# Transnationalising Dissidence Beyond the Global South: Arab Activists in Occupy Oakland

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> *I am beginning to suspect that people abroad with long experience*
> *of disenfranchisement and trampling of their dignity may in fact*
> *understand the fissures in our society better than we do ourselves*
> *(Slaughter 2011).*

The protests that began in the Arab world in late 2010 and swept through Europe, the USA, and beyond have unsettled dominant research paradigms (Baron and Pursley 2013). They have challenged views on the spread of activist strategies as flows primarily from North to South. Furthermore, they have drawn attention to the interconnectedness underlying peoples' struggles irrespective of world systems of power. Against this backdrop, Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park have emerged as emblematic spaces for studying the exchange of activists' grievances and protest tactics, and focus has been placed on the 'teaching' potential of the Arab revolts (Greene and Kuswa 2012, p. 283).

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In terms of regional spillover, research has usually dedicated attention to the diffusion of activist strategies from Latin America to the West (Smith 2004, p. 326). Yet, almost no literature has taken an in-depth look at whether, and if so how, learning occurs from the Arab world to the West, even though the Arab protest camp, namely Tahrir Square, has, in fact, inspired protesters in the Western world (Ramadan 2011; Ryan 2011).

This chapter draws on what W. J. T. Mitchell (2012, p. 18) describes as the 'temporality of contagion' between the Arab uprisings and the Occupy Movement. I make a case for studying Arab immigrant activist networks as political subjects who can provide us with insights into how methods of contention diffuse across Arab and Occupy protest sites. I specifically examine whether—and if so, how—Arab activists in the USA drew on Occupy to advance their claims and connect the roots of discontent that stimulated both protest waves. I look at Arab contentious politics at one Occupy site—Occupy Oakland (OO)—and analyse the repertoires Arabs drew on to relate both protest movements.

Recent studies have focused on the factors underlying the diffusion of protests across different regions (Weyland 2012), and have argued that the Arab uprisings constitute a fertile terrain for investigating the sharing of activists' repertoires of contention (Kerton 2012). A less developed line of research has, however, looked at migrants as agents of diffusion in protests happening simultaneously—albeit in cities situated in different geopolitical contexts.

Cities are 'micro-environments' revelatory of 'the global' (Sassen 2004, p. 652). In these domains, which are tightly connected to global networks, immigrants refract transnational agendas (Glick Schiller and Çalar 2009), and acquire visibility more easily than at the national level (Sassen 2004, pp. 650–652). With this in mind, I chose the city of Oakland in California's Bay area as an exploratory case study for generating insights into the engagement of Arab activist networks in Occupy.

The involvement of 'communities of colour' was not significant in Occupy (Anglin 2012). Still, some protest sites, namely OO, witnessed higher levels of immigrant mobilization.[1] OO was also considered—in addition to the main Occupy Wall Street (OWS)—as an important site of political dissent (Pyatok 2012, p. 321). It managed, furthermore, to stage contentious performances that globalized some of the domestic issues that the US Occupy Movement grappled with (Sassen 2012). The city of Oakland can, moreover, be conceptualized as a paradigmatic locality for reflecting transnational subjectivities. One of the most diverse cities in the USA, Oakland is 'the

political and administrative centre of the East Bay' (Pyatok 2012, p. 321). It stands out as a city with a high immigration rate, in which 'the majority of residents' are 'non-white' (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012, p. 282).

The city's multiethnic composition and legacy of activism (Douzet 2008) shaped the dynamics of the Occupy actions that started in October 2011 and continued until the first half of 2012 despite the eviction of the camp in November 2011. Further, the excessive use of force by the Oakland Police Department emboldened the movement (Carter 2012), strengthening comparative linkages with the Arab uprisings.[2]

The first section of this chapter maps the linkages between Occupy and the Arab uprisings, and frames the intersectional space relating both protest movements as a 'transnational protest field'. The latter is defined as an ensemble of common protest narratives, slogans, and tactics that activists drew on, and shared across protest sites without regard to territoriality. In this view, the repertoires of both Occupy and the 'Arab Spring' 'travelled' beyond their 'own location' (Greene and Kuswa 2012, p. 273), forging connections of solidarity across protest spaces. Immigrant networks acquired, in other words, the agency to transfer conceptions of change and craft linkages beyond their own local geographies.

The second section considers the conditions under which Arab activists in Oakland forged a transnational politics of claims-making. It shows how they capitalized on OO as both a discursive and political opportunity to voice the demands of the Arab uprisings in the USA, draw parallels between grievances in the Arab world and in the USA, and raise consciousness about their plight. I conceptualize Occupy as a discursive opportunity in the sense that Arab activists framed the protest field as appropriate to diffuse and recontextualize their own frames. A political opportunity is here conceived as a context in which dissenters have exposed cracks in political conditions. This in turn improves Arab activists' possibility to disseminate the core demands of the Arab uprisings on the one hand, and their grievances on the other.

According to Oakland-based Arab activists, disseminating the demands of the Arab uprisings revolves around calls for the dismantlement of autocracies, bottom-up democratization, dignity, and social justice. At the same time, in their eyes, such demands cannot be extricated from the end of US financial support to Arab regimes and involvement in wars in the Middle East.

Though the Arab world was at the centre of their political claims-making, Arab activists sought to highlight grievances that similarly

impacted Arabs in their homeland and in the USA. Those grievances, framed as the common causes of Occupy and the Arab uprisings, revolved around economic precarity such as unemployment, lack of services, and political marginalization. In this perspective, Arabs are subject—both in their authoritarian homeland and in the USA in the light of the so-called 'War on Terror'—to security apparatuses and discriminatory practice (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013; American activist, email communication, December 13, 2012).

