

*/A Critique of Ally Politics/
/On Nonprofit-Certified “White Allies” and Privilege Theory/
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Revolutionary Solidarity

A Critical Reader for Accomplices



*All you see are demographics
All you hear is “systems”
Without undressing me down to the sum of my parts you cannot
achieve that checking-your-privilege erection.
You defend dogma cuz it’s all you’ve got left
But
Humanity won’t fit into data bars or scripted syllabi
And won’t stick around when you can no longer see it.
Undressing us all with your politics you become the most correct
And also an entity you’d probably hate—could you escape for a
moment.
You steal our dignity and undermine our friendship
When the dots connect
And I see you seeing me through the activist gaze.
I’m not the beating heart I feel
Your eyes just reflect a female queer blob of color.*

—Rakhee Devasthali

*Come and we’ll find our way together, without leaders and
hierarchical structures.*

-Zapatistas

like Mike Brown's.

There are so many other ways that revolutionary solidarity can tangibly be practiced—more than we can yet know under this current nonsollicitous social arrangement. So let's bring bold imagination to bear on the project of implementing solidarity among us, as our weapon par excellence, toward new worlds.

Let's get some rest during this storm that has come, but not get so comfy that we forget why we are on the streets to begin with.

I want to walk in the streets nightly, exhausted and exhilarated, forging trusting social relations, becoming new people in a new culture that we are trying to create with each mile, opening up possibility and holding strong, collectively and cooperatively, against those forces that would destroy all that is life affirming.

I want to be part of what scholar James C. Scott calls an "anarchist calisthenics" while we walk the miles, in which whether one is an anarchist or not, we practice together what it means to feel more and more comfortable in breaking the laws that aren't just, the very structural logic that's never going to be just by definition, so that we can build up rebel muscles for the harder and harder fight ahead—the fight for freedom.

I want to love and rage, mourn and fight, with millions of others, against this killing machine, until we shut it down for good—replacing it with a social goodness that we can barely yet envision, and armed with do-it-ourselves steel-hard solidarity as shield, aid, humanity, ethics.

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daily pressure everywhere, to craft an ever-more imaginative and inclusive diversity of tactics, to encourage varied forms of resistance in many cities at the same time, complementing and sometimes contradicting each other but in concert, and we need to conjure up ever-more savvy strategies.

We need empathy and solidarity among all of us—far less judgment and far more kindness, because it matters if black (brown, indigenous, trans, and other) lives matter.

“If you are at a protest and you choose to take pictures or record video of people doing illegal things, you may end up putting that person in jail,” observes Shareef Ali of Oakland. “That is, because you disapproved of someone’s behavior, because you thought it was ‘violent’ toward inanimate objects, or because you thought it might hurt the movement, you are choosing to assist the state in sending that living, breathing person to one of the most violent places in the world, for the *expressed purpose* of destroying the movement. Even if you’re right about the ethics or efficacy of property destruction—and I don’t think you are—that is totally, utterly unconscionable, and it is far more violent and counter to the cause of justice than smashing a window ever could be.”

Or as someone succinctly offered, “Solidarity is love.”

We are tired too, like those freaked-out cops, undercover and in their riot attire, but not of the streets. We are not tired of fighting for a free society of free individuals. Instead, we are weary beyond words and slogans about all the violence of state, capital, and white supremacy.

Revolutionary solidarity should look like us not chanting anymore “this is what democracy looks like,” because US-style democracy is murdering people at home and elsewhere. Any sort of self-governance will have to look far different, engaging in practices of solidarity that are about self-determination too.

Revolutionary solidarity should not look like chanting “whose streets, our streets,” because the police state, colonialist and/or capitalist, has already repeatedly stolen those streets and the land below them, and owns them yet as private property, increasingly as enclaves for the super rich. Those streets are killing fields, whether for those made homeless who now have to make those streets their homes, or for those whose lives are stolen every day on the streets,

others are moved by graffiti on or damage to police cars because it signals that the police aren't thoroughly in control as an invading army; yet others are drawn to reclaiming streets with sound systems and dance, by projecting films and slogans on the sides of public buildings, or via pulling together mass bike rides. Mostly, many are simply moved by the fact—and therefore are starting to join enthusiastically in the protest, too—that millions of feet are pounding many miles of pavement day after day against killer cops and white supremacy.

We haven't stopped, though the police are working overtime to divert and confound us.

Yes, maybe we need to “stop” to better self-organize. So that we can do deeper, sustained jail and court support as follow-up to arrests. So that we can strategize on how to really shut down this system, in myriad ways, and practice, at the same time, new ways of being and living, a new society that makes this old one truly look as brutal as it is and ultimately makes it history. So that we can more freely share ideas and tactics with each other on how to better outwit the police as we struggle against them. So that we can do trainings on how to offer forms of mutual aid, from medic to legal to educational to standing by those who already, always, bear the brunt of state violence. And mostly, to join in dialogic reflection on the “why” behind our organizing: what we are against, and what we envision as potential alternatives.

Most important, though, we need to “stop” to better enact revolutionary solidarity as a verb, our best weapon, a living practice as we struggle toward better having each other's backs when our backs all look quite different from each other—as they should.

We are, of course, far from that place of autonomous, dignified, and caring communities. But we can start experimenting with what such communities of care could look like, in micro-ways, in the many micro-moments we are handed, frequently by riot police. For we are not provoking the police; they provoke daily, which is why we are on the streets, where as should be self-evident, they will continue to provoke. Our best provocation, in return, is making police obsolete precisely by striving to constitute new social relations of revolutionary solidarity that make such institutions unnecessary.

Given this, we need to stay extra powerful in our resolve to keep up

A Critique of Ally Politics

This piece emerged from reflections on the struggle in Durham, North Carolina, and was originally published as a zine in 2013 under the title “Ain't No PC Gonna Fix It, Baby.”

After several recent disappointing and hurtful experiences—and to be clear, a lifetime of related minor and major run-ins with friends, comrades, and activists—my need is unrelenting for us to rethink how we engage with the question of otherness and our organizing. How do we integrate a genuine approach to oppression and anti-oppression? This writing takes apart the concept of “ally” in political work with a focus on race, though clearly there are parallels across other experiences of identity.

Charity Is to Solidarity What Ally Is to Affinity

Thanks to experience working with indigenous and other international solidarity movements, anarchists and antiauthoritarians draw a clear line between charity and solidarity based on the principles of affinity and mutual aid. Affinity is just what it sounds like: the idea that we can work most easily with people who share our goals, and that our work will be strongest when our relationships are based in trust, friendship, and love. Mutual aid is the idea that we all have a stake in one another's liberation, and that when we act from that interdependence, we can share with one another as equals.

Charity, by contrast, is one-sided: one shares “excess” wealth on one's own terms. Ideologically, charity implies that others inherently *need* the help—that they are unable to take care of themselves. This is patronizing and selfish. It establishes some people as *those who assist*, and others as *those who need assistance*, stabilizing oppressive paradigms by solidifying people's positions in them.

Autonomy and self-determination are essential to the distinction between solidarity and charity. Recognizing the autonomy and self-determination of individuals and groups acknowledges their compe-

tence and capability. The framework of solidarity affirms that other groups have something of worth to be gained through interactions with them, whether materially or by gaining something less tangible like perspective, joy, or inspiration. The solidarity model also dispels the idea of *one* inside and *one* outside, foregrounding how individuals belong to multiple groups and groups overlap with one another, while demanding respect for the identity and self-sufficiency of each of those groups.

The charity and ally models, on the other hand, are so strongly rooted in the ideas of *I* and the *other* that they force people into distinct groups with preordained relationships to one another. According to ally politics, the only way to undermine one's own privilege is to give up one's role as an individual political agent, and follow the lead of those more or differently oppressed. White allies, for instance, are explicitly taught not to seek praise for their ally work, especially from people of color—yet there is often a distinctly self-congratulatory air to the work of allyship and a false humility. Many white allies do their support work in a way that recentralizes themselves as the only individuals willing to come in and do the hard work of fighting racism on behalf of people of color.

Whereas ally politics suggest that in shifting one's role from actor to ally one can diminish one's culpability, a liberating or anarchist approach presumes each person retains their own agency while also accounting for and responding to others' desires, revealing how our survival/liberation is fundamentally linked with the survival/liberation of others. This fosters interdependence while compelling each person to take responsibility for their own choices, with no boss or guidance counselor to blame for their decisions.

For a liberating understanding of privilege, each of us must learn our stake in toppling those systems of power, recognizing how much we all have to gain in overturning every hierarchy of oppression. For many people, this requires a shift in values. A rights-based discourse around equality would lead us to believe that we could all become atomized middle-class families of any race who are either straight *or* gay married.¹ But anyone who's been on the bottom knows there's never enough room for everyone on the top—or even in the middle. A collective struggle for liberation can offer all of us what we need, but it means seeking things that can be shared in abundance—not privileges that are by definition limited resources, such as wealth

ple who are doing things that discomfort you—tactically and politically—see your discomfort as your own growing pains, as a wake-up call, as all of us becoming different and better people through the many beautiful, varied, powerful acts of making social change toward a better world as we discomfort ourselves and society.

