global wave of anti-austerity and anti-police brutality general strikes, occupations, and riots across the globe – from Barcelona to Tottenham, from Tahrir to Mali, and from Bhopal to Johannesburg.

We do not believe that autonomous groups will be able to sustain themselves without creating non-state based support networks and without recognizing the mutual implication of white supremacy with capitalism and patriarchy. Undocumented immigrants confront a vicious, coordinated, and entirely mainstream ICE, police, and civilian assault which is, to be absolutely clear, a nativist anti-Latin@ movement committed to patrolling the borders of a nation understood as fundamentally white. Intensifying anti-immigrant racism is not unrelated to capitalism, and just a national but an international phenomenon, fueled by the success of capitalist globalization, by the profits which could be realized through debt and structural adjustment programs, US agribusiness subsidies, “free trade” agreements like NAFTA and CAFTA, and through multinational industries inevitably searching for lower labor costs through the fragmentation of global supply chains. Austerity means women, and particularly poor black and brown women, are being

forced by the state and their husbands, boyfriends, and fathers to make up for the cuts in services and wages through additional domestic and reproductive labor they have always performed.

As a recent W.A.T.C.H. communique from Baltimore puts it, “We know that economic crises mean more domestic labor, and more domestic labor means more work for women. Dreams of a ‘mancession’ fade quickly when one realizes male-dominated sectors are simply the first to feel a crisis – and the first to receive bailout funds. The politics of crisis adds to the insult of scapegoating the injury of unemployment and unwaged overwork. And the nightmare of fertility politics, the ugly justification of welfare and social security ‘reforms.’ ‘Saving America’s families,’ the culture war rhetoric that clings to heteronormativity, to patriarchy, in the face of economic meltdown. Crisis translates politically to putting women in their place, while demanding queers and trans people pass or else. And the worse this crisis gets, the more the crisis is excused by a fiction of scarcity, the more the family will be used to promote white supremacy by assaulting women’s autonomy under the guise of population control. The old Malthusian line: it’s not a crisis, there’s just not enough – for them.”

Capitalism can neither be reduced to the “predatory practices of Wall Street banks” nor is it something which “intersects” with race, gender, and sexual oppression. Capitalism is a system based on a gendered and racialized division of labor, resources, and suffering. Violence and deprivation, premature death, and rape, are structural aspects of an economic system which requires that some work and some do not, some receive care and some do not, some survive, and some die. To say that poor people of color, queers, or immigrants are not interested or not profoundly impacted by the economy, and instead interested only in reaffirming their identities within existing hierarchies of power, is to work within a rigged zero-sum game for the liberation of a particular oppressed identity at the expense of all the others. In the US in particular, the celebration of cultural diversity, the recognition of cultural difference, the applauding of women and queers entering the workplace, and the relative decline of overtly racist or sexist beliefs among younger generations, has not improved but instead masked a dramatic deterioration of the material circumstances of racialized populations.

Massive accumulation through dispossession of native lands; racialized enslavement, murder, and incarceration; constant, intimate, and intensive exploitation of women’s unpaid labor, both in the home and as indentured domestic work, and always violently stratified according to race — all of these form the naturalized and invisibilized underbelly of capital’s waged exploitation of workers. The cumulative economic impact of centuries of enslavement, genocide, colonialism, patriarchy, and racial segregation is not simply peripheral but integral and fundamental to the nature of the global capitalist economy.

The US economy reproduces racial, gender, and sexual inequality at every level of American society—in housing, healthcare, food sovereignty, education, policing, and prison. And also endlessly recreated in these very same sites are the categories “man/woman,” “normal/abnormal,” “able/disabled,” “legitimate/illegitimate,” “citizen/illegal,” and a series of stigmatized populations who always interfere with the smooth functioning of the national economy. The natural, “harmonious” relationship between citizens, patriots, taxpayers, owners, workers, rich, and poor, are disrupted by “illegals,” welfare queens, faggots, freaks, careless promiscuous teens, and so on. The category of “race” is materially recreated and endlessly renewed through these institutions which organize the lives of the undocumented, the imprisoned, the residents of aging ghettos which increasingly function as open-air prisons.