The second section further analyses the claims-making performances and framing strategies OO-based Arab activists used to transnationalize solidarity and dissent. It also sheds light on the constraints that hampered a sustained mobilization. The third section assesses the significance of Arab activists' attempt to negotiate a politics of claims-making through the 'Occupy Movement-Arab uprisings' prism.

The research for this chapter is based on a dozen in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted between 2012 and 2014 with key Arab activists who participated in OO, a study of their statements, newsletters, and opinion articles, and several interviews with American activists who organized Occupy performances and collaborated with Arab activists. First, Arab activists were selected through a snowball process, which though random, allowed me to identify and interview, in the more advanced research stages, key Arab activists who either initiated or co-staged Occupy events. My key respondents were Arab Americans, mostly Lebanese Americans and Palestinian Americans aged between 22 and 32. Most of these activists have been involved in grassroots organizing before Occupy. I also interviewed representatives of Arab organizations that provide resources to Arab organizing in the Bay area. Moreover, I carried out six interviews and various informal conversations with experts in the USA who have conducted research on Occupy. Between 2011 and 2013, I had various informal conversations with Arab Americans living in the East Bay area but who did not participate in the protests.

Conceptualizing the Occupy Movement and the Arab uprisings as one transnational political field, this chapter highlights interconnected economic and political struggles uniting the Global South and the Global North. On the one hand, it debunks the assumed dichotomy between the so-called 'core' and the so-called 'periphery'. On the other, it explains how immigrant communities connect grievances in the Global South to those in the Global North, bringing into stark relief aspects of resemblance in peoples' struggles regardless of constellations of power, wealth, and development.

Moreover, the chapter adds to the research on the ways in which immigrants shape arenas of political struggle in cityscapes (Sassen 2004). It contributes to the discussion on how activists create opportunities to advance their claims (Rutland 2013). More specifically, the chapter seeks to integrate Arab migrant communities into the literature on social movement theories. Although they are firmly integrated in the diaspora literature (Wald 2009), Arab migrant communities have been only superficially addressed as actors in transnational movements. The article restricts its scope to generating demonstrative insights into one Occupy site that multisited observations could further build on. However, it contributes to a broader understanding of the strategies that Arab activists utilize in transnational settings and links those struggles to wider debates about the agency of marginalized groups globally.

## The Making of a Transnational Protest Field

The Occupy Movement started in New York City on September 17, 2011, before spreading across the USA and worldwide. Denouncing corporate capitalism and the weaknesses of representative democracy, hundreds of thousands of protesters rallied in Downtown Manhattan and set up encampments in Zucotti Park. 'Occupiers' considered themselves representatives of the '99 %' allegedly at the mercy of a ruthless capitalist machinery that privileges 1 % of the population. Although the movement was leaderless, a consensus-based General Assembly served as the deliberative space for joint decisions.

While Occupy activists drew on various protest movements (such as the Spanish Indignados Movement), studies show how the Arab uprisings constitute a fundamental source of inspiration as far as the 'strategic deployment of the rhetoric of space and the tactics of occupation' were concerned (Mitchell 2012, p. 11). Occupy activists drew on identifiable methods,[3] rhetoric and imagery (Shenker and Gabbatt 2011) used at Arab protest sites, particularly Tahrir Square (Barnard 2011; Schneider 2011).

It is worth highlighting that goals and dynamics of both protest waves were dissimilar (Ramadan 2011, pp. 146–147). Though both decried an exclusivist economic system, the Arab uprisings aimed at dismantling autocracies, while the Occupy sites denounced the imperfections of capitalism and representative democracy. Furthermore, the Arab revolts that broke out in 2011 gave way to complex political trajectories with long-term repercussions on state-building in the region (Benhabib 2014).

Notwithstanding the global outpourings of solidarity that Occupy galvanized, the movement quickly lost momentum. Some experts criticized Occupy for its inability to generate practical claims once the camps had been dismantled by the police (Gitlin 2013). In contrast, others emphasized the movement's capacity to act as a 'common place' for 'innumerable demands' (Mitchell 2012, p. 11).

In spite of those dissimilarities, much ink has been spilled on depicting connections between Occupy and the Arab protest wave (Hardt and Negri 2011). For instance, studies analysed how both capitalized on public squares, physical encampments, built horizontal ties among various types of challengers across the social spectrum, and relied on digital media to sustain insurgency and solidarity (Razsa and Kurnik 2013). Both Arab and Occupy activists used common discursive frames to forge transnational imaginaries highlighting interconnectedness. More specifically, they expressed support to each other in their online and offline publications and drew on each other's slogans and tactics (Keating 2011; Ryssdal 2012; Shenker and Gabbatt 2011). They further exchanged physical visits to the protest camps (Barnard 2011; Strasser and Elmeshad 2011). Such linkages—articulated through speeches, slogans, physical and virtual encounters—created a 'global street' enabling the rise of new geographies defined as 'assemblages' of 'territory, authority, and rights'. (Sassen 2012, p. 69) In this 'global street', protesters acquired new possibilities to produce and connect repertoires. Though unstructured and highly rhetorical, an interactive protest field dissociated from national boundaries and formal institutions emerged.

