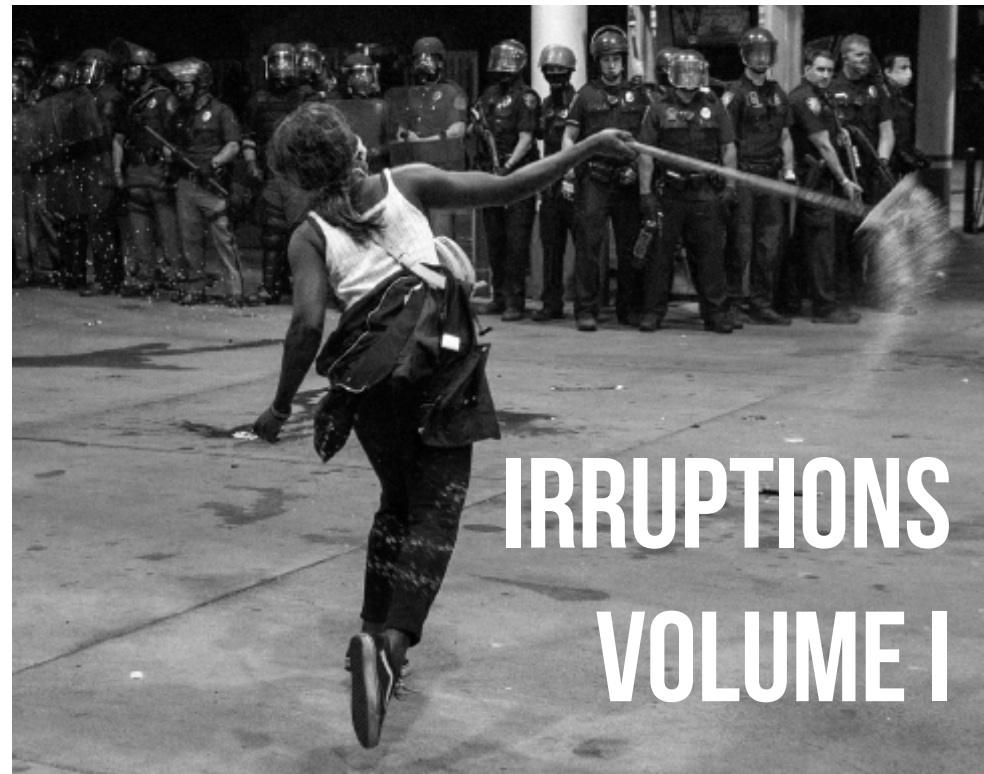


# REFLECTIONS ON THE GEORGE FLOYD REBELLION IN SO-CALLED LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

“TOWARD THE ANONYMOUS HUM OF PROVOCATIVE THINKING”

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IRRUPTIONS  
VOLUME I



Beyond CHOP, few constructive projects have received much airtime. The spectacle of police brutality, and the catharsis of seeing that brutality deflected, is understandably very alluring. There is no more potent a symbol today than the bloced-up “antifa” kid throwing teargas cans back at the cops. This figure presently inhabits the hackneyed debate of freedom-fighter-vs.-terrorist. Frontliners, though indispensable, are symbolically contested figures. To remain focused on a battle over definitions of frontliners is to be lured into a trap because, like CHOP, we find ourselves surrounded by symbolic cultural structures of “peace” and “law and order” that will crush us. If we want to increase our joy, to transform ourselves and each other into something new, we must pay equal attention to and undertake as much experimentation with constructive strategies for building autonomy in the vanishingly temporary zones of our liberation.

First, find each other. Find the other people who were transformed. Then, find unexpected ways to free yourselves and those around you. Create spaces where you can be briefly free—free from the ransom price for bread and shelter, free from the violence of bosses and cops—and push the borders until the borders push back. Be ready to flee, only to regroup and try again. The effects of COVID-19, wrought by the state, demand even greater ingenuity as we do these things.

**Be like water and nourish the soil around you. Most importantly of all, understand that we do not know what is planted there. We do not know what will grow. But we wish to be attuned to the possibilities beneath the soil. We wish to help it emerge, whatever it is.**

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## A NOTE FROM THE COLLABORATORS

The works contained within this zine were first published online by an anonymous writing collective in Lincoln, Nebraska: Irruptions, NE. Although written as a series of essays, it was found that they would also be effective as a published volume. *The primary function of this volume of essays is to bring together an analysis of the present political imagination in recent social movements against white supremacist violence and policing in Nebraska. We also aim to explain what we imagine our intervention in Nebraskan socio-political discourse to be.*

*Following this methodology, our general intention in engaging with this form of discourse is to produce particular effects: We aim to inspire international connections between points of conflict, joining together struggles in the region to a larger framework of theories and strategies developing around global revolts.*

**We express solidarity with the recent actions of working people in our city for systematic overthrow in Lincoln, and we hope our work contributes toward an anonymous hum of provocative thinking.**

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# A FRONTLINER'S RECOLLECTION OF THE GEORGE FLOYD UPRISING IN NEBRASKA

*[The following narrative was written by request and sent to Iruptions from someone who experienced the demonstrations in Lincoln in late May and early June. While we were finalizing the edits for this piece, Omaha Police murdered Kenny Jones, a 35 year old Black man. It is difficult to find the right words to express the mixture of grief and anger that we and many in the Omaha and Lincoln communities are feeling. However, it is certain that this anti-Black violence cannot persist. We must stand in solidarity to put an end to the institutions that continue to murder Black people. It is our hope that this piece helps us to consider how to defend our communities from state violence. We feel deeply the sentiment expressed at the end of the text: “We have each others’ backs. We’re still here.”]*

