

# *A Mask and A Target Cart*

*The liberal attachment to previous movements as peaceful, nonviolent, and respectable obscures the historical efficacy of riots, blockades, and looting as legitimate forms of revolt.*

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On Tuesday morning, I woke to a flood of texts about “horrible events.” Something had happened outside Cup Foods on 38th and Chicago in South Minneapolis. On Monday evening, four police arrested a Black man named George Floyd. Officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on Floyd’s neck; Floyd told officers he couldn’t breathe. He begged for help while other officers stood by and watched. Floyd lost consciousness before EMT help was called and was declared dead at 9:25pm.

Cup Foods is legendary. I’ve driven or walked by the store hundreds of times since I moved to Minneapolis in 2014. 38th and Chicago lies between Powderhorn, Bryant, and Central neighborhoods; Bryant is one of the only historically Black neighborhoods in South Minneapolis and Central and Bryant are both two of three majority Black neighborhoods in South Minneapolis. Even during the pandemic lockdown, 38th and Chicago has been a gathering place, a local hangout for Black folks. The previous Saturday, I walked past a Black-run charity running a stall in a vacant lot, offering people free backpacks and bags. Now the space in front of Cup Foods is a memorial, filled with flowers and notes and black balloons. And people. More people in one place than I’ve seen in over three months.

While Minnesota began reopening businesses after pandemic lockdown last week, the cops’ murder of George Floyd has mobilized people to come out, to be on the streets, despite the risk of COVID-19. The following is a brief account of the past week.

On Tuesday, people are gathering at 38th and Chicago all day. By 5pm the crowd is officially in the thousands, after which people march 2.5 miles to the 3rd Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department at East Lake St and Minnehaha. Almost everyone is walking six feet apart and wearing masks. (As someone with a history of masking up at protests, I've taken a weird pleasure in watching as everyone masks up.) People gather outside the police station and break a window; around 7:00pm, riot cops erupt from the station and began teargassing, spraying mace, and shooting rounds of rubber bullets. A friend and I drive to Lake and Minnehaha around 11:30pm. We missed the tear gas, but we witness a few hundred people standing around, mostly quiet, while riot cops line the perimeter of the police station and defend the liquor store opposite. Police shoot rubber bullets directly at protesters' heads every few minutes, but people are undeterred. The atmosphere is festive. People are letting off fireworks. A truck sound system parks in the Target lot and turns up "Fuck Tha Police" on repeat. This stand-off continues until the early hours.

On Wednesday, there's another march in the afternoon. Protestors take the Third Precinct briefly before police emerge to defend it. People walk into the Target store across the road and expropriate goods. A livestream reporter describes, with Midwestern understatement, protesters as "interacting with materials." On the video feed, people are yelling "Hands Up Don't Shoot," "We're Right Here," "I Can't Breathe" as riot cops guard the barricaded front door of the station. Police on the roof shoot at individual people with rubber bullets and other "non-lethal" rounds. The reporter films a young Black woman walking towards the cops. "What are you fucking doing? Don't shoot! Stop shooting at us!" she yells. The police just reload their weapons and aim again. Later in the evening things reach a critical mass. Fires are started at Auto Zone across the road; another grocery store is relieved of its inventory.

methodology. SOME of us believe in nonviolence. Many of us don't. There is no one organization of person or group of people who speak for all of us. We will get free regardless.

western city. At the initial march on Tuesday, I saw many more “Abolish the Police” signs than I have in previous years. “Fuck The Police” was playing everywhere. People have had enough. The march itself was overwhelmingly composed of Black and brown folks who already hate the cops because their survival depends on it. Yet even white liberals were holding signs that said, “Fuck the Police”.