A lack of revolutionary solidarity can also be traced to disagreements about strategic symbols, strategic choices, and/or forms of organization. Debate is essential to growth, personal and societal, and to a dynamic movement. Yet critical thinking and being comfortable with harmonic dissonance is neither encouraged nor taught in our society. So we do “conflict” badly. That's one reason that police seem necessary to many folks. People are loath to work things out among themselves; it seems scary or impossible, perhaps because they don't know their neighbors, or because they don't have the know-how about conflict resolution techniques or restorative justice models, or because they don't have good models of how to engage in constructive criticism and arrive at complex solutions that aren't either-or. Marry that to an individualistic ethos—the very origin myth of the United States—and many of us, consciously or not, usually want to see things go a certain way—our way. Such an outlook at heart relies on notions of control. That translates into a sentiment: “we” need to do something [fill in a single tactic or strategy] that “people” can understand—with “understand” meaning what you feel good about doing.

Yet as should be apparent from the multitude of strategies, tactics, protests, and direct actions, not to mention prefigurative forms of politics, different actions and tactics speak to different people. That's not only good; it's essential if we really do aspire toward “a world in which,” as the Zapatistas have joyfully proclaimed time and again, “all worlds fit”—social transformation in which, ultimately, all lives really do matter. Such openness to not getting one's way—or rather, to being inspired by all us humans can dream up, that alone we would have never imagined—is why this gorgeous (albeit always-messy) movement is staying so strong and moving more people to engage.

Some people are moved by die-ins in malls; others by trains or bridges being blocked, or kids self-organizing in defiance of administrators; others are touched by seeing a new luxury restaurant's windows smashed, knowing that such places mean more policing, criminalization, and evictions of people of color and the poor; still

enforcers of racist and classist “cleanups” of neighborhoods so rich people to move in.

Likely what is hard, really, is that certain actions trouble your own life experiences and especially socialization; that’s OK! None of us are immune from being socialized, badly, by racism in a racist society, even if disproportionately so.

For instance, with places like UC Berkeley costing tens of thousands per year, many students now come from sheltered upper-class backgrounds, whether they are white or people of color. They are gaining degrees within an institution that is structured to manufacture the next generation of wealthy and powerful elites, whether in business or the nonprofit industrial complex. So you might, as a student, not have been exposed to what it means to have your kids be bull’s-eye for every cop who walks by, simply because they are black or brown. You might not get how it feels to be evicted from your home, criminalized for your skin color or gender, or go hungry on a regular basis. It might feel scary, challenging, or discomforting to now be exposed to ideas, people, and varied life experiences and upbringings that are far from your own underlying assumptions and lived experiences. That’s OK.

You can walk through and beyond those assumptions; you can choose solidarity not charity, to be on the side of the dispossessed, as accomplices and co-conspirators in shaping an egalitarian and self-organized society. As a student who has already chosen to step into the street, despite the odds of that happening given the reactionary state of “higher” education, you can choose to become a rebel who thinks and acts for themselves, collectively with others—and stay one, even if it takes you a while to work through your prickly feelings.

What is not OK, however, is what students and many others are doing with their prickly feelings to their purported fellow protesters.

It is not OK to take out your own personal limits on others who are trying, like you, to create a better form of social organization, especially when those others are often people who are the precise targets of policing because of skin color and/or class and gender, politics and/or tactics—or whatever.

So rather than yelling “peaceful protest” and waving fingers at peo-

and social legitimacy that are only available on account of others’ poverty and marginalization.

Allyship as Identity

The concept of allyship is embedded in the rights-based discourse of identity politics. It assumes that there are fixed groups of people (black people, women, gay people, and so on) who are structurally oppressed in our society, and that we must work across these differences in identity to achieve equality for all. In the discourse of ally politics, this responsibility falls especially on those who benefit from those structural oppressions. Thus allyship is born as an adjunct of identity—and as an identity unto itself.

Allyship centers on the idea that everyone’s life experiences are shaped by their perceived identities, and thus someone with an identity that is privileged in our society cannot understand the experiences of someone with an identity that is oppressed. There is no “essential” experience of belonging to any of these categories, however. Oppression runs along countless axes, and the subtleties of our experiences are irreducible—which makes a strong case for listening to and trusting each other wherever we possibly can.

A good ally learns that if one can never understand the implications of what it is to walk through this world as an oppressed [fill in the blank with a person on the receiving end of a specific oppression], the only way to act with integrity is to follow the leadership of those who are oppressed in that way, support their projects and goals, and always seek out their suggestions and listen to their direction.

This gets complicated, quickly, as soon as the aspiring ally starts navigating through the world and discovers that there is no singular mass of black people, latino folks, or “people of color” to take guidance from, and that people within a single identity not only disagree with each other but also often have directly conflicting desires and politics. This means that one cannot be a white ally (for example) as an identity; one can be an ally to specific people of color in specific situations, but not to people of color as a whole category.

Legitimacy, Justification, Authority

In seeking oppressed groups to take direction from, white folks often end up tokenizing a specific group whose politics most match their own. “What does the NAACP [or Critical Resistance, or the Dreamers] think about this?” Likewise, they may latch on to the most visible “leaders” of a community because it is quicker and easier to meet the director of an organization, minister of a church, or politician representing a district than to build real relationships with the people those leaders purport to represent. This approach to dismantling racism structurally reinforces the hierarchical power that we’re fighting against by asking a small group to represent the views of an entire category of people with radically different lived experiences.

Perhaps you’ve watched or participated in organizing that seeks *to develop the leadership* of individuals who live in a specific neighborhood or work in a particular kind of labor force. This language seems to offer the benevolence of the skills of the organizing group to those who haven’t been exposed to such ideas. In fact, it is coded language describing a reductive and authoritarian approach imposing an organizing model on a group of people from the outside. It also conveniently creates spokespeople who can then be used to represent the whole of that (often heterogeneous) body of people. Over the last several decades, an entire elite class of politicians and spokespeople has been used to politically demobilize the communities they claim to represent.

Antiauthoritarian white allies often express that they are working with authoritarian or nonpartisan community groups, sometimes on projects they don’t believe in, because the most important thing is for them to follow the leadership of people of color. The unspoken implication is that there are no antiauthoritarian people of color—or none who are worth working with. Choosing to follow authoritarian people of color in this way invisibilizes anarchist and antiauthoritarian people of color; it also functions to marginalize and suppress efforts from less powerful or influential members of these communities. In this way, white allies diminish the agency and leverage of people of color who disagree with the established, institutionalized groups, reinforcing hierarchies of legitimacy and policing the boundaries of political approach by throwing the weight of their privileges behind those who already have more power. There is at

without drawing the cops’ attention. They don’t necessarily share the same political beliefs, or even have a worked-out politics; what they do share is a healthy antagonism toward authority, which is why they’re inclined to mutually aid fellow protesters.

Many who don masks, when the masks aren’t in place, are the ones sharing free food, creating indie media and street art, organizing in their neighborhoods against all sorts of injustice, deschooling and free schooling, raising bail funds, setting up social centers and other autonomous spaces, doing Copwatch, and being regularly targeted by police because of their race, class, or gender—or politics. They are most often the ones setting up all sorts of do-it-ourselves experiments to replace hierarchical structures of domination and death.

Revolutionary solidarity also means not letting your own discomfort(s) get in your way of being there for others, even if that means you need to walk away from something for a few minutes to collect yourself, or skip a protest to rest and do some self-reflection, which then might better allow you to push past your discomforts.

It means being precise and truthful in your language about what is troubling you about various ideas or strategies. “Peace,” for instance, is a vacuous word in light of all the violence forced on people daily, from killer cops to homelessness to domestic assault and rape, to climate-change disasters, lack of health care, and the new Jim Crow. The list is long and painful. There are many “wars” going on against all sorts of people, even if seemingly invisible to some of us. In our protests, then, peace becomes poor shorthand for “this act or behavior feels hard for me.”

Think about what makes it feel hard for you. Think about why something that feels hard for you—like dumpsters being rolled into the streets for use as a barricade to hinder oncoming riot cops and protect you, the demonstrator, and your friends—isn’t different from you helping to move picnic tables from an adjacent park to block traffic on a freeway for several hours, and yes, keep riot cops at bay so as to protect each other and hold a major urban artery, causing commerce to come to a costly standstill. Think about why a chain-link fence being cut open so people can escape a police “kettle” (i.e., when police surround folks on all sides, with no exit, in order to contain or arrest) isn’t any different in terms of “peace” or “not peace” than some other piece of lifeless property being damaged, usually as symbolic point about, say, the complicity of police as

and movements have flourished to the north of us—in comparison to our part of Turtle Island.

What this diversity of tactics translated into at that time was a diversity of people, not to mention growing an enormous and vibrant movement. Rather than an assertion of difference for difference's sake—potentially implying a diverse movement emptied of content—the diversity of tactics notion supplied a tangible guide of how to go about nurturing inclusiveness and unity in a way that was at once qualitative and sincere, and moreover, allowed the particular (such as, now, black lives) and universal (all lives) to complement not crush each other—and struggle together for social transformation while concentrating squarely on whose lives do not matter, historically and presently.

What does revolutionary solidarity look like now?

For one, it looks like not jumping to conclusions about each other, especially based on perceived identity(ies), or things you can't or don't see. Such conclusions apply as well to what you didn't see during, for instance, a heated interaction, or rumors you were told, reports in mainstream media, or spins on events by the police. Speaking from our own firsthand knowledge of events and our own experiences, listening with curiosity so as to ask empathetic questions later (or with skepticism, when the speaker is a cop or politician), and trying to view others in this social movement as the multidimensional humans that they are—humans who will all make mistakes, and are all embroiled in various power imbalances, but can also self-reflect, grow, and change—might go a long way here.