On Monday May 25th, George Floyd was murdered by the state. The next day, the streets of Minneapolis filled with people, rising up against what they knew to be a reprehensible system. The talking heads on cable news and Twitter wasted no time making comparisons to the Ferguson uprisings years earlier, and even the Rodney King riots. In the immediacy of the moment, it seemed like the reaction to this crime would stay localized. Then, the 3rd precinct was razed to the ground, and it was as though the whole world changed. Although the rebels in the streets faced a night endless assault of tear gas, beatings, and arrests, their will remained strong. Protests spread from city to city, but I wrote off my own town as one that would not stand up to fight. After all, for years this city seemed to be falsely insulated from overt conflict. I was wrong. On Saturday, May 30th, Lincoln, Nebraska, woke up to the news that the rebellion had travelled across the plains and somehow ended up on 27th and O Street. A small skirmish between demonstrators and police erupted late the previous night, and it was like waking to a cold shock. It was the beginning of a story that is hopefully still being written.

The uprisings, which began as a response to George Floyd’s murder by Minneapolis Police this summer, has been the subject of countless analyses, op-eds, and personal narrative pieces that seek to situate the events within the history of proletarian struggle. My aim here is to reflect on the significance of the uprising specifically in the city that I live and in the people I share a community with: the working people of Lincoln, Nebraska. This piece is meant to examine the surprising turn of events in Lincoln from my vantage point as a blue collar worker turned frontliner,

etc.—as well as the popularization of shield walls. But, just as important as these self-defense measures (though far less reported) are the constructive strategies being deployed in these cities—Riot Ribs feeding protestors, a group of witches bringing aid to wildfire victims, and many similar free distributions of reclaimed food and other necessities.

Neither Lincoln nor Omaha got very far on either of these fronts, both of which are necessary to sustain a local movement. On the one hand, there is the need to be like water, to move in such a way that any attempts to surround (physically or ideologically) the movement and eliminate it will fail. On the other hand, evasions from power must ultimately coalesce into something purposeful. It is not enough to constantly be on the run from the state and its lackeys. There must be something to run toward. Emancipatory projects that actualize food autonomy and other forms of liberated life are vital components of the uprising.

It can be difficult to see this importance through the haze of media coverage. If it bleeds it leads, the tired trope goes, and constructive strategies aim to stem the blood loss from the US’s centuries-long genocide. Expectedly, mainstream outlets talk about vandalism, but they never discuss the redistribution of food liberated from big-box grocery stores. Even Left Twitter is dazzled by the spectacle of shield walls and de-arrestings, while the rarer posts about mutual aid projects are afforded far less attention.

The Capitol Hill Organized Protests (CHOP, formerly CHAZ) was one attempt to move toward a new way of life, toward a neighborhood without police. It constitutes one experiment in constructive strategy. However, it was quick to collapse in the face of a multiplicity of factors, among which were its inability to evade attack by white supremacists or to stand up to media scrutiny. CHOP was not water, it was land, and land can be surrounded and choked (again, either physically or ideologically). By cementing themselves into place, by drawing a border, the inhabitants of CHOP were forced into a defensive posture, no longer holding the initiative. As such, mobility seems to be a particular aspect of the struggle in the United Statesian metropolis. (I.e., food trucks and other forms of mobile distribution stations are worth experimenting with.)

Lincoln or in Omaha. Activists dragged people to the courthouses, where they demanded accountability. All that the mayors and governors and councilmembers had to do was wait until people had talked themselves into exhaustion and disillusionment. Cops were not kept out of schools. The police budget was only marginally decreased. James Scurlock's killer escaped justice.

People should be more furious than ever, yet our anger lies buried beneath the banality of continuous murder by the very machine we are told to petition. Faced with such misery, many cannot be bothered to show up to marches anymore. And why should they? What will it achieve? The custodians of power do not even seem to notice people's being on the streets. The powerful are not the least bit afraid of what is happening at this point. Not like they were afraid when people had each other's backs in the face of the riot cops. Not like when cars rolled up to the police line, subs booming "Fuck Tha Police," and people were dancing in the streets. Not like when the loud-speaker sparked to life with music at the front of the protest and the cops tried to snatch the owner from the crowd, because the most impermissible thing is for there to be unregulated joy. The cronies of power are most afraid when we show them we are living.

We must, then, find ways to come alive. We must reveal our vitality to ourselves and to each other. The riots have passed, and they will not return in the same way they did before. No one can say what will happen or when. That leaves us in the present. And, right now, we need to rediscover what was found in the predawn glow on the sweating summer streets. We must remember what many of us have forgotten. And we must start experimenting with our own power.

## LIKE WATER

In closing, we turn a curious eye to cities across the United States that are home to sustained uprisings. Our friends-in-struggle in such cities as Portland and Seattle are developing and experimenting with tactics to defend themselves from increasingly violent state and white supremacist repression while they struggle toward greater liberation. Among such experiments are those adopted from Hong Kong and elsewhere—umbrellas, traffic cones,

the unsurprising pattern into which the movement settled, and where I see multi-racial coalitions of the working-class seizing their place in movements in Lincoln in the future.

That Saturday, it seemed as if the day-to-day worries of those in Lincoln faded into the background. Everyone had been watching the protests unfold in other places, and now that they were here, no one knew what would happen next. Like many others, I drove downtown in the late afternoon to see if anything was happening. Without a call to action on Facebook, a flyer, or even texts from friends, the people found each other on the streets of downtown Lincoln. All one had to do was follow the mass of kids on skateboards, couples holding hands, and angry individuals with signs.

