

Constituent Imagination

**Militant Investigations
Collective Theorization**

**Edited by
Stevphen Shukaitis + David Graeber
with Erika Biddle**

Eating in Public

Gaye Chan + Nandita Sharma

Part 1: Autumn

In November of 2003, we planted twenty papaya seedlings on public land near our house in Kailua, Hawai'i. In doing so, we broke the existing state laws that delineate this space as “public” and thereby set the terms for its use. Our act had two major purposes: one was to grow and share food; the other was to problematize the concept of “public” within public space.

Our questioning of public space may at first glance seem odd, perhaps even reckless. Many progressives see the defense of all things public as a necessary response to neoliberal assaults on state-funded spaces and services. The maintenance of resources as “public” is seen as working against processes of privatization. These sentiments are based upon two assumptions: that public space is the antithesis of private property, and that the existence of public space represents a victory of the people over nefarious special interests. The concept of the “public” is a corollary of nationalist ideologies of state power that legitimate and sustain unjust social relationships, particularly those organized through private property rights. The liberal-democratic national state is camouflaged as a political apparatus, indeed *the* political apparatus, designed specifically to serve “the people.” The legitimacy of modern state power within liberal democracies, such as those of Canada and the United States, is widely regarded as being derived from popular, public consent. The “public” is touted as holding the power to revoke this legitimacy through their votes or their participation in the state’s daily operations. The idea that the national state exists because of the will of “the people” conflates the existence of the national state with the actions of political rulers/administrators of the moment and promotes the assumption that all have equal access or say in making decisions. It also obfuscates how the historic formation of national states is rooted in the struggle over land, labor, and life—a struggle *lost* by those who fought against capitalism

and for common, rather than private or state (i.e. “public”) property. The conflation of the state and “public will” conceals that the “public” is never the sum of all those who are born, live, work, and die in any given space, but is limited to members of an always gendered and racialized discourse of citizenry.

Historically, the creation of “public” spaces came at the expense of “commonly” owned property, and alongside efforts to annihilate multifaceted, broad social movements mobilized to protect a communal way of organizing life in spaces simultaneously local and global. Contrary to contemporary popular belief, common land was not only reorganized as “private” property, but also as “public” space. Nascent national states expropriated common lands as *their* newfound property. The violent enclosure of common lands preceded the formation of both the national state and global capitalist markets for labor and for trade. Everywhere, public spaces that had been known as the commons, were converted into sites of either private/capitalist or public/state power. Thus, while public land is said to exist as the goodly opposite to the theft that is private property, the two different ways of relating to space are actually mutually constitutive.

Private property laws legislated by national states secure the personal investments of those with capital. Public property serves a host of purposes (although it too is often used as a resource-rich haven for capitalists). Perhaps most importantly, property owned by the public serves the *ideological* purpose of assuaging people who otherwise are exploited and oppressed into believing that the territorial nation state is indeed *theirs*—even as it is the main regulatory mechanism for ensuring the rights of private property owners.

To this day, public land use is narrowly defined by the state within the confines of leisure activities, such as soccer, picnicking, admiring the view, walking a dog, and being edified by the display of commissioned artworks. In this way, the public comes to be understood as the group that *already* has access to private property where they can conduct all the other activities that life demands: sleeping, working, having sex, growing food. All those things that are banned from public space. For those without private homes or reliable access to food, or for those performing activities prohibited in public, “public space” becomes a zone of criminality. Like us, the planters of prohibited papaya seedlings, all such trespassers can be charged with being a nuisance to the public, thereby eradicating them from this supposedly all-encompassing category and making them legitimate targets for coercive state force.

In planting the papaya seedlings, we invoked the name of another group who were maligned simultaneously as insignificant *and* as a massive threat to the security of the public: the Diggers.

The first Diggers organized in the seventeenth century, in one part of the space reorganized as England during this time. Their movement rose

in defense of the commons' that were being systematically destroyed by the violent land reforms, privatizations, and thefts characteristic of the formative period of industrial capitalism and the consolidation of European colonialism. We see our planting of papayas in public space as a continuation of their struggle. By making many of the same points, we are trying to recall and revamp their methods of resistance. Common land belonged in perpetuity to the community as a whole. Self-sustenance was dependent on the ability of people *to common* (i.e., to hunt, graze, forage, fish, and farm). *Commoning* was well understood as the only way of life in which people could remain free from complete bondage. The Diggers knew that the continued existence of the commons was vital to the independence of individuals and collectivities from the arbitrary demands of rulers. The retention of lands as a commons was equally essential to their freedom from hunger and desperation. The liberatory politics of the Diggers thus integrated a politics of eating. The Diggers came together to fight against the expropriation and transformation of their common lands into either parcels of private property or into the public property of the nascent national state. The Diggers and their allies (the Levellers, the Ranters, the urban rioters, the rural commoners, the fishers, market women, weavers, and many others) waged a battle that was about the preservation and maintenance of a communal life. The Diggers therefore raged against the drive to entrap displaced people as either slave or wage labour in the factories, or on the plantations and ships of the emerging nascent capitalist system.

