



ATTACKING
LIBERAL
DELUSIONS

BLACK ANARCHISM, LOOTING,
& MULTICULTURAL REBELLIONS



A READER

ON THE MYTH OF BLACK LEADERSHIP AND OTHER WHITE MYTHS

*from a Black affinity group,
posted to It's Going Down*



What they call, “the black leadership,” does not exist. Let’s be serious: what they are talking about is nothing more than a figment of the white liberal imagination. That is, if these so-called black leaders even exist at all, then they can only be found shucking and jiving a “woke” white person’s head.

Isn’t it interesting how progressive whites seem to have a direct line of communication with black leaders, while everyone else in the street fails to suffer from the same delusional schizophrenia? What’s all the more odd is that the voices that they hear from these magical negroes always manage say the same things: “Everyone should peacefully protest on the sidewalk, because unmediated black rage makes others uncomfortable.” “Don’t strike back at that cop even if he wants to kill you and everyone you love.” “I know the manager follows black kids from aisle to aisle, but still, his store shouldn’t be looted.” In other words, the message relayed from the sounds on repeat in a white liberal’s head is to end the black revolt and conduct civil disobedience in a manner that is appropriate for Karen and Ethan, not Jamal and Keisha.

It is worthwhile to note that black people, ourselves, never refer to any mythical black leadership. This is because we know, full and well, that all of our leaders, since Martin and Malcolm, have been killed. Even our potential leaders, like Trayvon and Tamir, are gunned down before they can share with us their vision. What's more, if they are not brutally murdered, then they are locked away forever with Sundiata, Mutulu, and Mumia. That is, we know that if you speak with truth and move against oppression, then the only way to avoid the pig's bullet or penitentiary, the modern-day cracker's whip or plantation, is to go on the run like Assata Olugbala Shakur! In fact, any black person that says otherwise should be exposed for what he or she is: a poverty-pimp!

After half a century without a figurehead in the front, the black youth has shown the whole country that they are more than capable of setting their own path and directing their own initiatives. They have demonstrated to us a dynamism that can never be reduced to a homogeneous mass following of anyone one authoritative voice. Paradoxically, it is the entire spectrum of the black revolt in the streets that can be identified as leaderless "leaders," since they have shown everyone else what it means to free yourself.

To paraphrase James Baldwin's still apt observation, we black people are more aware of the inner workings of our pale-face antagonists than they are of themselves. Consequently, the diagnosis of woke whitey's psychological condition is quite simple: this James Earl Jones, Carl Winslow, or Rafiki from the Lion King voice, which bellows off the walls of their skull, is a defense mechanism against their inability to completely repress their own white superiority complex. What's also abundantly clear is that the only way to fully work through this hang up is to gain even a small percent of the courage of a black adolescent and overcome their white guilt with a fist, a stone, and a Molotov cocktail.

- The We Still Outside Collective

P.S. Fuck 12!

was you who represented the majority of Black people and it were those radically against colonial policing who were few and far between. Now you see us in our thousands. Stop crying.

X: "That Uncle Tom wore a handkerchief around his head. This Uncle Tom wears a top hat. He's sharp. He dresses just like you do. He speaks the same phraseology, the same language. He tries to speak it better than you do. He speaks with the same accents, same diction. And when you say, 'your army,' he says, 'our army.' He hasn't got anybody to defend him, but anytime you say 'we' he says 'we.' 'Our president,' 'our government,' 'our Senate,' 'our congressmen,' 'our this and our that.' And he hasn't even got a seat in that 'our' even at the end of the line. So this is the twentieth-century Negro."

Black liberal, as we brace for the second wave of repression from your government, remember that we still see you. When your police, your National Guard, your dogs are sicced on us, when your P W Botha/Bull Connor of a president who agitated for a Sharpeville 1960 against the migrants, prepares to commit atrocities, despite our masked shouts, stones and placards, we still see you. We know why you have come. But you are too late.

For the first time in a long while we have also been seen and know that we are not alone. Before we might have stepped out sheepishly, politely asking to consider more radical solutions, thinking that we were moving, vulnerably, naked and alone, into an open field of attack dogs.

But now that we have stridden bravely forth, without shields, into the centres of white supremacy, we have discovered that we are covered by a multitude of good people. Look at the world. We are not alone. As you jump the bandwagon and attempt to wrestle the reins away from us, know that this is a Black radicals' moment. See us.

Black radicals are here to stay. Come up off that mic and get out before you get "looted". And take those Barack and Michelle posters with you. They never belonged to us.

The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards Malcolm.

on your face as your mask, we will still see you.

We know that when we say abolish prisons and police you will intercede on behalf of the state and white power with your deliberate mistranslation saying we asked for “less harsh sentences and more trust between the police and Black community.”

When we say we want this thing over with, you will say we want “change”.

When we say this white supremacist settler-colony has anti-Blackness in its DNA and is incapable of providing any adequate liberation you say, “America is failing Black people”.

We say we want to get out of here. You ask “how do we move forward?” As if we do not hear in your tone the hope that all this “unrest” can be quelled and we can move quietly onto the next killing.

You insist on mistranslating us.

Black liberal, your time is up. You have held the mic for too long. Give the mic to any random protester on the street. Any one of them will have something more insightful and analytically sound to say than you do. When you dress up in clothes with our slogans and go on TV all you do is cry. What are you crying about? I cannot remember the last time I have smiled so much.

You have been smiling too long with our oppressors. There is no reason to cry when the resistance comes out. We would have thought you would be ecstatic, all you who have professed to be interested in change.

You who would speak lovingly of the English peasants of 1381 who, torch in hand, emerged from the ruins of the Black Death to burn the property of the ruling classes in the hope of emancipating themselves. But now, when Black people who are forced to witness themselves publicly hunted and tortured to death on a weekly basis rise up, you attempt to coax them away from their cigarette lighters.

When the Target starts burning down, the Black liberal will fight harder to put it out than its owners. But as Malcolm X said: “You had another Negro out in the field. The house Negro was in the minority. The masses - the field Negroes were the masses. They were in the majority. When the master got sick, they prayed that he’d die. If his house caught on fire, they’d pray for a wind to come along and fan the breeze.”