By the time I arrived, the crowd had started marching. There was no route. There was no one with a megaphone leading the charge. The crowd simply marched to where they would be seen, to where the status quo had been upended the night before. The people at the back of the march may have assumed that some of us at the front had a plan, but there was no plan. We were there to make undeniable the existence of an oppressive, racist system to disturb the comfort of the Midwesterners hiding behind white picket fences and Nebraskan niceties. Walking up O Street, passing by the EZ Go (with its smashed-out windows) the police helicopters and news cameras followed us as we continued past the intersection on 27th Street.

After what seemed an eternity of walking against weekend traffic, with the noise of chants, the honking of horns, and terrified white stares glaring through the windshields of their Dodge Caravans, I turned to the young man next to me and asked "Where the hell are we marching to?"

**He made no pause in response: "We're marching until they hear us. And they haven't heard shit."**

The power that I felt in the crowd on that day is unmatched by any moment I can recollect in my recent life.

As we began our return march to the capitol, our reinforcements arrived. They seemed to come from all over, coming out of the night like the stars appearing in the sky.

I noticed the diversity in the crowd. We were a multi-racial crowd, undeniably, but the composition of demonstrators was also a mixed bag of sub-cultures, professions, and stages of life. There were skater kids, teenagers of every stripe, liberal activists, blue collar workers, parents in their 60's, mid-20s hipsters, and leftists.

The mood was angry, but there was hope in our solidarity.

I sat to take a breather on the capitol steps next to some high schoolers. People kept pouring onto Centennial Mall, and those of us on the steps watched as a group burned the American flag. No one told them to stop; it seemed appropriate. There was a speaker blasting “King Kunta” by Kendrick Lamar, and I shouted along with everyone around me. Looking down amongst the crowd, you could see small groups gathered throughout the plaza in front of different speakers, each with their own thing to say. I heard lots of “Fuck 12” and “All Cops Are Bastards” chants along with the Black Lives Matter chants and calls to say George’s name. We understood that we were confronting an enemy. After some time at the capitol, the crowd grew restless, and we stood to leave.

We knew it wasn’t over, and there was no dawdling parent there to tell us to go home, no organizer to say that our piece had been spoken.

## **BLOOD WAS SPILLED.**

The crowd gathered together and advanced into the street. In the middle of O Street again, I saw friends who lived downtown, who couldn’t help but be drawn to see what was going on. They came with us as we marched. No one spoke it, but we all knew where we were going. The helicopters followed us as we marched toward the Justice Center.

We were greeted by the LSO and LPD, literally smiling in their riot gear. We walked slowly up to them and stopped at the steps. We then did what we had been doing all night. Those of us in front knelt down and put our hands up. We spoke the opposite of what was about to happen - “Hands up! Don’t shoot!”

For this our blood was spilled.

The first of many volleys of tear gas began, bean bag rounds were fired, and flash bangs erupted into the night. This caused many of us to retreat. Most people there hadn’t experienced this before. Yet, as happens anywhere this takes place, it only emboldened the crowd. This violence confirmed in the open what we all knew, that the people are not allowed to speak outside the particular spaces given to us. So, we decided we were going to take the space without regard for the assent of the powerful.

## **WE CAUSED A DISTURBANCE.**

fell short of transforming us.

## **EMPTY PALACES**

Amid clashes with police, members of the crowd could be overheard saying that people needed to protest out front of the capitol building in Lincoln, or outside the courthouse in Omaha. Why? Who was there to hear? Who was there to care? Even if Pete Ricketts himself was looking down from atop his phallic tower, what could he possibly do to make us more free? Should he have reminded the cops that teargas is a war crime? They knew it. Every cop in every precinct in the country knew that it was wrong to teargas people, and they did it anyway—whether there was an injunction against it or not.

So, what was it that people wanted from these places? What was there to gain from besieging halls of power and sterile office buildings and bourgeoisie shopping districts, which were empty even before the pandemic since they are merely smokescreens for power exercised from afar?

Another conversation amid the crowds that night, some distance from the lines of riot cops guarding the illusive halls of power: “That over there,” gesturing to the line of stormtroopers, “that’s not Nebraska. This is Nebraska—people being together, helping each other out.”

This person was quite wrong, though not entirely. Because Nebraska is the stormtroopers and the empty halls and the unprecedented lines of people at food banks as our illustrious mayor cuts CARES Act funding and urges us to go back to normal. That is Nebraska, and that is the United States of America, and that is the callous game of the nation-states.

What that person saw that night was people pulling each other out of the way of pepper bullets and washing teargas from one another’s eyes—that is what it means to be a person, to be alive. Were we able to recognize that? That we were living, some of us for the first time? Because no boss and no landlord and not even a strong-jawed cop could tell us what to do? We could move and breathe and live on our own terms.

A realization like that ought to change a person. But not much changed in

experiences of rebellion. So, what was missing from Lincoln's uprising? What diluted its staying power in the collective life of those who participated?

## CIRCULAR MARCHES

The reimposition of capitalist drudgery played no small part in the erasure. When the moment of revolt passes, often we return to our private, individual lives that are governed by the organization of time into the hours of work and leisure. In other words, private individuality is a form of control. Spinoza might call it a sad affect, a state in which our capacity to act is diminished. During the revolt, our capacities to choose how to act become freer due to our shared power. With the reinstatement of "normal time" (i.e., the endless cycles of work and school with leisure), our power is decreased, and we become less able to act. All we can manage is to march in circles, if we can be bothered to show up at all.

