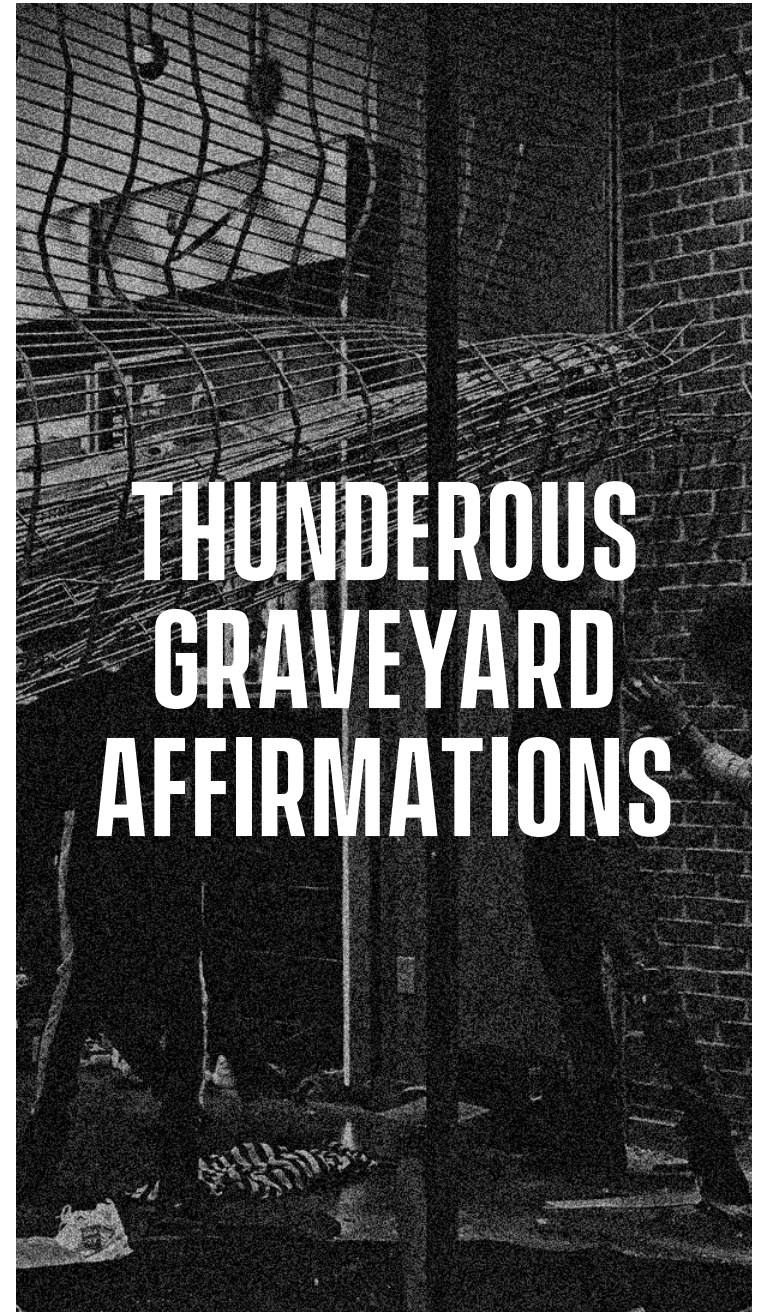


A letter from the uprising in New York.

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Set in *Bembo* & VANGUARD.

Cover photo: looting in Manhattan, June 1 2020.

Notes

1. In 1971, the imprisoned George Jackson wrote a letter to a comrade in which he quoted another letter from his brother Jonathan, who had died the year before in an effort to free his older brother. His brother's words made a call "from his grave" to confront "racial genocide," another voice among so "many thunderous graveyard affirmations," which, for Jackson, urgently accelerated the question of revolution.

"We overestimate them, or perhaps have little sense of our own power."

— Jonathan Jackson, November 1969

DEAR LIAISONS,

Once I sit down to write you, I am struck by an instance of the gap that separates language and experience. I want to shout, "It is righteous, the uprising of the oppressed!"—then realize that it threatens to ring hollow, worn out as such words are by misuse and time. As the world now knows, George Floyd was a 46-year-old black man murdered in Minneapolis on Monday, May 25. He was pinned to the ground for several minutes, the knee of a pig pressed against the back of his neck. In a video that quickly went viral, Floyd says, "I can't breathe"—a phrase that echoes, in hellish repetition, the last words of Eric Garner, killed by police on Staten Island in 2014, as well as those of Derrick Scott, killed by police in Oklahoma City in 2019, and perhaps those of others whom we will never know. By Tuesday, Minneapolis was on fire. By Wednesday, the uprising had spread across the country.