They gave you the platform, but there are more of us than there are of you. The greatest trick you ever pulled off was to make it seem that it

THE ANARCHISM OF BLACKNESS

by Zoé Samudzi & William C. Anderson

This essay is reprinted from ROAR Magazine #5, and is the precursor for the book “As Black As Resistance” by the same authors.

Present incarnations of an unfazed and empowered far right increasingly demand the presence of a real, radical left. In the coming months and years, the left and left-leaning constituencies of the United States will need to make clear distinctions between potentially counterproductive symbolic progress, and actual material progress. Liberalism and party politics have failed a public attempting to bring about real change — but there are solutions.

The Black liberation struggle, in particular, has long provided a blueprint for transformative social change within the boundaries of this empire, and it has done so due to its positioning as an inherently radical social formation — a product of the virulent and foundational nature of anti-Blackness in American society. Understanding the significance of this struggle, we can proceed through examinations of the past, present and future to build new movements, a strong and radical left, and political power that generates and inspires rather than disappoints.

The Failings of American Liberalism

The United States’ self-ascribed democratic traits have long been filtered through oppressive forms that the state insists are necessary. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are measured by the success of a capitalist system that only truly benefits a few. Meanwhile, everyone else is told to believe that our supposedly meritocratic chance at being one of those few beneficiaries is what makes us “free.” True, unfiltered freedom and deep democracy are far too revolutionary for this state, so radical and revolutionary critiques of systemic limitations are often dismissed as overly idealistic or a utopian fantasy. But it is in the midst of the real-life nightmare that is the Trump administration that we should now — more than ever — be dreaming and striving to achieve something better.

For many years now, American liberalism has been a bitter disappointment to many of those who somehow maintained faith in the democratic

integrity of the two-party system. The Democratic Party has seemingly been the only choice for those who consider themselves progressives working for a better society, but the notion that social inequities will be solved through the electoral process was always naïve at best. The entrails of this system are lined with the far-right fascism that is currently rising and has been bubbling under the façade of liberal democracy at the expense of non-whites in a white supremacist society. A system predicated on the over-emphasis of “order” and “security” is primed for authoritarianism.

Genocide, enslavement and other forms of violence the empire inflicts have grown more tepid in their bluntness since this nation’s birth. Over time, the violence has been displaced and restructured by more insidious and invisible modalities of community destruction. The reservation, the prison system and austerity policies are just some of the negotiable forms of violence that liberalism has facilitated over time.

Over the past few decades, the United States has seen a shift in liberal politics leaving the Democratic Party in a completely compromised position. The emergence of the Tea Party, a populist surge in the Republican Party, alienated the more “moderate” establishment Republicans in favor of a more explicitly articulated bigoted takeover. The lack of a real response to this moment further enabled the rightward shift as a shaken liberal establishment only sought and attempted bipartisan negotiations with the more extreme elements commandeering the party. Instead of moving left, the Democratic Party pandered to the alienated “moderate” right as it had been for years, and facilitated this conservative shift with nearly every waking opportunity.

Bipartisan Delusions

Liberal support for the Iraq War, post-9/11 domestic policy and the foreign policy extensions of the War on Terror made clear the position of the Democratic Party. For “millennials” in particular, our generation has come of political age watching perpetual disappointments to this end. There has been no true left in the United States because the positioning of the Democratic Party is not one of stark opposition to the right. The messaging that suggests we should meet conservatives halfway and work on “both sides of the aisle” has comfortably consolidated a giant right-wing apparatus.

It seems fitting that at the end of the Obama era we would see a white supremacist Trump presidency, and that immediately following a Black president whose cabinet was outspoken about diversity and inclusion we

trained in the belief that King is king and his word is law.

It is a cult of King sustained, on the one hand, by the power of white liberal media, schools and corporate offices that have bled him of what little anti-colonialism he had in order to parade him for their purposes, and on the other hand, by the effective silencing of his contemporaries and his contemporary critics.

We have had to endure the silencing of people like Kwame Ture, who said, “In order for nonviolence to work, your opponent has to have a conscience. The United States has no conscience.” We have endured the silencing of people like Assata Shakur, who said, “Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of the people who were oppressing them.”

You have not only been complicit in the silencing of the radicals, but by hogging the mic and having the prerogative on how Black struggle is spoken of and its history remembered, you have engineered it. Even as our people are permanently incarcerated or are made refugees and hunted, they die a second death in your willful amnesia.

Black radical critics have proven to be right although you would not know it by how little their names are known and how little room you have given them. Get off the mic and give it to the people. Get off the platform and out of the newsroom. Your time is up.

For far too long, Black liberal, you have been allowed to domesticate Black radicalism. Because our oppressors prefer you to us and at any sign of trouble, rush out to find you to speak on behalf of all Black people, you have eagerly taken the chance to hog all of the mics and silence us. You weaken our revolt with your narration.

We know that even now you are preparing to invade us with your linked arms performing that played out “we shall overcome” nonsense in order to reframe destruction in the colony and of the civil order as a quest for policy changes.

You have come to firehose the fire in our uprising while pretending to be angrier and more rebellious than the rebels. As if it were not just yesterday that you were standing shoulder to shoulder with police and politicians begging for calm and agreeing that this is sad.

We know that by the immensity of your power and the relative strength of your megaphones you will have some successes in the coming fraud. But no matter how well you carve and gut this revolution and lay its skin

BLACK LIBERAL, YOUR TIME IS UP

by Yannick Giovanni Marshall

As you ready yourself to attempt to hijack the work of radicals, to go undercover dressed in our clothes and slip into the crowd pretending that you were always there and that you are us, know that we see you. Even now, as you are preparing your watered-down Black Lives Matter syllabi and your “Hope and the Black Spring in the Time of Corona” book manuscripts, which are by now ready for press, filled as they are with the same dimly lit, unimaginative pabulum about “improving race relations”, feel-good “anti-racism”, and “ways to move forward”. We see you. We know why you have come.