It means not buying into the stereotypes or derogatory caricatures of different political perspectives, which typically is utilized as a wedge by the state and its policing agencies to egg us into voluntarily self-policing the “bad” protesters to protect the “good” ones. If social movement history in the United States is any guide, undercover cops can easily be dressed up as “peaceful protesters” to whip crowds into fighting among themselves—a far more likely scenario than putting masked-up “anarchists” into the mix. Those who mask up by and large, if you take time to discover for yourself, are the ones most looking out for others on the streets and not initiating the call-out of others' tactics. They are simply trying to shield their identity from police so as to avoid arrest and prosecution—something we would all be well to avoid—or better lend solidarity to others, again

least as broad a range of political ideologies in communities of color as in white communities, but no one would ever assume that there is a *single* white community or that there are “representatives” capable of speaking for all white people as a whole.

When learning how to *appropriately take leadership from those more affected by oppression*, activists may seek out the leader of a community not simply because it's the easiest approach but also because—whether they admit it to themselves or not—they are not just looking for guidance; they also are seeking to legitimize their own political projects and analysis. Sometimes they are looking for legitimacy in the traditional sense by siding with others who carry more mainstream social or political capital. At other times they are seeking the legitimacy of siding with those who offer the most anti-oppression credibility—and the goal of opposing oppression morphs into a strange political competition in which we valorize oppressed identities to such an extent that people strive to be identified as oppressed, or at least to be allied with the “most oppressed.”

As an ally gaining an anti-oppression education, each person learns how they benefit from the oppression of others because of the way our society values certain identities. Allies must come to terms with the fact that they are granted privilege in our society simply because of how they look or where their family comes from—and there is nothing they can do to fully refuse or redistribute those privileges, because they are re-created across society. The knowledge that one has advantages that others can never have, which one has done nothing to deserve, often produces a deep sense of white guilt.

This sense of guilt, coupled with the idea that the only ethical way to act is to take direction from others, can make one feel powerless. The model of ally politics puts the burden of racism on white folks, intentionally flipping the social hierarchies, emphasizing that white allies can never escape this deep inequality, but offering at least a partial absolution for allies who can stick to this script: *Listen to people of color. Once you've learned enough from people of color to be a less racist white person, call out other white people on their racism. You will still be a racist white person, but you'll be a less racist white person, a more accountable white person. If nothing else, you'll gain the ethical high ground over other white people so you can tell them what to do.* This model has repeatedly failed to equip would-be allies to do more than seek their own endlessly deferred salvation.

Being an ally has come to mean legitimizing a political position by borrowing someone else's voice—always acting in someone else's name without questioning the principle of appropriating others' struggles. It's a way of simultaneously taking power and evading personal accountability. The idea of allyship obscures the fact that hidden choices are being made about who is being listened to, inculcating the idea that there is a single "community of people of color" sharing common interests that could be properly represented by leaders, rather than a heterogeneous mass with both overlapping and sometimes deeply contradictory ideas. This repositions the white ally to wield the power of determining who are the most representative and appropriate black and brown voices. And who are white allies to determine who is the most appropriate anything?

Example from the Streets

On Sunday, July 14, 2013, in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, and the widespread and consequenceless murder of black and brown youths in our society, our small city witnessed the collision of a rowdy, angry demonstration and a somber, sedentary speak-out. The speak-out was intended to be a space where individuals could give voice to their sorrow and pain, be held by friends and strangers, and find solace in one another. The marching crowd was lively, vocalizing rage with a palpable energy to release.

In the short stretch from the plaza to the courthouse, folks of a variety of ages, racial and ethnic groups, and genders found pace in the streets together, resolute in our desire for rebellion on this day of ferocious mourning. The incongruent energies of the two different events met each other abruptly. As the march arrived, small groups tumbled into the awaiting speak-out, meeting and chatting with one another. This suddenly overflowing crowd began situating itself, joining the group on the sidewalk and settling into the street in front of it.

The march was clearly an uninvited disruption, and the friend who was holding the space of the speak-out, a prison abolitionist and organizer from a radical African American cultural organization, was encouraging people to quiet down and move to the sidewalk so the speak-out could continue. Among hesitant attempts to bring the clatter down, the noise of the new crowd slowly began to lower; but rather than giving space for a true silence to settle, a few white allies

During the "distant" era of the global anticapitalist movement in the 1990s to early 2000s, people around the world tried to bring Zapatismo into their understandings of how to work—how to walk—side by side in what became known as a solidarity of "horizontalism." Folks around the world eagerly hashed out the Peoples' Global Action Hallmarks, looking to allow for heterogeneous social movements and lifeways against the homogenization that "globalization" signaled. Various continental, regional, and city-based consultas, spokescouncils, and convergences picked up the hallmarks, which offered a welcoming, humanistic frame, while not ignoring the disproportionate weight of who suffers under various systems of social control.

One formation from that period, Montreal's Anticapitalist Convergence (CLAC), still actively exists today, despite political highs and lows, in part because it embraced such hallmarks. Its "Basis of Unity" is not completely applicable to the Ferguson-inspired movement. Yet the solidarity it affords is far more expansive than present-day protocols or principles—open arms of trust and promise, not judgmental dos and don'ts.

For starters, it rejects "all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism, and religious fundamentalism of all creeds," even as it steadfastly acknowledges "the full dignity of all human beings." It strives to do this in actuality by organizing around a "philosophy based on decentralization and autonomy," holding out a "confrontational attitude," supporting "social movements' struggles," and engaging in "forms of resistance that maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples' rights as well as the construction of local alternatives."

Most critical, though, is its commitment to an inclusive, revolutionary solidarity in theory and practice: "Respecting a diversity of tactics, the CLAC supports the use of a variety of creative initiatives, ranging from popular education to direct action and civil disobedience."

The diversity clause, in essence, acknowledges that an opposition to systemic domination, such as white supremacy and a police state, could and should take many forms if any sort of large-scale social revolution is to be forged. In fact, due in good measure to this sensibility, much deeper, longer-lasting, spry, and diverse (on numerous levels), not to mention creative and even effective, social struggles

backs, just like the folks who bravely exposed these undercover cops, putting themselves in harm's way to try to ensure everyone made it home that evening.

We need to continually remember why we are on the streets to begin with: cops will and do kill, every single day in this United States, and with near-complete impunity. They do it to uphold the system that has, from the start, stolen lands and stolen lives in the name of colonialism and slavery, social control and social domination, wealth and power for some, and misery and impoverishment for the many.

For us many, solidarity is a strong weapon. It is probably our best weapon. Even if the state doesn't have a full monopoly on violence, as anarchists of old contended, it has a vast arsenal of violence, ranging from teargas and tanks to torture and drones, from endless amounts of guns to endless amounts of prison cells to endless techniques of psychological warfare.

Solidarity is what initiated Ferguson protests across this continent and now world; it's what is keeping our fires of resistance burning; it's what is fueling our desires for a new world. Solidarity has built a movement against killer cops and white supremacy, and that's no small feat given the history and legacy of genocidal racism in the formation as well as maintenance of the United States. If we can craft smarter, stronger, more empathetic, and higher walls of solidarity to surround as well as sustain us, together in our differences, we might just succeed in walling out the world of hierarchical social forces intent on breaking us down and ripping us apart.

So how can all our varied organizing efforts—our choices of strategies and tactics, based on manifold political perspectives and aspirations—better encompass a generous attitude toward each other? How can a full sense of revolutionary solidarity, or a unity in our diversity, be practiced in the form of organizing itself—the process of getting from “here” to “there”? How can our organizing not mush down this moment into a liberal “all people are great,” stay focused on whose bodies are most impacted systemically, and yet not devolve into divides based on hierarchies too often reinforced by identity politics, allyship and charity models, or ideological/organizational insularity?

came to the edge of the sidewalk, physically and verbally corralling people out of the streets and shouting such choice phrases as, “Shut up! Have some respect! You're all idiots!”

Their comments were pointedly directed to the white folks in the street, though the crowd in the street included people of many races. Did this make them uncertain to how to proceed without clear guidance from a single, united community of color? What does the white ally handbook say you should do when groups of people of color are actively engaged in conflict? In this case, white allies gave preference to the elder, the one with the most important reputation in radical community.

Personally, I think the most respectful thing would have been to get out of the way.

Perhaps these white allies thought that's what they were doing by addressing their directives solely to the white people in the street. An irritated brigade of bike cops had been tailing the march, however—also nudging folks on to the sidewalk. White allies guilted many demonstrators out of the street, physically attempting to move some people in close proximity to the police officers who were trying to do the same thing—without yet putting their hands on anyone.⁴ The effect of this was to leave me and another woman of color isolated in the streets with only the police around us because all our comrades had been pushed away.

After listening to many, many speeches, the crowd began to get restless, though folks didn't want to disrespectfully leave before the speak-out ended. Some of the folks who had marched from the plaza to the speak-out, including several mothers of youths being held in the jail, rallied the crowd to march to the jail, and a few people continued the speak-out as many folks from the speak-out joined the marching crowd in taking the demonstration out into the night.

Did the black folks at the speak-out need a few young white folks to speak for them? Certainly none of us needed white radicals to do the police's job for them.

Community Policing and Power

Perhaps the least legible aspect of ally politics is the tendency for people who otherwise seem to aspire to relationships free of domination to try to exert control over others. Is it because when we feel like we occupy the most legitimate or most objectively justified position, it is easy to inflate our sense of righteousness?⁵ Or is it that we feel that when we have the most information—or most connections—we can make decisions for others better than they can make them themselves? (ick!)

Respecting individual and group autonomy means that we don't need managers. It means that no matter how well positioned or knowledgeable we believe ourselves to be, we understand that people can communicate and resolve conflicts best when speaking with humility from their own direct experiences. Some of the first skills taught in conflict resolution, facilitation, and de-escalation trainings are how not to speak for others. Good mediators learn that you break trust when you try to represent others without their consent.

