
“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

The Limits of Contemporary Anti-Oppression Theory and Practice

A Critique of Privilege Theory and Cultural Essentialism

This short piece was excerpted from “Who is Oakland: anti-oppression activism, the politics of safety, and state co-optation” which was collaboratively written by a group of people of color, women, and queers, which provides an extensive criticism of anti-oppression politics, their relation to non-profits, capitalism and the state, as well as how they play out in movements such as Occupy.

Identity is not Solidarity

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

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For too long individual racial privilege has been taken to be the problem,

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*.



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“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.

Oakland police preventing the reoccupation of a property in the process of foreclosure. 90% of Oakland’s foreclosures are concentrated in 3 largely black and brown zip codes, 94621, 94603, 94605.

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.

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

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 anticiscentric 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.

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

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