

On Oakland's Decolonize/Occupy moment 2011-2013

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Wall Street is the physical site of a vanished wall built by enslaved Africans to protect colonial settlers against resistance from Manhattan's indigenous peoples. To "occupy" Wall Street is thus in physical and symbolic terms to challenge the power of both capitalism and colonialism/racism. Occupy Oakland's strong focus on both labor solidarity and antiracism reflected this double consciousness. The particular struggles throughout the history of labor and race relations in the City of Oakland, and its location in the San Francisco Bay Area where there have been radical movements going back at least to the 19th Century, help account for both the intense repression of Occupy Oakland and the liveliness of the local post-Occupy projects.

The Occupy Wall Street slogan "We are the 99%" is a metaphor for political reality. While the U.S. has formal elections, the mass of the people have lost control of their government to concentrated corporate and financial capital. That reality led to the collective cry of pain in the Decolonize/Occupy moment. That the highly-concentrated corporate media was tone deaf to this critique should surprise no one.

Representative democracy in the United States is the best democracy that money can buy. "Wall Street" is of course a metaphor for American and global capitalism. The phrase "Occupy Wall Street," rather than "Washington," implies a criticism of the absence of people power even though the U.S. routinely has elections. In 2011 the Wall Street "occupation" captivated the imagination of thousands of Americans who occupied hundreds of public squares throughout the United States.

In the Bay Area, "Occupy Wall Street" work continues today even if the intensity of the first year is well past. Thousands are proud former participants of the port shut downs supporting long-shore workers and port truck drivers (November 2011, and December 2011 [west coast]) From these two mass demonstrations, Occupy Oakland became the primary Occupy voice for unorganized and organized workers in the United States. Occupy Oakland also has a powerful anti-racist focus built on some local history we will discuss later. These features of Occupy Oakland inspired other activists across the country and indeed worldwide.

Occupy Oakland and Occupy Wall Street both drew inspiration – and some philosophy and participants – from the global justice movements associated with the Seattle protests of 1999 and that continued into the 2000s. Occupy Oakland and Occupy Wall Street further drew inspiration from resistance against austerity in places like Spain and Greece and Portugal, and similar rebellions in South America, including the earlier Argentinian uprising of the

19th and 20th December 2001, the Venezuelan revolution, and from the popular youth-led rebellions that overthrew dictators in Tunisia and Egypt.

The port city of Oakland, the former terminus of the transcontinental railroad, has a history of populist mobilizations that goes back more than a century. Features of this history shaped Occupy Oakland. In 1894, Oakland's railroad workers and others went out to support the national Pullman strike. In 1896 Jack London took to socialist speechifying in City Hall Park, and running in 1903 and 1905 as a socialist candidate for Mayor. The 1920s and 1930s saw dock, longshore, shipyard, cannery and packinghouse workers in working class Oakland repressed by a business-dominated city leadership. However worker organization was facilitated from 1933 on by section 7(a) of the National Industrial Recovery Act. In 1946, downtown Oakland department store clerks, predominantly women, seeking unionization went out on strike. Rank and file Teamsters honored their picket line. The downtown business power structure then persuaded Oakland's elected officials to order the police to break the picket. That violent repression backfired when first streetcar workers went out in sympathy and then the County American Federation of Labor called a general strike. The "work holiday" lasted 2 1/2 days.

Oakland's C.L. Dellums, at the 1925 founding of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters ("BSCP") urged the Pullman porters and indeed all workers to "fight or be slaves!" The BSCP union hall became a center for West Oakland's Black community life, and Dellums later served with the Bay Area NAACP. In Spring 1934, longshore workers struck the waterfront but the management began recruiting Black and Mexican strikebreakers. Union militants then met with Dellums and other leaders, unionized those Black workers who had worked a year on the waterfront, and had them serve on the strike committee. From then on West Oakland's black workers played an increasingly significant role in the Bay Area labor movement and then in Oakland's civic culture. Oakland's Black population grew from 3% in 1940 to over 20% in 1960. It was in this Black labor, internationalist, and civil rights milieu that scholar Cedric Robinson as well as Black Panther Party founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale grew up.

