Lessons from #Occupy in Canada: Contesting Space, Settler Consciousness and Erasures within the 99%

Konstantin Kilibarda

Under a slogan of ‘We are the 99%', the #occupy movement has won praise for its bold re claimations of public space and for re-centring class analysis in North America. Despite this, however, important critiques of the movement’s elisions and erasures have also been raised. This article examines how three #occupy encampments in Canada have engaged with these calls to #decolonise the movement and to address divisions within the 99%. These critiques question #occupy’s ability to fix a ‘broken social contract’, ‘reclaim Canada’, or ‘take back our democracy’ without addressing the underlying racial contracts foundational to North American settler-states. Practical experiences with raising postcolonial critiques are examined through in-depth interviews with organisers at #occupy encampments in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver.

Introduction

#Occupy is a late addition to the recent wave of global resistance against neoliberal austerity following the 2008 financial crisis. People continue to be pushed out of jobs, lands, and homes in order to secure an economic model that seeks to commodify all social relations in a context of growing global inequality. But while #occupy addresses these issues directly, its critique remains circumscribed by eliding the racialised nature of inequality in North America, which has been built on settler-colonial dispossession, genocide, slavery, imperial adventurism, indentured and precarious labour, as well as patriarchal, xenophobic and anti-immigrant nationalisms. The #occupy movement’s desire to transform the prevailing social contract by reclaiming democratic citizenship in
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North America, without engaging what Charles W. Mills (1997) identifies as its underlying ‘racial contract’ – which enshrines white-male, settler privilege – represents a dangerous bracketing manoeuvre for this nascent movement. In response to this, a #decolonise framework has emerged at several #occupy locations, which seeks to re-articulate a postcolonial critique from within.

This article examines efforts to shift #occupy’s discourse and praxis in Canadian cities like Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver towards a #decolonise framework. To this end, in-depth e-mail and phone interviews were conducted with organisers directly involved in the #decolonise effort. Given the time sensitive nature of the paper – not to mention the commitments of interviewees engaged in #occupy and similar campaigns – only two to three organisers were selected from each city through snowball sampling. These organisers were asked to provide their reflections on the internal dynamics they observed at the #occupy encampments in their cities. Furthermore, the Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and websites of 39 #occupy locations in Canada were also analysed for their content. While important strides were made in advancing a #decolonise framework, many organisers felt that their interventions were only partially taken-up at #occupy. Nevertheless, some positive changes were noted, illustrating the power of critiques in transforming social movements from within.

In order to consider the contributions of the #decolonise approach in transforming the #occupy movement, this article draws on postcolonial International Relations (IR) theory, indigenous critiques of settler-states, and intersectional social movement analysis. Thus, after briefly situating #decolonise within these relevant literatures, the article goes on to discuss three basic issues: (1) how the #decolonise framework was practically articulated in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver; (2) how inequalities within the 99% have informed decision-making power at the various #occupy sites; and (3) what the potential alliances are that #occupy would be able form were it to acknowledge the importance of those local social movements and struggles that preceded it. Finally, it concludes with some reflections on the challenges that #occupy faces in the wake of increasing repression, and on the lessons that the #decolonise framework can offer in this context.

Re-centring Postcolonial Imaginaries in North America: Putting Theory into Practice Through #Decolonise

Postcolonial theory has been a relative latecomer to the cloistered world of IR. In 2002, Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair’s edited volume _Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations_ (2002) and L.H.M Ling’s _Postcolonial International Relations_ (2002) both marked an important turn towards questioning the ethnocentric, imperialising and racialised geographies of IR’s mainstream (See also Agathangelou and
What these academic interventions achieve is the rendering of a radically different geography, enabling IR theorists to re-imagine the world’s remaining settler-societies in both precolonial and postcolonial terms. This echoes the project that #decolonise seeks to forward on the streets by drawing attention to the stolen and occupied nature of North American lands themselves (Montano, 2011; Yee, 2011). In fact, #occupy’s elision of these themes echoes IR’s own relative silence concerning the string of broken inter-national treaties between indigenous peoples and settler-states, thereby implicating the discipline in the naturalisation and reproduction of tenuous claims to US and Canadian territorial integrity and sovereignty. The failure of the US and Canadian governments to ratify the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) highlights the legitimacy of indigenous claims to un-ceded lands, waterways, forests and mountain ranges. Indigenous understandings of the global thus effectively draw attention to the unfinished business of decolonisation, rupturing the assumed coherence of the North American nation-space through appeals to both international law and to a growing transnational network of indigenous alliances (Shaw, 2008).