Walter Benjamin famously called the revolutionary event a "Messianic cessation of happening" (263). In essence, this means that what we know as historical time is suspended; there is a rupture in the supposedly sequential unfolding of history. Benjamin describes this irruption as a kind of shock to the system, one that we rebels are tasked with remembering in order to continue to perceive the hope we discovered during the event. That is to say, if we are transformed by our participation in the revolt, then when normal time is inevitably reinscribed we at least bring with us our memories of the experience. And these memories can recharacterize how we see the abysmal day-to-day. They can remind us that we are more powerful than, can do far more than, whatever our appointed task is within the economy of death and destruction.

We cannot allow ourselves to forget this at the hands of a progressive counterinsurgency that steals our joy. We must not allow ourselves to be lined up behind a megaphones, which is an ideological firing line. But, the fact is, we have forgotten and we have been lined up. Although there are those of us who still feel the thrumming vitality of those nights on the streets, there seem to be many more of us who have forgotten or become lost. That means that the revolt did not transform us collectively. If we wish to emerge toward something different, we need to look critically at the uprising here and how it

I saw people on the streets that night deploying a diversity of tactics. Some continued to kneel while taking abuse at point blank range; some watched from across the street; others threw fireworks and gas canisters back at the cops. I could hear the sound of windows breaking behind us and see the flickers of light from small fires being started. My wife called me from the middle of town and told me she could hear the flash bangs miles away. The facade of normalcy in this small midwestern town was being dismantled.

We would be told later that the people lighting fireworks, smashing windows, and spray painting were somehow outsiders, or even worse - infiltrators. But those of us who were there know that everyone felt the same mixture of rage and hope, and those acting directly were simply the ones making those feelings concrete.



The next day, Lincoln was a different city. A curfew was issued, but the presence of the local police, the state police, and the national guard brought more of us out. No one would be dissuaded by calls to abide by the law, because the law had long ago lost its façade of legitimacy to people of color, poor people, and everyone else it never defended.

As a crowd gathered Sunday night, the first attempt at negotiating with the state was initiated by individuals at the front of the crowd. The first issue with this was that not only did none of us need someone to do this for us, the police, of course, lied to our faces. We were told that if we stayed away from the symbols of power - the capitol and the courthouse - no force would be levied against us.

However, the police met us that night wherever we went. The sun went down, and the paranoia around us went up. There was talk of undercover cops and an order by the governor to use live rounds - and it didn't seem out of the realm of possibility. As we walked through the Everett neighborhood, people were running up to the front of the crowd, pleading for us to turn toward the justice center. They said that other protestors were being attacked there, and it wasn't until we saw videos that we marched to meet them there.

Before we could get far, what looked like a battalion of militarized police met us, equipped with their very own tank. As we approached, people passed word through the crowd about what was about to happen: "Know what you're about to get into. If you don't want to be a part of this, leave." It could've just been my perspective in the dark, but I didn't see one person leave the group.

When we came to the intersection on 11th & H, we did what we had done the night before. We sat down with our hands up. The rows of police from their different departments and agencies fired on us from point blank range. Most of us got up and ran. This time though, it didn't seem like many people left. We had only been forced into a retreat. For the next several hours, small groups of protestors continuously regrouped and confronted the cops. All over that neighborhood, the people came outside to watch, some even joined us.

As the night went on, I watched as person after person was treated by street medics for wounds from rubber bullets, bean bag rounds, & tear gas. I knelt to check my leg for the bruise left by an impact round. It hurt like hell. My eyes stung from tear gas, and I found it hard to breathe. On 11th Street, a woman ran by me with her nose bleeding, nearly torn off by a bean bag round shot directly into her face. I didn't know her, but before I could get to her, three others were already helping her find treatment.

This was the police that I knew. This was the violence that BIPoC and working-class people have experienced in their communities in Lincoln for years. It was only now that the world seemed to care.

## WE DISCOVERED OUR POWER

The vast system of oppression that exists around us had been confronted those nights in a way that was impossible to ignore. It had been confronted by teenagers, single moms, and people who would have never called themselves activists. We discovered the power to act in the solidarity that had been hidden from us. We felt it return to us when we stood together, when we confronted the enemies of our community, when we took care of each other's needs, and when we literally fought

of us who work to transform ourselves and our world through struggle to be militant about joy—that is, to commit ourselves to increasing our and our friends' capacities to act.

Montgomery and bergman pinpoint struggle as one source of such joy:

*Anyone who has been transformed through a struggle can attest to its power to open up more capacities for resistance, creativity, action, and vision. This sense of collective power—the sense that things are different, that we are different, that a more capable “we” is forming that didn't exist before—is what we mean by joyful transformation. (47-48)*

What struggle offers us, what getting into the streets offers us, is a chance to inhabit a new “us.” By embodying a new way of life, one which breaks all the rules of the old way of life, we suddenly realize that we are capable of much more than we were ever told. That epiphany ought to change the whole way we live our lives. But, again, we ask: Did our participation in the George Floyd Rebellion succeed in transforming us?

## IMPOSED AMNESIA

First, a brief recap of the Lincoln uprising. This blog has previously described the short-term neutralization of the local movement. This neutralization was achieved via the interplay of middle-class activists and the police. While the activists bent people's collective power into the form of issues and interests to be offered to a labyrinthine administrative machine, the police temporarily recused themselves from beating protestors so as to let the energy evaporate amid speeches and marches that led nowhere.