In 1967, Oakland's Black Panther Party (BPP) developed its Ten Point Program, and began to focus on armed surveillance patrols against racialized police brutality. In response to this widely felt grievance and a newly proposed gun regulation, they marched with arms onto the Sacramento State Capitol floor. They also founded the Free Huey movement after BPP founder Huey Newton was charged with murder for the death of an Oakland police officer. These actions made it the 'go-to' organization for Black low income folks, and other youth, as well as for the white New Left. The BPP challenged Oakland's white political power structure by running its leaders as candidates for political office with the newly formed California Peace and Freedom party. Its anti-capitalist and revolutionary nationalist ideology had wide appeal and continues to resonate in Oakland city and Bay Area politics today.

For many in Oakland mere survival is resistance. Widespread poverty followed both de-industrialization and the decommissioning of some large military facilities that earlier supported the city economy. Oakland is now known for its violent crime rate. The city is the seat of Alameda County which is one of the top two county contributors to the California's prison population via the school to prison pipeline. Oakland's police department remains notorious for its racist brutality against the town's brown and black populations, its corruption, and its excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators.

Occupy Oakland not Occupy Wall Street

To "Occupy" Oakland, then, has a different meaning than to "Occupy Wall Street." Actually existing political organization and non-profits, often including those lead by people of color or formed by or to serve non-whites promoted a perception that the leadership core of Occupy Oakland were predominantly privileged white young people whose very presence promoted gentrification. The lamestream media amplified this narrative as one key mechanism to delegitimize the activist work on Oakland's streets. While I followed that media, I was always skeptical of this ideological construction of Occupy, a mystification which also incidentally well served the real forces behind gentrification, outside investors and commercial real estate developers.

The young activists in their twenties who set the tone for the U.S. "Occupy" uprising grew up with personal electronic communications devices. They are highly networked. They have instant access to news of social justice struggles and their repression not only in this country but all over the world. Occupy Oakland often expressed solidarity for people's anti-austerity and pro-democracy struggles elsewhere. We thus engaged routinely in internationalist mass political education on Oakland's hard streets. I am grateful for what I learned from the young activists. I often miss their generational presence in my continuing work.

Occupy Oakland further engaged hundreds of other issues and campaigns in its General Assembly (GA) at Oakland's City Hall amphitheater. The GA met daily in the first weeks and several times a week in the first months of the occupation. Dozens if not hundreds of other Occupy assemblies convened in smaller cities and towns across California, as well as in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, and San Francisco. As I wrote at the time, wide-ranging political discussions and broad participation in and around the GA enabled the work of the liberatory imagination. The imaginative work also continues.

At the core of the Occupy Oakland GA was direct democracy. If you showed up you could join in the conversation, propose a topic for discussion, make a proposal, argue, and vote. Formal proposals required at least three individuals to bring it to the facilitation committee to be put on the GA agenda for discussion and decision. Either consensus or modified consensus was sought

once that proposal was thoroughly discussed at GA. Marina Sitrin named the decision-making form “horizontalism” based on the assemblies in the Argentinian rebellion beginning December 19 and 20, 2001. Like them Oakland's horizontalism contrasts with the top-down hierarchical decision-making of most U.S. institutions.

Consensus process was cumbersome as its premise is allowing everyone physically present who is so moved the opportunity to speak. It thus involved a lot of listening and required willingness to learn from the diverse perspectives those present brought with them. Even so the participatory decision-making in the Oakland public square often worked surprisingly well. This contrasts with the professional political class in electoral office wholly bought up by the special interests whose money they need to run election campaigns. It is these interests that the 1% term points to, interests someone once referred to as malefactors of great wealth. The GA consensus process posed an alternative, and often an empowering, vision and practice of shared governance by, for, and of the people.

Oakland General Assembly participants were told early and often that most of Occupy Oakland's work was not there in the GA but in other groups and committees. We were all encouraged to join at least one such entity outside of the GA. Most people took this to heart. Like the other Occupy groups we encouraged autonomous action. While decentralization at first allowed explosive growth it also meant that as time went by the participants could drift away to autonomous projects and groups. Tensions emerged, cliques formed, and the center did not hold. Although Occupy Oakland's quorum requirement moved down from 100 to 70 people, quorum has very rarely been met since early 2012. Nonetheless a small GA continues to meet today.