### *Migrants as Political Subjects in the Protest Field*

The literature has described how digital media and rhetoric enabled the 2011 Arab and Occupy protest sites to 'interact with each other' (Greene and Kuswa 2012, p. 284). Media articles placed special focus on the visits of Arab activists to Occupy sites so as to impart their teachings (Strasser and Elmeshad 2011) and ways on how solidarity was crafted through digital networks and signage (Comrades from Cairo 2011). Still, the extent to which Arab communities in the USA drew on Occupy to advance claims vis-à-vis the host land and the Arab homeland has not received previous attention. Only vague reference was made in the media to the presence of Arab migrant communities in the protests (Barnard 2011; Sifri 2011).

Focusing on Arab migrants as political subjects involved in Occupy holds the promise of understanding Arab politics of claims-making and, more broadly, the diffusion of repertoires across geographically distant protest sites. It also allows a connection to be made with the broader field of study of vulnerable citizens and their strategies of organization in the Global South, a link that research has ignored up to now.

The USA constitutes a main site for the development of Arab identity and activism in diaspora (Yazbeck Haddad 1991). One major reason can be traced to the centrality of the USA in world affairs and its involvement in the Middle East. Literature on Arab Americans discusses at length the manifold ways through which the community has attempted to influence American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Arab state (Wald 2009). Arab Americans are considered to be an ethnic diaspora in the USA. They are, however, a heterogeneous community that comprises significant cultural and socio-economic diversity. Arab Americans originated from various countries of the Middle East and North Africa and arrived to the USA as a result of various emigration waves since the nineteenth century. Throughout decades, they have sought through awareness raising, advocacy, lobbying, and protests to promote their interests. Important triggers of activism were the failing Arab-Israeli peace process and the war on terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks. US stances towards the 2011 Arab uprisings constituted a window of opportunity for a renewed Arab-American engagement.

Looking at the various strategies through which Arab activists in the USA drew on during both protest waves as an interspatial field of contention reveals how Arab contentious politics manifests itself in transnational spheres. Linked to this observation is the attempt to understand the ways Arab activists seek to expand political opportunities beyond their countries of origin. More broadly, recent studies have emphasized the ways migrants ground political practices in localities while decoupling them from a state-centred perspective (Landolt 2008).

Contention transnationalizes through various modes such as communication technologies, learning, and networking. Still, migrant populations remain the physical bearers and carriers of transnationalism. They help to track how horizontal linkages materialize in spatial localities. At the same time, as they dissociate contention from the nation-state, they contribute to configuring protest sites as refractions of multisituated struggles. Despite dissimilar scales of contention, the significance of crafted linkages between Occupy and the Arab revolts lies in their potential to forge new access points to political agency.

The tactic of occupying unpermitted spaces was not propitious to immigrants' mobilization in Occupy. Nevertheless, the transnational nature of connections that were woven across US and Arab protest camps empowered Arab-American activists as local political actors. Arab activists' broad or unstructured political practices[4] acquire deeper significance in the type of protests that can be framed as novel. In such protests, the production of innovative repertoires improves the 'possibilities for exposing political opportunities' (Koopmans 2004, p. 24).

## ARABS IN OCCUPY OAKLAND: SEARCHING FOR OPPORTUNITIES AND IMAGINARIES

*The intent was to claim space; make ourselves visible. We carved presence in Occupy. We carved our own space. We made announcements, displayed literature, participated in the committees; we submitted proposals for protest marches which got accepted (Arab activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 28, 2013).*

Occupy came to Oakland on October 10, 2011. Protesters set encampments at Frank Ogawa Plaza and staged various Occupy actions in diverse parts of the city. They succeeded in organizing a General Strike on November 2 and port shutdown actions on December 12. However, OO was marred by violent clashes between the police and the 'occupiers'. Despite the clearing of encampments by November 21, meetings, protests, and direct action did not subside. On January 28, for instance, OO protesters unsuccessfully tried to take over a convention centre.

Arab engagement in OO ranged from claiming physical space through encampments to participating in various Occupy actions. After the second eviction of the encampments in November, Arab protesters started pulling out. Their engagement, however, continued in the post-encampment phase through participation in protests, direct action, campaigns, and meetings.

As underscored previously, Oakland's multicultural setting and the legacy of anti-war activist networks offered a fertile terrain for linking up various demands. Described as 'one body with multiple arms', OO assembled a plurality of socio-economic but also racial and ethnic grievances (American activist, email communication, December 13, 2012). Activists discussed the themes of foreclosures, mental health services, and child care in the USA. At the same time, they took up the politics of immigration[5]

alongside the connections between US foreign policy and the propping up of autocracies in the Middle East. Like other Occupy sites, OO was related to the Arab uprisings in its protest methods. Yet, higher thresholds of police repression intensified shows of solidarity between Oakland and the Arab uprisings, especially Tahrir Square. For instance, in October 2011, marches in support of OO were organized from Tahrir Square to the US embassy in Cairo (Strasser and Elmeshad 2011). In Oakland, the banner declaring that 'Oakland and Cairo are one' was one of the first banners to be held during marches (Arab activist, email communication, December 12, 2012).[6]

As OO was a fluid protest space, it is impossible to quantify Arab public presence. Participants I interviewed all agree that there was a 'sizeable' Oakland-based Arab community. According to the respondents, hundreds of Arabs took part in marches, attended Occupy events, or simply socialized in the encampments. A group of 30 to 40 Arab activists co-organized marches and panels, and participated in working groups, while about a dozen stayed in the encampments.

