

## Decolonize PDX applies education to practice freedom

BY WALIDAH IMARISHA  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

"Here we go," Hector muttered to me as we stepped out of the frigid New Year's Eve night air onto the toasty warm MAX train. Ten of us spread out through the car. It was 8 pm and the train wasn't crowded yet, but it had more people than the one we let pass 20 minutes before. It was too cold to wait for the next one, so we figured might as well start now.

I plopped down next to a 40-ish white man with a beard. Christopher sat across from me. We studiously avoided making eye contact.

Hector said later he was incredibly nervous the first time he walked up to someone and started our street performance. You wouldn't have been able to tell looking at him. He walked up to Michael, one of our "plants," and smiled. Hector held up the gold empty picture frame. We had taped a neon pink sign to the bottom that said, "Should the cops have the right to murder me?"

This was Decolonize PDX's first independent action. We had participated in the Portland Port Shutdown, and in the Occupy Immigrant Rights March, but this was our coming out, so to speak. Barely two months old, the collective formed partially in response to Occupy, but really in reaction to the global resistance movement. Our group of about 25 radical people of color work with communities of color on issues that affect our communities deeply.

As we said in our founding statement, decolonization to us means "connecting to the traditions of our ancestors in order to create new forms of authentic interpersonal engagement... healing from institutional and systemic violence... and telling stories that emancipate our minds and dreams. It is education as a practice of freedom."

It sounded great on paper. Here was our opportunity to take it out into the real world, and see what everyday folks thought about it.

"Excuse me, I was wondering if we could interview you? We're with Decolonize PDX. Tonight we are commemorating the lives of people who have died at the hands of police violence. We're specifically here to honor Oscar Grant, an unarmed young black father killed in Oakland by police two years ago tonight. He was waiting on a train platform, just like you were a minute ago.

"Would you mind holding this sign and answering the question, while we film you?"

The doors opened and another wave of passengers got on the train, looking at Hector and the picture frame curiously.

Michael eyed Hector a little suspiciously. "What is this for again?"

This was part of the plan. Michael was acting the role of the reluctant participant, so others on the train would feel more comfortable in engaging when we asked them.

Hector explained again, raising his voice. He had the attention of the majority of the car.

The white man sitting next to me leaned over. "Do you know what this is about? What's the sign say?"

I shrugged my shoulders, falling into the role of fellow bystander. "I can kinda make it out from this angle. I think that guy said he was talking about police who killed someone down in the Bay area. They said they shot him in the back as he was face down on the train platform."

The man shook his head. "That's not right, that's not right at all. It doesn't matter if they're police or not, unless their lives are being threatened, they shouldn't have the right to kill anyone. And then they should have to prove it."

I started, surprised. I chose to sit next to him because I had pegged him as someone who would probably disagree with us, and maybe even get disruptive. Instead, he not only was he with us, he was, without knowing it, now part of our street performance, as he began to engage the people seated around him who were too far

being used against indigenous peoples in this country and around the world today."

This was the catalyst for our nascent Decolonize PDX to run around in the freezing cold on a night most people were thinking only of celebration and good times. We started our ride at the Interstate/Lombard MAX stop, chosen because it was in the heart of the historic black neighborhood that is quickly being gentrified out of existence. We made stops along the way as we rode down to Pioneer Courthouse Square and back, engaging folks on the platform as well as on the train.

We allowed anyone who was interested to get on camera and say their piece: The business man who had relatives who were cops. He had to put down his briefcase to hold the sign. He said if someone was doing something wrong, like running away from the police, then police should be allowed to shoot them in the back. The young white guy in a Guy Fawkes mask at the Square who told us our question was "ridiculous." The two young black men waiting at the Rose Quarter who wanted to make sure we got their boisterous "Fuck the police!" on tape.

As the evening progressed, my assumptions about what people would say based on what they looked like eroded away. There was the soccer mom who said she was scared for her life every time she saw the police. The older woman who responded to Hector's request to film: "I don't want to be interviewed but I like what you have to say... Thank you for being out here." The man who had spent many years homeless, a friend of Portland police shooting victim Jackie Collins. He told of police harassment and brutality against the homeless community as the train rumbled through the Skidmore Fountain stop, where we could see people bundled in doorways.