During the anti-globalization movement at the turn of the twenty-first century, I often found myself in baffling arguments about “violence” with pacifists or others who self-described as adhering to a strict code of nonviolence. Many of the same folks who argued that we shouldn't do anything that could hurt someone else's property consistently yelled at other people so aggressively as to make them feel threatened; some also engaged in emotional manipulation and passive-aggressive maneuvers in meetings and during demonstrations. Several times, I saw “nonviolent” demonstrators physically hurt other protesters, attempting to drag them out of the streets for spray painting a wall or breaking a window.

Why do people feel justified trying to pacify others—even when they know little about them? Such vehement attempts to contain others' rage and rebellion often needlessly escalate conflict between those who should be able to struggle together, not against each other.

For instance, a few years ago, at a May Day march in our town, an unnecessary conflict erupted out of attempts to negotiate within a large crowd about whether or not some should continue marching in the street without a permit. At least one group of organized un-

belief—backed by courts, states, the nonprofit industrial complex, and other top-down organizations and powerbrokers—that they are immune to criticism, much less responsibility, much less having to worry about suffering any consequences if—when—they kill people—again and again.

But, it seems, too many protesters still don't get it. They are surprised when an undercover cop, discovered, flagrantly brandishes their gun.

That is the surprise here. How can the nightly street lessons not firmly be underscoring the reason we are already on the streets? And more to the point, how can such lessons not be binding us closer, deepening our desire to better look out for each other and distrust cops?

Instead of being able to plainly see the relationship between the institutional pattern of cops as killers, cops as violent enforcers of everything from racism to capitalism, and our contestation of that fact—and thus why police dogging our protests are absolutely the violence, absolutely the violent ones, absolutely going to violently take aim at people of color and especially black males—the “peaceful” protesters in Oakland on December 10 quickly tweeted and circulated myths about the unmasked undercovers. As Tio Brooke of Oakland put it:

“Undercovers are outed by militants at great personal risk, get a gun pulled on them by freaked out cops, and the story already being propagated online is the conspiracist / peace police fantasy of the cops ‘instigating looting’ with absolutely zero supporting evidence. ‘Outside agitator’ or ‘cop agitator’ both are red herrings, and not only don't capture the complexity of what is going on, but both are dangerous tropes being used to confound and divert.”

The police likely are laughing over their doughnuts and coffee about how easily indeed we are diverted. That, alas, is one of the best tools in their box: getting us to break ranks with and police each other; getting us to unravel our own movement for them.

We need to confound the logic of state and its police apparatus by stepping up the concept of solidarity—not merely in name, but unfailingly and substantively in practice. We need to have each other's

It is not surprising that individual, exhausted cops are, according to news reports, “freaking out” and making such “mistakes” as drawing a gun on protesters. Nor is it surprising that uniformed cops are given orders to shoot “nonlethal” bullets—bullets that injure, and have been known to permanently maim and kill. For the moment, the police forces are on the defensive, and the only way for them to strive to regain it is to bring their frequently hidden violence (or hidden, at least, to many who are now protesting) into the light of the nightly marches.

This is, as they say, a teaching moment for the US public—or it should be, if people are even remotely listening, witnessing, or participating in this remarkable time.

As the nights wear on, you see more support in the streets, but also, tellingly, from passersby in cars, folks leaning out their windows or doorways to cheer protesters on, or in casual conversations overheard. This movement is weaving its way into the social fabric, gaining new adherents and eliciting more reflection. It not only isn’t stopping; it is spreading.

That is why, unsurprisingly, the police are getting more serious about using every weapon in their toolbox, from ammo to lies, to stop it—to divide and hence stop us.

What is surprising is not the police violence, not that the police use guns aimed unflinchingly at people, not that the cops daily murder people of color in the United States. That is the reason we millions are rising up across this continent—our bodies as a massive exclamation mark that “enough is enough. It has to stop!”

It is not at all surprising either that since we are spotlighting the violence inherent to police, the police who are on the streets with us are none too happy. They are, in fact, enraged—a rage that probably puts the best of our rage to shame. They are not there to protect protesters or their rights, nor serve the communities that are demonstrating. Police per se, or more exactly, the institution of policing as a whole, is precisely the *raison d’être* for what has become a far-reaching movement.

They know that. And when cornered, they are going to get even more freaked out, more violent, and sloppier, based on their correct

documented folks asked others to stay out of the streets because they didn’t want to risk arrest. In this minimally policed and low-tension situation, rather than beginning conversations about whether it was possible to create space where some people could be in the street and some could be on the sidewalk, several people shifted immediately into control and management mode, increasing the antagonism and artificially creating two opposing sides.

In retrospect, there were numerous ways that we could have worked through this respectfully with better communication both before and during the march. The conflict brought up important questions about how to navigate multiple risk levels within a single event, build trust that can translate into plans for safety in the streets, and organize exit strategies that accommodate different groups of people. But the communication by some people on behalf of others dramatically escalated the situation.

While the march was still in progress, somehow I was tasked with talking to members of a different organization who work in a nearby neighborhood with undocumented folks. I approached a group of people who were visibly upset that others remained in the streets, and I had a brief but intense interaction with a man I’d never met before. I don’t remember the exact words that we exchanged, but I remember calmly approaching him and asking if we could speak about what was going on. He responded by screaming in my face.

After walking away from that interaction, I turned to a woman from the same organization to try again to see if we could strategize a workable solution. She launched into a tirade about how I must not understand the disproportionate police harassment that people of color—especially undocumented people—would face if the police chose to attack the march that day. With hard-to-veil irritation, I asked her if she had ever personally experienced police violence or had ever spent time in jail. When she answered “no,” I told her how ridiculous it felt for her to make such baseless assumptions about me when I had more stories than I cared to share about police violence in both social and political contexts relating to race and gender. Then I asked her what kind of conversation she expected we could have when she was speaking so stridently about experiences that weren’t even hers. She apologized and said that she would just rather talk after the march was over.

After the march, my housemate told me a story from the day that I can only explain as a temporary loss of perspective. While she was walking in the street with her five-year-old nephew, a mutual friend of ours who was frustratedly trying to redirect everyone off the street and on to the sidewalk approached her. With a bullhorn to her mouth, this friend shouted at my housemate to get out of the street. At this point, my housemate said to me with some confusion and sadness, “I thought she was coming to talk to me, but she didn’t even say hello to me. She didn’t speak my name. She pretended that she didn’t know me. I know she knows who I am, but she acted like I was just a body, separated from our hearts.”

Not Trying to Get Comfortable—Trying to Get Free

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 re-played endless empty calls for revolution and militancy from a by-gone era while in practice being forced to fetishize our spiritual powerlessness.

—from the zine Escalating Identity

Revolutionary struggle is indeed *radically unsafe*. It is a project that can and does mean prison or death for some of us, and it is important to be aware that these risks can intensify based on where people are situated in the matrices of oppression. The concept and role of ally politics, however, has distorted this awareness into a practice of collective policing by would-be managers who are shielded from criticism by the authority of a depersonalized, stereotyped other.

The ally framework individualizes structures of oppression, shifting discussion away from how to attack those structures and emphasizing individual behavior instead. The focus on individual privilege has become such a popular political discourse precisely because it does not necessarily question the structures that create that privilege. It is essential to understand how systematic forms of oppression shape us, but the point is to collectively dismantle the structures of domination that produce and perpetuate those privileges. Individual transformation can only happen concurrently, not prior to this. We all experience fear and doubt, and wanting to relinquish our re-

Solidarity, as Weapon and Practice

(versus Killer Cops and White Supremacy)

This piece related to the antipolice struggle in the Bay Area, written by Cindy Milstein, is a revised version of a blog post on Outside the Circle, cbmilstein.wordpress.com.

On December 10, 2014, after marching some four hours from downtown Berkeley to downtown Oakland, with only about three hundred people at most, as the FTP (“fuck the police”) demo was winding down, some folks outed two undercover cops. (These police were not infiltrators, mind you; infiltrators blend in much better and disrupt in much more subtle, long-term ways, including by building trust and friendships.) One of the undercover cops got spooked and whipped out a gun; they also arrested one or two black people—seemingly at random (i.e., due to the logic of institutional racism).

This incident is surprising and not surprising.

The cops seemed tired; they admitted it themselves in a December 9 news story. Our nightly protests these past two weeks have already cost the Oakland police department \$1.36 million in overtime alone—and that’s just one of the many police departments, city, state, and federal, following us visibly and in the shadows.

The vibrant, dynamic movement sparked by the courage and resolve of Ferguson is raising the social as well as economic costs of the US business as usual of police murdering black and brown people on a daily basis without cause, save for the root reason: white supremacy. Many people are stepping up and stepping out—from thousands of newly politicized high school students who’ve walked out of their classes, decrying the violence of policing and its relation to “the whole damn system,” to the families who have lost loved ones to murderous police and who have long known, intimately, that “it’s not one bad apple; it’s the whole damn tree.”

sponsibility for the choices we make is a natural response to those feelings, but we must hold those fears as our own, as we must hold our desires for freedom as our own. When we act on behalf of an imagined “other,” it makes honest communication around tactics, strategy, and solidarity impossible, shattering our relationships and fueling mistrust where there could be affinity. Our relationships are not what we need to be breaking.

Just Because You Feel Like You Broke It, Doesn’t Mean You Need to Fix It

Growing up in this culture, we’re taught so much hatred for the parts of ourselves as well as others who are different from the mainstream or dominant culture. We learn what it means to have good hair or a good nose; we’re told our lightest-skinned sibling is the most beautiful; we’re taught shame about the size and shape of our bodies, and about who and what we desire. White supremacy, misogyny, and all the ideologies that create “the other” are at once superficial and incredibly rooted within us.