Speaking of capitalism as though it were somehow separable from racist exploitation, gendered violence, and the gamut of complex oppressions facing us in this world, confines antiracist and antipatriarchal struggle to the sphere of culture, consciousness, and individual privilege. The current dominant form of anti-oppression politics in fact diminishes the extent to which racialized and gendered inequalities are deepening across society despite the generalization of policies promoting linguistic, cultural, gender, and sexual inclusivity. Without attacking the material infrastructure which agglomerates power in the hands of some (a process whose end result is now called “privilege”), the equalization of “privilege” and the abolition of these identity-based oppressions in class society is a liberal fantasy.

d. The Racialization of Rape and the Erasure of Sexual Violence

Over the last year in California, the racist specter of potential rape has been used to both delegitimize spaces of militant action – in parks, streets, homes, or college campuses – and to erase the prevalence of sexual violence throughout society. The figure of the black rapist is routinely invoked to excuse police violence, retroactively justifying the murders of countless black men like Kenneth Harding. The need to preempt potential rape has been explicitly used to rationalize the widely publicized pepper spraying of UC Davis students on November 18, 2011. We are tempted to say this incident is more about the need for state bureaucracies to justify their own existence than it does about epidemic of sexual violence in America, but the truth is that the reality of rape and sexual violence along with rape’s deployment as an ideological weapon are fundamental to the everyday functioning of the economy and the state.

In recent interviews, UC Davis Chancellor Katehi and Vice Chancellor Meyer, respectively, defend the police response to the Occupy UC Davis encampment by invoking Occupy Oakland and the implicit threat of sexual violence from the “outside.” Katehi claimed, “We were worried especially about having very young girls and other students with older people who come from the outside without any knowledge of their record . . . if anything happens to any student while we’re in violation of policy, it’s a very tough thing to overcome.” Chancellor Meyer was much more specific about the hypothetical threats in question: “So my fear is a long-term occupation with a number of tents where we have an undergraduate student and a non-affiliate and there is an incident. And then I’m reporting to a parent that a non-affiliate has done this unthinkable act with your daughter, and how could we let that happen.”²

These statements illuminate how gender and race are typically linked in public discourse – here, Katehi, a woman in a position of power attempting to justify an illegal police action, infantilizes women as permanent victims and posits a tacitly racist specter of the criminal rapist, coming from the “outside” to the “inside” of the campus community. After the hypothetical rape, the rape survivor disappears. The rape is regrettable; this regret is not articulated in terms of the trauma of the rape survivor, but through the fact that the incident will have to be reported to a parent. To say rape is “unthinkable” is only possible from a position of privilege in which sexual violence is not an everyday reality.

Considering the fact that rape occurs within every class and every possible racial demographic, usually perpetrated by friends and family, it is utterly fantastic to suggest that a large university campus like UC Davis is a place where rapes do not occur and where rape culture doesn’t flourish. Rendering rape unthinkable is absolutely essential to its structural use as a tool of gendered subordination and exploitation, and also as an ideological tool of white supremacy. The pepper spray incident reveals how the specter of rape appears in state and media narratives when it’s politically useful, and functions as a tool of racialization and criminalization (two processes which converge on poor black and brown populations) when in fact rape and sexual violence affects every sector of society.

The locations which we are told to fear rape and sexual violence change depending upon what is politically expedient, and it’s crucial to notice which sites are emphasized and when – rape has occurred in Occupy encampments across the country, but far, far more rapes have occurred in American households, and yet media reports do not discourage us from heterosexual marriage and co-habitation. When is rape ignorable, and when is it unacceptable? Rape occurs frequently in dorm rooms, in fraternities and sororities, in cars, on dates, amongst persons of

² <http://disoccupy.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/for-people-who-have-considered-occupation-but-found-it-is-not-enuf/>

like age, ethnicity, and class. When the exclusion of police from public spaces is represented by the media as an invitation to rape, we are not at the same time informed that police themselves rape, sexually assault, and abuse women, trans people, queers, sex workers and others with stomach-turning frequency.