#Decolonise represents a fragment of such struggles and has sought to take these critiques into the heart of the #occupy movement, thus providing an important case-study not only of how theory becomes translated into practice, but also of how social movements themselves are formed and reshaped by contestations from within. Social movement theory has generally focused on issues of resource mobilisation (McCarthy and Zald, 1979; McAdam, 1996), opportunity structures (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald, 1999; Tarrow, 2011) as well as the importance of social networks, repertoires of contention and common cultural/identity frameworks for building sustainable movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006; Tilly, 2004). Below I mainly focus on the last of these social movement considerations by examining how the #decolonise framework has attempted to transform everyday organising at the three #occupy spaces considered.

#Decolonise Canada: Re-centering Indigenous Self-Determination on Turtle Island as Foundational

Jessica Yee, a Mohawk organizer with the Native Youth Sexual Health Network in Toronto, succinctly summarised the indigenous critique of #occupy’s framework in late-September 2011: “There’s just one problem: THE UNITED STATES IS ALREADY
BEING OCCUPIED. THIS IS INDIGENOUS LAND. And it’s been occupied for quite some time now” (Yee, 2011). John Paul Montano (2011), a Nishnaabemwin language instructor, echoed this point in a widely circulated ‘open letter’:

I am not one of the 99 percent that you refer to. And, that saddens me. Please don’t misunderstand me. I would like to be one of the 99 percent...I had hoped that you would address the centuries-long history that we indigenous peoples of this continent have endured being subject to the countless ‘isms’ of do-gooders claiming to be building a ‘more just society,’ a ‘better world,’ a ‘land of freedom’ on top of our indigenous societies, on our indigenous lands, while destroying and/or ignoring our ways of life.³

In spite of centuries of genocidal policies targeting indigenous lands, belief systems, and bodies, indigenous communities have nevertheless repeatedly managed to check the same capitalist system that #occupy is now confronting (Smith, 2005). This history of struggle is significant in the Canadian context since prior to #occupy, one of the most common uses of the actual term ‘occupy’ in the media was to describe indigenous peoples’ resistance to state appropriation of their lands.

Since the early 1970s, indigenous groups across Turtle Island have increasingly sought to reclaim traditional territories by blockading bridges, railways and roads; by occupying parks, taking over government offices, and staging sit-ins and hunger-strikes before federal and provincial legislatures (Johnston, 2005).⁴ As a result, indigenous organisers have faced the full force of the Canadian state, including police violence, extrajudicial executions, military intervention and surveillance, mass arrests and paternalistic government interventions into community governance (Pasternak, 2011). Not only have indigenous communities managed to mobilise support for their struggles in spite of this repression but they also continue to win important victories, which include recent challenges to TransCanada’s Keystone XL and Enbridge’s Northern Gateway pipelines.

Unfortunately, these facts appeared lost on many #occupy activists in Canada. An examination of the thirty-nine Facebook pages and websites that claimed to represent #occupy initiatives in various Canadian cities revealed that most failed to acknowledge the (often un-ceded) indigenous territories on which they were being organised. Only #OccupyWinnipeg initially adopted a statement of unity that took indigenous sovereignty as foundational to its analysis (2.6% of the sample), while only six websites in all addressed the issue (15.4% of the sample). Of course, such a sampling is an imperfect reflection of the important work done at various #occupy sites to correct these erasures. However, for a movement whose organisational basis is heavily dependent on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogs, the omissions are telling. In response,
a number of alternative online forums like ‘Occupy(ed) Canada’ and ‘Decolonize Vancouver’ emerged to correct the situation online.