I’m not watching the mainstream news, but everyone seems to be expecting these riots to go on for days, if not weeks. We want them to. In this pandemic, after so much gratuitous Black death from COVID, in Trump’s eerie light which reveals every white supremacist “bug” of the nation-state as a feature, people are done. In a strange turn, the fact that many people are currently out of work or not in school means that people can follow their desires to riot, or protest, or be on the streets, for as many days as they want. They have nothing to lose. In that spirit, I close with a statement the Twin Cities-based (and now defunct) Black Liberation Project wrote in 2016 (on non-violence, anarchists and the Movement for Black Lives). Theirs is a statement that is wise to revisit right now:

We want to make it clear we are not in the business of forcing non-violent methods on everyone else in our attempts to get free. We know that it is not possible for a people to be consistently beaten, brutalized and killed for centuries with no reprieve and there not be violence reciprocated. We do not believe in distancing ourselves or worse, aiding in the persecution of those of us in this movement whose tactics are decidedly more violent than Liberals would like us to be, including anarchists. We understand that we are not responsible for absolving White America of its fear that the centuries of violence it has inflicted on us is now being reciprocated. This movement is not non-violent. This movement is made up of hundreds of thousands of people with varying experiences, viewpoints and

On Thursday night, protesters return to the Third Precinct in greater numbers and police finally abandon the station entirely. As someone on Twitter describes it, “citizen involved seige [sic] is occurring in Minneapolis, resulting in a police station being surrendered.” The building burns to the ground overnight. It is the first time in U.S. history that protesters have taken over a police station. By Friday morning, fires are burning across the Twin Cities. And this is where we’re at as I write. Numerous buildings have been destroyed by fire: a Wendy’s, Auto Zone, the Hexagon punk bar and a large community arts building in nearby Seward as well as many stores up Lake St into Uptown. As this ridiculous year of 2020 got worse and worse we said we wished to burn it all down. And now it’s burning. As Governor Tim Walz talks ineffectively about a curfew over this weekend, and D.A. Mike Freeman finally charges Derek Chauvin with third degree murder and manslaughter, everything might be burning indefinitely.

**Y**ou cannot truly understand the riots happening in Minneapolis without knowing something about the city’s geography. Lake Street is a wide, busy thoroughfare that stretches west to east across south Minneapolis from the Mississippi River to the fancier area around Bde Maka Ska and Lake of the Isles and on into the exurbs. It is storefronts and strip malls all the way along, with many Black-, Latinx- and East African-owned businesses closer west. The strip near the Third Precinct, East Lake St is one of the only ungentrified areas that remain in the city. The intersection with Minnehaha is a sea of parking lots for two grocery stores, a Target, charter schools, strip malls, and low-cost housing complexes. This is where poor Black and brown people get their groceries and hang out. This is where the city has corralled them, pressed further and further in from all sides. From small, territorial residential neighborhoods to the north and south that are historically working-class,

many of which had racial covenants to prevent house sales to non-white people until the early 1950s, and are now becoming increasingly middle-class. From the west further along Lake St, which is slowly becoming a sea of expensive, high-density apartment complexes.

The focus on Target as a source of rage feels especially important. At first, Target shopping carts came in handy as barricade materials. But Target signifies many things for Twin Cities people. Target corporate headquarters is based in Minneapolis and employs thousands of people across the Twin Cities. It pays under the \$15 per hour minimum wage and as a “diversity-friendly” corporation that sells fancy, overpriced goods to mostly working poor people, it’s an appropriate outlet for rage. Target partnered with the Minneapolis Police Force on a surveillance program called SafeZone, which links police and private security in downtown Minneapolis with a Target-sponsored CCTV network covering 40 blocks. In return for sponsorship on SafeZone, Target opened stores in downtown Minneapolis. The East Lake Target store in particular is also notorious. It serves as a corporate laboratory for theft prevention and surveillance policies geared towards poor Black people and people of color. Target HQ stocks the East Lake Target badly compared to the larger suburban Super Target outlets, and so East Lake Target also serves a captive market of people who are too busy or have no transport to get out to the suburbs. It recently remodeled in an effort to appear more high-end, but the shelves remained bare.