While these administrators mobilize the specter of rape to defend the police response to the Occupy encampment at UC Davis, they take part in a nationwide campus culture that sanctions sexual violence. A major study on the topic found that colleges only expel persons found responsible for sexual assault in 10–25 % of all reported cases. These students were often suspended for a semester or received minor academic penalties. Half of the students interviewed said that student judicial services found their alleged assailants not responsible for sexual assault.³

When sexual violence manifests in public organizing spaces, the subject is routinely labeled “divisive” or “just personal”. In a disturbing feat of capitulation to the state’s attack, ‘radicals’ will frequently suspect that allegations of rape and sexual assault are in fact inventions of state forces attempting to infiltrate communities of struggle. Many radical communities have come to associate a focus on addressing and attacking sexual violence with a politics of demobilization or distraction from the “real issues.” Again, the result is that the reality of sexual violence, not merely in one month encampments, but in personal spaces, amongst persons from every racial and ethnic demographic who know and trust one another, is methodically erased. The silence around sexual violence sanctions it, just as the spectacular outrage at isolated incidents of racial violence (e.g. Trayvon Martin) marks the everyday police murder of black and brown individuals as routine. The reality of sexual violence is that it is silenced, evaded, and ignored, empowering primarily cisgendered men at every level of society, and transforming conversations about sexual violence into further justification for intensified racist segregation, incarceration, and policing.

III. The Limits of Contemporary Anti-Oppression Theory and Practice

a. Identity is not Solidarity

Privilege theory and cultural essentialism have incapacitated antiracist, feminist, and queer organizing in this country by confusing identity categories with

³ http://www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/campus_assault/articles/entry/1945/

solidarity and reinforcing stereotypes about the political homogeneity and helplessness of “communities of color.” The category of “communities of color” is itself a recently invented identity category which obscures the central role that antiblack racism plays in maintaining an American racial order and conceals emerging forms of nonwhite interracial conflict. What living in a “post-racial era” really means is that race is increasingly represented in government, media, and education as “culture” while the nation as a whole has returned to levels of racial inequality, residential and educational segregation, and violence unseen since the last “post-racial” moment in American history – the mid-60s legal repeal of the apartheid system of Jim Crow.

Understanding racism as primarily a matter of individual racial privilege, and the symbolic affirmation of marginalized cultural identities as the solution to this basic lack of privilege, is the dominant and largely unquestioned form of anti-oppression politics in the US today. According to this politics, whiteness simply becomes one more “culture,” and white supremacy a psychological attitude, instead of a structural position of dominance reinforced through institutions, civilian and police violence, access to resources, and the economy.

Demographic categories are not coherent, homogeneous “communities” or “cultures” which can be represented by individuals. Identity categories do not indicate political unity or agreement. Identity is not solidarity. Gender, sexual, and economic domination within racial identity categories have typically been described through an additive concept, intersectionality, which continues to assume that political agreement is automatically generated through the proliferation of existing demographic categories. Representing significant political differences as differences in privilege or culture places politics beyond critique, debate, and discussion.

For too long individual racial privilege has been taken to be the problem, and state, corporate, or nonprofit managed racial and ethnic “cultural diversity” within existing hierarchies of power imagined to be the solution. It is a well-worn activist formula to point out that “representatives” of different identity categories must be placed “front and center” in struggles against racism, sexism, and homophobia. But this is meaningless without also specifying the content of their politics. The US Army is simultaneously one of the most racially integrated and oppressive institutions in American society. “Diversity” alone is a meaningless political ideal which reifies culture, defines agency as inclusion within oppressive systems, and equates identity categories with political beliefs.

Time and again politicians of color have betrayed the very groups they claim to represent while being held up as proof that America is indeed a “colorblind” or “post-racial” society. Wealthy queers support initiatives which lock up and murder poor queers, trans* people, and sex workers. Women in positions of

power continue to defend and sometimes initiate the vicious assault on abortion and reproductive rights, and then offload reproductive labor onto the shoulders of care workers who are predominantly women of color.

But more pertinent for our argument is the phenomenon of anti-oppression activists – who do advance a structural analysis of oppression and yet consistently align themselves with a praxis that reduces the history of violent and radically unsafe antislavery, anticolonial, antipatriarchal, antihomophobic, and anticentric freedom struggles to struggles over individual privilege and state recognition of cultural difference. Even when these activists invoke a history of militant resistance and sacrifice, they consistently fall back upon strategies of petitioning the powerful to renounce their privilege or “allow” marginalized populations to lead resistance struggles.