From the outset, Arab activists joined multiethnic tents and various Occupy committees such as the Occupy Oakland Research Group, the Anti-Colonial Reading Group, and the People of Colour Committee. Yet they soon reached the conclusion that mobilization required a distinctive spatial grounding. A handful of Arab activists established the Intifada tent, with a view to providing a platform for Arab involvement in Occupy. Aged between 20 and 35, they were for the most part Arab Americans, mostly Palestinian Americans and Lebanese Americans. There were also a few Yemeni Americans and Egyptian Americans.

Described as the 'central hub for Arab and many non-Arab solidarity activists', the tent's objectives consisted of 'building community', 'sharing information about Arab issues', and 'showing the joint struggle' of Arabs 'with OO communities' (American activist, email communication, December 13, 2012). A few days after the tent's erection, Arab activists built informal alliances with transnational coalitions in OO and other Occupy sites. Examples include coalition formation with the Afghan-American community and non-Zionist Jewish groups in Oakland, the anti-war leftist movements and the War Resisters League in OWS, and Arab organizations and councils in the Bay area (Arab activist, phone interview, December 10, 2012). Such coalitions grouped Americans, Arabs, and non-Arab Muslims. Some Arab organizations provided the Intifada tent with resources such as banners and sleeping bags, and helped them

convene protests and panels. Other Arab activists who participated in OO's assemblies and groups joined efforts with the Intifada tent to insert in OO's actions the demands of the Arab uprisings and the grievances of Arab communities in the USA.

## Mapping Claims and Repertoires of Contention

'So we wanted to educate first, then agitate, then link our struggles together, and fight together. We rallied with leftists, socialists, Muslims' (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013). This statement summarizes the repertoires that key Arab activists relied on to advance their claims in the Oakland setting.

Through my interviews with Arab Occupy participants, I observed that the main process of frame alignment used to make a politics of claims-making (Snow et al. 1986) involved weaving relations and analogies across the protest camps of the 'Arab Spring' and Occupy. To this end, activists crafted and reproduced rhetorical frames in addition to co-organizing Occupy actions which emphasized questions relevant both to Occupy and the Arab world.

The strategy of frame alignment aimed at enacting a discursive field in which 'Arab issues' can be 'infused onto Occupy' and Arab demands 'recontextualized' in 'the Oakland setting' (Arab activist, phone interview, December 10, 2012).

> We connected the issue of militarization in the Arab world with the issue of tear gas in Oakland. The easiest link was tear gas; people could not refute it. Referring to tear gas canisters is a weak link but can be easily used […] We spoke of US support to the Egyptian military […] We wanted to frame Occupy as a decolonial movement on native American land and link it with the anti-colonial and anti-authoritarian movements in the Arab world […] (Arab activist, August 28, 2013).

Below, I describe the main narratives and claims-making performances that Arab activists utilized to echo the theme of Arab revolts in the USA, and to knit interrelationships between disaffected groups across regional clusters. I show how a transnational field of politics (Mahler 2000) was enacted across both sites through discursive, communicative, and visual repertoires. Studying these framing perspectives and performances helps not only to illuminate how the involved activists assigned meaning to their

actions, but also how they relocated their claims so as to reach broader public and transnational allies.

### Crafting Links of Resemblance

A major strategic mechanism was to select narratives through which activists could infuse links of resemblance between OO and Arab insurgencies. The issues of state repression, militarization, occupation, and parallels in economic inequalities were key to forging connections between the '99 %' represented by Occupy and the disaffected in the Arab world. Tahrir Square and Palestine were drawn upon as key referential frameworks in Occupy to evidence the struggles' similarities.

Key linkages were made in communicative acts and teach-ins highlighting the parallels between state repression in Egypt and Oakland police brutality. A recurrent discourse, for instance, was to show how both communities in Oakland and Tahrir Square were facing invasive security apparatuses. This argument was stretched further to depict both communities as subjugated to 'global militarization', irrespective of geographical location. In cooperation with other activists in Northern California, OO-based Arab activists, for example, published several statements highlighting interdependent domestic and global dimensions underpinning Occupy and the Arab uprisings.[7]

Displaying signage in front of tents[8] and during protest marches was a crucial means of juxtaposing the demands and grievances of Occupy and the Arab uprisings. OO-based activists made sure in Occupy performances to exchange, replicate, and reappropriate slogans used in OO and Tahrir Square to cement resemblance and solidarity (Tharoor 2011). For instance, they co-organized a solidarity march in response to an event that protesters in Tahrir Square staged to show solidarity with OO. During the march in Oakland, activists recycled the banner that protesters displayed in Tahrir Square which read, 'Oakland, don't afraid [sic], go ahead'. [9] In other rallies organized in support of Tahrir Square, they prioritized putting up signs for parallel happenings such as the simultaneous raiding of both protest camps (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 18, 2013).

It is worth noting that groups of various backgrounds participated in solidarity marches and endorsed the banners cementing linkages with OO's Tahrir Square counterpart. At the same time, Arab activists exhibited agency by submitting proposals for solidarity rallies and events to OO's

General Assembly. Once these proposals were accepted, Arab activists capitalized on transposing signage that anchored solidarity and analogies.