You are here to translate an uprising. You are here to show your black skin so that you can claim the mantle of authority on anti-Blackness that white liberals have bestowed upon you. You are here to sit at their pundit tables, before their cameras. Your face beaming across the world as it provides the safest possible interpretation of a revolution in order to police its possibilities and pave over the threat of abolition with as mild and ineffective a reform as possible.

Although uprisings are spearheaded by radicals, we are shut out of the public discussion. Neither the Black radical, nor Black radical thought is given air time. Instead, we are forced to endure being talked about and having the revolution we fought for be defused and repackaged to be palatable to a white liberal audience.

We see you gearing up for your mission. You will not be able to blend into the crowd this time.

No interpretation of a revolution is needed. Its commentators should not be the people who yesterday were only too happy to sit at the table with white nationalists and who took smiling pictures with the “good police”.

It cannot be narrated by the same people who - alongside their white liberal colleagues - jump Black radicals, beating us down with tired Martin Luther King Jr quotes in an attempt to discipline our anger and fix the boundaries of our action. Not by the same people who spew King at every opportunity, wielding him as a cudgel against those whom they have

would see a spike in right-wing hate group enrollment. And through the transition of administrations and the first wave of antagonistic legislation, there was neither sustained nor sustainable protection being planned by the party purporting to defend progress. That quiet has now manifested itself in a Trump administration filled to the brim with the worst of the worst: the absence of a real left has left so many vulnerable populations exposed and at the mercy of a plutocratic tyrant hell-bent on destruction.

After a spate of extrajudicial police killings, hate crimes and domestic terror incidents, the country is reeling. Black America has been reminded again and again that we are seen as a monolithic group of feeble-minded children to be chastised by the state for our own disenfranchisement and community disadvantage. If there is nothing to be offered that addresses the reparations Black America is owed on several fronts, then we should seek to secure these things ourselves through action.

Liberalism and Democratic Party politics are simply not working for Black people. The agenda of the liberal establishment is frequently not one that is in line with the everyday material needs of Black America. Despite the optics of change and the promises of a new day and the moral victories of “going high,” an old sun is rising on a white horizon. At this point Black people and all people of color across the United States will have to decide between securing real change and bargaining with bigotry for compromise.

Blackness and the Zone of Non-Citizenship

Societal fascism describes the process and political logics of state formation wherein entire populations are either excluded or ejected from the social contract. They are excluded pre-contractually because they have never been a part of a given social contract and never will be; or they are ejected from a contract they were previously a part of and are only able to enjoy a conditional inclusion at best.

Black Americans are the former: they are residents in a settler colony predicated upon the genocide of indigenous people and the enslavement of the Africans from whom they are descendants. Residents in the United States, as opposed to citizens of. Despite a Constitution laden with European Enlightenment values, and a document of independence declaring egalitarianism and inalienable rights as the law of the land, Black existence was that of private property. The Black American condition is perpetual relegation to the afterlife of slavery, and as long as the United States continues to exist as an ongoing settler project, in this afterlife Black people will remain.

As Hortense Spillers makes clear in her seminal work, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Story,” Blackness was indelibly marked and transformed through the Transatlantic chattel trade. European colonialism and the subsequent process of African enslavement — both as a profit-maximizing economic institution and an un-humaning institution — can be regarded as “high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding.”

Crimes against the flesh are not simply crimes against the corporeal self: the wounded flesh, rather, was the personhood and social positionality of the African. The wounding is the process of blackening and necessarily of subjugation, a wound from which Black people and “Blackness” writ large have yet to recover. Black exclusion from the social contract is existence within a heavily surveilled and heavily regulated state of subjection. We are carriers of the coveted blue passport still trapped in the zone of citizen non-being. We are simultaneously subjugated and teased with promises of liberation via individualized neoliberal self-betterment and swallowing of a long-soured American Dream whilst choking back dissonances and forcibly reconciling irreconcilable double consciousnesses.

Whiteness has long sought to grapple with the existential threat posed by Black freedom. Black repatriation to Africa, or “colonization,” has long been floated as one potential solution. Founded in 1816 and driven by a variety of ultimately complementary motivations, the American Colonization Society helped to found the colony of Liberia in 1822. The abolitionist contingents within the society believed that because of the insurmountable discriminations free-born Black people and freedmen and their families experienced, Black people would fare far better organizing themselves in their African “homelands.”

Slaveholders within American society were concerned that the presence of free Blacks would inspire enslaved Blacks to revolt and thus compromise the stability (both economic stability and the stability of the anti-Black racial order) of the southern slaveocracy, and other openly racist members outright refused Black people the opportunity to integrate into American society. Others still were concerned that Black families would burden state welfare systems and that interracial labor competition would ultimately compromise wages for white workers.

A lesser known proponent of colonization was the “Great Emancipator” himself, Abraham Lincoln, who entertained a far lesser known and quickly abandoned plan for Black colonization in Panama — one decried by Frederick Douglass as “ridiculous” — which would also play a role in the expansion of American trade influence in the Caribbean. The “Back to Africa” project was subsequently taken up by Black thinkers

people in their community who barely survive on Social Security and can’t work (or loot) themselves. They might just be expropriating what they would otherwise buy—liquor, for example—but it still represents a material way that riots and protests help the community: by providing a way for people to solve some of the immediate problems of poverty and by creating a space for people to freely reproduce their lives rather than doing so through wage labor.

Modern American police forces evolved out of fugitive slave patrols, working to literally keep property from escaping its owners. The history of the police in America is the history of black people being violently prevented from threatening white people’s property rights. When, in the midst of an anti-police protest movement, people loot, they aren’t acting non-politically, they aren’t distracting from the issue of police violence and domination, nor are they fanning the flames of an always-already racist media discourse. Instead, they are getting straight to the heart of the problem of the police, property, and white supremacy.

Solidarity with all Ferguson rebels! Justice for Mike Brown!

the average Ferguson resident really say it's "our QuikTrip"? Indeed, although you might hang out in it, how can a chain convenience store or corporate restaurant earnestly be part of anyone's neighborhood? The same white liberals who inveigh against corporations for destroying local communities are aghast when rioters take their critique to its actual material conclusion.

