On Earth Day—April 22, 2012—about 200 people, accompanied by children in strollers, dogs, rabbits, and chickens, and carrying hundreds of pounds of compost and at least 10,000 seedlings, entered a 14-acre piece of land containing the last Class I agricultural soil in the East Bay. Located on the Albany-Berkeley border in the Bay Area, the plot is owned by the University of California Berkeley. By the end of the day, they had weeded, tilled and successfully cultivated about an acre of the land. By May 14, when 100 University of California riot police surrounded the tract and began arresting the farmers, Occupy the Farm had cultivated around five acres of the plot known as the Gill Tract.

The Occupy farmers have laid out footpaths around cultivated plots, created wildlife corridors, riparian zones, protected areas for native grasses and a wild turkey nest, and set up a library and a kitchen. They have planted thousands of seedlings of corn, tomatoes, squash, beans, broccoli, herbs, and strawberries, including heirloom varieties from a local seed bank. Other plots have been reserved for agro-ecological research. There’s also a permaculture garden for kids on the other side of a gazebo of woven branches where wind chimes tinkle in the breeze.

Gopal Dayaneni of Movement Generation says that the vision for the farm is the “practice and promotion of sustainable urban agriculture with a commitment to food justice and food sovereignty.” He is a father, activist and member of what he calls the “new urban peasantry.” Food grown on the farm will be distributed—for free—through existing food justice networks in the San Francisco Bay Area.

On April 24, the University shut off the water supply and threatened the farmers with eviction. University administration has gone on a media offensive, attempting to pit researchers against the Occupy farmers and according to some reports, preventing them from negotiating with the farmers. Some faculty members have published statements in support of the farmers, arguing that the goals of the farm are aligned with the public policy goals of the state and the U.C. mission. If transforming a student’s life is part of that mission, U.C. Berkeley student Lesley Haddock has certainly experienced it working on the farm. “Before our project began, I had never planted a seed,” she admits. “But in the past two weeks, I have become a farmer!”

Public Good—Private Gain at the Gill Tract

One of the Occupy farmers, Ashoka Finley, is a program assistant with Urban Tilth and runs an organic farm in collaboration with students at Richmond High School, in Richmond, California. A political economy graduate of U.C. Berkeley, Finley believes that the farm is redefining and reclaiming the role of the public university, just as the Occupy movement is redefining and reclaiming public space. “The history of the Gill Tract is [about] public subsidization of private research that [profits] the corporate industrial complex; not research for the public good,” he says.

It was not always this way. The 104-acre plot was sold to the University in 1928 by the Gill family with the condition that it be used as an agricultural research station. Under the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, part of the University’s mission as a land grant institution is to promote community involvement and initiatives in agriculture.

From the 1940s through the 1990s, research con-
duced at the Gill Tract laid the groundwork for successful, non-chemical and non-petroleum-based methods for controlling numerous major insect pests on several California crops, and for the integration of biological, chemical and cultural methods of pest control. The innovative methods developed, shared and refined at the International Center for Biological Control included intercropping and using bugs to control pests in addition to or in place of pesticides, and means to reduce overall chemical dependency and prevent the development of superbugs in industrial and community agriculture worldwide.

The turning point came in 1998, when Novartis gave $25 million to the Plant and Microbial Biology department to conduct genetic research on the land. “They kicked off the local organic pest management project to do gene research,” says Ulan McKnight of the Albany Farm Alliance. “What was here before directly benefitted the people of California; now what they do here directly benefits biotechnology companies. Instead of doing things that can help people, they are doing things that benefit the one percent.”

Among the projects closed down at the time was a seed bank of rare heirloom varieties of many important food crops, and a state-of-the-art drip irrigation system from a student-run urban sustainable agriculture demonstration plot. Until the water was cut off at the Tract, the Occupy farmers were planning to start using those irrigation tubes again.

Privatization Leaves U.C. System Impoverished

The trend of privatizing the research and knowledge produced at public institutions is systemic, according to Julie Sze, associate professor of American Cultures at U.C. Davis. A long-time supporter of social justice and student movements, Sze attributes her activism to her student days at U.C. Berkeley, where she took courses with the likes of RP&E founder Carl Anthony. She credits the university with being the “social justice innovation lab” that produced so many of the environmental justice leaders of today and argues that corporatization is an impoverishment of the U.C. system and a betrayal of the system’s legacy for California.

It is worth noting that the number of people graduating from UCLA annually exceeds the total number of people graduating from all private colleges in the

“I was nervous about taking my daughters into a land occupation. But I also feel an enormous responsibility to stand up against a global economic system that puts profit over people.”

— Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan

Photo: Occupy the Farm at the Gill Tract, Albany, California.

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state. It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that whatever happens with the U.C. system affects the future of California.