Moreover, the theme of tear gas canisters was used as a frame bridging reference to link the '99 %' of OO with Gaza and the West Bank (Gharib 2011). Incarceration was another intersectional theme. On the 'National Occupy Day for Prisoners in the USA', OO activists staged direct action in San Quentin while Arab activists highlighted similarities between Palestine's hunger strikers against incarceration and prisoners in the USA: 'we went there to support Occupy4Prisoners. Yet we brought our prisoners' (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013).[10]

Arab activists further sought to transpose 'Arab struggles' to Occupy protest actions through the tactics of cross-referencing.[11] During the Valentine's Day protest in February 2012, Arab activists utilized references to the Bahraini uprising where tear gas was used—just like in Oakland.[12] On March 13, they co-organized a Day of Solidarity with Palestine with a view to bringing the Palestinian struggle to OO.[13] On that day, the third anniversary of an Oakland activist who was shot in Palestine was commemorated. In the May Day Strike, Arab activists at OO evoked the general strike taking place at the same time in Syria.[14]

Bridging frames through crafting discursive and visual links of resemblance helped Arab activists pursue a plurality of goals. Evidencing interconnections between the grievances of protesters in the USA and those in the Arab world reflected an attempt to make their frames resonate with the American public. Such tactics made it easier, according to some of my respondents, to echo the demands of the Arab uprisings in the Occupy community and garner support.

The goal of cross-referencing struggles was to shine a light on repression in both contexts, and to show how various forms of subjugation speak to each other. According to my respondents, they aimed to convince American audiences why practices such as the use of force against protesters and state repression should be delegitimized whether in autocratic or more liberal settings.

Although my respondents concur that comparative links were exaggerated, they note that their relevance lay in creating a transnational imaginary of empathy. The tactics of drawing analogies and transposing grievances are, however, not unique to this case study but have been historically deployed by a variety of social movements to universalize their claims. OO-based Arab activists used reading and discussion groups to discover how to draw on the legacy of social movements and on seminal

works written about activism—such as Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon's, and Edward Said's writings—in the construction of their own narratives.

### Crafting Links of Interdependence

Another key strategy consisted in building argumentative links demonstrating that Occupy and Arab grievances were mutually constitutive and reinforcing. Special emphasis was laid on constructing interdependencies between the discontent that catalysed Occupy and US policies in the Middle East: 'we made the link between austerity measures in the USA and its foreign policies in the Middle East' (Arab activist, phone interview, October 9, 2012, Beirut); 'we justified our stance by connecting grievances. We are against austerity measures in the USA also because we did not want our money to fund wars abroad'. (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, 21 April, 2013).

A frequently used tactic was to argue in writings and teach-ins that budget cuts were introduced in the USA even though the American government provided military aid to Arab autocracies such as the Mubarak regime. An additional tactic was to counterpose the introduction of austerity measures in the USA with the financial gains the US government makes through the arms industry (Arab activist, phone interview, December 10, 2012).

Additional mechanisms consisted of using the encampment's teach-ins and discussions to establish linkages between the outcomes of the Arab uprisings and US foreign policies. One illustrative example consisted in reproducing the narrative that Arab uprisings do not 'stand a chance' if certain US policies do not shift. Arab activists made in this context specific reference to US ambivalent stances in the Syrian and Bahraini uprisings (Ibid.). Visual signage was, moreover, paramount for displaying such interdependencies. For instance, a frequently repeated slogan was 'From Egypt to the Bay, Stop Militarization of Our Communities!'

Through demonstrating these interdependent links, Arab activists sought to 'expand the discourse of OO beyond domestic capitalism' and link it with 'war and military aid' (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, September 6, 2013). In alliance with solidarity networks in the broader Northern California area, they called for ensuring that tax dollars were not to be invested in violence or repression. They further articulated some concrete demands, such as stopping the shipment of weapons and tear gas canisters to Arab states, and tracking US corporations that benefit from selling weapons to the Arab world.[15]

The main goal of this strategy was to raise awareness that corporate capitalism and its socio-economic role in the USA cannot be dissociated from the complex ways through which repressive legacies sustain themselves in the Arab world. By voicing concerns about the US economic system and involvement in world politics, Arab activists further sought to align their discourses with the broader occupy movement.

### Voicing the Grievances of Arab Americans

In addition to refracting the demands of the Arab uprisings in Occupy, Arab activists drew on Occupy actions to voice the grievances experienced by Arab-American communities. Mainly, the activists shed light on the themes of racial profiling, surveillance, and islamophobia that Arab communities have—according to my respondents—been facing since 9/11 (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, September 6, 2013). To make these grievances accessible to the Oakland communities, activists crafted discursive analogies through teach-ins, events, and visual signage. For instance, Arab immigrants' problems in the USA—namely, racial profiling and surveillance—were connected to the theme of militarization in Egypt. The so-called 'War on Terror' targeting Arab communities in the USA and beyond was connected with the repressive police apparatus in Occupy encampments. Though exaggerated, these links were used as symbolic tools to build bridges with broader audiences.

Arab activists further drew on the overarching frame of the 99 % to position themselves as equally disaffected groups in the USA. In protests denouncing scarcity of social services and jobs, they emphasized that such grievances impacted American, Hispanic, Muslim, and Arab-American communities alike. Such a strategy allowed them to shift the scale of contention. More specifically, they sought to position themselves as actors who not only seek to promote Arab interests but who also share demands for social justice in the USA and beyond.

### The Interactional Context: Beyond the Visible Protest Space

Mapping Arab activists' claims and strategies in the context of OO's visible spaces and contentious performances is important. But these actions should be contextualized within an interactional perspective that factors in the 'invisible' spaces they drew on. OO might have been a brief 'political moment', yet it did not emerge out of nowhere (American activist, interview

with the author, Berkeley, August 18, 2013). Many of my respondents contend that Occupy was embedded in a longer continuum of collective action whose ramifications go beyond the episodes of madness (Zolberg 1972) that protests allow for. OO dynamics have to be interpreted against the longstanding activism of Bay area social movements. In this continuum, Arab activists have been active in forming coalitions and articulating claims: 'We were doing it anyway but Occupy Oakland was an opportunity for outreach: reaching more people, and drawing on the media' (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013).