The Target and police precinct butt up against a railway line and Highway 55. When 55 was built, the city bulldozed through poor working class neighborhoods to make a highway that would connect Fort Snelling and the airport with downtown. On the other side of Highway 55 is Little Earth, the first dedicated Native American public housing project in the US, and historically a base for the American Indian Movement and later Native organizing, including

as peaceful, nonviolent, and respectable (rewriting the civil rights movement as entirely non-violent, for instance) obscures the historical memory of riots, blockades, and looting as legitimate forms of response to state violence, or even actually effective modes of revolt. Were the freeway marches modeled on “peaceful” civil rights era freedom marches and Martin Luther King, or are they drawing on histories of riot in the mode of Watts, the Rodney King riots in LA, or the riots of Black and brown young people in London in 2011 after the police shot another young Black man, Mark Duggan? Is looting defensible? Is it more dangerous for people of color to engage in civil disobedience, and how do protesters organize to protect each other in the midst of chaotic protests?

One answer emerged in Minneapolis in 2016 with the formation of a white ally group, Wake Your Ass Up, which shut down I-35 on July 13 during the morning rush hour. Wake Your Ass Up became a collective of white people and non-black people of color. But freeway shutdowns are one thing; relieving the entire contents of Target and Cub other stores of their inventories and setting multiple buildings on fire may be another.

The people out rioting and looting this week are young, mostly Black and brown people. Liberals, media outlets, and city officials may condemn them as criminals and deny their political agency; they only recognize the legitimacy of “peaceful,” organized protests. Yet the people out protesting are political agents. They know what they’re doing. Many of them probably attend or attended South Minneapolis High School, three blocks west and one of the most radical political spaces for youth in the Twin Cities. South High students walked out to protest Black police killings in 2014, 2015, and 2016, and if school were in session right now, they would do so again. South Minneapolis is one of the most staunchly left, and most racially mixed, parts of this segregated, racist Mid-

did not work to break up the blockade, they arrested 102 people. About half were charged with felonies, including third-degree riot, and many were injured.

The city finally ousted its police chief after the guilty verdict of officer Mohamed Noor, who had shot a white woman, Justine Damond, in 2017. Noor was not incidentally the only Black man to be indicted for a police shooting. After another round of protests, promises were made to reform the police department, including bringing in Medaria Arradondo as the city's first Black police chief. This is its fruit. Arradondo immediately fired the four officers involved in George Floyd's death. The Mayor condemned the officers. But the facade of community-based policing has given way to the routine response to protests: SWAT teams and riot cops shooting rubber bullets and teargassing unarmed protesters.

As outlets are doing now with the protests at the Third Precinct, news media in 2016 depicted the freeway blockades as dangerous and thoughtless. They ask questions like: What about the ambulances forced to reroute or the people commuting to work who have to sit in traffic for hours? Police also made predictable accusations about violence against police. Allegedly, 21 officers were injured. This set off a wave of informal and formal debates about tactics: Black Lives Matter Mpls issued a statement calling for peaceful protest and a prominent organizer blamed white anarchists for antagonizing police then running away and letting others get arrested.

These debates are also not new. As Vicky Osterweil notes [in her 2014 essay "In Defense of Looting"], news media and liberal criticism of looters follows almost every large rebellion, most recently the Ferguson protests in 2014. And now they are being rehearsed again. People accuse protesters of being "outside agitators," white anarchists, people from out of town, or criminals. Left liberals worry about property damage making the movement "look bad." At moments like these, a liberal attachment to previous movements

many activists who supported the Standing Rock protests. Between the train line and Highway 55 is a city of tents: what is called a "homeless encampment" that has been going for two years now. A lot of Native people are houseless in Minneapolis, and this is where many of them live. The encampment was broken up by the city in December 2019, with promises to find them all housing. But the city broke its promises and they are here still, numbers boosted by increased austerity measures under the pandemic conditions. Cops line up in an alley between the precinct and a theater that until recently housed Patrick's Cabaret, an independent queer cabaret, until it closed down, just one of many theater and art space closures across the city over the last five years.