The political dialogue around the Oakland encampment whether inside or outside the General Assembly nonetheless informed and inflamed thousands of participants. We formed numerous groups and committees that were both issue and project focused. Some that are still going are highlighted below. We thereby taught or further developed hundreds of people's organizing skills through the participatory democracy of the GA and the related direct action. It is too soon to tell how embers in people's consciousness and practice will affect politics in the Bay Area and beyond.

In sum the Decolonize/Occupy moment highlights how from the perspective of the people there is a democracy deficit. For the ruling class, by contrast, the surplus of democracy is terrorism. Democratic Mayor Jean Quan's administration ordered the Oakland Police Department, with the cooperation of federal, state and local law enforcement through the federally-funded counter-terrorism fusion center, to remove the Occupy Oakland encampment. This police operation almost killed Iraq War veteran and peace activist Scott Olsen. Dozens of others were beaten, arrested, incarcerated, and hundreds were tear-gassed and otherwise brutalized. Images of Oakland's repression circulated globally.

Bay Area community outrage at the police assault on Occupy Oakland brought thousands out for the next General Assembly (“GA”) in front of Oakland’s City Hall. Some three thousand participants consensed to shut down Oakland’s port a week later on November 2, 2011 in response to the police action. While protesting police terrorism and protecting civil liberties was the impetus, labor solidarity soon emerged as the political focus for that first port shutdown protest. Workers from Longview Washington’s ILWU Local 21 who were fighting to retain unionized jobs at an export grain terminal, came to Occupy Oakland seeking solidarity. They got it.

Alameda County organized labor, through the AFL-CIO’s Alameda Labor Council, formally endorsed Occupy Oakland’s November 2 “Day of Action” by resolution and urged unions and their members to participate. The Labor Council’s barbeque at the plaza fed thousands of participants late in the day and into the early evening. Occupy Oakland’s November 2, 2011 mass protest, tens of thousands strong, was the largest protest seen in town since the 1946 Oakland General Strike.

Perhaps the particular class conscious character of the Oakland Decolonize/Occupy moment came to be seen by the American state and capitalist ruling class as the most dangerous of the local movements. We await the labors of a future historian to declassify all the relevant documents to show this. It signifies something that while Oakland is only the forty-seventh largest U.S. city, nearly one in ten of all the recorded Occupy protest-related arrests nationwide occurred here.

Oakland’s elected officials and administrators viewed citizens and residents as terrorists. There was a proposal to expand real-time anti-terrorism surveillance designed for the Port of Oakland to the entire city of Oakland. Funded by the Department of Homeland Security, and subcontracted to a security-intelligence company SAIC that we hear is known in its industry as NSA-West. This suggests again a deficit of democracy. Oakland’s mayor and city council have instantiated “the citizen as terrorist” for a broader American public.

As noted earlier, in Oakland our Occupy moment has a much stronger focus on racism than other cities. Oakland’s history of police terrorism against Black/Latina/o communities framed Oakland’s occupation. Oakland occupiers renamed the plaza in front of City Hall after Oscar Grant, and named the library and class space after Raheim Brown, both young African American men murdered by police. Events were also held at Lil Bobby Hutton, or DeFremery Park, renamed for the first Oakland Black Panther Party victim of police murder in the late 1960s.

The Justice for Alan Blueford Coalition formed after the May 2012 Oakland police murder of Skyline High School senior Alan Blueford. The focus on racial injustice was further reflected in the Occupy4Prisoners group which challenged the American gulag archipelago, or what Michelle Alexander named The New Jim Crow. The carceral state remains an important focus. Solidarity for the

California prisoner hunger strike, and the current national prisoner work strike, reflect this focus. Former Occupy Oakland participants have become quite active in both the local Black Lives Matter chapter, and in the remarkable and powerful work of the Anti Police-Terror Project, which is itself a project of the Onyx Organizing Committee. Lastly, the Qilombo, an autonomous Black Power community center, builds community among people of color and co-conspirators in downtown Oakland. With these projects some of Occupy Oakland's former participants foreground the racial state.