For too long there has been no alternative to this politics of privilege and cultural recognition, and so rejecting this liberal political framework has become synonymous with a refusal to seriously address racism, sexism, and homophobia in general. Even and especially when people of color, women, and queers imagine and execute alternatives to this liberal politics of cultural inclusion, they are persistently attacked as white, male, and privileged by the cohort that maintains and perpetuates the dominant praxis.

b. Protecting Vulnerable Communities of Color and “Our” Women and Children: The Endangered Species Theory of Minority Populations and Patriarchal White Conservationism

The dominant praxis of contemporary anti-oppression politics relinquishes power to political representatives and reinforces stereotypes of individually “deserving” and “undeserving” victims of racism, sexism, and homophobia. A vast nonprofit industrial complex, and a class of professional “community spokespeople,” has arisen over the last several decades to define the parameters of acceptable political action and debate. This politics of safety must continually project an image of powerlessness and keep communities of color, women, and queers “protected” and confined to speeches and mass rallies rather than active disruption. For this politics of cultural affirmation, suffering is legitimate and recognizable only when it conforms to white middle-class codes of behavior, with each gender in its proper place, and only if it speaks a language of productivity, patriotism, and self-policing victimhood.

And yet the vast majority of us are not “safe” simply going through our daily lives in Oakland, or elsewhere. When activists claim that poor black and brown

communities must not defend themselves against racist attacks or confront the state, including using illegal or “violent” means, they typically advocate instead the performance of an image of legitimate victimhood for white middle class consumption. The activities of marginalized groups are barely recognized unless they perform the role of peaceful and quaint ethnics who by nature cannot confront power on their own. Contemporary anti-oppression politics constantly reproduces stereotypes about the passivity and powerlessness of these populations, when in fact it is precisely people from these groups – poor women of color defending their right to land and housing, trans* street workers fighting back against murder and violence, black, brown, and Asian American militant struggles against white supremacist attacks – who have waged the most powerful and successfully militant uprisings in American history. We refuse a politics which infantilizes us and people who look like us, and which continually paints nonwhite and/or nonmale demographics as helpless, vulnerable, and incapable of fighting for our own liberation.

When activists argue that power “belongs in the hands of the most oppressed,” it is clear that their primary audience for these appeals can only be liberal white activists, and that they understand power as something which is granted or bestowed by the powerful. Appeals to white benevolence to let people of color “lead political struggles” assumes that white activists can somehow relinquish their privilege and legitimacy to oppressed communities and that these communities cannot act and take power for themselves.

People of color, women, and queers are constantly compared to children in contemporary privilege discourse. Even children can have a more savvy and sophisticated analysis than privilege theorists often assume! “Communities of color” have become in contemporary liberal anti-oppression discourse akin to endangered species in need of management by sympathetic whites or “community representatives” assigned to contain political conflict at all costs.

And of course it is extremely advantageous to the powers that be for the oppressed to be infantilized and deterred from potentially “unsafe” self-defense, resistance, or attack. The absence of active mass resistance to racist policies and institutions in Oakland and in the US over the last forty years has meant that life conditions have worsened for nearly everyone. The prisons, police, state, economy, and borders perpetually reproduce racial inequality by categorizing, profiling, and enforcing demographic identities and assigning them to positions in a hierarchy of domination where marginalized groups can only gain power through the exploitation and oppression of others. The budget cuts and healthcare rollbacks are leaving poor queer and trans people without access to necessary medical resources like Aids medication or hormones, and other austerity measures have dovetailed with increasingly misogynist anti-reproductive-rights legislature

which will surely result in an increasing and invisible number of deaths among women. As “diversity” has increased in city and state governments, and in some sectors of the corporate world, deepening economic stratification has rendered this form of representational “equality” almost entirely symbolic.

We have been told that because the “Occupy” movement protests something called “economic inequality” it is not a movement about or for people of color, despite the fact that subprime targeting of Blacks and Latinos within the housing market has led to losses between \$164 billion and \$213 billion, one of the greatest transfers of wealth out of these populations in recent history. And despite the fact that job losses are affecting women of color more than any other group.

We are told that because the “economy” has always targeted poor people of color, that increasing resistance from a multiracial cohort of young people and students, and from downwardly mobile members of the white working and middle class, has nothing to do with people of color – but that somehow reclaiming and recreating an idealized cultural heritage does. We are told that we are “tokens” or “informants” if we remain critical of a return to essentialist traditional cultural identities which are beyond political discussion, and of the conservative political project of rebuilding “the many systems of civilization—economics, government, politics, spirituality, environmental sustainability, nutrition, medicine and understandings of self, identity, gender and sexuality—that existed before colonization.”