The Diggers movement organized itself on behalf of *all* people—not only one subsection of an increasingly parceled portion of humanity. They seemed subtly aware that during the early seventeenth century, the nascent idea of what was “European” was integrally related to the ongoing appropriation and parceling of land characteristic of colonization. The Diggers were thus equally concerned with the dispossessed of “Europe” as they were with the diverse people of Africa, Asia, and the Americas being dispossessed and enslaved through colonial expansion. Theirs was neither a prototypical version of Eurocentric universalism, nor simply charitable humanitarianism. Instead, the movement articulated the radical call for self-determination for all people, and the recognition of their increasingly global interconnections. The Diggers were as much opposed to the project of making “Europe” as were those who would be colonized by it in the centuries to come.

One of the signature actions of the Diggers was to sow the ground with edible seedlings, such as parsnips, carrots, and beans. A simple gesture, no doubt, but their goal was no less than global justice, freedom for all, and the self-sufficiency of all producers. By planting on land previously stolen from commoners, the Diggers gave notice that the battle over what kind of property laws would prevail was far from over. In taking direct action to reclaim their stolen land, the Diggers came up against some of the most powerful

forces in society at the time: merchants, lesser gentry, and early industrialists. These groups were eager to overturn the existing ruling structure and bring about their new world order.

The new elites backed the leaders of the emerging parliamentary movement against the King. Led by Oliver Cromwell and his militant Puritans, the aim of the parliamentarians was to create a liberal democratic state with the respectable citizen-worker as its national subject. The new parliamentary democracy created the conditions of “national” security and the rule of law much desired by the ascendant bourgeoisie.

The Diggers, and their attempt to repossess the commons, were seen as a threat to the new Parliament. The new Council of State belittled the Diggers as “ridiculous,” yet it declared: “that conflux of people may be a beginning whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow.” Unsurprisingly, one of the first actions taken by the new English parliament was the military suppression of the Diggers. Under the command of the new parliamentarians, soldiers destroyed the Diggers’ spades, trampled the crops they had carefully planted and tended, flattened their homes and drove them from the land. This was no small loss. The defeat of the Diggers and groups like them around the world assured the centrality of the market economy, the further entrenchment—and later racialization—of slavery, and the hegemony of both global capitalism and the national state.

Currently in Hawai’i, as in most parts of the world, practices of commoning have been more or less eradicated. Commoning is now practically impossible due to the imposition of private and state/public property laws including patents on life issued by the state, the ecological destruction wrought by cash crops (sandalwood, sugar, pineapple, etc.), the engineering of water canals, and the ongoing effects of both industrialization and tourism. The site where we planted the papaya seedlings is evidence of such destruction. The seedlings grow on a narrow strip of public land upon which only grass and a few weeds grow. A chain-link fence separates this slip of land from what was previously known as Kaelepulu Pond (renamed Enchanted Lake by developers).

The fence was erected by Kamehameha Schools (formerly the Bishop Estate), the most recent in a long line of state-recognized owner/developers, that parceled out parts of the land surrounding the lake to be sold to individual homeowners. The Enchanted Lake Residents Association, made up of these homeowners, was established as the authority that oversees the lake. With the complicated bureaucracy enacted through both the state and Kamehameha Schools the latter still has the right to determine what happens on the six feet of land on either side of the fence.

Kaelepulu Pond was once a thriving fish cultivation area. Its corollary streams fed taro and rice crops. It is now part of a fetid lake in which the water can no longer flow freely to the ocean. Those with homes abutting the

lake create their own community entitled to gaze, boat, and occasionally haul garbage out of its now murky depths. The fence serves the dual purpose of protecting Kamehameha Schools from injury claims as well as the Lake Residents Association who wish to keep out what they identify as trespassers who poach now polluted fish from their lake.

In responding to these contemporary developments, we find that we have to contend with something that was less of a problem for the first Diggers. During their time, it was fairly clear to people that their land was being stolen, their labor was being exploited and that nationalism, racism, and sexism were being used to sow dissent amongst the motley crew of commoners, peasants, artisans, and the emerging proletariat throughout the world. Today, many of the things that the Diggers fought against—private property and the nation state with its public lands—are so hegemonic that to merely question them is to open yourself up to ridicule and perhaps much worse.