Activists argue that the post-Occupy legacy has given new impetus to Arab organizing in the Bay area. Though Occupy encampments were dismantled, activists built on coalition networks between groups such as Lebanese, Egyptian, Palestinian, Latino, and Black American to continue their work. In this context, various Occupy projects continue.

> There was no interruption. Organizations and activists drifted back to the causes they were working on […] it was not necessarily the end of Occupy which continues through other forms and shapes. (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013)

For instance, a seized space was transformed into a library in East Oakland. Protest actions in which linkages between the Arab world and Oakland are articulated have become almost a modular performance in the activists' repertoires. The same narratives are articulated whenever an opportunity for reviving connections arises (Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity Committee 2014).

Peripheral sites that are remote from the main protest site are, moreover, paramount to understanding the ways Arabs networked and organized in Oakland. By peripheral sites, I allude to meetings in squares far from Oakland's central plazas, working groups as well as offshoot committees functioning in parallel to the main Occupy. These sites allowed for research, networking, and reflecting on base organizing. On the one hand, Arab activists used such sites to connect their storylines with the black, Hispanic, and non-Arab Muslim communities in Oakland. On the other, such sites provided the terrain for discussing strategies as to how to move beyond solidarity shows in protest performances, forge strategic links for community organizing in the Bay area, and build concrete links between actions in the countries of origin and reception. My respondents point in

this context to the importance of conducting research to track tangible linkages between US policies and political regimes in the Arab region.

In addition to building on peripheral sites, Arab activists in Oakland sought to extend their reach beyond the physical locality of Oakland to other US Occupy sites on the one hand and to the Arab world on the other. One illustrative case that emerged was the coalition-building and emulation of tactical repertoires between the Intifada tent in Oakland and the Global Justice Working Group (GJWG) in OWS. A meeting between the Intifada Tent and Arab activists in the GJWG in New York inspired the latter to recontextualize the demands of the Arab uprisings in OWS. In light of these exchanges, Arab activists in the OWS working group promoted a campaign demanding that the USA stop shipping tear gas to Bahrain (OWS Arab activist, phone interview, July 22, 2013).

OO-based Arab activists, furthermore, networked with other activists in Occupy sites such as Seattle, Atlanta, and Georgia. The aim was to share resources and tactics, convene events around Arab organizing, and reflect on the efficiency of direct action versus base-building (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, September 6, 2013). My respondents further relate that transnational cyber-interactions and physical visits between Oakland and Tahrir Square were frequent and intense, mainly from October 2011 to January 2012 (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 28, 2013). In addition to the proliferation of hashtags and Facebook pages that Arab and American activists participated in curating,[16] many Arab and American activists travelled between Arab countries, namely between Tahrir Square and OO, to take part in protests. In this context, the transnational protest field emerges, according to my respondents, as a site of learning, emulation, and friendship networks.

### Fractures in the Protest Field

Arab involvement is, however, not only to be nested in the wider interactional context but also in the spaces of exclusion that Occupy generated. While OO provided an opportunity for coalition formation, it also accentuated fractures. In a context of both opportunities and constraints, Arab activism is to be conceptualized as one that has 'waxed and waned' in a very brief period of time, undermining prospects for sustained mobilization.

Despite OO's horizontalism, occupiers were confronted with implicit power inequalities. Some activists assumed informal privileges when it came to taking the 'bullhorn' or making proposals on topics to be discussed at the assembly (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 18, 2013). Furthermore, ethnic and class cleavages—deeply entrenched in Oakland's structure and history—remained visible in OO dynamics. Many of my respondents emphasized that middle-class white activists gained more visibility than members of ethnic communities, who felt far from the 'core field of power'. At the heart of this observation lies the illegality of the Occupy protest space that de facto entrenched inequalities. Almost all of my respondents concur that immigrant communities felt less comfortable claiming 'unpermitted' physical space. On May Day 2012, for instance, the organization of two different protests exemplified such power gaps, according to some of my interviewees. While activists in the main OO site staged an unlicensed protest, immigrant communities started a licensed protest march from the Fruitvale district to Oakland's centre. Once both camps met, clashes arose due to different logics of mobilization.

Occupy's lack of structure further amplified rifts, as the so-called '99 %' in Oakland lumped together various communities with different perceptions of inequality (King 2011). With time, parallel movements that did not fit in the main Occupy framework carved out their own spaces. For instance, some communities of colour, including Arabs, proposed from the outset to replace the term Occupy with 'liberate' or 'decolonize'. According to them, Occupy itself was reminiscent of imperialism and colonization. A parallel site called Decolonize Oakland rallied various groups that felt alienated by the terminology of 'occupation'. OO's 'People of Colour Committee' for instance proposed to work on the phraseology of decolonization rather than occupation. Yet soon enough, rifts emerged within the committee itself.

Following police repression in the encampments, tensions heightened around the tactics of contention. A main divide separated the so-called leftist and anarchist groups advocating escalation in the use of disruptive tactics from those favouring non-violent methods. Rifts also emerged in regards to appropriating cultural frames from non-American settings. For instance, divergences emerged over the extent to which crafting parallel narratives between protest camps in Egypt, Syria, or Bahrain on the one hand and US Occupy sites on the other was respectful of the specificities of those uprisings (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 18, 2013).