We reject race and gender blind economic struggles and analysis, but we do not reject struggles against what is, under capitalism, naturalized as the “economy.” While the majority of Occupy general assemblies have adopted a neo-populist rhetoric of economic improvement or reform, we see the abolition of the system of capital as not peripheral but fundamental to any material project of ending oppression.

Recent statistics give a snapshot of worsening racial inequality in the US today: the median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households, the greatest wealth disparities in 25 years. Over 1 in 4 Native Americans and Native Alaskans live in poverty, with a nearly 40% poverty rate for reservations. From 2005 to 2009, Latin@s’ household median wealth fell by 66%, black household wealth by 53%, but only 16% among white households. The average black household in 2009 possessed \$5,677 in wealth; Latin@ households \$6,325; and the average white household had \$113,149.

To address these deteriorating material conditions and imagine solutions in terms of privilege is to tacitly support the continual state and economic reproduction of racial and gender hierarchies, and renew racist and patriarchal violence in the 21st century.

c. On Nonprofit Certified “White Allies” and Privilege Theory

Communities of color are not a single, homogenous bloc with identical political opinions. There is no single unified antiracist, feminist, and queer political program which white liberals can somehow become “allies” of, despite the fact that some individuals or groups of color may claim that they are in possession of such a program. This particular brand of white allyship both flattens political differences between whites and homogenizes the populations they claim to speak on behalf of. We believe that this politics remains fundamentally conservative, silencing, and coercive, especially for people of color who reject the analysis and field of action offered by privilege theory.

In one particularly stark example of this problem from a December 4 2011 Occupy Oakland general assembly, “white allies” from a local social justice nonprofit called “The Catalyst Project” arrived with an array of other groups and individuals to Oscar Grant/Frank Ogawa Plaza, order to speak in favor of a proposal to rename Occupy Oakland to “Decolonize/Liberate Oakland.” Addressing the audience as though it were homogeneously white, each white “ally” who addressed the general assembly explained that renouncing their own white privilege meant supporting the renaming proposal. And yet in the public responses to the proposal it became clear that a substantial number of people of color in the audience, including the founding members of one of Occupy Oakland’s most active and effective autonomous groups, which is also majority people of color, the “Tactical Action Committee,” deeply opposed the measure.

What was at stake was a political disagreement, one that was not clearly divided along racial lines. However, the failure of the renaming proposal was subsequently widely misrepresented as a conflict between “white Occupy” and the “Decolonize/Liberate Oakland” group. In our experience such misrepresentations are not accidental or isolated incidents but a repeated feature of a dominant strain of Bay Area anti-oppression politics which – instead of mobilizing people of color, women, and queers for independent action – has consistently erased the presence of people of color in interracial coalitions.

White supremacy and racist institutions will not be eliminated through sympathetic white activists spending several thousand dollars for nonprofit diversity trainings which can assist them in recognizing their own racial privilege and certifying their decision to do so. The absurdity of privilege politics recenters antiracist practice on whites and white behavior, and assumes that racism (and often by implicit or explicit association, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia) manifest primarily as individual privileges which can be “checked,” given up, or absolved through individual resolutions. Privilege politics is ultimately completely dependent upon precisely that which it condemns: *white benevolence*.

IV. Occupy Oakland as Example

a. Occupy Oakland, “Outside Agitators,” and “White Occupy”

When Mayor Quan and District Attorney Nancy O’Malley claim that Occupy Oakland is not part of the national Occupy movement, they’re onto something. From the start, Occupy Oakland immediately rejected cooperation with city government officials, wildly flexible state and media definitions of “violence,” and a now largely discredited arguments that the police are part of “the 99%.” After the coordinated raids on Occupy encampments across the country, the innumerable incidents of police violence, and slowly emerging details about the involvement of the Department of Homeland Security and its information “fusion” centers, the supporters of collaboration with the police have fallen silent.