What occurred in the wake of the May-June uprising was an erasure. As Idris Robinson says in his talk “How It Might Should Be Done”: “A militant nationwide uprising did, in fact, occur. The progressive wing of the counter-insurgency seeks the denial and the disarticulation of the event.” Lincoln has seen very well the disavowal and subsequent expunging from memory of the riots. Though many of us wear t-shirts commemorating the violent teargassing of us and our friends, collective action in Lincoln reveals a lack of collective transformation by our experiences in the uprising. Instead, the old formulae of marches and speeches resumed the throne and disavowed our



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# ON THE SUPPRESSION OF THE NEBRASKA REBELLION AND THE POSSIBILITIES THEREIN

Some of you reading this were out on the streets for the May-June uprising. Some of your bodies bear traces of those events. You experienced the brutal violence cops are willing to deploy when you ask them to stop murdering Black people. Some of you felt a joy you had never felt before: a range of motion, a range of living, that only becomes possible when the people tasked with running your lives at gunpoint have lost control. Did these things change you?

This blogpost attends to the notion of transformation through struggle, and the ways that the collective energy in Lincoln has or has not been transformed by the local manifestations of the George Floyd Rebellion. We will begin by exploring transformation.

## ATTUNEMENT TO TRANSFORMATION

In discussing the subject of militant struggle at large, Nick Montgomery and carla bergman employ Baruch Spinoza's concepts of joy and sadness in their book, *Joyful Militancy*. In brief, Spinoza writes that joy is what increases one's capacity to act, whereas sadness is what diminishes that capacity. Montgomery and bergman use these Spinozan concepts to discuss contemporary liberatory struggle, explaining that, "Empire reacts to resistance by entrenching and accumulating what Spinoza calls sadness: the reduction of our capacity to affect and be affected" (53, original emphasis). Conversely, "[t]o be militant about joy means being attuned to situations or relationships and learning how to participate in and support the transformation rather than directing or controlling it" (48). Montgomery and bergman call those

back against the ones who continue to oppress us.

This is the reason why I would keep going out into the streets night after night, even when the shooting stopped. I didn't go because I supported a particular organization or politician, or because I thought all this could simply get fixed with a ballot, I went out because we had discovered we could get there directly without

any intermediaries. I wasn't alone in this.

## POWER WAS CONSOLIDATED BY A FEW.

Over the next week, power was slowly re-distributed from the crowd itself to just a few individuals.

After the events of Saturday and the intense police violence on Sunday, we found each other once again congregated outside the courthouse on Monday. This time though, there were people from the front telling us how we should feel and how we should act. The mood was still hopeful, but there was disagreement amongst the crowd. Several individuals were now recognized as leaders of the movement, though it didn't seem like we had ever asked to be led. Some of those leaders instructed the crowd that they didn't want anyone to stay out past curfew that night. The Mayor herself was allowed to speak and urged us all to abide by the curfew, otherwise she couldn't guarantee our safety.

At this point, individuals in the crowd still had some agency. Person after person stood up and said that giving in at this moment and playing on the city's terms would be the death of anything meaningful to come from this uprising. So, we decided to march past curfew, but in a compromise: We followed the leaders who had just told us to go home.

They led us to the capitol steps. For some reason, we agreed to wait. We were waiting for the same thing that had happened the last two nights to happen again. After all, why wouldn't it? Nothing had changed in Nebraska's police departments. No structures had been dismantled. But that night, our leaders negotiated. They said that if the supervisor of the State Troopers knelt with the crowd, and we all went home afterward, the police would refrain from violence.

That is exactly what happened. We let ourselves be represented by a few. Unsurprisingly, our new representatives gave in to the wishes of the city, accepting shallow symbols of support in exchange for the public perception that Lincoln was somehow above the unrest that continued in the rest of the country. The city talked the next morning not of the courage of its people but the courage of those troopers

who kneeled. It was the perfect democratic resolution to the protests, the police and politicians heard us, and nothing had to change. The police did not beat us that night, but they did defeat us.

## THE PEOPLE LEFT.

As soon as organizers began to treat our oppressors in the police and city government as collaborators, the faces I saw those first few nights started to be replaced by the very people whose strategic passivity and complicity we had attempted to upend in the beginning. Our protest had been gentrified. Graffiti was replaced by nicely printed signs, and the people were displaced by middle-class liberals who needed the aesthetics of resistance to re-legitimize their facile politics.

## WE WILL MEET AGAIN.

I continue to be hopeful. Even though each demonstration I have attended since this summer has failed to achieve anything close to the mass movement we saw in May and June, it will happen again. The bruises on our bodies may have gone away, but I hope their memory never does. I'm not the only individual who has realized the effect working people can have on this city, and it's only a matter of time until we find each other again.

Next time, we must not allow ourselves to be silenced. Not by the cops, not by the city, and not by pacifiers and clout chasers, speaking through microphones. Our comrades all over the world and throughout history have done this very thing. We can look to those examples as inspiration. We can look to Chiapas in 1994, Tahrir square in 2011, and Hong Kong, Chile, Nigeria, Belarus, and Minneapolis in 2020.

If Lincoln's streets are filled again two weeks, two months, or even a year from now, I am confident the fabric of this city will change. We know that we can organize and support ourselves directly and autonomously; we have done it. Let's keep the memory of these events close. Let's refuse the gatekeepers in charity and government. Let's find each other again. We have each others' backs. We're still here.

self-indulgent pet projects and stop worrying about the being behind the deed. Instead, the deed will take the place of the voice. The deed is the presence that words fail to represent. Silent incivility will break the grip of leaders, both those that the state imposes and those that attempt to quell us with their megaphones. We realize that the activists and the "left" in Lincoln will continue to jabber. And they can continue to do so as long as it pleases them. But they will remain as they have for so many years—perpetually burnt out, producing nothing but cynicism for their efforts, trapped on the lonely island they inhabit. Under their leadership all protests have been unable to build long-term infrastructure. A handful of activist cliques have created a small world for their organizations where they mull about outside of any conflict except for the conflict they have between themselves.