Beyond social media, the experience of those attempting to shift the #occupy discourse on the ground has been equally difficult. Through sustained interventions by indigenous organisers and allies, initially hostile attitudes towards indigenous sovereignty shifted over time. Liisa Schofield (2011), of the ‘Stop the Cuts’ anti-austerity campaign in Toronto notes the non-linear ways in which these shifts occurred:

[I]n the beginning there were tensions about the constant representation of Canadian nationalism in symbols and the way people talked about Occupy. But then it morphed into Indigenous folks leading off the [General Assembly] every night and people somewhat problematically / tokenistically engaging (in my opinion – again, from outside). Then it morphed again into Indigenous folks defending the sacred fire, and not engaged as much in the GA’s.

The permutations were telling of the shifting dynamics at Toronto’s St. James’ Park. An important workshop entitled ‘Race, Colonialism and the 99%' in early November helped stimulate more concrete discussions about decolonising Toronto’s #occupation (Nielsen, Tabobondung and Walia, 2011). By 12 November 2011, #OccupyToronto’s one-month anniversary was celebrated with a ‘de-Occupy’ march. Rebeka Tabobondung (2011), publisher at MUSKRAT Magazine and member of the Wasauksing First Nation, noted the positive impact that some #occupy organisers had in shifting the terms of debate in Toronto:

[A] real effort was made on the part of several Occupy organizers and Indigenous Sovereignty Week allies to ensure there was space for Aboriginal voices to be included. They even offered us tobacco as speakers, a gesture that was greatly appreciated and in my experience not common working with Non-Aboriginals…These key occupy organizers outreached to us to help them outreach to the broader Aboriginal community and in the end on the day of the march it was an Aboriginal female Elder that opened, mainly female speakers and the march was led by Aboriginal women with the men marching behind. They even painted a huge banner that said ‘Decolonize Bay Street’ [n.b. Toronto’s equivalent of Wall Street] which is what we suggested prior to the march. To see that felt wonderful.

Nevertheless, as Krystalline Kraus (2011), an organiser at the Toronto encampment noted, the “movement [remained] split in regards to being open and accepting of centering Indigenous ideas.”

Organisers involved with #OccupyMontréal’s encampment at Victoria Square
also experienced difficulties when attempting to shift the discourse towards decolonisation. Fred Burrill (2011), an organiser with ‘Décolonisons Montréal,’ explains that some of these difficulties were simply the result of the fact that “there was very little crossover between ongoing radical organising in Montréal (around indigenous solidarity but also around anti-capitalist critiques) and the folks who came together to make the call for an occupy encampment in our city.” In order to address this gap in analysis, a diverse coalition of organisations came together behind a ‘Décolonisons Montréal’ contingent for the initial October 15 rally. This contingent eventually evolved into a permanent presence based around one large tent in Victoria Square. Burrill (2011) explains that:

… we tried to put forth a solid anti-colonial analysis, create a space for discussion and popular education, and promote a diversity of tactics. In terms of bringing an anti-colonial perspective to the occupy effort, I think we were reasonably successful in the early goings, at least: the General Assembly adopted a motion to the effect of recognizing indigenous sovereignty over the territory and created an Indigenous Solidarity Committee. It’s hard to say how effective this was over the long-term, but certainly the discussion was ongoing.

Farha Najah Hussain (2011), who was part of the South Asian Women’s Community Center (SAWCC) in Montréal, found that while these efforts were worthwhile, they ultimately fell short of transforming the discourse at the #occupy site: “Although I was not consistently at the site, I think social justice organisers attempted to address the reality of colonialism of Indigenous lands and communities (e.g. via discussions, organising the decolonise tents, speeches) but this did not seem to be sufficient”. Ultimately, Hussain (2011) found that: “Occupy Montréal did not re-center its analysis from an anti-colonial or anti-racist perspective” (ibid.). Accordingly, issues of indigenous self-determination seemed “more of an add-on, than a proposal coming from an emerging anti-colonial perspective” (Hussain, 2011).