The mystifying ideological claim that looting is violent and non-political is one that has been carefully produced by the ruling class because it is precisely the violent maintenance of property which is both the basis and end of their power. Looting is extremely dangerous to the rich (and most white people) because it reveals, with an immediacy that has to be moralized away, that the idea of private property is just that: an idea, a tenuous and contingent structure of consent, backed up by the lethal force of the state. When rioters take territory and loot, they are revealing precisely how, in a space without cops, property relations can be destroyed and things can be had for free.

On a less abstract level there is a practical and tactical benefit to looting. Whenever people worry about looting, there is an implicit sense that the looter must necessarily be acting selfishly, "opportunistically," and in excess. But why is it bad to grab an opportunity to improve well-being, to make life better, easier, or more comfortable? Or, as Hannah Black put it on Twitter: "Cops exist so people can't loot ie have nice things for free so idk why it's so confusing that people loot when they protest against cops" [sic]. Only if you believe that having nice things for free is amoral, if you believe, in short, that the current (white-supremacist, settler-colonialist) regime of property is just, can you believe that looting is amoral in itself.

White people deploy the idea of looting in a way that implies people of color are greedy and lazy, but it is just the opposite: looting is a hard-won and dangerous act with potentially terrible consequences, and looters are only stealing from the rich owners' profit margins. Those owners, meanwhile, especially if they own a chain like QuikTrip, steal forty hours every week from thousands of employees who in return get the privilege of not dying for another seven days.

And the further assumption that the looter isn't sharing her loot is just as racist and ideological. We know that poor communities and communities of color practice more mutual aid and support than do wealthy white communities—partially because they have to. The person looting might be someone who has to hustle everyday to get by, someone who, by grabbing something of value, can afford to spend the rest of the week "non-violently" protesting. They might be feeding their family, or older

like Marcus Garvey in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries following the failures of Reconstruction in the South, the first attempt to meaningfully extend citizenship to newly emancipated Blacks, to protect them from white supremacist violence and also the social and political disillusionment of Blacks who had migrated to northern states. It is no coincidence that interest in repatriation peaked during the period.

The major problem with both historical and contemporary repatriation-colonization programs is the means by which they fail to both provide reparation for historic violence and answer the perennial question of Black citizenship in the United States. Many or most Black people, including many descendants of enslaved Africans trafficked from the continent centuries ago, have no desire to return to an Africa that has never been their home in any material sense. Given plans to remain, Black people have organized in myriad ways to affect change and actualize varying conceptions of liberation in the United States. But as history has demonstrated, some vehicles for change and political advancement are more fickle than others.

The Anarchism of Blackness

Make no mistake: progress has been secured by Black people's mobilization as opposed to a single political party. We are the ones who have achieved much of the progress that changed the nation for the better for everyone. Those gains were not a product of any illusion of American exceptionalism or melting pots, but rather through blood, sweat and community self-defense. Our organization can be as effective now as it has been in the past, serving every locality and community based on their needs and determinations. This much can be achieved through disassociating ourselves from party politics that fail to serve us as Black freedoms cannot truly be secured in any given election. Our political energy is valuable and should not all be drained by political cycles that feed into one another as well as our own detriment.

While bound to the laws of the land, Black America can be understood as an extra-state entity because of Black exclusion from the liberal social contract. Due to this extra-state location, Blackness is, in so many ways, anarchistic. African-Americans, as an ethno-social identity comprised of descendants from enslaved Africans, have innovated new cultures and social organizations much like anarchism would require us to do outside of state structures. Black radical formations are themselves fundamentally anti-fascist despite functioning outside of "conventional" Antifa spaces, and Black people have engaged in anarchistic resistances since our very arrival in the Americas.

From slave ship and plantation rebellions during enslavement to post-Emancipation labor and prison camps, to Harriet Tubman's removal of enslaved peoples from the custody of their owners, to the creation of maroon societies in the American South, to combatting the historic (and present) collusion between state law enforcement and the Ku Klux Klan — assertions of Black personhood, humanity and liberation have necessarily called into question both the foundations and legitimacy of the American state.

So given this history, why do we understand Black political formations as squarely entrenched within liberalism or as almost synonymous with supporting for the Democratic Party? The reality of the afterlife of slavery shows that the updated terms of Black citizenship are still inextricably linked to the original sins levied against us from the moment of this nation's inception. We are not able to escape a cage that has never been fully removed, though liberal fantasy would have you think we will have a dream or dignifiedly protest out of harm's way.

The simple and increasingly realized reality is that mass protests, petitions and the over-exhausted respectable methods liberals tout as sole solutions have a purpose, but do not stop bullets — that is why Dr. King and many of their favorite sanitized “non-violent” protesters of yesteryear carried weapons to defend themselves.

Responding to this Neo-Fascist Moment

Liberalism cannot defeat fascism, it can only engage it through symbolic political rignarole. The triteness of electoral politics that has been superimposed onto Black life in the United States positions Black people as an indelible mule for much of this nation's social progression. Our hyper-visible struggle is a fight for all people's freedom and we die only to realize that everything gained can be reversed with the quick flick of a pen. While liberalism takes up the burden of protecting “free speech” and the rights of those who would annihilate all non-whites, Black people and other people of color assume all of the risks and harms.

The symbolic battles the Democratic Party and its liberal constituents engage in pose direct existential threats to Black people because they protect esteemed ideals of a constitution that has never guaranteed Black people safety or security. The idealistic gestures with which liberalism defines itself are made at the expense of Black people who are not protected by such ideals in the ways institutional whiteness and even articulations of white supremacy are protected.

not. The earliest working definition of blackness may well have been “those who could be property”. Someone who organized a mob to violently free slaves, then, would surely be considered a looter (had the word come into common usage by then, John Brown and Nat Turner would have been slandered with it). This is not to draw some absurd ethical equivalence between freeing a slave and grabbing a flat screen in a riot. The point, rather, is that for most of America's history, one of the most righteous anti-white supremacist tactics available was looting. The specter of slaves freeing themselves could be seen as American history's first image of black looters.