It is inevitable that as we develop a critical analysis of the various axes of identity—race, gender, class, ability, and more—that we will experience deeply personal and political moments of self-realization about ourselves and our relationships with others as well as the way this culture functions. It is important and positive that we make those kinds of developments in identifying how oppression works, internally and externally. Yet we must not get so caught up in our own self-discoveries that we unthinkingly put those breakthrough moments on others who live daily with the realities we are just beginning to understand.

Trayvon Martin became a symbol for this generation of the normalcy of violence perpetrated against criminalized, black bodies. The events around his death and his murderer’s acquittal were dramatically emotional for many of my younger white friends; it was clearly a moment of realization about something big. In conversations with other friends of color, however, the pain of the unexceptionality of this case was always at the forefront. We all know this is standard treatment for youths of color. A young friend of mine put it best when he said, “Of course I’m mad; I’m always mad at the police. But I don’t know why anyone is surprised. This is how we’re always treated. I just wish those white girls would stop crying and get up.”



Here are a few tips.

Slow down: Don't try to fix it. Don't rush to find an answer or act out of your guilt. Remember that many of your comrades have been doing this work for a long time and experience the kind of oppression you're learning about more acutely than you. It didn't start with you and isn't going to end with you.

Keep it internal: Don't take up too much space with your thoughts and emotions. Be sensitive to the fact that folks are in a variety of places in relation to what you're working through; don't force conversations on others, especially through the guise of public organizing.

Write about it: Give yourself the unedited space to feel all the things you need to, but know that it may hurt others if you share your feelings unthinkingly.

Read about it: Look for resources from people of a variety of political ideologies and experiences of identity to challenge yourself and get the widest range of input.

Listen to older people: Listening to stories from your eighty-year-old African American neighbor when you're working through questions around racism will likely be thought provoking, regardless of their political ideology or your life experience. Don't underestimate what a little perspective can do for you.

Don't make your process the problem of your comrades: Be careful not to centralize yourself, your stake in fixing the problem, or your ego. Work it out on your own, and with close friends and mentors.

be solved, or are we lacking the resolve and imagination necessary to answer these questions through meaningful deeds. Given the fact that we found ourselves struggling around the atrocious murder of Oscar Grant, why don't we see ourselves in similar ruptures sparked by the daily abuses faced by oppressed people, your neighbors, your kids' friends, and your coworkers?

It's Going Down with or without Us

Insurrections, rioting, mass expropriations, occupations, and all sorts of unimaginable forms of class warfare are not only inevitable but also are taking place all over with more frequency and veraciousness as the crisis that is capitalism deepens.

It is crystal clear that the deprived, exploited, and violated have organized, and will continue to do so, formally and informally to the demise of their oppressors, those who remain neutral, or each other.

The side of history on which we find ourselves is not determined by whether or not we share the experiences of one horror or another, or how we individually identify, but instead on our own resolution to see the end of each of these miseries that perpetuate this racist, capitalist, shit show called society.

To those of us who cooperatively destroyed capitalist and state property, humiliated and terrified police and yuppies, and found power and a sense of dignity together that we had never known before, and to those of us who found ourselves high off the lack of social divisions in the streets of Oakland during a moment of open revolt, let's figure out ways to maintain these moments outside a riot. We must play a part in continuing this rebellious trajectory as a motley crew of insurrectionists or be deemed irrelevant—or worse, the recipients of the wrath of the righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed.²

2 “This monster—the monster they’ve engendered in me—will return to torment its maker, from the grave, the pit, the profoundest pit. Hurl me into the next existence, the descent into hell won’t turn me. I’ll crawl back to dog his trail forever. They won’t defeat my revenge, never, never. I’m part of a righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed. We’ll gather at his door in such a number that the rumbling of our feet will make the earth tremble” (George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 1970).

expendable, and not to be trusted. Without consciously and intentionally bucking against this logic, black death—be it psychological, physical, slow, or fast—will remain the norm, and will make any attempt of insurrectionary or revolutionary activity smack of insincerity and history lessons unlearned.¹

It's more obvious than ever that leftist politicians and NGO admins with grant money dollar signs in their eyes have done and will do little to address everyday problems for—or with—folks from Oakland's hoods. The question that anarchists must seriously grapple with is, Do we blow just as much hot air as our leftist enemies?

Beyond our lackluster efforts in countering the state repression of our fellow rebels, have we also left the response to everyday atrocities to be tackled by those who we know are invested in the very institutions that perpetuate these everyday oppressions and exploitation? It's fine (great even) that we can't stand to do reformist campaigns to make daily life more tolerable. That being the case, what are we willing to do? If we can't stand the victim-making rhetoric that strips power from the very people who must wield it, if we loath representational politics and neither want to speak for or do anything for anyone who is "not us," where does this leave us? For many of us who are white and/or male anarchists, we know that calls to "check privilege" and tiptoe around language do little to nothing to topple racial and gender hierarchies. Throwing ourselves into the role of social service providers also misses the boat. What strategies are left available? Are these theoretical dead ends that cannot

¹ It is worth noting that whiteness as a social category was created and promoted by plantation owners and other capitalists in the early days of America's colonization in order to put a wedge between the workers they were exploiting. Before this, poor fair-skinned people were dirty Irish, criminals expelled from England, indentured servants, trash, etc. This was done through both extreme terror campaigns against those who co-conspired in insurrections on plantations, shipping docks, and urban centers as well as by convincing the poor, recently named "whites" that they had special privileges that were under threat by those of darker skin color, thus creating a perfect situation for the no-longer-shook capitalists when whites began putting racial solidarity above class solidarity. So nowadays, most persons of color live in crippling poverty while white capitalists still are rich fucks ruling over them. What is often overlooked, however, is that in exchange for accepting the privileged position of white, whites still make up half of those in the United States living in poverty, left to the whims of the same ruthless whites in power. That is to say, selling out one's class members and helping to prop up a racist system through clutching on to a psychology that our white friends, family, and selves are somehow more exalted than nonwhite folks has for hundreds of years effectively been a shot to our own feet.



disappeared, or solidarity was a given. Disappointingly, we all went back to our usual lives as individuals: dodging cops, reading about horrendous police brutality on Facebook, struggling to make ends meet, drinking too much, dragging ourselves to school, or doing our hustles. Whatever different “normal” is for each person who ran wild in the streets of Oakland in the name of Oscar Grant, we went back to it.

For some, “normalcy” is going to jail.

Throughout the Oscar Grant and then Occupy movements, despite whatever demographics took part in the street festivities, it has remained that those stuck with heavy sentences have been black and/or homeless, many of who were on probation or parole. This fact should not reinforce the myth that only black and brown youths were arrested, but should highlight the intensely racist nature of the judicial system. If we are to struggle alongside these folks in moments of uproar, we must recognize that they often have higher stakes if they get caught up in the bullshit justice system. When folks already criminalized by the system put themselves on the line, there should be unrelenting pressure on the system to the scale that we know we are capable of with hundreds of anarchists in the Bay. It’s not that black and brown rebels are people to feel sorry for and “help,” nor feel protective of and “keep safe” as they rage in the streets, as paternalistic leftists might suggest. But if we take seriously that these fellow rioters will be our comrades and co-conspirators for bigger and badder insurrections to come, we cannot let them hang out to dry when they’re going down for the same acts that we (allegedly) took part in.

Do some of us—whites and people of all races—find ourselves shrugging and accepting that it is normal for black people to go to jail? We feel indignant when someone is murdered by the state, but somehow feel less moved when someone is kidnapped and held captive by the state. Why is it so shocking to us when a white anarchist comrade goes down for a year, but not when many black or homeless comrades are locked up repeatedly, and for longer sentences?

There is an unquestioned and deeply seeded logic embedded in the psyche of US society that has taught all of us, white or not, and anarchist or not, that white bodies are to be cared for and coddled, while nonwhite and especially black bodies are assumed to be criminal,

represented, the chant “We are all Oscar Grant!” rang through the downtown streets of Oakland. For those indoctrinated into the logic popularized by nonprofit organizing culture that treats identity and experiences of oppression as one and the same, it is inappropriate for anyone other than people of color to yell this slogan. This critique falls flat for many as it assumes that we yell this to declare collective victimhood rather than a collective proclamation to not be victims.

For those of us who are poor and black or brown, anarchist or not, we cannot claim to share every experience with Oscar Grant, but we do live our days with the knowledge that we could have the same fate as him if our class society, with its racialized implications, is not reckoned with. For women and queers, especially those of us who also are not white, our experiences may not mirror Oscar Grant’s life and death, but we too live with the sick threat of violence on our bodies by both the patriarchal, trans misogynist, and racist state, and the individuals who replicate the attitudes and oppressive actions of the state. For any of us who are not poor and black or brown, anarchist or not, we may not usually fear for our lives when police are near, but it is plain as day that if we don’t all start acting like it’s our very lives at stake as well, not only are we an accomplice to these racist deaths, we foolishly assume we will not be next. For whites who joined in this chorus of “We are all Oscar Grant!” this declaration meant that we refused to be another white person, if being white means letting this shit continue to slide for the bogus justification that this racist violence keeps society (read: white people) safe.

The spirit behind “We are all Oscar Grant!” is indicative of the attitude of the Oscar Grant rebellion as a whole. Despite the fact that many of us did not generally know each other before those nights because of the racial divisions imposed by society and maintained by ourselves, we found glorious moments of struggling with one another in the streets where our identities or experiences were not collapsed into a faux sameness.