Similarly, while #OccupyVancouver (OV) acknowledged that it “is taking place on un-ceded Coast Salish territories”, Jasmine Rezaee (2011) – a volunteer with Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) Women’s Centre and an #occupy organiser – noted that the analysis continued to meet with obstacles in implementation. As a result, an ‘Indigenous Solidarity’ committee was formed, since it appeared that “many participants of OV did not understand the ramifications of this reality and did not pose the question, how can we reclaim/liberate space without recolonizing/reoccupying it?” (Rezaee, 2011). Rezaee explains that the Indigenous Solidarity committee sought to: “[E]nsure that Indigenous-specific issues...[were] heard, that Indigenous people, particularly elders, are respected at OV and that Indigenous self-determination, ways of living and traditions are supported and understood” (ibid). The committee aimed to
educate those onsite around that fact that “all the economic and political injustices [we are protesting] are built on the history of colonialism and that colonialism and indigenous struggles are foundational” (Rezaee, 2011). While the effort was a step forward, many at the camp still had problems taking leadership from indigenous peoples (Rezaee, 2011; Walia 2011a).

Overall it seemed that concerted efforts by indigenous organisers, elders, members of the homeless urban indigenous population, as well as allies forwarding a #decolonise narrative had some impact. By organising (and often defending) teach-ins, special committees, sacred fires, special tents and territories within the #occupy sites, a space for discussing indigenous sovereignty and decolonisation was created. However, in the experience of most organisers such spaces flourished away from the General Assemblies or were only reluctantly internalised as part of the #occupy analysis. While many #occupy sites in Canada have since planned rallies focused on indigenous rights, the #occupy movement as a whole is still far from coming to terms with the implications of such a politics. This is perhaps understandable given the short time span of these interventions, the limited and already committed resources of #decolonise activists and the nationalist and populist starting-points of many drawn to #occupy.

Beyond Tokenism? Confronting Identity and Privilege in the 99%

The ability to address indigenous issues in the #occupy movement is arguably an important gauge for the movement’s broader ability to reflect the diversity of identities, interests and locations of privilege/exclusion within the 99%. In an article for The American Prospect, Kenyon Farrow (2011) summarised the ways in which some of #occupy’s discourse can be alienating to racialised communities in North America:

Comparing debt to slavery, believing police won’t hurt you, or wanting to take back the America you see as rightfully yours are things that suggest OWS is actually appealing to an imagined white (re)public. Rather than trying to figure out how to diversify the Occupy Wall Street movement, white progressives need to think long and hard about their use of frameworks and rhetoric that situate blacks at the margins of the movement.6

Similarly in Canada, many community organisers felt that the 99% discourse glossed-over the multiple hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexuality, dis/ability, etc. that structure everyday social relations in the country. As #OccupyVancouver’s Rezaee (2011) notes: “I’ve personally disliked the 99% vs. 1% analysis from the beginning. I think this analysis oversimplifies many issues … Fighting the 1% isn’t enough in my opinion, we have to fight all the other issues that exist within the 99% in order to be successful.” As with indigenous self-determination, Rezaee explains that the #OccupyVancouver GA decided to form an
‘anti-oppression committee’ to address and discuss some of these issues because: “classism, sexism and ableism (but many other issues as well) have been a significant problem at OV and in some ways pose the biggest threat to the success of our movement” (ibid.).

Furthermore, Rezaee was troubled by the problematic distribution of labour and decision-making power that emerged onsite:

... participation took on a very oppressive, classist dynamic and reproduced the division between mental and manual labor. The people participating in the ‘decision making’ bodies i.e. committees and general assemblies were largely university educated and didn’t sleep at the encampment overnight whereas most of the people who tented and participated in more communal things (food, cleaning up, peace keeping, etc.) were homeless, not university educated and/or poor. This dichotomy didn’t apply to everyone of course, but it was an issue nonetheless that kept manifesting itself and [was] reproduced in ugly ways. Tent city folks eventually voted to be autonomous from the General Assembly.

Harsha Walia (2011a) – a longstanding community organiser in Vancouver – also described a similar dynamic at play in the ways that tasks were divided and decision-making power enacted in Vancouver:

If you go to the site, it would seem inclusive. At the tent city it was mostly street involved folks, people of color, women, etc. On site you’d see a diversity of people. But you wouldn’t see those people being actively involved in decision-making. In response tent council had its own meetings and created its own community... The leadership [of OV nevertheless] remained overwhelmingly white and/or middle class.