On Twitter, a tongue-in-cheek political hashtag sprang up, #suspectedlooters, which was filled with images of colonial Europeans, slave owners, cowboys and white cultural appropriators. Similarly, many have pointed out that, had Africa not been looted, there wouldn't even be any black people in America. These are powerful correctives to arguments around looting, and the rhetorical point—that when people of color loot a store, they are taking back a miniscule proportion of what has been historically stolen from them, from their ancestral history and language to the basic safety of their children on the street today—is absolutely essential. But purely for the purposes of this argument— because I agree wholeheartedly with the political project of these campaigns—I want to claim that what white settlers and slave traders did wasn't mere looting.

It was genocide, theft, and barbarism of the lowest order. But part of how slavery and colonialism functioned was to introduce new territories and categories to the purview of ownership, of property. Not only did they steal the land from native peoples, but they also produced a system under which the land itself could be stolen, owned by legal fiat through force of arms. Not only did they take away Africans' lives, history, culture, and freedom, but they also transformed people into property and labor-power into a saleable commodity. Chattel slavery is the most barbaric and violent form of work coercion—but as the last 150 years has shown, you can dominate an entire people through law, violence, and wages pretty well.

Recently an Instagram video circulated of a Ferguson protester discussing the looting and burning of the QuikTrip convenience store. He retorts the all too common accusation thrown at rioters: “People wanna say we destroying our own neighborhoods. We don't own nothing out here!” This is the crux of the matter, and could be said of most majority black neighborhoods in America, which have much higher concentrations of chain stores and fast food restaurants than non-black neighborhoods. The average per capita income in Ferguson, MO is less than \$21,000, and that number almost certainly gets lower if you remove the 35% white population of Ferguson from the equation. How could

John to deliver the famous speech and begin moving towards civil rights legislation.

This would have been impossible without the previous months of courageous and tireless non-violent activism. But it is also the emergent threat of rioting that forced JFK's hand. Both Malcolm X and MLK had armed bodyguards. Throughout the civil rights era, massive non-violent civil disobedience campaigns were matched with massive riots. The most famous of these was the Watts rebellion of 1965 but they occurred in dozens of cities across the country. To argue that the movement achieved what it did in spite of rather than as a result of the mixture of non-violent and non-violent action is spurious at best. And, lest we forget, Martin Luther King Jr., the man who embodied the respectable non-violent voice that the white power structure claims they would listen to today, was murdered by that same white power structure anyway.

Though the Civil Rights movement won many battles, it lost the war. Mass incarceration, the fact that black wealth and black-white inequality are at the same place they were at the start of the civil rights movement, that many US cities are more segregated now than they were in the sixties: no matter what "colorblind" liberals would say, racial justice has not been won, white supremacy has not been overturned, racism is not over. In fact, anti-black racism remains the foundational organizing principle of this country. That is because this country is built on the right to property, and there is no property, no wealth in the USA without the exploitation, appropriation, murder, and enslavement of black people.

As Raven Rakia puts it, "In America, property is racial. It always has been." Indeed, the idea of blackness was invented simultaneously with American conceptions of property: via slavery. In the early days of colonial America, chattel slavery was much less common than indentured servitude—though the difference between the two was not always significant—and there were Irish, French, German and English immigrants among these populations. But while there had always been and continued to be some black freedmen, over the course of the 17th century light-skinned European people stopped being indentured servants and slaves. This is partially because production exploded in the colonies much faster than a working population could form to do the work—either from reproduction or voluntary immigration—and so the cost of hired labor went through the roof. Even a very poor and desperate European became much more expensive than an African bought from the increasingly rationalized transatlantic slave trade.

The distinction between white and black was thus eventually forged as a way of distinguishing between who could be enslaved and who could

Constitutional amendments are contorted based on the state's historical disregard for sustaining an active antagonism towards Black life. The First Amendment has been repeatedly trampled by militarized police trotting through Black neighborhoods. The Second Amendment has been shot down by countless state enforcers who have extra-judicially murdered Black people based merely on the suspicion they might have a weapon. The Thirteenth Amendment legitimized enslavement through mass incarceration and extended the practice into a new form of white supremacist rationalization and an old capitalist labor politic that still tortures us to this day. This fascist moment is neither ideologically new nor temporally surprising. It is an inevitability.

Anti-fascist organizing must be bold. The mechanisms working against us do not entertain our humanity: they are hyper-violent. They deal death and destruction in countless numbers across the non-Western world while turning domestic Black and Brown neighborhoods into proxies for how to treat sub-citizen "others." The militarization of police, border regimes, stop-and-frisk and ICE are clear examples of how the state regards the communities it targets and brutalizes. At the very least, a conversation on self-defense that does not mistreat our survival as a form of violence is deeply needed. And it would be even better if such a conversation normalized anti-fascist organizing that prepared people for the possibility of a fight, instead of simply hoping that that day never comes and respectably clutching proverbial pearls at those currently fighting in the streets.

Everyone has a stake in the fight against fascism. It cannot be defeated with bargaining, petitioning, pleading, "civilized" dialogue, or any other mode of response we were taught was best. Fascists have no respect for "othered" humanities. Regardless of age, gender, race, sexuality, religion, physical ability or nationality, there is a place for all of us in this struggle. We are always fighting against the odds because there is no respite in a perpetually abusive state. It can only function through this abuse, so we can only prevail through organizing grounded in radical love and solidarity.

Our solidarity must prioritize accountability, and it must be authentic. Strategic organizing of this sort, organizing where we understand the inextricable linkedness of our respective struggles, is our means of bolstering the makings of a cohesive left in the United States. The time wasted on dogma and sectarianism, prejudice and incoherence among leftists is over.

The sooner Black America in particular begins to understand our position as an inherently anarchistic element of the United States, the more realistically we will be able to organize. Moving beyond the misnomer

of chaos, the elements that make us such are the very tools we should utilize to achieve our liberation. This burning house cannot be reformed to appropriately include us, nor should we want to share a painful death perishing in the flames. A better society has to be written through our inalienable self-determinations, and that will only happen when we realize we are holding the pen.