Toward a Never-Ending Uprising

Moments of cross-racial solidarity and the crumbling of various social barriers were particularly evident on these few warm rebellious nights in January 2009. This should not lead one to believe that the days between or beyond these riotous evenings were days where police shootings ended, or where social distinctions and hierarchies

On Nonprofit-Certified “White Allies” and Privilege Theory

This short excerpt, a reflection coming out of the Occupy Oakland movement, is from the Who Is Oakland zine, April 2012, available on the Escalating Identity blog, <https://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com/>

Communities of color are not a single, homogeneous bloc with identical political opinions. There is no single unified antiracist, feminist, and queer political program that 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 it claims 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 substan-

tial 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 was 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. The failure of the renaming proposal, however, 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 rather a repeated feature of a dominant strain of Bay Area anti-oppression politics that—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 that can assist them in recognizing their own racial privilege and certifying their decision to do so. The absurdity of privilege politics re-centers antiracist practice on whites and white behavior, and assumes that racism (and often by implicit or explicit association, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia) manifests primarily as individual privileges that can be "checked," given up, or absolved through individual resolutions. Privilege politics is ultimately completely dependent on precisely that which it condemns: *white benevolence*.

We Are All Oscar Grant(?)

Attacking White Supremacy in the Rebellions and Beyond

This essay is from the 2012 revised edition of the zine Unfinished Acts: January Rebellions, Oakland, California 2009.

The project of sustained insurrectionary activity must constantly chip away at the foundations of white supremacy. Although anarchist practice is assumed to be inherently antiracist, evidence of this is often hard to find. This should be obvious, but it is worth repeating: to loathe the United States of America and capitalism, to want them destroyed, means the task set in front of us is to attack and abolish the racial order that has enabled these beasts.

The Oscar Grant rebellions give us a little glimpse of people in the Bay Area doing just that. In the riots, we saw the collective power of black and brown young people battling, with little fear, against the established white supremacist order. Surprisingly, there also was a small showing of white people in the rebellion as well. This brief show of solidarity from white folks—both those who do have experiences of being criminalized poor young people and those who do not—reveals that white folks can have agency to violently oppose a clearly white supremacist institution side by side with nonwhites without pretending to share identity or experience where it is not the case. Also, contrary to dominant narratives that paint the essence of riots as male-dominated affairs, many queer and female (mostly nonwhite) comrades took their place at the front lines, participating in the supposedly masculine rebellion without apprehension. Their participation is significant as it throws a wrench into the logic of peace-loving, docile femininity and what self-determination looks like for some who live on the axis of gender tyranny and white supremacy. Although most police-shooting victims are black and brown men, the Oscar Grant rebellions show us that their deaths affect and outrage masses of people across race and gender lines.

During each demonstration and riot where folks gathered to express their rage in the face of Oscar Grant's murder and what his death





Accomplices listen with respect for the range of cultural practices and dynamics that exist within various indigenous communities.

Accomplices aren't motivated by personal guilt or shame; they may have their own agenda, but they are explicit.

Accomplices are realized through mutual consent and build trust. They don't just have our backs; they are at our side, or in their own spaces confronting and unsettling colonialism. *As accomplices, we are compelled to become accountable and responsible to each other; that is the nature of trust.*

Don't wait around for anyone to proclaim you to be an accomplice; you certainly cannot proclaim it yourself. You just are or you are not. The lines of oppression are already drawn.

Direct action is really the best and may be the only way to learn what it is to be an accomplice. We're in a fight, so be ready for confrontation and consequence.

If You Are Wondering Whether to Get Involved with or Support an Organization

Be suspect of anyone and any organization who professes allyship, decolonization work, and/or wears their relationships with indigenous peoples as a badge.

Use some of the points above to determine primary motives.

Look at the organizations funding. Who is getting paid? How are they transparent? Who's defining the terms? Who sets the agenda? Do campaigns align with what the needs are on the ground?

Are there local grassroots indigenous people directly involved with the decision making?

The ally establishment co-opts decolonization as a banner to fly at its unending anti-oppression gala. What is not understood is that decolonization is a threat to the very existence of settler “allies.” No matter how liberated you are, if you are still occupying indigenous lands, you are still a colonizer.

Decolonization (the process of restoring indigenous identity) can be very personal and should be differentiated, though not disconnected, from anticolonial struggle.

The work of an accomplice in anticolonial struggle is to attack colonial structures and ideas.

The starting point is to articulate your relationship to indigenous peoples whose lands you are occupying. This is beyond acknowledgment or recognition. This can be particularly challenging for “nonfederally recognized” indigenous peoples as they are invisibilized by the state and by the invaders occupying their homelands.

It may take time to establish lines of communication, especially as some folks may have already been burned by outsiders. If you do not know where or how to contact folks, do some groundwork and research (but don’t rely on anthropological sources; they are Euro-centric), and pay attention. Try to do more listening than speaking and planning.

In long-term struggles, communication may be ruptured between various factions; there are no easy ways to address this. Don’t try to work the situation out, but communicate openly with consideration of the points below.

Sometimes other indigenous peoples are “guests” on others’ homelands yet are tokenized as the indigenous representatives for the “local struggles.” This dynamic also perpetuates settler colonialism. A lot of people also assume indigenous folks are all on the same page “politically”; we’re definitely not.

While there may be times folks have the capacity and patience to do so, be aware of the dynamics perpetuated by hand-holding.

Understand that it is not our responsibility to hold your hand through a process to be an accomplice.

Outside Agitators

This fragment of a longer piece was taken from You Can’t Shoot Us All, published in 2010 as a pamphlet-size memoir of the Oscar Grant movement in Oakland, California.

When the South has trouble with its Negroes—when the Negroes refuse to remain in their “place”—it blames “outside agitators.”
—James Baldwin

The term “outside agitator” was popularized during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, when southern politicians would blame the growing unrest in exploited black communities on the presence of (often-white) radicals from outside the city. Presently, it is a term used by Oakland politicians (and aspiring politicians) to try to keep the situation under control, to prevent local marginalized people from realizing the power they have.

Today, we face enemies that we could have never conceived of before this. Sometimes, it’s the people who pretend to be on your side that are the most dangerous enemies. The nonprofit world has, for eighteen months, waged a campaign against this movement.

Many nonprofits that function independently of the local government have disparaged us. They oppose collective uprisings and spontaneous activity because they feel the need to control the movement. These organizations view themselves as the saviors of the downtrodden; when dominated people rise up on their own terms, it threatens the position of leadership that these organizations occupy in their imaginary worlds.

We have also come under attack from nonprofits that operate entirely under the influence of the city government. One of these city-funded nonprofits has taken up a full-fledged assault against us, using some of the \$2 million in city money it has received to wage a propaganda campaign against the unity that we have found with each other

through this struggle. This nonprofit has even used city money to pay young people to come to its indoctrination workshops, where the organization speaks of the evils of people coming together and standing up to their enemies.

It has also helped to spread the absurd logic of the mayor's office that only people born and raised in Oakland have the right to take to the streets. This micro-nationalism is an attempt to foster collaboration between disenfranchised people and their exploiters in a united front against the enigmatic "outsiders."

It is incorrect to assert that nonprofits of this type have motivations of their own. They are simply the hip mouthpieces of the city government that funds them. Their agenda is the agenda of the mayor's office and police department. They use the language of "peace" to try to preserve the institutions that created them. We have never been concerned with their peace. The peace of the powerful is the silent war waged against the dispossessed.

In the past, our enemies have attempted to divide movements by distinguishing the "good" element from the "destructive" element. This time, it seems that the primary division they created was not between the "peaceful" and "violent" but instead a racial division wedged between groups in the uncontrollable element in an attempt to neutralize our collective strength.

I, identifying with a man whose photograph was not unlike my own reflection, wondered if people who did not see themselves in Oscar Grant at least saw in his image their friend, their neighbor, their classmate, someone whose life was worth fighting over. I hoped that there were white people who, after watching a video of a black man being murdered by the police, would be angry enough to break windows. In time, I met these people, because they fought alongside us, throwing bottles and chunks of concrete, cursing the police and writing the names of the dead on the walls of this city.

down to being held accountable or taking responsibility for fucked-up behavior.

Floater are folks you can trust to tell the cops to "fuck off" but never engage in mutual risk, constantly put others at risk, are quick to be authoritarian about other peoples' overstepping privileges, but never check their own. They basically are action-junkie tourists who never want to be part of paying the price, planning, or responsibility, but always want to be held up as worthy of being respected for "having been there" when a rock needed throwing, bloc needed forming, etc.

This dynamic is also important to be aware of for threats of infiltration. Provocateurs are notorious floaters going from place to place, never being accountable to their words or actions. Infiltration doesn't necessarily have to come from the state; the same impacts can occur by "well-meaning" allies. It's important to note that calling out infiltrators bears serious implications and shouldn't be attempted without concrete evidence.

"Acts of Resignation"

Resignation of agency is a by-product of the allyship establishment. At first the dynamic may not seem problematic. After all, why would it be an issue with those who benefit from systems of oppression to reject or distance themselves from those benefits and behaviors (like entitlement, etc.) that accompany them? In the worst cases, "allies" themselves act paralyzed believing it's their duty as a "good ally." There is a difference between acting for others, with others, and for one's own interests. Be explicit.

You wouldn't find an accomplice resigning their agency or capabilities as an act of "support." They would find creative ways to weaponize their privilege (or more clearly, their rewards of being part of an oppressor class) as an expression of social war. Otherwise, we end up with a bunch of anti-civ/primitivist appropriators or anarcho-hipsters, when saboteurs would be preferred.