That is no reason for us to despair. We are not activists. We do not need them. Demonstrations in the city should be one of the places we find each other, revealing ourselves to one another through our actions. It is our moment to break from the sadness of everyday life and to find evidence that we are not alone—we are everywhere. The first two nights of protest in May/June showed what we are capable of when we refuse the futile space of politics and instead make our own. We should reject designation. Our relationship to the city should be tactical. We should ask: What companies are gentrifying our neighborhoods? Which companies are investing in the city and causing displacement? How can these operations be interrupted or blocked? Where are the focal points of the local economy? What direction is capital flowing and where are the surveillance devices that protect it? What terrain gives us strategic advantages, and how can we disappear into the city when the job is done?

We will continue to explore these questions in the near future.

can anything other than domination occur? This uncontested circulation is the tragic fate of political action that is not organized according to a discordant logic. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney suggest in *The Undercommons* that this discordant logic is something like improvisational jazz; it is something that takes shape in the spontaneity of the game—that game of power we continue to reference. We must improvise in order to avoid the trap of believing that these spatial arrangements serve anything other than the interests of the dominant class and the flow of capital. So far, Lincoln activists have sealed the act of protest into a predictable form, one that abides by the rules of normative politics. They have produced a movement that is immobile. We must avoid this stranglehold. We must allow ourselves to be fluid, our actions and organization to take any number of shapes. We must refuse totality and embrace infinity.

## INACTIVE ACTIVISM AND FINDING OUR FRIENDS

It is likely that activists and organizers will continue to fall for the trap of normativity. We should warn activists of the pitfalls we have discussed, but we do not want to waste too much time and energy convincing liberal organizers of anything. They are not our friends. They are counter-insurgents. Instead, we implore Lincoln's rebels, delinquents, lumpenproles to create blockades along the state's and the economy's infrastructures. The battle is in the game of circulation, in the flows and stoppages of power and capital. We are not without recourse.

However, among Lincoln's activists, there is a sense of defeat and failed imagination from the outset. Organizers, even the "radical" sort, will say, "Stuff like that just doesn't happen here," abandoning revolutionary struggle and condemning themselves to the logic of liberal politics. We should cease playing within the confines of liberal-democracy or performing activist scripts. As we have discussed, we must completely reimagine the organizational relationship between the city and the economy. Building a revolutionary force is not just starting some sort of branded project, communal house, food distribution, etc.; these projects are important for building relationships, but if they do not reveal underlying antagonisms within the city and develop a plan to exacerbate them, then it is just another formal organization that exists only for itself without connection to struggle. Let us abandon our

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# POLITICAL ACTION IN STASIS: ON PROTESTS IN LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

The unrest surrounding the murder of George Floyd unexpectedly spread to Lincoln, Nebraska, in late May and was intensified by the murder of James Scurlock in Omaha by a white supremacist. Unsurprisingly, activists, city officials, and "the left" were woefully unprepared for these events in the city. In a similar fashion to insurrections in Ferguson, MO, after the murder of Mike Brown, there was at first no established leadership to manage the unrest. The first two nights of demonstration in Lincoln (May 30 and June 1) presented unprecedented opportunity for individuals to encounter one another and attack the local economy. But, just like Ferguson, a leadership was produced to mount a counter insurgency. Yes, this same sequence of events has played out in cities across the nation. However, Lincoln's counter-insurgency seems to us uniquely effective, worthy of a closer look.

The emergent leadership in Lincoln were young, inexperienced, middle-class activists who assumed the representative role of the voice for Black lives. Originally, they branded themselves as the Lincoln chapter of Black Lives Matter, but they soon distanced themselves from the movement's "polarizing reputation," rebranding as Black Leaders Movement, making explicit their entrepreneurial aspirations. Over the course of the summer, they called various marches and funneled energy into city budget hearings until they finally burned out in the beginning of August. We should not be surprised that these protests fizzled out; the tactics organizers deploy have movements circling the drain nearly immediately. They structured the political space of the march in such a way that every act passed through the neutralizing filter of leadership—every act was ordained. They targeted individuals who broke away from the marches (or were even caught with a spray can), claiming they were outside agitators, and threatened to turn them over to police.

The interviews contained in a Lincoln Journal Star profile on the Black

Leaders Movement quite ominously gesture toward this neutralization: One of the organizers says she “noticed there wasn’t anyone in charge” when protests first began, and the article then tells us that she “didn’t let things stay that way for long.” She goes on to say, “As more organizers joined them... the Black Leaders Movement was formed, and the protests began to take a more peaceful and coordinated shape.” Here, little analysis is needed. The activist readily admits that their project was to paralyze the potentiality of the event, to transform the protest into something compatible with the status quo and its political infrastructure.

Thus, we watched the numbers dwindle and the crowds grow more white and liberal with each demonstration.

Lincoln Police Department happily played to the activists’ egos, and instead of tear-gassing protesters as they had in June, they removed themselves from the equation. With no visible force to resist, it was as though the police altogether vanished from the minds of these middle-class activists, who contented themselves with chanting at empty halls of power. Meanwhile, the police continued to harass Black bodies in poor neighborhoods—the same Black bodies that were excluded from the marches of the Bourgeoisie and threatened with police intervention.