Other entities that stayed active for some years include the Coalition to Stop Goldman Sachs, Foreclosure Defense Group, and Decolonize Oakland. Strike Debt Bay Area, formed with some San Francisco activists, continues to challenge the power of finance capital over national and global economy and the manufacturing of debt to advance servitude. The Omni Oakland Commons, a collective of collectives, is seeking the purchase a former night/social club in the formerly Italian American neighborhood of Temescal to establish a permanent community commons space. Occupy the Farm, which has made a movie, remains active. The Community Democracy Project which promotes participatory budgeting also remains active. There was an effort to localize Decolonize/Occupy work by creating popular assemblies in Oakland neighborhoods. The Occupy Brooms Collective active in North Oakland was one such group. Prominent among these efforts was the Biblioteca Popular Víctor Martínez protesting the disinvestment reflected in the city's abandonment of a Carnegie library building in the Fruitvale area. The Biblioteca built a community library and garden, and thus local community, on the grounds of the shuttered structure in this predominantly Latina/o neighborhood. These groups engage in a complicated dance of anti-austerity work, subscribing to anti-gentrification ideas and restoring the commons while challenging the project of profit-oriented developers.

The safer spaces group formed during the encampment because of the ways in which heterosexual and cis male supremacy was expressed in the public square. Queer/feminist critique articulated a need for a woman and/or queer only space and part of the encampment was designated safer space. Feminist formations emerged as well, among the Oakland Occupy Patriarchy and Offensive Feminists. These sought to foreground and develop a practice of feminist and queer politics. Moreover part of the collective that produced the materialist-feminist LIES Journal was based out of Oakland. Another project that emerged from this tendency was The Tsega Center, named for an encampment comrade later murdered by her intimate partner.

Occupy Oakland's hallmark diversity of tactics philosophy along with a modified consensus process that required a quorum of 100 humans and if consensus could not be reached by them, a ninety percent vote of participants to pass a resolution, enabled broad unity on the actions agreed upon. Moreover it gave Occupy Oakland the capacity to have dozens of left sectarian groups, socialist, anarchist, communist and so forth, work together democratically that otherwise

might have continued their seemingly perpetual fights over the political line. Attempts by any such groups to dominate the political line at General Assembly usually lead to people leaving and thus the meeting losing quorum.

The question of diversity of tactics was a key debate often repeated. Although not always understood by participants in the conversation, especially by some who repeatedly argued a narrow non-violence position, the central question regarded targeted property destruction – named by the state as vandalism – through smashing or tagging the local property of the most egregious transnational corporate offenders of the recent past. A special focus was the large banks responsible for the 2008 financial crisis and the depression that followed. The publicly discussed “violence” contemplated was limited to such property destruction. We called it “smashy-smashy.” No one I am aware of argued for “Second Amendment solutions,” armed insurrection, or anything even close.

I observe, though, that to reduce Dr. Martin Luther King’s philosophy and social justice contributions, as Mayor Quan’s administration and the police propaganda apparatus does, to the mere injunction “do not vandalize” is, to use George W. Bush’s wonderful coinage, to utterly “misunderestimate” Dr. King’s philosophy and contributions. My sense is the majority of Occupy Oakland’s participants did not think property destruction particularly useful but nonetheless saw it as an understandable tactic. However a handful undertook the internal policing of those with whom they disagreed. Ironically their “non-violence” action involved physical assaults by individuals against other individuals perceived by such self-volunteered “police” as “vandals.” Proponents of a “non-violence” plank at the GAs to promote such internal policing also found their attempts to pass their position stymied by the meetings repeatedly losing quorum.