The press releases of the city government, Oakland Police Department, and business associations like the Oakland Chamber of Commerce continually repeat that the Occupy Oakland encampment, feeding nearly a thousand mostly desperately poor people a day, was composed primarily of non-Oakland resident “white outsiders” intent on destroying the city. For anyone who spent any length of time at the encampment, Occupy Oakland was clearly one of the most racially and ethnically diverse Occupy encampments in the country—composed of people of color from all walks of life, from local business owners to fired Oakland school teachers, from college students to the homeless and seriously mentally ill. Unfortunately, social justice activists, clergy, and community groups mimicked the city’s erasure of people of color in their analysis of Occupy, when they were not negotiating with the mayor’s office behind closed doors to dismantle the encampment “peacefully.”

From the beginning the Occupy Oakland encampment existed in a tightening vise between two faces of the state: nonprofits and the police. An array of community organizations immediately began negotiating with city bureaucracies and pushing for the encampment to adopt nonviolence pledges and move to Snow Park (itself later cleared by OPD despite total compliance of individuals who settled there). At the same time, police departments across the Bay Area readying one of the largest and most expensive paramilitary operations in recent history. It became increasingly clear that the city’s reputation for progressive activism could not tolerate the massing of Oakland’s homeless, and the extent of urban social damage, made visible in one location.

Oakland city officials and local business people stage an Occupy Oakland counterdemonstration on the steps of City Hall.

The ongoing history of Occupy Oakland is a case study in how much antiracist politics has changed since Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown attempted to run for Oakland mayor and city council respectively in 1973 against a sea of white incumbents. Oakland's current city government—including the mayor's office, city council, and Oakland Police Department—is now staffed and led predominantly by people of color. State-sanctioned representatives who claim to speak for Oakland's "people of color," "women," or "queers" *as a whole* are part of a system of patronage and power which ensures that anyone who gets a foot up does so on the backs of a hundred others.

Whatever the rhetoric of these politicians, their job is to make sure the downtown property owners and homeowners in the hills are insulated from potential crime and rebellion from the flatlands due to increasingly severe budget cuts to social services, police impunity, and mass incarceration. Increasing numbers of Oaklanders rely upon a massive, unacknowledged informal/illegal economy of goods, services, and crime in order to survive. In other words their job is to contain this economy, largely through spending half (or over \$200 million annually, and \$58 million in lawsuit settlements over the past 10 years) of the city budget on the police department. When city politicians argue that protests are the work of "outsiders," they're also asserting the city government and the Oakland Police Department truly represent the city.

We do not believe that a politics rooted in privilege theory and calling for more racial diversity in fundamentally racist and patriarchal institutions like the Oakland Police Department, can challenge Oakland's existing hierarchies of power. This form of representational anti-oppression activism is no longer even remotely anticapitalist in its analysis and aims.

By borrowing a charge used against civil rights movement participants and 60s-era militants of color like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, and even Martin Luther King Jr., as "outside agitators," city residents have been told that the interests of all "authentic Oaklanders" are the same. The one month Occupy Oakland encampment was blamed by the Oakland Chamber of Commerce and its city government partners for everything from deepening city poverty to the failure of business led development, from the rats which have always infested the city plaza to the mounting cost of police brutality. An encampment which fed about a thousand people every day of its month-long existence, and which witnessed a 19% decrease in area crime in the last week of October, was scapegoated for the very poverty, corruption, and police violence it came into existence to engage.

If you believe the city press releases, "authentic Oaklanders" are truly represented by a police force which murders and imprisons its poor black and brown residents daily (about 7% of OPD officers actually live in the city) and a city government which funnels their taxes into business-friendly redevelopment deals like the

\$91 million dollar renovation of the Fox Theater—\$58 million over budget—which line the pockets of well-connected real estate developers like Phil Tagami. In a complete reversal of 60s-era militant antiracist political movements, we are told by these politicians and pundits that militant, disruptive, and confrontational political actions which target this city bureaucracy and its police forces can only be the work of white, middle class, and otherwise privileged youths.

b. The Erasure of People of Color From Occupy Oakland

A recent communique critiquing the Occupy movement states, “The participation of people of color [in Occupy Oakland] does not change the fact that this occupation of public space upholds white supremacy. . . . Some of our own sisters and brothers have silenced our critiques in order to hold on to their positions of power as token people of color in the movement.”⁴ The communique argues that people of color can suddenly “uphold” white supremacy because they do not share the political analysis of the document’s authors. People of color who do not agree with the politics advanced by this group are labeled white, informants, members of Cointelpro, or tokens. Often many of us are simply erased. This is a powerful and deeply manipulative rhetorical tactic which simply fails to engage substantively with any of the reasons why people of color did participate in Occupy Oakland and equates critical participation with support for rape, racism, sexism, homophobia, and gentrification. Needless to say, the authors of the above-quoted passage do not speak for us.