Schofield (2011), speaking about these issues in Toronto, echoed Rezaee and Walia’s concerns as power appeared to be concentrated in white, male and middle class hands:

The people that I have made connections with at Occupy [Toronto] have been critical of the blanket ‘99%’ and have sought to reflect diversity in the space/organizing. The sense that I got is that it was certainly an up-hill battle at [St. James] park. There was one demonstration at City Hall where all of the speakers, except for one woman, were white men. It was a constant list of John’s, Sean’s, etc. People in the crowd actually started to revolt and heckle. It opened up space at the park and in the action committee about what went wrong, and what needs to be different for next time. There were some strong women who I saw
step up and really challenge men on the involvement of marginalized communities in the organizing and would actively seek out organizations like Jane-Finch Action Against Poverty, OCAP, No One Is Illegal, Stop the Cuts, etc. to come to the park and speak with people…The outreach and action committees largely took this work on.

Nevertheless, Schofield identified ‘a lot of oppressive behavior’ that persisted at the General Assembly and in the ways that leadership developed:

The loudest voices often dominated or blocked process. I think consensus decision-making models of that kind were certainly a huge challenge for facilitators. Leadership inevitably developed, and from what I could see, some decisions were definitely being made behind the scenes by small groupings of people that weren’t always accountable to the group or critical of their own privilege in making decisions for other people…I wish I could say it became more nuanced than that on the whole, but I am not sure…[that] on a whole the Occupy movement took this up.

Kraus (2011) also noted that the ‘free Skool’ set-up at #OccupyToronto became another space where critical reflections on the tensions within the 99% were addressed. While this space became “a hub for discussion”, she also noted how “diversity was often confined to the free Skool” and that she “would have liked to see more or better integration of these issues into the larger Occupy Toronto movement” (Kraus, 2011). According to Kraus (2011): “part of this failure [had] to do with the slogan ‘we are the 99%’ which created the false assumption of binding unity where diversity is seen as divisive to that 99% whole”.

#Occupy and Movement Building: Looking Behind to Look Ahead?

While often presenting itself as a *sui generis* response to the current economic crisis, the reality is that #occupy draws on broader genealogies and repertoires of action. In addition to indigenous land reclamations, the ‘occupy’ tactic has been repeatedly used in a variety of contexts: from the civil rights movement (the occupation of lunch counters, buses, publicly segregated spaces, etc.), to student, labour, anti-poverty, queer, dis/ability, feminist, environmental, housing rights and alternative community projects. Drawing on these histories of resistance, Rinku Sen (2011), editor of *Colorlines.com*, notes that in the long run, #occupy will have to learn to engage with “all the people in communities—working people, unions, homeless people, tenants, immigrants—who have been struggling for so long to make particular things happen and to get back some of the stuff that was stolen from us”. Sen (2011) also suggests that a key question for #occupy remains whether racialised participants and those engaged in long-standing struggles
against various forms of oppression within the 99% are “able to influence the agendas of local occupations?”; and whether “[occupy is] able to help people who are attracted to Occupy Wall Street get moved back out to all of the organizations and campaigns and efforts to really win things?”.

The recent experiences of #occupy encampments in Vancouver and Toronto suggest that this may already be happening. Along these lines, Rezaee (2011) provides a humble assessment of the #occupy movement in Vancouver and the lineages from which it emerged:

Vancouver has a rich and radical history of social movements and OV is a baby movement that, in many ways, has a great deal left to learn. Key campaigns in Vancouver have been about stopping gentrification of the Downtown Eastside (DTES), one of Canada’s poorest neighborhoods, and making Vancouver an affordable, inclusive city that has enough social housing and support services for all. Aggressive development has displaced many local residents of the DTES and many locals have been excluded from enjoying the benefits of ‘urban revitalization.’ Campaigns against economic cleansing in the DTES have taken place for decades now in this city. Other movements that are/have been active in this city in recent years are organizations like No One is Illegal, Food not Bombs, Stopwar.ca, Anti-Poverty Coalition, Carnegie Action project and anti-Olympics resistance.