Suggestions for Some Ways Forward for Anticolonial Accomplices

Allyship is the corruption of radical spirit and imagination; it's the dead end of decolonization.

An accomplice as academic would seek ways to leverage resources and material support and/or betray their institution to further liberation struggles. An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for, and not be afraid to pick up a hammer.

“Gatekeepers”

Gatekeepers seek power over, not with, others. They are known for the tactics of controlling and/or withholding information, resources, connections, support, etc. Gatekeepers come from the outside and within. When exposed, they are usually rendered ineffective (so long as there are effective accountability and responsibility mechanisms).

Gatekeeping individuals and organizations, like “savior allies,” also have tendency to create dependency on them and their function as support. They have a tendency to dominate or control.

“Navigators and Floaters”

The “navigating” ally is someone who is familiar or skilled in jargon, and maneuvers through spaces or struggles, yet doesn’t have meaningful dialogue (by avoiding debates or remaining silent) or take meaningful action beyond their personal comfort zones (this exists with entire organizations too). They uphold their power and, by extension, the dominant power structures by not directly attacking them.

“Ally” here is more clearly defined as the act of making personal projects out of other folks’ oppression. These are lifestyle allies, who act like passively participating or simply using the right terminology is support. When shit goes down, they are the first to bail. They don’t stick around to take responsibility for their behavior. When confronted, they often blame others, and attempt to dismiss or delegitimize concerns.

Accomplices aren’t afraid to engage in uncomfortable, unsettling, and/or challenging debates or discussions.

Floaters are “allies” that hop from group to group and issue to issue, never being committed enough, but always wanting their presence felt and their voices heard. They tend to disappear when it comes



for. Self-asserted allies may even have anti-oppression principles and values as window dressing. Perhaps you've seen this quote by Lilla Watson on their materials: "If you come here to help me, you're wasting your time. If you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." They are keen to posture, but their actions are inconsistent with their assertions.

Meaningful alliances aren't imposed; they are consented on. The self-proclaimed allies have no intention to abolish the entitlement that compelled them to impose their relationship on those they claim to ally with.

"Parachuters"

Parachuters rush to the front lines seemingly from out of nowhere. They literally move from one hot or sexy spot to the next. They also fall under the "savior" and "self-proclaimed" categories as they mostly come from specialized institutes, organizations, and think tanks. They've been through the trainings, workshops, lectures, etc.; they are the "experts" so they know "what is best." This paternalistic attitude is implicit in the structures (nonprofits, institutes, etc.) that these "allies" derive their awareness of the "issues" from. Even if they reject their own nonprofit programming, they are ultimately reactionary, entitled, and patronizing, or positioning with power-over those they proclaim allyship with. It's structural patronization that is rooted in the same dominion of heteropatriarchal white supremacy.

Parachuters are usually missionaries with more funding.

"Academics and Intellectuals"

Although sometimes directly from communities in struggle, intellectuals and academics also fit neatly in all these categories. Their role in struggle can be extremely patronizing. In many cases, the academic maintains institutional power above the knowledge and skill base of the community/ies in struggle. Intellectuals are most often fixated on unlearning oppression. These lot generally don't have their feet on the ground, but are quick to be critical of those who do. Should we desire to merely "unlearn" oppression, or smash it to fucking pieces and have its very existence gone?

amplified or marginalized regardless of whose homelands they're operating on. The nonprofit establishment or nonprofit industrial complex also seeks out "sexy" or "fundable" issues to co-opt and exploit, as these are ripe for the grant funding that they covet.

Too often, indigenous liberation struggles for life and land, by nature, directly confront the entire framework to which this colonial and capitalist society is based on. This is threatening to potential capitalist funders, so some groups are forced to compromise radical or liberatory work for funding, and others become alienated and further invisibilized or subordinated to tokenism. Co-opters most often show up to the fight when the battle has already escalated and it's a little too late.

These entities almost always propose trainings, workshops, and action camps, and offer other specialized expertise in acts of patronization. These folks are generally paid huge salaries for their "professional" activism, get overinflated grants for logistics and "organizational capacity building," and struggles may become further exploited as "poster struggles" for their funders.

Additionally, these skills most likely already exist within the communities or they are tendencies that need only be provoked into action.

These aren't just dynamics practiced by large so-called nongovernmental organizations; individuals are adept at this self-serving tactic as well.

Co-optation also functions as a form of liberalism. Allyship can perpetuate a neutralizing dynamic by co-opting original liberatory intent into a reformist agenda.

Certain folks in the struggles (usually movement "personalities") who don't upset the ally establishment status quo can be rewarded with inclusion in the ally industry.

"Self-Proclaiming / Confessional Allies"

All too often folks show up with an "I am here to support you!" attitude that they wear like a badge, ultimately making struggles out to feel like an extracurricular activity that they are getting "ally points"

The Poor Person's Defense of Riots:

Practical Looting, Rational Riots, and the Shortcomings of BlackLiberalism

This piece, following the Ferguson uprising, was written by Delio Vasquez and originally published in CounterPunch, December 26, 2014.

Since the Ferguson decision, we have been flooded with stories about how the overwhelmingly peaceful nationwide protests against police brutality have been occasionally ruined by looting and property destruction caused by "fringe" elements. In conservative media, the troublemakers have been generally characterized as parts of the black "criminal" underclass. In the liberal media, the lawbreakers have often been characterized as "outside agitators," "violent political radicals," and "white anarchists." While the conservative side has worked to make it seem like the actions of these black "criminals" are not legitimately political, the liberal side, on the other hand, has avoided publicizing stories about people of color engaging in property destruction altogether. There is a real danger that these omissions have been motivated by white guilt—as well as by the legitimate concern that publicizing these stories will be interpreted as feeding into racism. Rather than challenging the assumption that property destruction is necessarily bad, however, many liberals have refused to acknowledge the lawbreaking altogether, perhaps for fear of being labeled racist.

Some of the more insightful attempts to defend rioting and property destruction in light of the history of US political dissent have unfortunately relied on moralistic arguments that portray rioting as driven primarily by emotion—with the idea being that we should sympathize with the feelings of the rioters. These stories reinforce the mis-

conception that riots are all about anger, rage, and frustration. These perspectives also fail to acknowledge that when riots do happen, they arise from particular historical situations. It is not everyday oppression that immediately causes a riot but instead those symbolic events—like a major nonindictment—that shock the senses, shake our expectations, and act as a brutal affront to our collective sense of what is right (even if sometimes those expectations are sadly divorced from reality in the first place). Many times throughout history, populations have simply starved to death rather than riot; at other times they have rioted over matters that to us may seem less urgent. Accordingly, when someone takes the time to go smash a window, putting themselves in legal danger, we need to try to make sense of why they would do it.

Mob Decision Making

History shows us that mob actions are most often intentional, targeted, and rational. During the eighteenth century, angry mobs of starving English peasants, rather than steal from grain merchants, instead forced them to sell the bread at a fair price decided by the crowd. In *The Moral Economy of the Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, E. P. Thompson cites the example of peasants “who, having taken corn from the farmers and [having] sold it at the popular price in the market, brought back to the farmers not only the money but also the sacks.” In Ferguson, people have stopped in the middle of rioting to have impromptu theoretical discussions as well as strategically discuss, from the base of operations at a local gas station, where to target next. In Berkeley, California, corporate businesses like RadioShack, Wells Fargo, and Trader Joe’s have been damaged and looted, but when individuals have chosen to break a residential window, collective boos and chants of “No houses!” have risen from the crowd, and those individuals have been stopped without any further conflict.

Anyone who has been in a large crowd, be it a church group or political “mob,” is well aware that spontaneous forms of group decision making often arise and allow the crowd to move with a more or less shared purpose. A form of group consciousness takes shape, with people communicating across the crowd to each other, protecting each other, and working together to avoid dangerous situations, such as being trapped by police maneuvers. Sometimes, too, there are bad forms of communication, and a crowd does not cooperate so

While the strategies and tactics of asserting (or abolishing, depending on your view) social and political power may be diverse, there are some hard lessons that could bear not replicating.

Consider the following to be a guide for identifying points of intervention against the ally industrial complex.

“Salvation aka Missionary Work and Self-Therapy”

Allies all too often carry romantic notions of oppressed folks they wish to “help.” These are the ally “saviors” who see victims and tokens instead of people.

This victimization becomes a fetish for the worst of the allies in forms of exotification, manarchism, ’splaining, POC sexploitation, etc. This kind of relationship generally fosters exploitation between both the oppressed and oppressor. The ally and allied-with become entangled in an abusive relationship. Generally neither can see it until it’s too late. This relationship can also digress into codependency, which means they have robbed each other of their own power. Ally “saviors” have a tendency to create dependency on them and their function as support. No one is here to be saved; we don’t need “missionary allies” or pity.

Guilt is also a primary ally motivating factor. Even if never admitted, guilt and shame generally function as motivators in the consciousness of an oppressor who realizes that they are operating on the wrong side. While guilt and shame are powerful emotions, think about what you’re doing before you make another community’s struggle into your therapy session. Of course, acts of resistance and liberation can be healing, but tackling guilt, shame, and other trauma requires a much different focus, or at least an explicit and consensual focus. What kind of relationships are built on guilt and shame?