People of color who were not only active but central to Occupy Oakland and its various committees are routinely erased from municipal and activist accounts of the encampment. In subsequent months the camp has been denounced by social justice activists, many of whom work directly with the mayor’s office, who have criticized it as a space irreparably compromised by racial and gender privilege. Racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia were all clearly on display at Occupy Oakland – as they are in every sector of social life in Oakland. None of these accounts has even begun to examine how the perpetrators and victims of this violence did not belong to a single racial demographic, or track the evolving efforts of participants to respond to this violence.

People of color, women and trans* people of color, and white women and trans* people who participated heavily in Occupy Oakland have regularly become both white and (cis) male if they hold to a politics which favors confrontation over consciousness raising. And within white communities, similar political

⁴ <http://disoccupy.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/for-people-who-have-considered-occupation-but-found-it-is-not-enuf/>

disagreements are routinely represented as differences between individuals with “white privilege” and those who are “white allies.”

There is clearly a need to reflect upon how the dynamics of the encampments quickly overwhelmed the capacity of participants to provide services and spaces free from sexual harassment and violence. To describe the participants of Occupy Oakland as primarily white men is not simply politically problematic and factually incorrect – it also prevents us from being able to look honestly at the social interactions that have actually occurred under its auspices.

V. Conclusion: Recuperating Decolonization and National Liberation Struggles; or, Revolution is Radically Unsafe

Nearly fifty years after the dramatic upsurge of wars of national liberation fought over the terrain of what used to be called the “Third World,” there are few political tools for confronting emerging local and global racisms between non-white communities, and the persecution of ethnic minorities in former colonies by native, nonwhite elites. In the US, this has taken the form of increasing anti-black, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant racism within “communities of color” and increasing class divisions within nonwhite demographic categories.

National elites in decolonizing countries have frequently appealed to idealized ethnic traditions and histories in order to cement social cohesion and hierarchies of domination within dictatorial one-party states. Appeals to a kind of authoritarian traditionalism often mobilize components of indigenous traditions which justify caste or caste-like social divisions. No longer requiring the force of occupying armies, formal decolonization in newly “independent” countries from Senegal to Vietnam has given way to neocolonial austerity, structural adjustment, and debt imposed by the global north and administered by those who Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, famously called the native “national bourgeoisie.”

As Maia Ramnath observes about the actually-existing history of formal decolonization,

“In seeking to replicate the techniques of colonial rule by institutionalizing states rather than abolishing them, the nationalist goal diverged from that of substantive decolonization. If the colonial regime’s structures of oppression were not simply to be reopened for business under new local management, yielding a new generation of authoritarian dictatorships and cultural chauvinists, a different logic of anticolonial struggle was imperative.

. . . [T]he specter of stateness—the pressure to establish your own, or to resist the aggression of someone else’s. . . calls forth the enforcement of internal conformity, elimination of elements who fail or refuse to conform, and relentless policing of boundaries, including those of hereditary membership, for which task the control of female bodies, sexuality, and reproduction is essential.”

The belief that communities of color in the US to represent coherent, bounded internal colonies or “nations” working for self-determination has been stretched to the breaking point by class divisions within these communities. To be clear: we believe that wealth can only buy limited protection against worsening racism, sexism, and homophobia. We desire radical liberation, from what theorists have called the “coloniality of power” and the institutions – the borders, the nation-form, the churches, the prisons, the police, and the military – which continue to materially reproduce racial, gender, class, and sexual hierarchies on a global scale. And yet we believe that the political content of contemporary decolonial struggles cannot be assumed in advance.