But of course, the goal is not merely the attention of dominant media. Nor is the goal a certain kind of media attention: no matter how peaceful and well-behaved a protest is, the dominant media will always push the police talking points and the white-supremacist agenda. The goal is justice. Here, we have to briefly grapple with the legacy of social justice being won in America: namely that of non-violence and the civil rights movement. And that means correcting a more pervasive and totalizing media and historical narrative about the civil rights movement: that it was non-violent, that it claimed significant wins because it was non-violent, and that it overcame racial injustice altogether.

In the 400 years of barbaric, white supremacist, colonial and genocidal history known as the United States, the civil rights movement stands out as a bright, beautiful, all-too-brief moment of hope and struggle. We still live in the shadow of the leaders, theory, and images that emerged from those years, and any struggle in America that overlooks the work (both philosophical and organizational) produced in those decades does so at its own peril. However, why is it drilled into our heads, from grade school onward, in every single venue, by presidents, professors and police chiefs alike, that the civil rights movement was victorious because it was non-violent? Surely we should be suspicious of any narrative that the entire white establishment agrees is of the utmost importance.

The civil rights movement was not purely non-violent. Some of its bravest, most inspiring activists worked within the framework of disciplined non-violence. Many of its bravest, most inspiring activists did not. It took months of largely non-violent campaigning in Birmingham, Alabama to force JFK to give his speech calling for a civil rights act. But in the month before he did so, the campaign in Birmingham had become decidedly not-non-violent¹:

protesters had started fighting back against the police and Eugene “Bull” Conner, throwing rocks, and breaking windows. Robert Kennedy, afraid that the increasingly riotous atmosphere in Birmingham would spread across Alabama and the South, convinced

1 I use the rather clunky phrase not-non-violent purposely. For some non-violence ideologues breaking windows, lighting trash on fire or even building barricades in the street is “violent”. I once watched a group of black teens chanting “Fuck the Police” get shouted at for “being violent” by a white protester. Though there are more forms of violence than just literal physical blows to a human body, I don’t believe a conception of “violence” which encompasses both throwing trash in the street and the murder of Michael Brown is remotely helpful. Frustratingly, in protest situations violence tends to be defined as “whatever the nearest cop or non-violence practitioner says it is.” Calling breaking a window “violent” reproduces this useless definition and places the whole argument within the rhetorical structure of non-violence ideology. Not-non-violent, then, becomes the more useful term.

over the clear voices and testimony of an entire community, members of which witnessed the police murder a teenager in cold blood. The media are more respectful to white serial killers and mass murderers than to unarmed black victims of murder.

And yet, many of the people who perform this critique day-in, day-out can get jammed up by media perceptions of protesters. They want to correct the media's assertion that protesters were all looters for good reason: the idea of black people looting a store is one of the most racially charged images in the white imaginary. When protesters proclaim that "not all protesters were looters, in fact, most of the looters weren't part of the protest!" or words to that effect, they are trying to fight a horrifically racist history of black people depicted in American culture as robbers and thieves: Precisely the image that the Ferguson police tried to evoke to assassinate Michael Brown's character and justify his killing post facto. It is a completely righteous and understandable position.

However, in trying to correct this media image—in making a strong division between Good Protesters and Bad Rioters, or between ethical non-violence practitioners and supposedly violent looters—the narrative of the criminalization of black youth is reproduced. This time it delineates certain kinds of black youth—those who loot versus those who protest. The effect of this discourse is hardening a permanent category of criminality on black subjects who produce a supposed crime within the context of a protest. It reproduces racist and white supremacist ideologies (including the tactic of divide-and-conquer), deeming some unworthy of our solidarity and protection, marking them, subtly, as legitimate targets of police violence. These days, the police, whose public-facing racism is much more manicured, if no less virulent, argue that "outside agitators" engage in rioting and looting. Meanwhile, police will consistently praise "non-violent" demonstrators, and claim that they want to keep those demonstrators safe.

In working to correct the white-supremacist media narrative we can end up reproducing police tactics of isolating the individuals who attack property at protests. Despite the fact that if it were not for those individuals the media might pay no attention at all. If protesters hadn't looted and burnt down that QuikTrip on the second day of protests, would Ferguson be a point of worldwide attention? It's impossible to know, but all the non-violent protests against police killings across the country that go unreported seem to indicate the answer is no. It was the looting of a Duane Reade after a vigil that brought widespread attention to the murder of Kimani Gray in New York City. The media's own warped procedure instructs that riots and looting are more effective at attracting attention to a cause.

STEALING AWAY IN AMERICA

a conversation with
Zoé Samudzi & Vicky Osterweil

This conversation is from June 10, 2020 in Jewish Currents.

Since the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25th, the country has been seized by protests against police brutality. In addition to peaceful marches and demonstrations, there have also been dramatic scenes of looting and property damage: for example, the burning of Minneapolis's Third Precinct, which was preceded by looting of shops in the surrounding neighborhood, including a Target. These scenes—and similar ones in cities across the nation—have prompted the return of familiar arguments about looting that have periodically arisen for years—including, in recent memory, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 1992 LA riots that followed the police assault of Rodney King.