“Exploitation and Co-optation”

Those who co-opt are only there to advance self-interests (usually it’s either notoriety or financial). As these “allies” seek to impose their agenda, they out themselves. The “radical,” more-militant-than-thou “grassroots” organizers are keen on seeking out “sexy” issues to co-opt (for notoriety, ego, super ally, or most radical ally), and they set the terms of engagement or dictate what struggles get

workshops, read zines, or been part of deep discussions on how to be a “good” ally. You can now pay hundreds of dollars to go to esoteric institutes for an allyship certificate in anti-oppression. You can go through workshops and receive an allyship badge. In order to commodify struggle, it must first be objectified. This is exhibited in how “issues” are “framed” and “branded.” Where struggle is commodity, allyship is currency.

Ally has also become an identity, disembodied from any real mutual understanding of support.

The term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless.

Accomplices Not Allies

ac·com·plice

noun: accomplice; plural noun: accomplices
a person who helps another commit a crime.

There exists a fiercely unrelenting desire to achieve total liberation, with the land and together.

At some point there is a “we,” and we most likely will have to work together. This means, at the least, formulating mutual understandings that are not entirely antagonistic, otherwise we may find ourselves, our desires, and our struggles to be incompatible.

There are certain understandings that may not be negotiable. There are contradictions that we must come to terms with, and certainly we will do this on our own terms.

But we need to know who has our backs, or more appropriately: Who is with us at our sides?

The risks of an ally who provides support or solidarity (usually on a temporary basis) in a fight are much different than that of an accomplice. When we fight back or forward, together, becoming complicit in a struggle toward liberation, we are accomplices. Abolishing allyship can occur through the criminalization of support and solidarity.

well—but these communication failures are no less egregious than those that occur daily in the chambers of Congress, surely. Crowds make decisions together, and those decisions are cosigned by individuals who think through questions like, “Do I want to participate in this?” “Should I leave now or stay?” “Do I want to stand by and provide cover for those doing things that I refuse to do, or should I abandon them?”

When Smashing a Window Is “Just Political” and When It Is Practical

There is a stark difference between political protest and direct action. Political protest is a form of expression, done specifically so as to be seen by an audience—such as the general public or politicians in power—with the hope of convincing that audience to share the protesters’ viewpoint and maybe act on their behalf. Direct action is also political, but avoids the “middleperson”; it is instead an action done to directly pursue a concrete goal, such as acquiring food with which to feed oneself. Holding a sign that criticizes Jim Crow laws is political protest; refusing to get off the bus or move to the back when ordered to is direct action—as, Robin D. G. Kelley points out in *Race Rebels*, hundreds of individuals in the South were doing before Rosa Parks, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People successfully turned the act into an organized, political tactic. Tea Partiers and conservatives who wave “Don’t Tread on Me” flags are engaging in political protest; those who buy their own land and arm themselves to protect it are engaging in direct action.

The question, then, is when you smash a window, are you doing so because you are looking to grab some food or some diapers, or a television to sell so that you can make next month’s rent? Or are you smashing a window to express anger and frustration, and so that maybe the elites or general public pay attention to your political views? If you are smashing a window for the second reason, you have more in common with those engaging in peaceful political protest. Both the person chanting “black lives matter” and the person putting up graffiti are engaging in political protest—to speak out against something.

By contrast, looting is rarely motivated purely by emotion and political expression, but instead must be more instrumental and practi-

cal than other forms of political action. Looting takes intentionality, foresight, and quick decision making, and directly results (unless you get arrested) in your acquiring the things that you are seeking. Because poor people often cannot afford to waste their time engaging in symbolic forms of protest, and because they rarely expect to be heard by those in power anyway, they are much more likely to engage in practical, direct action than in symbolic political protest. Things like stealing food from work, not paying taxes, and calling in sick to work when you're not actually sick are actions that produce clear results. By contrast, holding a sign and marching in circles for hours is admittedly a lot more abstract and requires free time that only some of us can afford. A mass "die-in" like those engaged in by many across the country is indubitably a valuable political action, but we would be deluding ourselves if we did not admit that the link between such symbolic acts and concrete political change can be painfully unclear, abstract, and slow moving in its effectiveness.

Black Liberalism and Disruptive Tactics

At a very large rally I recently attended in Oakland, California, several members of a coalitional group of black organizers spent a considerable amount of time laying out ground rules for reining in the voices of white "allies." The organizers argued that while well intentioned, white allies often reinforce racism by taking over political demonstrations that are about issues that black people face. Most white participants that I observed were willing to accept these critiques, deferring to what they felt was the greater authority that the black leadership should rightfully have over a movement that involves most prominently the deaths and abuses of black persons. The rally then turned into what was essentially a passive crowd listening to and watching a black leadership give speeches from the steps of the Alameda County Courthouse. Some in the audience took group photos and selfies of themselves with the black leadership in the background, feeling that they had performed well as silent, white allies, and went home with smiles on their faces. As I later found out, many of those black leaders later met at an exclusive cocktail party scheduled for that evening. At the same time that the party was happening, about a thousand people of mixed racial and class backgrounds continued in the streets, after the "official" rally had ended, marching and demonstrating for the next few hours and blocking a major traffic tunnel; some of them ended up getting tased and beat by police, and many others were arrested.

Accomplices Not Allies:

Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex

The attribution on the original zine version of this piece reads "an Indigenous perspective." It was published by Indigenous Action Media, www.indigenoussaction.org.

This provocation is intended to intervene in some of the current tensions around solidarity and support work as the current trajectories are counterliberatory from my perspective. Special thanks goes to DS in Phoenix for convos that lead to this zine and all those who provided comments, questions, and disagreements. Don't construe this as being for "white, young, middle-class allies," just for paid activists, nonprofits, or as a friend said, "downwardly mobile anarchists or students." There are many so-called allies in the migrant rights struggle who support "comprehensive immigration reform," which involves the further militarization of indigenous lands.

* * *

The ally industrial complex has been established by activists whose careers depend on the "issues" they work to address. These nonprofit capitalists advance their careers off the struggles they ostensibly support. They often work in the guise of "grassroots" or "community based," and are not necessarily tied to any organization.

They build organizational or individual capacity and power, establishing themselves comfortably among the top ranks in their hierarchy of oppression as they strive to become the ally "champions" of the most oppressed. While the exploitation of solidarity and support is nothing new, the commodification and exploitation of allyship is a growing trend in the activism industry.

Anyone who concerns themselves with anti-oppression struggles and collective liberation has at some point either participated in



While the black critique of overzealous white allies may seem like a positive intervention to limit racism, it can instead frequently become a way for self-designated “black leaders”—who also happen to be more moderate—to successfully demobilize and marginalize the more disruptive branches of a movement, shaming white radicals through white guilt while also making it seem like the more radical organizers of color and poor people who have come to protest simply do not exist. Often, these black moderates and liberals focus their attention on intra-movement racism and “micro-aggressions” because the more brutal dimensions of racism, like intense police violence, may in fact be alien to them. Sometimes, middle- and upper-class people of color who have not actually experienced severe police brutality can only relate to racism through their experiences of more subtle, structural forms of racism, like discriminatory hiring practices or racially insensitive language. To them, the racist tones of a “white radical” who disagrees with moderate strategies and tactlessly insults a black liberal leader are easier to address, more tempting to attack, and simply more familiar than the racist violence that poor people of color experience.

Of course, affluent people of color experience police violence as well. As Dr. Ersula Ore and Dr. Henry Louis Gates know well, rarely will police stop to take note of how many degrees you may have, how “respectable” you may be, or even if you happen to be an off-duty police officer yourself. But these experiences simply cannot be equated with the constant threats of violent death and malnutrition that poor people of color face on a daily basis. The failure to acknowledge these class differences then means that black liberals and moderates gloss over the crucial fact that many of the poor people who have been most brutally abused by police in the past turn out to be the same people who later decide to engage in looting. Accordingly, when the president talks about his struggles catching cabs in Chicago or being confused for a waiter, only to then turn around and insist to us that we must accept the decisions made by the grand jury and trust “the rule of law,” despite overwhelming evidence that the institutions of law—the police, the justice system, etc.—are the very problem that people are protesting against, it becomes hard to ignore that notwithstanding the racism that the president has faced, he likely cannot relate to the forms of racism that someone like Michael Brown experienced.

A History of Lawbreaking

We often suffer from a collective amnesia about the crucial role of lawbreaking in the history of social change. Martin Luther King Jr., the paragon for pacifist protest, was arrested an impressive thirty times between 1955 and 1965. And still, the effectiveness of his militant pacifism can only be properly understood against the background of many other, much more tumultuous political conflicts—riots included—that occurred throughout the civil rights movement. Political change does not, and never has, come about through peaceful protest alone. All tactics of course play a role—and riots, the threat of violence, and violence itself are frequently the context and background that situate as well as frame the force and effectiveness of more mainstream, moderate, and agreed-on tactics. In a conversation with Coretta Scott King, Malcolm X, infamous for his antipacifist rhetoric and direct attacks on Martin Luther King's strategies, nonetheless stressed to King's wife his awareness of the value of a diversity of tactics: "I want Dr. King to know that I didn't come to Selma to make his job difficult. I really did come thinking I could make it easier. If the white people realize what the alternative is, perhaps they will be more willing to hear Dr. King."

Ultimately, then, we do ourselves a disservice when we attack others for doing the important political work that we ourselves are not willing to do—work that in fact allows us to do what we do. As a political theorist, I do not have the patience to research the various ways and tedious details that show how procedural corruption may have occurred during the Michael Brown case, but I appreciate the contributions of the lawyers and legal experts who do that important work. Equally, those who work inside formal institutions to pass antipolice brutality policy and legislation must also acknowledge that their voices would not be heard were it not for the background roar of those angry mobs shouting outside our legislative buildings and in the streets.