What occurred in this situation suggests a different configuration of power and force than is perhaps typically imagined. Power acted from within the crowd itself, managing its own organization and composition. The actions of the crowd were determined, not by the direct repression of the state, but by a system of management that developed via the interplay of liberal activism and city police tactics. To put it more concretely, Lincoln Police realized that attacking crowds would only antagonize them, so they instead left the policing to the crowd’s leadership. Everyone who knew better stayed far away from these marches. It was a shift from autonomous actions and the absence of political decorum to permitted marches and a simulacrum of resistance that arrested the movement in a stasis from which it never recovered. “This is what democracy looks like!” Indeed, it is. That is to say, democratic political space is shaped in such a way that protest will always neutralize itself as long as it operates according to the logic of the space. We really cannot emphasize enough how exclusionary these marches in Lincoln were and how the Black proletariat were banished from the very beginning by the middle-class

it, not only insofar as it represents space in thought, but also because it politicizes, produces, and structures space in reality. (Galli 5)

Thus, we are again in the domain of struggle, the game of power. What is politically possible is determined by the space of politics. In other words, spatial arrangements inform the conditions for action. Because we want to think specifically of Lincoln politics, this raises a significant question. How does space in Lincoln determine particular political formations? As we discussed



above, nearly all of the protests in Lincoln privilege the capitol building, an empty vessel. Though it does not store power, it does have a function within relations of power. The steps of the capitol appear as a kind of town square, a space to give voice to grievances and petitions. This may be a vulgarly simple way of viewing the space, but it seems to us characteristic of how, at the very least, it is used.

The space of the capitol serves, then, to circulate the voice of the democratic political subject. The space contains the subject and creates the route for its participation in politics. The power the subject intends to exercise in this relation (between the subject itself and the political institution) passes according to the route that has been determined by the dominant political formation. How can an interruption of the political system occur if the action of the political subject is congruent with the dominating infrastructure? How

to notice. There is no interior, only exteriors, only surfaces. It is no longer that the emperor is without clothes, but but that the clothes are without an emperor. Power is not contained. It moves, circulates, permeates, produces effects.

Last year, The Climate Strike protests provided us with another reminder that power is not fixed in place, not held by a person or in an institution. We were forced to listen to the same boring speeches, lectured to vote, and to upload selfies, hashtagged with the governor's name. We overheard others: "So now we take the streets?" Alas, after the selfie, everyone went home. There were whispers, people saying, "Let's just burst into the capitol," but we now know that it is a void space. Yet, it is precisely into this void that the activists in Lincoln would like to lead us (and we feel this is most likely the case in any small, non-organized city). If we continue to follow activists' abyssal march, we will never be able to understand or analyze power and its daily effects, nor will we have a plan to grow and build infrastructure for ourselves. The unorganized small town will, instead, float like a moth to the flames of local politics, co-optation, and incremental progress. We, ourselves, will perpetually circulate along the state's infrastructure, the fixed politico-economic space that subsumes our protest and sells it back to us on the internet.

## POLITICAL SPACE AND THE CITY

Thus far, we have tried to provide a rudimentary sketch of the concept of the circulation of power. We have not, of course, discussed circulation in all of its nuance. Hopefully for the purposes of our analysis, it was adequate, as we must now turn to the space of circulation: the polis—that is, the city. We use the term polis to emphasize that the city as such was, from the beginning, explicitly conceived as a political apparatus. It defines the borders and maps the terrain of Western-style democracy. It is designed according to the logic of a particular political configuration. For this reason, much of modern political space is engineered to facilitate economic movement. Italian political philosopher Carlo Galli writes,

[P]olitics cannot but measure itself with space, that the control of space is one of the stakes in the game of power... It is, in other words, politics that arranges itself in space and that, moreover, arranges space itself, determining

leadership.

## NEW LEADERSHIP

At the end of the summer, a new leadership emerged, calling themselves Fight for Black Lives. If this group ever had emancipatory ambitions, they were obscured by the theatrics of its leadership and poor strategies. This group was even more willing to work with police than the Black Leaders Movement. The allegiance between Fight for Black Lives and LPD was made public after an unhinged wingnut attempted to drive through the crowd. LDP let him go, and instead charged a protester for attempting to intervene (making LPD's position clear). However, instead of recognizing LPD's antipathy, the activists asked for police escorts. When questioned about coordinating with police, their primary organizer shouted into a megaphone, "We gotta work with police until we don't need them anymore," as though the police were a vanguard party. Prior to this tone deaf move, between thirty and fifty people had consistently marched with Fight for Black Lives. These numbers diminished to roughly ten when the police escorts began.

As usual, it was not just police who controlled the flow of bodies in the march. Fight for Black Lives' young organizer had also been spreading conspiracies of "outside agitators" in the crowd, declaring into the megaphone, "I don't know how much longer things will be peaceful tonight. I didn't want to scare anyone, but there are outside agitators here who want to loot and discredit the movement." A crew of bicyclists, who had attempted to obscure the police's vision, were singled out that night. We never saw them return to demonstrations.

Of course, the police escorts did nothing to protect the remaining few who did continue to march, and when, a week after the first incident, another car harassed protesters LPD did nothing. The young organizer announced after that night that they would no longer be working with police (only after another protester called him out for this). Sadly, this was a lesson that activists here needed to learn (many still do), but more importantly it reveals that this leadership only exposes protesters to more harm by not taking seriously the threat that police pose.

Lincoln police have benefited greatly from the new leadership. The so-called

leadership here only strengthened the police's control over the protests because the forces of policing and activism worked together to create an utterly immobile body politic.

We have yet to point out the stark contrast between strategies used by Lincoln police and Omaha police, but it is worth mentioning. Demonstrations in Omaha persisted energetically due to OPD's overtly violent response. Mass arrests and riot control tactics only angered protesters in Omaha. On the other hand, as we have already discussed, LPD utilized a hands-off approach after the first few nights of physical violence; cops even showed up "in support" of protesters.