*This debate was also reactivated six years ago at the beginning of the Ferguson uprisings, after the murder of Michael Brown, when many pundits and lay commentators praised the peaceful protests against police brutality while forcefully condemning looting as misguided or even counterproductive. In response, Vicky Osterweil published the essay "In Defense of Looting" in *The New Inquiry*. In the essay, Osterweil refuses the moralistic distinction between "non-violent protesters" and "looters," writing that looting actually reveals "precisely how, in a space without cops, property relations can be destroyed and things can be had for free." She also pushes back on common objections to these tactics, such as the claim that rioters are engaging in self-defeating behavior. She quotes a viral video in which one Ferguson rioter says, "People want to say we're destroying our own neighborhoods. We don't own nothing out here!" Osterweil writes, "This . . . could be said of most majority black neighborhoods in America, which have much higher concentrations of chain stores and fast food restaurants than non-black neighborhoods . . . How could the average Ferguson resident really say it's 'our QuikTrip'?" She goes on to argue that liberal critics of looting are often hypocritical. "The same white liberals who inveigh against corporations for destroying local communities are aghast when rioters take their critique to its actual material conclusion," she writes.*

*Now, Osterweil has expanded her essay into a book, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action*, out this August. In the book, Osterweil has developed the original essay into a searching examination of the origins and evolution of policing, race, and property rights. Ultimately, Osterweil demands we not only overcome the respectability politics animating our desire for "peaceful protests," but that we work to abolish the racial capitalist*

logics at the heart of American empire—logics that, she argues, are contested by the very act of property damage. In light of the resurgent conversation about whether to divide the “looters” from the “peaceful protesters,” I spoke to Osterweil about her book and its view of property damage as essential to the erosion of the racist property relations that uphold white supremacy—and the often fatal police violence that enforces it.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Zoé Samudzi: Can you describe the etymology of the word “looting” and how that informs its present racialized usage?

Vicky Osterweil: The word “loot” was taken from Hindi by [British] colonial officers. It first appears in English in an 1845 colonial officer’s handbook. From the very beginning it’s this really racializing word that contains the idea that black and brown people were obsessed with plunder—that they had a deviant relationship to property, as opposed to the proper ownership embodied by the colonizers. This connotation persists today, which is why people are so reactive and defensive against the word. It really is a classic dog whistle. When Trump says, “When the looting starts the shooting starts,” we know he’s not talking about the white protesters who might be helping and participating. He’s talking about murdering black people.

ZS: In your book, you explain the relationship between property rights and the evolution of white supremacy and racial structures. You write, “Many historians have shown that strong, explicit racist ideology does not appear in the historical record in America until the revolutionary period, when the rights of man (and it is indeed man) became the defining philosophy of US politics. If the rights to liberty and property are inalienable, then what to do about all these people who are very clearly not in possession of liberty, or the capacity of property ownership?” To solve this conundrum, the colonists enforced the structure and hierarchy of race in America by designating white people as owners and black people as things to be owned, therefore joining racial identity and citizenship to property relations. How can we think about looting in the context of what you are describing as the racial roots of property?

VO: [The Jamaican writer and cultural theorist] Sylvia Wynter talks about this in her essay “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” about the way LA police were referring to a black criminal underclass using the phrase “No Humans Involved,” or “NHI.” She uses that as a jumping-off point for her project about the construction of the human: how the idea of humanity itself is built on the denial of [human] status to black people. This project of rights and legal bourgeois subjecthood is being built on a definition of humanity that necessarily has an outside:

IN DEFENSE OF LOOTING

by Vicky Osterweil

This essay is reprinted from The New Inquiry from August 21, 2014.

For most of America’s history, one of the most righteous anti-white supremacist tactics available was looting.

As protests in Ferguson continued unabated one week after the police killing of Michael Brown, Jr., zones of Twitter and the left media predominantly sympathetic to the protesters began angrily criticizing looters. Some claimed that white protesters were the ones doing all of the looting and property destruction, while others worried about the stereotypical and damaging media representation that would emerge. It also seems that there were as many protesters (if not more) in the streets of Ferguson working to prevent looting as there were people going about it. While I disagree with this tactic, I understand that they acted out of care for the struggle, and I want to honor all the brave and inspiring actions they’ve taken over the last weeks.

Some politicians on the ground in Ferguson, like alderman Antonio French and members of the New Black Panther Party, block looting specifically in order to maintain leadership for themselves and dampen resistance, but there are many more who do so out of a commitment to advancing the ethical and politically advantageous position. It is in solidarity with these latter protesters—along with those who loot—and against politicians and de-escalators everywhere that I offer this critique, as a way of invigorating discussion amongst those engaged in anti-oppression struggle, in Ferguson and anywhere else the police violently perpetuate white supremacy and settler colonialism. In other words, anywhere in America.

The dominant media is itself a tool of white supremacy: it repeats what the police deliver nearly verbatim and uncritically, even when the police story changes upwards of nine times, as it has thus far in the Brown killing. The media use phrases like “officer-involved shooting” and will switch to passive voice when a black man is shot by a white vigilante or a police officer (“shots were fired”). Journalists claim that “you have to hear both sides” in order to privilege the obfuscating reports of the state

readily than the quaint “small business” the phrase is designed to evoke. I believe we should trust those who loot and riot to understand their targets and their actions: to have analyzed the social world they live in, and therefore to trust them when they select the targets of their rage and resistance—especially when that rage is applied to property. No amount of lost business is worth more than a single lost life.

ZS: You quote the black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman—whom I consider the queen of pleasure and anarchy—describing black people taking small moments of pleasure as “stealing away”—which, as you noted, is a phrase enslaved people used to talk about escaping. It’s so interesting that the language used to talk about pleasure overlaps with the language of theft, the criminal and also self-emancipatory act of freeing oneself from bondage. This also makes me think about how the revolutionary Frantz Fanon talks about violence as an act of self-making. What you think is the function or role of pleasure in looting? I don’t think that part is negligible or apolitical.

VO: One of the things that scares police and politicians the most when they enter a riot zone—and there are quotes from across the 20th century of police and politicians saying this—is that it was happy: Everyone was happy. In the book, I quote a piece by the playwright Charles Fuller, who happened to be a young man starting out his career during the Philadelphia riots of 1964. He talks about the incredible sense of safety and joy and carnival that happens in the streets.

I think riots and militant violent action in general get slandered as being macho and bro-y, and lots of our male comrades like to project that sort of image. That definitely happens, but I actually think riots are incredibly femme. Riots are really emotive, an emotional way of expressing yourself. It is about pleasure and social reproduction. You care for one another by getting rid of the thing that makes that impossible, which is the police and property. You attack the thing that makes caring impossible in order to have things for free, to share pleasure on the street. Obviously, riots are not the revolution in and of themselves. But they gesture toward the world to come, where the streets are spaces where we are free to be happy, and be with each other, and care for each other.