At the center of this juncture sits the Third Precinct, surveilling. The building design allowing for vantage points up Lake St in both directions and behind. Of course, a police station is made to be defended from all sides, because police stations embody and enact state violence, and everyone knows it. But its presence can feel natural, particularly when you're lucky enough to drive by it without threat. From Tuesday until Thursday night, marksmen with rubber bullet rifles and black masks stood on its roof, trying to pick off protesters one by one. The Third Precinct is also two parking lots away from the Schooner Tavern, a "veterans" bar where a white supremacist named Dean Schmitz attacked CeCe McDonald in 2011, and Third Precinct officers arrested and charged McDonald after she defended herself against her attacker. The Schooner Tavern burned down on Thursday night, and many of my friends are quietly celebrating.

These cops have always been picking off the community in one way or another.

These riots, this movement, are not new. The infrastructure for rebellion in Minneapolis was established by the responses to two other police murders of Black people in the last 5 years. But they are already established in another way, too. Black movement organizers understand that they are the continuation of a long history of revolt against the foundational antiblackness of the United States, against slavery retained in the form of policing and prisons, against the racist militarism that governs the cycle of shooting-protest-police violence and news media-slash-white outrage at “violent” protesters. These news cycles draw on a long and deadly imaginary of Black and brown people as naturally ungovernable, naturally oppositional, and only disciplinable through the “full force of the law”—that is, the Law that equates civility with whiteness and any insurgency as illegitimate.

Riots are not new in Minneapolis, either. In 1967 the entire north side rioted after police let white assailants throw bottles into a Black crowd and beat a young Black man. The 1967 riot was met with a massive police response and the National Guard was called out. The Twin Cities-based organization MPD 150 has been doing historical work on the history of racial violence at the hands of the MPD. From its beginnings as a tiny force dedicated to protecting property in the growing city, MPD supported strike-breaking, fostered corruption, extortion, and burglaries, and infiltrated labor groups. MPD officers were white supremacist from its inception, beating four Black men who had invited white women to a dance in 1922. Throughout the twentieth century, the MPD was notorious for racially motivated harassment against Black, Native, and immigrant residents. Riots, protests, and unrest were followed by calls for reform and numerous policies designed to move the MPD towards community policing. But as MPD 150 shows, those calls for reform have never resulted in any real change. The Police Union President Bob Kroll is a known white supremacist who wore a white power

patch on his motorcycle jacket, as alleged in a suit filed by four Black police officers (including current chief Medaria Arradondo) against the MPD in 2007. Community policing has not worked; the MPD is still racist as hell. And George Floyd was murdered by this “reformed” force.

This longer history precedes the last five years of struggle. A Black Lives Matter movement emerged on the ground in November 2015 after the police shot Jamar Clark in North Minneapolis, historically designated as a racialized slum to enclose Black life away from the more middle-class parts of the city. Protesters blockaded the North Minneapolis police precinct and camped there for 18 days in the deepening cold of an Upper Midwest winter. The encampment became a place to feed people, to shelter people, to have community meetings and to activate. When the police evicted the camp, people kept protesting in solidarity with each new killing by police across the country.

On July 6 2016, cops shot a man named Philando Castile in his car in St. Anthony, a northwestern neighborhood in the adjacent city of St. Paul. The closest landmark to the site of the shooting is the Minnesota governor’s house, three blocks from the elementary school where Castile worked as a food services supervisor. Black Lives Matter assembled a protest camp at what became known as the “People’s Mansion” over the summer of 2016.

If BLM and the “movement” were at a critical point in 2016, that point emerged as tensions over tactics. Freeway shutdowns roll across the United States to respond to every new Black police shooting. Interstate-94, the “downtown connector” that enables commuting between Minneapolis and St Paul, is blocks from the governor’s mansion and made a logical place to bring the cities to a standstill. The first freeway shutdown in the Twin Cities happened in early July in 2016, three days after Castile was shot. Riot cops set off smoke bombs, fired concussion grenades, tear gas, and when this