Others have articulated the history of systematic, genocidal disregard for black life more eloquently than I can here. What I want to note is how these deaths and their mourning have shaken this racialized, rotting order to the core, by way of what George Jackson called so many “thunderous graveyard affirmations,”¹ calls for a violent and beautiful redemption. In what follows, I attempt to share something of their reverberations in the rhythms of uprising in New York, and what has suddenly become the prehistory of these events is worth briefly tracing here. While protests followed the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013, what became known as Black Lives Matter, or the movement for black lives, took on national proportions after the murder of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August of 2014. At the end of the summer and throughout the fall after Mike Brown’s death, a series of large marches took place in New York: for Mike Brown, and for Akai Gurley, murdered in Brooklyn in November of 2014. For Eric Garner, after a jury decided not to indict his killer in December of 2014, as well as others murdered during that fall and in years before. At that time, I took part in efforts to preserve the energy of the movement against its institutional capture and neutralization. Many of those caught up in the protests became guilty of that special sin of militancy, a kind of *falling away from the grace of the crowd*.

Militancy has been defined as “the special trap” our world sets for revolutionaries. It is rooted in our alienation and embodies the paradox of attempting to be part of the mass movement while still holding fast to our identities as “revolutionaries,” which keep us from the opportunity to be transformed by revolt. Then, as now, the masses—or the crowd, the proletariat, the protestors, the people (each one of these terms attempts to conceptualize a phenomenon that exceeds it)—surpassed the militants’ best-laid plans. At the movement’s height in December of 2014, crowds shut down bridges and highways all over the city, evading any effort to channel their energies. As things waned, however, we misread the signs and attempted to escalate a movement already running out of steam. This ended in an iteration of the state’s classic technique of dividing the movement into “good” and “bad”

against the death machines of capital is the primary conflict that animates global civil war today. In this sense, George Jackson was prescient when he considered that, without the autonomous survival programs of the Black Panther Party—which were destroyed by the state and recreated on a mass scale by way of the nonprofit, to facilitate state surveillance and control—black communists would never be an effective force. In this regard, Raúl Zibechi’s recent return to the first sentences of Walter Benjamin’s eighth thesis seems instructive:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism.

For Zibechi, as it did for the Black Panthers, and as it does today for Kali Akuno and Cooperation Jackson, bringing about “a real state of emergency” means learning to live and organize at a distance from the state as the only means of obtaining “the ethical, organizational, and political resources needed to confront the enemy.” Over the past week, a march for queer liberation as well as scuffles with cops at the site of a contested occupation near City Hall have shown promising signs for an antagonistic renewal of the movement, whose final act remains to be seen. If any lesson might be drawn from the uprising in New York, it is the remembrance that, for the past 70 years, black struggles for survival have been at the forefront of threats to the U.S. order; it is in the call for a newfound attentiveness to these thunderous graveyard affirmations, whose redemptive power frightens our rulers and summons the masses into action from beyond death.

bration, a festival of newfound common power.

This is a power that lays waste to attempts to contain it, a power not confined to a past that I once thought had laid it to waste. I understand why past revolutionaries who witnessed the mass power of the oppressed dedicated their lives to it, even if this turned out to be in vain. In New York, this power washed across the face of the city like the waves of a hurricane. There was nothing anyone could do to stop it. Any “revolutionaries” that do not let themselves be transformed by this power live a tragic irony, refusing to see life in revolt for what it is—something in excess of their expectations of clarity and purity.

If a narrative arc is discernible in the revolt, it is one of intensity. After about a week, the more riotous movement subsided, giving way to mass marches, but also large groups of skateboarders and bicyclists continuing to take the streets. As the uprising wanes and the sounds of the waves of revolt ebb inside of us, the hollow echo chamber of the middle classes can once again be heard. In the second week, I found myself in a march cut short by its self-appointed “leadership,” talking with two working-class black men disappointed by its domestication, two men who knew too well that, after all this marching—if it ended up *just being marching*—things would go back to normal again.

Whatever is said and whatever arguments are made, from now on they must take place in the shadow of this power, which renders irrelevant the petit-bourgeois labyrinths of meaningful words absent mass deeds.

In its messianic urgency, the black struggle for survival presents itself as a form of life in which the separation between the political and the personal, but also between ends and means, disappears: The cascade of concessions given by our frightened leaders shows the uprising has done more to curb the power of the police over a few weeks than any “progressive” force of the entire neoliberal era, including the tired electoral proposals of today’s insipid “socialism.” While particular to the situation of the racialized U.S. order, the present uprising again makes it clear that—from the struggles of water protectors to the Mexican feminist movement, the Yellow Vests of France, the insurrection in Chile, ecological collapse, and the sixth mass extinction—the struggle for life

protestors. Mayor de Blasio met with the good ones, who were more than happy to join in condemning the bad ones. As part of the bad ones, I ended up going to Rikers Island for two weeks in 2015. On that island, a strange combination of overgrown vegetation and caged existence, I had my most intimate experience with what Fred Moten has called “insurgent black social life,” “a profound threat to the already existing order of things.” While also a matter of necessity, the deep solidarity among inmates totally outstrips that of the most pious leftist, to consistently undermine prisoners’ persecution and dehumanization.