That outside is always African and Indigenous populations.

The enslaved—who were not only excluded from property ownership, but were themselves defined as property—understood innately that the concept of property made no sense. They would call just having a meeting “stealing” the meeting, and they would call escaping “stealing away.” Once you have been made into property by a society, then you recognize that any freedom you’re going to have has to be stolen.

ZS: You write, “This specter of slaves freeing themselves is American history’s first image of black looters.” I really love the way you play with time, retroactively applying the word “looters” and connecting it to contemporary usage. It really allows us to connect the sheer magnitude of the state’s theft, trafficking, and enslavement of African people to its present fear of the black looter destroying and stealing in return.

VO: For centuries, black thinkers have been arguing that slavery didn’t actually end [after abolition and emancipation]. Frederick Douglass was making that claim in the 1880s. Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe talks about how we have to understand the entire capitalist world as living in the wake of the techniques and modes of living that were produced in colonization and the slave trade. I think understanding that is really vital to breaking out of the progressive narrative that things have been getting better. In 1892, fewer people were getting lynched than are being killed every year by the police in America, which means there are more police lynchings now than there ever were at the height of lynching as a white fascist movement. None of these problems have gone away. There have been moments of uprising and resistance when they have been pushed back: Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, even LA in 1992. But the fundamental structures never shift.

ZS: I often find that the real objection to property damage is about the fact that there’s always a caveat for the preservation and maintenance of black life, a set of specific conditions under which most white people feel comfortable about allowing black people to exist. You write that the “specter of slaves freeing themselves,” the fear of black looting, is really the white fear of and objection to black people choosing terms of existence beyond white law and order. It’s a kind of deep-seated existential objection—one that we just don’t see, for instance, in responses, even condemnatory ones, to white people rioting and setting things on fire after a big sports victory.

VO: I think there is a desire on white people’s behalf to deny the existence of the anti-Black, white supremacist state that we live in. They don’t want to believe in it! They live their lives organized around not believing in it

even as they benefit from it.

Legal scholar Cheryl L. Harris, in her very important text “Whiteness as Property,” argues that the ultimate property in society is whiteness. And for many white folks, especially in this country in 2020, [whiteness] may be the only property they own. Part of why so many have come out to the street this time is because they realize that the wages of whiteness have gotten really low. It’s important to understand that whiteness and property are inextricable from each other: Without one there cannot be the other. We tend to think of property as tangible things or commodities, but it also includes rights, protections, and customs of possession passed down and ratified through law. Whiteness emerges as the race of people who are neither Indigenous nor enslavable—national identities are increasingly collapsed around the distinctions of slave/free and black/white.

So when black folks rise up and attack property, they’re also attacking whiteness. That is an understanding that goes back to the plantation: When you attack your status as property, you attack whiteness as domination over you.

ZS: It’s so interesting to think about the slogan we often see: Being pro-Black isn’t anti-white. But if you’re supporting black people in the street protesting the police, if you’re supporting white people protesting against the violence of the police, you are necessarily opposing whiteness.

VO: Yes. Whiteness only exists as the condition under which you can oppress black and Indigenous people. That’s the identity of whiteness. There is nothing [else] there. The peace of whiteness is a peace of the grave. It needs to be abolished—and if we’re talking about abolishing whiteness, we’re also talking about abolishing the police. Police evolved from slave patrols, slave catchers, colonial overseers (in the Caribbean as well as Ireland), and as anti-riot forces designed to control new urban non-white populations. The earliest modern police force in the world was in Charleston, South Carolina: the City Guard. It existed mostly to control and terrorize the quarters where “hired out” enslaved people lived at some remove from their plantations and enslavers, and thus represented some small amount of autonomy, and the possibility of rebellion or organization—which was a threat to the white establishment. Further, one of the main [original] tasks of the NYPD, the earliest police force in the North, included enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act—kidnapping free black people and sending them back into slavery—and putting down the anti-slave catcher riots that were a major part of the abolition movement in antebellum New York.

In other words, from the very beginning, police exist to prevent black people from unsettling their status as property and threatening property itself, as well as to repress other unruly proles who might riot, refuse work, and otherwise attack property and its systems.

ZS: In discussions about looting, people sometimes categorize survival theft—for example, stealing food or baby formula when you need it—differently from what’s seen as opportunistic, joyriding theft. Do do you think that particular distinction really matters?

VO: No. I don’t think so. Many people would, in moments of peace, encourage opportunism: They would tell you that you’re just not working hard enough, you just need to get a better job, you need to better yourself. But when people who have been denied those legal “proper” routes toward wealth take an opportunistic moment to act, then suddenly opportunism becomes a crime. Then opportunism reveals a sort of villainous or lazy disposition. This distinction ignores the law of value. If you were really broke and you go into a department store and you grab as much food as you can carry, that’s going to last you a lot less long in terms of survival than grabbing a handful of jewelry. You can carry a lot more value out of a store in more valuable things.

This understanding also erases something essential about the act of looting, which is that it’s actually really scary and tense and difficult. It’s not just an easy solution to the problems you have. It also undermines the capitalist system by pointing to a way of relating to things and to each other that doesn’t involve property. It’s a way of immediately transforming your relation to the world around you. I think that’s also part of what makes it so scary for onlookers, and why they want to divide between people stealing a bag of rice and people stealing a flat screen TV.

ZS: What about the distinction between looting from or damaging small businesses as opposed to chain stores or corporations?

VO: “Small business” has come to mean a “moral” business, a “good” thing. As anyone who has worked for small businesses can attest, small businesses often subject workers to just as much wage theft and workplace harm as large ones. Small businesses may occasionally uplift, but more often they prey on the poor as much as big businesses, just a little less profitably.

In the case of riots, as looting is usually done by people who live in the neighborhoods where it occurs, distinctions are often made between businesses that gentrify or oppress, and those that don’t. Liquor stores, pawn shops, pharmacies, and gentro-cafes tend to be hit much more