There is a history to the diversity of tactics discussion that comes out of last century’s global justice protests against the World Trade Organization. A key document that may be heard as summation is the Saint Paul’s Principles of 2008:

1. Our solidarity will be based on respect for a diversity of tactics and the plans of other groups.
2. The actions and tactics used will be organized to maintain a separation of time or space.
3. Any debates or criticisms will stay internal to the movement, avoiding any public or media denunciations of fellow activists and events.
4. We oppose any state repression of dissent, including surveillance, infiltration, disruption and violence. We agree not to assist law enforcement actions against activists and others.

These principles were proposed to the Occupy Oakland GA and discussed in November and December 2011. The value of this approach is that it allows groups who otherwise might fight one another on this or that political line to work together to achieve common goals through diverse actions and despite both much divergent philosophy and many different tactical approaches.

Oakland is historically a center for Black cultural life on the West Coast. It remains one of the most diverse cities in the country. Not surprisingly, then, it is a site where a strong critique of the term "Occupy" itself emerged. United States imperial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Israeli occupation of Palestine, as well recognition of American settler colonialism on occupied indigenous peoples' territories, prompted reflection on this question. As noted the "race" question also emerged in the Occupy Wall Street discourse in the first weeks.

My participation in Occupy Oakland was limited by a full-time day job in San Francisco. My specific job in unemployment insurance reminded me daily of the condition and struggles of waged workers affected by the depression. I am further a rank and file union job steward in my workplace. But as I have no family responsibilities I have more leisure than most people who work a forty-hour workweek. I was thus there many evenings and weekends usually for the Oakland General Assembly in addition to numerous protest actions and some cultural events. I also observed the San Francisco GA twice.

I entered the physical space of the Occupy Oakland encampment, however, after first experiencing Occupy Wall Street virtually. A former Brooklynite and New York area community and student activist, I started using Facebook during a year I was unemployed after filing a Berkeley dissertation. My newsfeed reflected my former New York comrades' posts on the emerging movement there. I further followed Occupy Wall Street developments in autonomous media generated by and around Occupy Wall Street and its progeny. However I did not then nor do I now use Twitter. My background as the child of a Japanese migrant and a 1956 Hungarian refugee, and prior years of anti-racist organizing focused on the Asian American community in the New York metro area was some baggage I carried with me into the Decolonize/Occupy moment. Additionally, I brought what I learned over a dozen years in Critical Race Theory, a legal intellectual movement, to the Occupy Oakland conversation.

Within days of the October 10, 2011 start of Oakland's occupation, I wrote an essay entitled "The Occupy/Decolonize Moment" based on alternative media, my news feed, and personal observation as sources. It was published first on October 19 on the Occupy Oakland website then elsewhere. The key race critique passage is:

The decolonization critique of [Occupy Wall Street] has two components. The first is stated in the slogan, "Take Back Wall Street: Occupied Since 1625." The major premise is that the economic and social development of the present U.S.

order originates in white settler colonization. A minor premise is that the invention of racism served as ideological justification for both conquest and enslavement and that racism still prevails in Occupied America.

The second component is based on experiences, and criticism based on those experiences, by people of color participants in the Occupy general assemblies. This part of the critique centers how male, heterosexual, class, and especially white racial privilege exclude the histories and experiences of women and queer people of color in articulating the uprising's politics.

Thus, a call to "Occupy America" obscures the histories of colonization and resistance that U.S. indigenous and people of color communities often carry with them. The slogan "Occupy Everywhere" also unfortunately evokes colonialist projects. The phrase "Occupy Together" – used by an unofficial online coordination project – avoids this danger by inviting everyone's participation.

The Queer People of Color/People of Color group formed early in Occupy Oakland. This was where I spent most of my time outside of the General Assembly when I was in Oscar Grant Plaza in the first weeks. Proposals for indigenous solidarity and then to change the name of Occupy Oakland to Decolonize Oakland came through this group. Ultimately members of this group changed their name to Decolonize Oakland, and that group then later declared autonomy from Occupy Oakland. The Decolonize Oakland name change debate remains a contested chapter in Occupy Oakland's trajectory.

Some white activists dismissed race-identity based politics. Some people of color activists wrote off white activists who dismissed the politics of races and racisms. Some male activists dismissed gender-based and feminist politics. Some heterosexual activists dismissed lesbian-gay—bisexual-transgender and feminist politics. These arguments led to much learning but also much hurt. Those who identified with the politics of these margins sometimes withdrew from the Decolonize/Occupy work.