As Audre Lorde pointed out long ago, we live in a time when we are enthralled by the very instruments used to oppress and exploit us. The enclosure of common lands has been accompanied by the enclosure of our imaginations. The notion of the goodly public space is one such instrument of colonization. The global system of national states, with its legalization of the expropriating practices of capitalists, has been and continues to be an integral feature of capitalist colonization. The fostering of national identities, particularly those of oppressed nations, is seen as a sign of empowerment, and eventual liberation instead of seeing such identities as the prison in which to contain us in the service of capitalist globalization. This is evident in the progressive rhetoric that complains about the loss of citizen's rights while remaining largely mute about the exploitation of non-citizens and/or that of people living in other nations—an outcome that Oliver Cromwell himself had hoped for so many centuries ago. This is evident in both mainstream and progressive versions of nationalism around the world.

The goal of our papaya planting is to stir desires of self-sustenance that *are not* based on the self-righteous desires of national entitlements for citizens. We erected a sign next to the papaya seedlings. It says:

These papaya plants have been planted here for everyone. When they bear fruit, in about a year, you are welcome to pick them as you need. We will return to feed the plants with organic fertilizer once a month. Please feel free to water and weed. Do not use chemical weed killers as this will poison the fruits and those that eat them—The Diggers

By associating our planting with the Diggers movement, we are reiterating the legitimacy of the commons as an alternative way to relate to the land. We are reasserting the authority of a community built upon a politics

of communal eating and needs over the needs of capitalist ideology and expansion. By doing so, we hope to fuel the recognition of the global interdependence of all those struggling for control of their communal lands. Such a politics of communal eating and land use instigates the shared dreams of freedom from capitalists and national states that, at best, sell us the notion of the public in place of our freedom from rulers. An old man walked by while we planted and said, "Oh good, I can have free papayas later." Exactly.

Part 2: Winter

Our project met with two predators within three months. First were joggers engaging in accepted public acts. Moving too fast to read the sign and unprepared to imagine another use for this land, the joggers reduced the number of plants by half in the first month. Trampled and torn by the new year the remaining ten nonetheless grew to a hefty three feet.

The second predator showed up in January as scrawls on the corner of our sign:

Dear Diggers, Sorry, I've been instructed to remove papaya plants by March 2004. Please transplant.

We were intrigued by the tension revealed in the message—the apologetic tone, the writer's attempt to distance her/himself from her/his boss, the effort made to save the plants. We decided to utilize the writer's empathy with the Diggers' project to elucidate the power distinction between those who determine land usage and those who are charged with carrying it out. We put up a second sign:

Thanks for the notice but we can't think of any other place better than here where everyone has easy access to the free papayas. If your bosses have a better use for this spot I guess they will have to kill the plants. We are anxious to see what they have planned —The Diggers

One week later a note was wedged into the fence behind the papaya trees. The note was crafted by taping together two postcards. On both the postcards were aerial views—one of a beautiful stream on the island of Hawai'i and the other of the eastern shore of Oahu's coastline. On the back was a note addressed to the Diggers in the same handwriting as the earlier scrawls. Almost entirely smeared by rain, we could barely make out its suggestion—that we seek out the help of a mediator.

We chose not to respond or to seek out a mediator. The Diggers project must be considered in two separate ways—whether we succeeded in pro-

viding the stuff of life for free and whether we succeeded in shifting consciousness regarding community, resources, and authority. While there was a remote chance that we may have convinced the state and/or Kamehameha Schools to allow the plants to grow, it was much more important to simply not acknowledge the legitimacy of their state and market-mandated authority. Instead of well-lobbied pleas for tolerance or the co-optation of our action by Kamehameha Schools to ensure its own continued existence, we chose to hold our ground. Knowing ours was a small gesture with great potential, we waited and watched to see what those around us would do. From eavesdropping and our non-scientific observations, we believe that those who encountered the Diggers project were either ambivalent or supportive. Furthermore, some seemed to have followed the exchange that took place with interest. One neighbor, without knowing that she was speaking with a Digger, commented on the mean-spiritedness of the authorities in not allowing the papaya plants to grow.

Like the first Diggers, our project performed a David and Goliath story to decolonize imaginations about land and its usage by asserting a politics of communal eating, demonstrating how difficult it can be for community members to use land to develop communal practices of self-sustenance. Our action sought to re-present the figure of the activist as one engaged in more than symbolic protest. Since broad social relations such as those of class, race, and gender are shaped by how people struggle to make their lives viable, expanding our consciousness of what is possible can only occur in any meaningful way when we can imagine changing the everyday material reality of our lives. Put simply, change happens only when we change things.

Part 3: Spring

Almost one month later than forewarned, the plants were cut down. The entire fence that separated public land and the land owned by Kamehameha Schools was taken down and rebuilt two feet closer to the road right over the severed papaya stumps.