It is worth adding that even ethnic groups—whether Latinos, blacks, or Arabs—displayed disagreements on tactics and frames. For example, committees and working groups that communities of colour formed to advance their claims subsequently splintered into smaller groups (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, September 6, 2013).

Divergences over frames and logics of mobilization greatly weakened Arab mobilization attempts. As underscored before, communities of colour reappropriated Occupy grievances in their own framing perspective. While, according to one of my key respondents, the black community was keen on ethnic politics in the Oakland commune itself, some Arab activists were more interested in transnational activist techniques that would link US foreign policies with 'Arab struggles'. Focusing on ethnic politics in Oakland prompted some Arab Americans to leave some working committees as they wanted to propagate linkages with the Arab world that were not confined to the politics of multiculturalism (Ibid.).

As the wave of contention was contracting, deep divides emerged between anarchist groups that sought to radicalize action repertoires and some Arab activists who questioned anarchist tactics and their relevance to advancing Arab claims in Oakland (Arab activist, interview with the author, Oakland, August 22, 2013). Many of my respondents further concur that many Arabs dreaded disruptive tactics because of their own immigrant status (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 20, 2013).

My interviews also revealed rifts among Arabs themselves. In the post-encampment phase, two main logics of organizing emerged. One camp continued to participate in Occupy actions. Another camp preferred to focus either on grassroots organizing or on ways to 'develop a line of practical internationalism' (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, September 6, 2013). For instance, some Arab activists alluded to the importance of building on practical linkages that could bolster concrete outcomes in the homeland, such as tracking and lobbying against US businesses linked to the arms industry in the Arab world. This camp questioned whether OO's lack of structure was effective in bolstering political claims-making. According to my conversations, another divergence in mobilization tactics emerged between Arab communities in Oakland who rallied around speakers and events and those activists who reached out to global justice groups (Arab activist, interview with the author, Oakland, August 22, 2013).

## What Are the Implications of This Case?

Arab participation in OO was not significant nor did Occupy's contextual settings encourage the involvement of communities of colour. But Arab activists asserted their presence at OO, despite having only scarce resources and precarious organizational structures. Notwithstanding the conditions limiting their activism, they forged a politics of claims-making mainly through the prism of narratives and political imaginaries. The very action of harnessing temporal and transnational linkages between Occupy and the Arab uprisings constitutes a symbolic resource that enabled such actors with scarce material and political resources to acquire some agency.

As one of my respondents argued, Arab presence has to be problematized not in quantitative terms but in the context of Occupy (Arab activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 28, 2013). Arab activists thus capitalized on the protest space, its existing resources, and the presence of the media to articulate their claims. Their tactical performances and framing strategies helped them to gain access to visible spaces of contention.

The concomitance of events between OO and Tahrir Square was the key facilitative condition: 'Arab presence was not only literal in the sense that there were Arabs from Arab descent. It was also in terms of solidarity, imagination, and connection with global events'. (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 20, 2013). Soon enough, Arab activists capitalized on the key innovative tactics of producing and propagating imaginary linkages (Ibid.). As one of my respondents emphasized, 'OO gets raided and Tahrir Square gets raided too […] Oakland is Cairo and Cairo is Oakland […] Cairo became a metaphorical sister city' (American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 18, 2013).

Creating 'visual solidarity' through the lens of signage in protest marches and social media platforms emerged as the key tool for constructing shared discursive and political imaginaries (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, September 6, 2013). Below are some circulated slogans evoking the shared language of insurgency (Arab activist, email communication, December 12, 2012):

Occupy Wall Street, not Palestine
The People demand an end to the regime
Defend the Egyptian Revolution!
Tahrir Square everywhere
From Egypt to the Bay, Stop Militarization of Our Communities!

Demand Accountability for State Brutality!
Stop US Aid to Egypt Military!
Campaign against Corporations that Profit from Chemical Weapons!

While some of these slogans evoke solidarity with Arab uprisings, others allude to common political struggles or construct links between US economic policies and the Arab uprisings. Another key strategic tool lay in placing the US hostland at the centre of the Arab uprisings. This enabled activists to justify why they claimed agency in the US protest spaces. Broadly put, since the USA is a global power, the activists explained that they had to localize their struggles on American ground in order to access higher opportunity structures:

As Arabs in the USA, we have a particular role, the role of inserting the political discourse framing US interests in the Arab region in Occupy and linking it to our demands towards the US government. It is difficult for the people back there to make demands on the US government and we have a larger stake in this […]. (Arab activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 28, 2013)

In assessing the effectiveness of their participation, one is bound to grapple with the question as to whether their activism is to be assessed through its achievements or methods. Arab networks used the Oakland protest camp to transnationalize claims, connect struggles, and draw attention to spaces of exclusion in the USA. It is hard to quantify the extent to which their discourses and actions garnered attention among policy circles or the broader public, not to mention that Occupy as a whole has not translated claims-making into practical demands. As activists themselves acknowledge, the main Arab tent in OO, the Intifada tent, could not effectively pursue its objectives beyond certain limitations. Activists hoped at the outset that their involvement could 'turn into a broader movement for economic and social change'. Still, the tent's concrete achievement was the passing of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) resolution related to the Palestinian question in OO's General Assembly.