While protests have continued over the past five years in New York since the emergence of Black Lives Matter, the end of last year and the beginning of this one saw a series of rowdy marches against policing in public transit that brought a measure of joy back to the streets. In addition to the appearance of a multiracial crowd of punks, revolutionaries, and other young people, the virus played an important part in the context that gave rise to the revolt. As a recent letter indicates, the virus is so deadly precisely because humans have lost a sense of relation to the other living beings of this world. For the dehumanized, poor health and lack of access to care have made matters all the more deadly, and the black aphorism that states, “When white America catches a cold, black America gets pneumonia,” has been invested with horrible, new significance. Black Americans are twice as likely to die from the virus as white Americans are. Over the past several months, black and brown New Yorkers have also been brutalized by cops for allegedly not following social-distancing guidelines, while photos have emerged of large groups of unmasked whites reclining in parks enjoying the sun.

Mass unemployment, police violence, the loneliness of quarantine, death by plague. George Floyd was fucking murdered, and by Thursday night, May 28, three days after his death, I saw what I never dared to imagine: A true uprising exploded across all five boroughs! This would not be so exceptional if New York weren’t essentially a police state. Compared to 800 in Minneapolis or 1,400 in Seattle, there are 40,000 cops in New York. They possess a \$5.6 billion budget, and have an international counterterrorist network at their disposal. On Thursday night, and for days and nights again and again, large marches broke out

all over the city. Tens of thousands of protestors emerged from quarantined isolation and found each other, taking the highways, bridges, and streets of a disease-stricken city, using logistical tools to coordinate among themselves and defying the futile commands of organizers and the state's curfew to disperse and go home. What has made this an uprising and not just a movement has been its *capacity to overcome*, from which it also derives its power. Violent clashes with cops broke out all over the city. In many instances, cops were surrounded and pushed back by bottles and bricks. Fireworks exploded and barricades were set up, police vehicles set on fire, radios stolen, and police drones attacked. Looting broke out all over the city but especially in Midtown and downtown Manhattan. Beyond the bail funds and jail support that normally accompany the movement, organizations opened their buildings, and mutual-aid initiatives coordinated rides home for protestors seeking refuge postcurfew from cops.

Over the past decade in New York, and even during the time of Occupy and Black Lives Matter, *mass presence*, especially in Manhattan—and in a strange way that now connects with the experience of quarantine—was nearly always accompanied by a feeling of confinement or suffocation. But now the uprising, which bears all the signs of a widespread, popular movement, has expressed an aggression toward cops. This has been what *sustains* it—opening up a space in which the masses have made the city their own. While people of all ages are involved, initiative has been taken by young people—punks, skateboarders, teenagers, and especially black youth, who are at the vanguard of the movement's production of black power. As some friends recently put it,

after half a century without a figurehead in the front, the black youth have shown the whole country that they are more than capable of setting their own path and directing their own initiatives. ... 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.

The descent upon the luxury shops of SoHo and Midtown, as a friend put it, constitutes an act of class revenge against a system with nothing to offer. Once the cops are neutralized, the street turns into a party. Though I would like to transmit to you something of the uprising's unfolding—something of this dynamism of insurgent black social life—it is difficult to capture within narrative time. It may be more communicable by way of polyphony or counterpoint, or by way of harmonic improvisation. Large masses would gather to march, often with an undetermined destination, and then improvise their trajectory into the night. Some fragments of masses would engage in protest forms that have emerged over the past decade (die-ins, taking a knee); other fragments would break out into asymmetric confrontation with the cops, setting up barricades, setting fires, trashing cop cars, getting drunk, looting, having fun. And sometimes it seemed as if all of this happened at the same time.

The following scene attempts to clarify something of the heterogeneous energies at play in the uprising. Another tactic in the activist repertoire of the past several years is the dramatic standoff with a line of police. It doesn't particularly seem to serve a strategic purpose, beyond affirming a moral high ground, and often ends in a round of applause. At one point, a solemn group of activists were caught up in this ritual. Down the block, a group of young people gathered according to a different affective sensibility. Difficult efforts had recently been rewarded by the liberation of some expensive liquor, and people danced in the streets to the Brooklyn drill rapper Pop Smoke, tragically shot in February, months before his 21st birthday. His songs "Welcome to the Party" and "Dior" ("I'm up in all the stores") have become anthems of the uprising. Like other Brooklyn artists, his work emerged from a drill scene at the forefront of the genre, innovating the Chicago sound with New York energy and distinctively Brooklynite vocals over UK beats. After a handful of songs, an activist with a megaphone came over to indicate that now was not a time to party and directed the crowd back toward the standoff with police. Yet for the youth, *there was no conflict*, just a difference coexisting within uprising. While the activists seemed to fetishize their relation to the police, the youth made of riot a cele-