21st century decolonization in the US would be unrecognizable to the individuals who have fought for liberation under the banner of anticolonial struggle in the past—a tradition which includes Toussaint L’Ouverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Lucy Parsons, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Robert F. Williams, Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, the Third World Women’s Alliance, CONAIE, the indigenous militants of Bolivia in 1990, the militants of Oaxaca in 2006, the Mohawk people in the Municipality of Oka, Tupac Katari, Chris Hani, Nelson Mandela (who led the ANC’s armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe), Emiliano Zapata, Juan “Cheno” Cortina, Jose Rizal, Bhagat Singh, Yuri Kochiyama, Kuwasi Balagoon, DRUM, Assata Shakur, and countless others.

Anticolonial struggles were violent, disruptive, and radically unsafe for individuals who fought and died for self-determination. One cannot be a pacifist and believe in decolonization. One cannot be horrified at the burning of an American flag and claim to support decolonization. And one cannot guarantee the safety of anyone who is committed to the substantive decolonization of white supremacist institutions. The fact that decolonial struggle has been reduced to state-sanctioned rituals of cultural affirmation, and appeals to white radicals to stop putting the “vulnerable” in harm’s way, reveals the extent to which contemporary privilege politics has appropriated the radical movements of the past and remade them in its own image.

We are told that the victims of oppression must lead political struggles against material structures of domination by those who oppose every means by which the “victims” could actually overthrow these structures. We are told that resistance

lies in “speaking truth to power” rather than attacking power materially. We are told by an array of highly trained “white allies” that the very things we need to do in order to free ourselves from domination cannot be done by us because we’re simply too vulnerable to state repression. At mass rallies, we’re replayed endless empty calls for revolution and militancy from a bygone era while in practice being forced to fetishize our spiritual powerlessness.

We are told that the victims of oppression must lead political struggles against material structures of domination by those who oppose every means by which the “victims” could actually overthrow these structures. We are told that resistance lies in “speaking truth to power” rather than attacking power materially. We are told that it is “privileged” to attempt to practically interfere with budget cuts, foreclosures, teacher firings, disappearing schools, hunger, or the loss of healthcare. We are told by an array of highly trained “white allies” that the very things we need to do in order to free ourselves from domination cannot be done by marginalized communities because they’re simply too vulnerable to state repression. At mass rallies, we’re replayed endless empty calls for revolution and militancy from a bygone era while in practice being forced to fetishize our spiritual powerlessness.

In a country where the last eruption of widespread political unrest was nearly forty years when the police go to war and it is called “force.” When business as usual is disrupted in any way, even by shouting, it is labeled “violent.” In this upside down world militant protests across the globe are characterized as heroic struggles for freedom while in the US SWAT teams are deployed to clear reproductive rights rallies. As an October 24th, 2011 letter from “Comrades in Cairo” published in The Guardian puts it, “In our own occupations of Tahrir, we encountered people entering the square every day in tears because it was the first time they had walked through those streets and spaces without being harassed by police; it is not just the ideas that are important, these spaces are fundamental to the possibility of a new world. These are public spaces. Spaces for gathering, leisure, meeting and interacting – these spaces should be the reason we live in cities. Where the state and the interests of owners have made them inaccessible, exclusive or dangerous, it is up to us to make sure that they are safe, inclusive and just. We have and must continue to open them to anyone that wants to build a better world, particularly for the marginalised, the excluded and those groups who have suffered the worst.

[. . .]

Those who said that the Egyptian revolution was peaceful did not see the horrors that police visited upon us, nor did they see the resistance and even force that revolutionaries used against the police to defend their tentative occupations and spaces: by the government’s own admission, 99 police stations were put to

the torch, thousands of police cars were destroyed and all of the ruling party's offices around Egypt were burned down. Barricades were erected, officers were beaten back and pelted with rocks even as they fired tear gas and live ammunition on us. But at the end of the day on 28 January they retreated, and we had won our cities.

It is not our desire to participate in violence, but it is even less our desire to lose. If we do not resist, actively, when they come to take what we have won back, then we will surely lose. Do not confuse the tactics that we used when we shouted 'peaceful' with fetishising nonviolence; if the state had given up immediately we would have been overjoyed, but as they sought to abuse us, beat us, kill us, we knew that there was no other option than to fight back. Had we laid down and allowed ourselves to be arrested, tortured and martyred to 'make a point,' we would be no less bloodied, beaten and dead. Be prepared to defend these things you have occupied, that you are building, because, after everything else has been taken from us, these reclaimed spaces are so very precious."⁵

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/25/occupy-movement-tahrir-square-cairo>

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