Universities have a special role to encourage ways of thinking that go beyond the corporate workplace, says Sze. People who have fought to work with communities on the side of racial and economic justice are an important legacy of the university. People like Paul Taylor, who in the 1930s, promoted the idea of the agricultural job ladder (where farm workers could eventually become family farmers) over the agribusiness model, which depended on seasonal workers. The university is a place to explore and imagine different possibilities and different futures, which is why student activism is a global force and so deeply threatening to the existing order.

Sze believes that the move towards corporate funding of research, coupled with increasing student debt, has curtailed the ability and desire of students to participate in the creative and innovative social justice thinking and activity that is so important to the common good.

David Naguib Pellow, another movement scholar-activist and a professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, observes, “Every [public] university I’ve worked at, professors are encouraged to secure external funding for their research to alleviate state budget constraints. This often involves seeking resources from corporations and foundations that have little or no accountability to the public, which amounts to the privatization of ideas, knowledge and the commons, and is a dangerous trend if we desire to live in a democratic society.”

The tuition hikes and the cuts in programs that do not have a corporate/profit bent are a direct result of the bias towards education in the service of corporations, according to Finley, and needs to be countered by the training of people in the service of people.

Occupy the Future—Take It, Make It, Shape It

In an email sent out in early May, Adbusters urges recipients to “occupy the future;” that is, “to describe, build and sustain the post-capitalist future we want to live in.”

Dayaneni concurs with that sentiment. “People ask me what they can do to support. I say, take more land. Occupy a library, a clinic, whatever, plan it right and [re-launch] it appropriately and at scale. We need to prove that we have the ability to self govern. This is the new moment of occupy, not tit for tat, not cat-and-mouse games with cops, but full-scale intervention. Occupy the Farm is one of the first to-scale interventions.”

Projects like Occupy the Farm also create a sort of sovereignty and allow a space for larger political expression where people can articulate their demand for a more egalitarian, just society through work done with their own hands, argues Finley.

“In the first world, we have been fed a false sense of security that is imploding,” says Michelle Mas-
carenhas-Swan, recounting her family’s experience with the militant experiment in collective governance and self-sufficiency. “On Earth Day, our families were a part of manifesting a collective vision for a better way forward—that the land be a community educational center. We have planted strawberries in the children’s garden and feed the chickens with snails that we collect from our own garden. My partner, a cook, brings us food regularly. We are making that vision real.”

Not everybody, however, sees Occupy the Farm in the same light and on the same terms, Finley points out. For many communities of color, farmwork is both a practice of material and cultural survival and self-sufficiency, and at the same time, deeply tied to racialized exploitation in the United States. For African Americans, farming is related to slavery and sharecropping. For recent immigrants from Latin America, farming is about the bankruptcy brought on by the dumping of subsidized monoculture products in their countries. And for Southeast Asian immigrants, farming is associated with a bloody countryside strewn with unexploded ordnance and other detritus from U.S. wars. At the same time, like other forced immigrants before them, these people have also brought with them a knowledge and identity that is wrapped up in the cultivation and ceremony of working the land.

Subsistence through the production of one’s own food is one of the most effective forms of resistance. But the action at Gill Tract also points toward the broader challenges at the University.

The arena of struggle revealed by Occupy the Farm is not just organic farming, food justice, and food sovereignty. The classrooms, the libraries, and the research agenda of the university are being shaped to meet the needs of corporate sponsors. Ground-breaking areas in scholarship that were pioneered at the University of California, such as Ethnic Studies, Women and Gender Studies, Peace and Conflict Studies, were won by student-led protest and strikes (and occupations) in the early 1970s. They now face devastating cuts, against which students are mobilizing. Battles against tuition hikes, student debt, and democratizing University governance will be key to shifting the overall direction of the University and the society.

Amilcar Cabral, the African revolutionary and agricultural engineer once said: “Culture contains the seed of resistance, which blossoms into the flower of liberation.” At the Gill Tract we can see seeds of resistance that have been planted—but it is clear that in order to blossom, they will need watering.

Endnotes
1. <daily.cal.org/2012/05/02/gill-tract-occupation-impedes-agricultural-research/>, <daily.cal.org/2012/05/02/gill-tract-occupiers-sustainability-ideas-are-wrong-headed/>
3. <daily.cal.org/2012/05/01/gill-tract-occupations-mission-mirrors-state-public-policy-goals/>
4. <daily.cal.org/2012/05/06/occupation-is-gill-tracts-last-chance/>
5. <mindfully.org/Farm/2003/Attiere-Gill-Tract28oct03.htm#1>
6. The practice of planting two or more crops together or in close proximity. Benefits include structural support for climbing plants (beans and squash growing on corn), increased yields (from legumes enriching soils), natural pest repellents (marigolds, for example), and climate control for shade loving plants (coffee grown under shade-producing trees, such as Erythrina or Jacaranda).
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