The authoritative repositioning of the fence is a poignant metaphor. While the lines drawn between public and private may shift, neither will, or is meant to, serve producers' interest of self-determination and self-sustenance. The private/public divide, long critiqued by feminists as ideological, is shown to be two halves of a globally encompassing system of capitalist colonization.

Part 4: Summer

On September 18, 2004, two blocks away from the papaya planting site, we opened Free Store, and a companion website Freebay (nomoola.com).

The term Free Store was used during the 1960s by a group calling themselves the San Francisco Diggers. These Diggers were an anarchist, guerilla street theater group that formed to challenge the dominant US commodity system as well as the assumptions of the counterculture of the time. In one of their early leaflets, SF Diggers suggested, "All responsible citizens bring money to your local Digger for free distribution to all." Two of their most important initiatives were the Digger Bread (where free food was distributed daily) and Free Store. Like their predecessors, this reconfiguration of the Diggers hoped that their actions would stir desires for radical change while showing how people's needs could be met outside of both the marketplace and state disciplinary structures of miserly handouts to the "deserving poor."

Since the opening of our Free Store and Freebay, a bit over two weeks prior to the date of this writing, we have given away free plants and herbs, pipes, cinder blocks, and even free labor. On October 1, 2004 ten papaya seedlings were given out at Free Store. A "price tag" was attached to each plant:

ANOTHER FREE STORE SPECIAL SUNRISE PAPAYA SEEDLING

Get 1 free, get another for the same price!

Suggestions from Free Store:

Papaya trees grow almost anywhere.

Plant in sunny spot in your yard,
vacant lots, or next to the sidewalk.

Try not to use chemical insecticide or fertilizer.

Trees will bear fruit in about a year.

Share your papayas.

All the plants were taken within two hours.

Part 5: Spring/Summer

Eighteen months since its inception, a following has developed for the Diggers site and Free Store. Regulars walk, jog, bike, skate, or drive by to either shop or restock the Free Store. The original Diggers site has been replanted and expanded both in scale and range of food plants as a direct result of people's support and participation.

Both projects have succeeded in messing with the suburban obsession with security and propriety. Even many of the initially timid or those haunted by middle-class decorum have become increasingly confident about taking and leaving things at the Free Store as well as tending and harvesting from the Diggers garden. The projects inspire observers and participants to

engage in surprising discussions on property, authority, self-sustenance, and collective responsibility. This growing interest and confidence has been accompanied by a growing understanding of how the Kamehameha Schools, the US, and the state of Hawai'i are part and parcel of the global capitalist market system and that this system is based on the theft of common property. This is an understanding based neither in unquestioning acceptance nor abstract objections to these systems, but on direct encounters with the Diggers Garden and Free Store. Both enthusiasts and detractors seemingly agree that neither capitalism nor state power have or ever will provide people with the stuff of life.

We expect that the projects will continue to change and shift with daily encounters. Like sweet potato vines, knowledge is rhizomatic and multi-directional. Among countless things we have learned is that sweet potato leaves are hardy little life forms that are heat resistant, look and taste good, and grow practically anywhere.

*The gentry are all round,
on each side they are found,
This wisdom's so profound,
to cheat us of our ground.
Stand up now, stand up now.
Glory here, Diggers all.
—The Diggers, 17th century*

Bridging the Praxis Divide: From Direct Action to Direct Services and Back Again

Benjamin Shepard

In recent years, a new breed of organizing has ignited campaigns for peace and justice. Many of these campaigns utilize innovative approaches to organizing diverse communities against a broad range of local and transnational targets, including global corporations and organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). According to the Institute for Policy Alternatives, the global justice movement (GJM) has had its greatest policy successes when matching the burlesque of protest with practical policy goals. While the movement has had policy successes in certain areas, such as slowing and shifting debates about "Fast Track" trade negotiations, compulsory licensing, debt cancellation, and through corporate campaigns like the Rainforest Action Network,¹ there are many areas in which the movement has failed to match its rhetorical goals with clearly outlined, achievable goals. While this limitation may result from challenging very large targets, it also results from ideological conflicts within this movement of many movements, herein referred to as movement of movements (MM).² Perhaps the MM's greatest strength is a focus on creative expression and praxis, rather than iron-clad ideological certainty.³ Naomi Klein's now famous essay, "The Vision Thing," elaborates on this theme.⁴ Anarchists have worked with liberals; queers have organized with environmentalists; and with respect for diversity of tactics, great things have happened through the savvy deployment of multiple approaches simultaneously. Once secretive policy meetings have become occasions for carnivalesque blockades, while the discussions inside become subject to newspaper accounts around the world. Yet work remains. While diverse groups have collaborated in direct action, not enough of them have worked