As Rezaee (2011) notes, many within the #occupy movement have come to recognise that “we need the support of other organisations in this city to succeed, collaborate, grow and successfully occupy a space … [and that] community outreach, building and support is key to our success”.

Some of these long-standing issues were dramatically highlighted by the tragic death of Ashlie Gough from a drug overdose at #OccupyVancouver in early November. The death amplified conservative media calls to evict the encampment, while British Colombia’s Liberal Premier Christy Clark sought a province-wide injunction against #occupy (citing health and safety concerns). Nevertheless, the autonomous tent-city in Vancouver and the strong tradition of resistance by the street involved community in the DTES provided a context for a more proactive approach to these issues. As Walia (2011a) explains: “while some organizers saw the presence of a tent-city composed of the homeless and poor as ‘bringing us down’, others sought to build more substantial links between #occupy and other movements in the city.” Following the eviction of #OccupyVancouver by police in late-November, a major focus of local #occupy activism has in fact shifted to long-standing anti-gentrification actions represented by the newly formed #occupycondos campaign – thus creatively bringing together the energy of
Similarly, in Toronto, the first #occupy planning meeting in late-September 2011 was convened a few days after 2,500 people had marched on City Hall to oppose newly elected mayor Rob Ford’s austerity budget. Since the spring of 2011, grassroots opposition to Ford’s proposed cuts has grown. Organisers formed neighbourhood committees, held speak outs and convened community forums to plan a response. Each neighborhood committee involved in the campaign defended local services and pushed for alternatives to City Hall’s austerity budget. Street-level polling of residents in affected neighborhoods, protests, creative occupations (including a family sleep-in in Dufferin Grove Park), petitions and marathon mass-deputations condemning the cutbacks were organised. Migrant justice organisations and organisers from marginalised (and often racialised) communities played an important role in these campaigns. A mass open-air public forum, with over 600 participants was held in early September that came up with a *Peoples’ Declaration* outlining alternatives. As a result of this campaign momentum, Schofield (2011) saw the initial caution that greeted #occupy as understandable:

> [B]oth Stop the Cuts and [the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty] OCAP were slow and hesitant to engage fully in the Occupy movement. We went to the large events, supported it on-line, and had private conversations where we voiced our concerns and worries. A lot of the more experienced activists/organizers that I know were definitely hesitant to engage fully (i.e. put tons and tons of energy into [#occupy]) – though at the same time self-critical about our cynicism. I think this comes from an honest place though of not wanting to drop the work that we are doing, of feeling alienated and worried of the space at Occupy (who is involved and who is missing, how anti-oppression gets taken up, etc).

Nevertheless, it appeared that the #occupy encampment in Toronto ‘responded really well’ to Stop the Cuts. Particularly important were the many people who acted as ‘bridges’ between #occupy and existing movements: “people who stayed at the camp, but were familiar/connected with work in the city” (Schofield, 2011). According to Kraus (2011): “The anti-Ford movement helped build the skeleton that Occupy Toronto continued to flesh out regarding activism in Toronto”. While #OccupyToronto was also evicted in late-November, many of the activists involved rechanneled their energies into the anti-Ford campaign, culminating in another 3,000 person rally in front of City Hall on 17 January 2012 that managed to reverse some $20-million in proposed spending cuts.
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What now for #Occupy? State Repression and Re-Imagining Alternatives

In her 'Letter to Occupy Together Movement', Walia (2011b) explains why recognising the diversity within the 99% is essential for #occupy’s future: “Ignoring the hierarchies of power between us does not make them magically disappear. It actually does the opposite – it entrenches those inequalities.” The experiences of organisers in Montréal, Toronto and Vancouver noted above speak to the potential of cross-pollination between #occupy and longer-standing social justice struggles. As the last section illustrates, there is no lack of organising for the #occupy movement to undertake as it faces eviction from public spaces by police forces. Building a broad-based anti-austerity program that understands the foundational nature of North America’s racial contract is an important step towards embracing a truly transformative politics. It requires that activists steer clear of the notion that #occupy is necessarily the biggest threat to the neoliberal order or that the current crackdown by the state represents unparalleled policy brutality, as Naomi Wolf (2011) claimed in The Guardian. Instead, it requires a more humble appreciation of the local and global struggles that enable movements like #occupy to emerge.