Determining what exactly the role of the state was in promoting fissures and fragmentation in Occupy Oakland is a project for a future historian. Certainly many anticipated a state role, questioning whether the positions and actions some participants took were articulated by agent provocateurs. Hopes were disappointed and dialogue closed too soon. Since I have no Twitter account, I missed the Twitter flame wars that I suspect caused hurt feelings and later depression in some participants. The intensity of conversations clearly could lead participants to withdraw.

I sensed that the life experience of some of the younger and most active activists in Occupy Oakland meant that they did not know how to talk with employed workers or across race and class lines. I should mention my service as worksite job steward in the public sector agency where I work means I have only just begun learning to talk. High unemployment in the young activists' cohort, or

their experience only in precarious employment, may further have had something to do with this.

The young activists were sophisticated about the politics of gender and sexuality, often having been trained primarily in the historically white precincts of American secondary and higher education. As Occupy Oakland continued they learned to listen and speak across other vectors of difference with varying degrees of success. Moreover, some lacked access to – although many quickly learned about – the historical political race consciousness that comes from long participation in community-based anti-racist work. Others were already quite inspired by the local history of radical anti-racist and anti-subordination social movements.

Nonetheless the utopian aspirations and anti-capitalist critique articulated by many occupiers often made an impression on many workers and the underemployed or unemployed of all different backgrounds. Most workers, especially those with the unwaged care work of families, had limited or no time and thus lacked capacity in most cases to participate in the drawn out Assembly process. Many – including my relatively poorly-compensated state worker union sisters and brothers – still repeatedly provided material support in the form of food and other aid.

The discourse of the 1% so shapes Americans' consciousness that it is unusual to find thinkers who do not subscribe. The dominant capitalist and individualism ideology is hegemonic. Mass culture reinforces that ideology through its communications media platforms and through the vast majority of other forms of cultural production. As a slogan "We are the 99%" points towards class analysis. However its use may have reinforced an American exceptionalism that class is the analytic that dare not speak its name.

Somebody commented that the reason we call it the American dream is that you have to be asleep to believe in it. Most Americans who work for a living do not think of ourselves as workers. One 1960s Bay Area radical even wrote of our being trapped in the sunlit prison of the American dream. Somebody else observed that most Americans think of themselves not as the poor or the working class but rather as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. The very concept of the middle class may be the walls and the bars of our sunlit prison.

The Democratic Party's 2012 electoral strategy to reclaim the White House reinscribed a dominant myth about the so-called middle class and social mobility in America. The reality I see every day on the Oakland and San Francisco streets, that I hear every day on the unemployment insurance phone lines, makes me extremely skeptical about this perception of America as description. It may be aspiration. But as Glen Ford succinctly put it, it sure seems that Barack Obama was not so much the lesser but rather the more effective evil.

We need change we can rely on rather than change to believe in. Among U.S. leftists, there is often a dialectic between hope and depression. As already noted the work for change continues in Oakland. Many of us though too soon returned to the flat atmosphere of daily waged and unwaged work and survival too soon forgetting what we had won. An English poet wrote about his participation in an earlier revolution: "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive ..." That phrase sums up nicely my feeling about Oakland's Decolonize/Occupy moment.

A version of this essay was presented Oct. 12, 2013 at the World Association of International Studies conference, Adrian College, Michigan. It has been shared with some Occupy Oakland comrades.

About the author

John Hayakawa Torok participated in the following Occupy Oakland committees and working groups: Queer People of Color/People of Color Committee, Research Committee, Labor Solidarity Committee, Privacy Working Group, and Livable Wage Assembly. He attends most of the weekly General Assembly meetings. Information on those and other meetings and events can be found at www.occupyoakland.org The author is a rank and file worksite shop steward at his California state civil service job in San Francisco. He is a member of SEIU Local 1000. He is also a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Research on Social Change, Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, University of California, Berkeley. He can be reached at: seuioooJohn AT yahoo.com.