Moreover, their politics of claims-making remained too broad to lay any foundation for goal-directed activism towards the homeland. In OO, Arab activists propagated transnational imaginaries gravitating around Tahrir Square and Palestine, two themes that were already taken up by solidarity activists in the Bay area. When it comes to formulating explicit

demands and connections related to different Arab countries in which insurgencies were happening as well—albeit in more complex forms—many of my respondents admit that organizing turned out to be difficult (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013). While they emphasize the linkages between US foreign policies and Arab political processes, they avoid dealing with structural problems blocking reform in the Arab world itself.

Their participation in OO, however, is not to be assessed in terms of the influence they exerted, but rather in terms of how migrants acquire 'strength for themselves' (Sassen 2004, p. 656) and how they negotiate visibility in a protest site that lumped together myriad claims and actors. Claiming presence and searching for opportunities are enactments of the political: 'activists never expected Occupy to accomplish it all. This was the launching pad; a way to experiment with tactics and strategies' (Arab activist, interview with the author, San Francisco, April 21, 2013).

Their performances help to illuminate our understanding of how they reframed their struggles to fit in transnational contexts. Their rhetorical frames, though built on exaggerated connections such as linking militarization in Egypt and the US security apparatus, fulfilled the functions of negotiating differences, approximating grievances, and reflecting on broader stratifications of power in local arenas.

This leaves several questions, such as whether the repertoires Arab activists at OO forged can be consequential to their future mobilization and whether pre-organizational forms of activism are indicative of how potential movements are shaped. In this analytical framework, emphasis is laid on the process rather than the outcomes of contention, and activism is to be explored as a work in progress. Additionally, analysing how Arab activists experimented with Occupy repertoires helps understand local protests as transnational sites of borrowing (Koopmans 2004, p. 25).

Scholars and policymakers can examine the narratives and actions explored here for different purposes. In light of the unclear post-2011 transitions, the Arab world faces crises of political legitimacy with national, global, and transnational dimensions. Such crises are manifested in unstable institutions and constitutions as well as military dominance (Benhabib 2014, p. 351). Arab politics of claims-making in diaspora adds to our understanding of the ways the Arab states and their communities are enmeshed in the multileveled constellations of power endemic to such crises. Contentious politics in diaspora sheds further light on the global inequalities facing Arab communities. Such inequalities are, for instance,

salient in the international governance of Arab migration (Gerges 2003). In their countries of origin, Arab emigrants dispose of few state-backed institutional channels to contribute to their homeland's politics. In countries of reception, the governance of Arab immigration has been criticized for restraining communities' ties and rights (Haddad and Golson 2007).

Research is therefore invited to account for unstructured migrants' political involvement beyond state-mediated practices such as transnational election campaigns. In this case study, Arab engagement in extra-institutional and extra-territorial spheres represents an indicator for gauging Arab diasporic populations' claims. It also constitutes one path through which communities seek to alternatively enact the political. This path lies in designing the political as a project from below, one that draws attention to global polarities, circumvents unresponsive state-centred channels, and grafts itself through transnational solidarities onto other struggles along the North–South divide.

## Notes

1. Lecturer, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 8, 2014.
2. American activist, email communication, December 13, 2012; American activist, interview with the author, Berkeley, August 18, 2014.
3. Such methods include camping in unpermitted urban squares reclaiming spaces and buildings, and seeking to disrupt the normal routine.
4. Itzigsohn et al. (1999) distinguish between broad and narrow transnational practices. Broad practices hinge on participation in meetings and protests, whereas narrow practices take more institutionalized forms.
5. See announcement (November 5, 2011) 'Rally at Occupy Oakland and March to Wells Fargo Detention Centre', Arab Resource and Organizing Centre, http://araborganizing.org/nov-2-general-strike-and-day-of-action-in-oakland/.
6. See picture available via http://www.occupyoakland.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CairoOnehandaction.jpg.
7. See, for instance, 'Stop Militarization of Our Communities in the US and Abroad!' November 30, 2011 http://uspcn.org/2011/11/30/stop-militarization-of-our-communities-in-the-us-and-abroad/.
8. See picture of the Intifada tent reproducing the slogan of the Arab uprisings: 'The People demand an end to the regime', available via https://secure.flickr.com/photos/dakini/6306828837/.
9. The flyer that publicized the rally in Oakland emphasized links of solidarity. See http://www.occupyoakland.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/CairoOnehandaction.jpg.

10. On February 20, 2012, at the Occupy4Prisoners in Saint Quentin, Oakland-based Arab activists linked the conditions of incarceration in California State Prison with the causes for hunger strikes in Palestine. See Deger (2012).

11. In this context, cross-referencing is defined as providing in a specific case or place information on another case or place.

12. See signage held at the Valentine's Day protest referring to the struggle in Bahrain. Picture available via https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=345812008782866&set=pb.279250092105725.-2207520000.1355100860&type=3&theater.

13. See 'Proposal for Day of Solidarity Between Oakland and Palestine on Tuesday', Occupy Oakland March 13, 2012 https://occupyoakland.org/2012/02/2-for-22612-ga-proposal-for-day-of-solidarity-between-oakland-and-palestine-on-tuesday-march-13-2012/.

14. See the stencil Arab activists made for the May Day strike in Oakland which refers to the strike taking place at the same time in Syria; picture available via https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=390440254320041&set=pb.279250092105725.-2207520000.1355100860&type=3&theater.

15. Such demands were articulated in statements that Arab and solidarity activists issued in Occupy Oakland and in the broader Northern California area. See for instance, 'Stop Militarization of Our Communities in the US and Abroad!'

16. Examples include the hashtag #Oaklandandcairoareonefist and the Facebook page 'Oakland and Cairo are one fist'.

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