As the #occupy movement faces increasing repression, internalising an analysis of settler-colonial state violence is important if the movement is to survive and adapt. Ignoring the historically racialised forms of state repression deployed against particular communities, while simply focusing on the violence against #occupy, risks undermining tenuous solidarities. Furthermore, while some continue to insist that calls to #decolonise are ‘unrealistic,’ or ‘complicate’ the analysis, it is worth recalling indigenous scholar Andrea Smith’s response to skeptics of decolonising frameworks: “Why? Why does it sound so absurd to say that we don’t want to live under a settler state founded on genocide and slavery? That the proposition seems silly shows the extent to which we have so completely normalised genocide that we cannot actually imagine a future without genocide” (Smith 2011). The experiences of the #decolonise contingents above offer a glimpse into the potential of re-imagining post-colonial futures. These experiences also pose the question for IR scholars of what it will take to #decolonise our own discipline.

Notes

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2 Charles W. Mills’ The Racial Contract (1997) provides a powerful critique of Western social contract theory, as does Carole Pateman’s earlier work The Sexual Contract.
(1988). In relation to #occupy, it is worth noting that a similar critique to the one presented in this paper was also leveled at the anti-globalisation movement following the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle (see Yuen, Katsiafas and Rose, 2001).

Since the beginning of colonisation, settler doctrines of *terrus nullius* and ‘Christian discovery’ – as well as early-modern liberal economic theories – were instrumental in framing North America as a ‘virgin’ land ready to be transformed through the enterprising agency of European explorers, colonists, missionaries, utopians and economic interests. The reality of the encounter for indigenous peoples was devastating (the first peoples to make ‘contact’ with occupying European armies were nearly always wiped out, including the Arawak in Santo Domingo; the Pequots in New England; and the Beothuks in Newfoundland). Wall Street’s own origins serve as a microcosm for the frequently repeated sequencing of settler-occupation, indigenous dispossession and trans-Atlantic slavery (Fraser, 2005; Harris, 2003; Barker, 2011).


The group was formed by a number of groups with a long history of organising in Montréal, including: Montréal’s Indigenous Solidarity Committee, Solidarity Across
Borders (SAB), the Montreal Childcare Collective, QPIRG Concordia, No One Is Illegal-Montreal, Tadamon and the Immigrant Workers Center (IWC).

In response to such concerns, initiatives like #OccupyTheHood (OTH) emerged in the United States to directly address issues relevant to African-Americans marginalized by #occupy’s framework (OTH, 2011). Ife Johari Uhuru, one of the founders of OTH, claims that understanding the links between identity and class in North America is a central concern for any transformative agenda: “When Occupy Wall Street started it just focused on capitalism and classism, and I think that some social issues were not brought up. You can't separate capitalism from racism – even if we did away with capitalism there would still be racism – so I posed this question to people of color on Twitter and Facebook: Do you think more people would be involved if racism was included in this movement along with capitalism? And the overwhelming consensus was yes” (Strauss 2011).

Sean Mills, an historian of Canadian social movements, notes that in addition to the indigenous land reclamations already mentioned, there are other prominent examples of this tactic being used in Canada. They include: the labour sit-down strikes in Oshawa, Sarnia and Windsor in 1936-1937 (Palmer, 1992: 255); the massive housing occupation movement led by Henri Gagnon after WWII (Comeau and Dionne, 1981); the 1969 occupation of the computer center at Sir George Williams University in Montreal by African-Canadian, Caribbean and allied students (Austin, 2007); factory, school and hospital occupations during the general strike in Quebec in 1972 (Ethier, Piotte and Reynolds, 1975); the factory occupations that followed plant closures in Ontario in 1981 (Palmer, 1992: 416); as well as on-going use of these tactics by the new social movements mentioned above.

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Konstantin Kilibarda is a PhD candidate at York University. His research interests include the political economy of neoliberalism, new social movements, and postcolonial theory.