Decolonize PDX had hoped to just hand out our statement about police brutality, give out some Know Your Rights with the Police cards, and not get too harassed on

**As the evening progressed, my assumptions about what people would say based on what they looked like eroded away.**

This action could not have been more timely in Portland. We have the ongoing federal investigation into police shootings like Campbell and Keaton Otis. We also have arbitration between the City of Portland and the Portland Police Association (the police union) about whether police officer Ronald Frashour, dismissed after shooting 23-year-old Aaron Campbell in the back with a sniper rifle and killing him last January, will be rehired or not.

Campbell's case in particular has sparked immense outrage in Portland generally, and specifically in the Black community. Campbell's brother had died earlier that day. Campbell, distraught, threatened to kill himself with a gun he owned. His girlfriend called the police for assistance. To save Campbell's life. Police negotiated with Campbell, and convinced him to surrender. He was walking backwards towards police, with his hands behind his head, when Frashour shot him in the back with a sniper rifle. Frashour said Campbell was reaching for a gun. Campbell was unarmed at that time.

Police chief Mike Reese fired Frashour last November after marches, protests, and a takeover of City Hall by outraged community members. But now many folks who have worked on getting Frashour fired say it's inevitable he will be hired back at the end of arbitration.

This arbitration process has already cost \$400,000 and is the most expensive arbitration in the city's history.

Back on the train, Hector smiled winningly, and raised his voice as he began the action.

to hear Michael's response, which was, "They shouldn't have the right to murder me. Or anyone. If I went out and killed someone because I was scared of my life, justified it like they do, I definitely wouldn't be treated the same way police are treated."

Michael went on to allude to the specifics of Oscar Grant's case. Police officer Johannes Mehserle and others were called to the BART station early in the morning on Jan. 1, 2009 after a fight was reported. The police pulled Grant out of the crowd and began searching him, even though multiple witnesses said he wasn't involved. Mehserle had Grant facedown on the ground, his knee in his back, when Mehserle said he saw Grant reach into his pocket. Mehserle said he meant to pull out his taser, but somehow mistook that for his .40-caliber handgun, and continued to mistake it as he fired fatally into 22-year-old Grant's back. The shooting was videotaped by multiple people on their phones and quickly went viral.

Oakland erupted in protest when Mehserle was convicted only of involuntary manslaughter, and given the minimum sentence, two years. Mehserle served less than a year in prison.

In a statement on police brutality we released Jan. 1 of this year, Decolonize PDX wrote, "We see all of these murders by police, and the use of police violence as a whole, as a continuation of colonization. We are clear we are already on land that has been occupied for centuries. These tactics of repression, containment and subordination are the same used against indigenous peoples before there was a United States, and they are the same tactics

New Year's Eve. Instead, we opened up a public space for people to have conversations that are too often hidden.

People told their experiences of police violence with strangers, who listened intently and gave them support. "I felt like I could have easily died that night, I was petrified," said one young black man who said he was falsely arrested and then beaten by police while in custody. A young black woman told a story of being in jail; she said she watched police tackle, mace and Taze another person in custody for "being too loud ... And then for 10 minutes, they argued about who was going to have to do the paperwork."

"Nine times out of 10 these cops who kill people get to come back. It shouldn't be that way at all." The soft blue eye shadow augmented the woman's beautiful dark eyes. Her serious look framed her face even more than the sign.

"I went to high school with Aaron Campbell... (Officers who) have multiple complaints by multiple victims... they should be punished on the spot ... You're an officer, you wear a badge, but that doesn't give you the right to beat people and totally discriminate," she said earnestly. "You take a vow to protect our community, and you're doing nothing but destroying it."

A short video of this action will be released on Decolonize PDX's website soon, [pdx.decolonize.org](http://pdx.decolonize.org). The response has been so successful, we are thinking about doing the action again. So if you see a group of brown folks with a camera and a picture frame coming your way, be ready!