Here, again, we can draw out some of the operative logic of the two strategies from their differing effects. In brief, clear lines of enmity serve to constitute partisan combatants, and the back-and-forth play of violence between groups quite visibly draws these lines, producing those subjectivities. Thus, when policing appears as battle, the conditions of battle are set, and what occurs within that field will take the form of battle. But if the violence of policing disavows itself, if enmity is not the manifest distinction between the crowd and the police, other possibilities emerge. In the case of Lincoln protests, the disavowed force of the police directed crowds down streets as though the march was a parade (indeed, one of the cops repeatedly referred to the protest as a parade during a confrontation with the aforementioned bicyclists), and liberal activists ensured that the composition of the crowd was respectable, civil, middle-class.

Simultaneously, LPD's Crimestoppers website continues to doxx protesters alongside petty shoplifters. Therefore, we must clarify that violence which disavows itself is still a violence, perhaps a more insidious violence. And precisely for this reason LPD has emerged as a model for other cities. Their de-escalation tactics, these tactics of disavowal, have been extremely effective, and, as we have shown, it cannot simply be chalked up to the notion of "Nebraska nice." At the end of the day, activists in Lincoln do not want to engage in any conflict. In fact, they rather enjoy the idea that their signs or chants are enough. The police understand that they would look like brutes if they attacked protesters and also recognize they would generate unrest (this happened in May). The organizers of demonstrations in Lincoln do not want to address conflict and these protests have no intention of bringing the city's

tive, rather than a repressive, force. We might think of this form of power as creative destruction. Policing is perhaps the most obvious example that we can call to mind. The force of police attempts to establish particular forms of life. It works to identify and expel the undesirable from society, simultaneously constituting the delinquent via its expulsion and manufacturing the citizen-subject by establishing and enforcing the values and desires of the dominant class. Neither subjectivity exists without the other and the forces that determine them—in our case, policing.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that only one force or power relation generates the totality of the body politic. A multiplicity of power relations exist that produce and sustain subjects, institutions, forms of living, etc. These relations circulate within a matrix, passing from point to point, node to node, vector to vector.

That is also to say, power does not flow downwards from a sovereign and its political representations (state buildings, monuments, judges, civil servants, etc.). Since we have now alluded to sovereignty, we might say that the capitol building is a relic of that older sovereign mode of power. It may symbolize a state form that configured power vertically, like a finger being pressed upon the population. And yet, we could argue that the status of the capitol building may have always been an instrument that exercised the type of power we have been discussing, that is, an apparatus that produced a particular relation between classes and political subjects. But this conversation is beyond the scope of our present discussion. To return to the point at hand, we must understand that power, as we experience it in the present, is operational; it flows within a nexus of relations. In *To Our Friends*, *The Invisible Committee* desanctifies the ostensible halls of power, explicating a logistical form of power:

It's not to prevent the 'people' from 'taking power' that they are so fiercely kept from invading such places, but to prevent them from realizing that power no longer resides in the institutions. There are only deserted temples there, decommissioned fortresses, nothing but stage sets—real traps for revolutionaries. (82)

Here we are called to realize that if we were to rush the capitol steps and burst through the building's front doors, we would find ourselves gazing into emptiness. Power has escaped out the back door, and the activists have failed

itself. It is the principal symbol of political power for the petit bourgeoisie, precisely because they are the class represented by it. The politicians who walk its halls during business hours still speak and legislate according to their values and desires: the home, the family, the nine to five job. Though the economy has long since abandoned this middle-class utopianism, activists are still interpellated by the beckoning call of socio-political normativity. Thus, every protest begins and, in the same moment, dies on the steps of the capitol.

What is at the heart of this problem is a critical misunderstanding of power and political space. We will begin addressing this misunderstanding by first discussing power and then we will turn to the question of political space.

## THE FORCE OF POWER

As we understand it, power is not an object. Rather, we are compelled by Michel Foucault's formulation of power: "The exercise of power is not simply a relation between partners, individual or collective; it is a way in which certain actions modify others... Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures" (788). Foucault's definition puts power into motion. It is not held. It functions. In an interview Foucault goes further to describe power as something operative rather than static:

[P]ower is nothing other than a certain modification, or the form, differing from time to time, of a series of clashes which constitute the social body, clashes of the political, economic type, etc. Power, then, is something like the stratification, the institutionalization, the definition of tactics, of implements and arms which are useful in all these clashes. (260)

The value of this definition for our purposes is that it situates power within the domain of struggle. Power is the agonistic or antagonistic relations that constitute the social body. It is the mechanism that produces the form a society takes. On the basis of this, it should be somewhat clearer what we mean when we say that one does not possess power as an object. Power is always in circulation. It passes through subjects and institutions as a produc-

latent antagonisms to the surface. Instead, protestors will self-police, quelling resistance before it interrupts the daily functioning of power. LPD's job is, therefore, simply to remove the possibility of confrontation. We imagine this will be the dominant tactic if unrest continues to spread to smaller cities and rural towns.

We turn, by way of conclusion, to Tom Nomad's "What is Policing." Nomad reminds us that policing is a logistical operation that projects its presence across space. At the same time, policing has its limitations:

This numerical limitation implies the inability to project across all space simultaneously, all the time, and therefore requires movement, action, which in itself generates conflict and modifies the dynamics of terrain, and thus the dynamics of operation. The police have developed all sorts of ways to amplify their projection through preparing the ground, so to speak. So much time and resources are spent by police departments every year on DARE programs, Neighborhood Watch, and auxiliary programs, all to amplify this projection. (Nomad, 110).

Activist leadership becomes an unpaid logistical operation for police that amplifies their projection. The management of bodies and space are part of this policing operation. Marches become an apparatus that capture us and separate us from our collective power. The only way to overcome this is to refuse to be managed and to exhaust the capacities of police. That is to say, the logic of the political space itself must be refused. When, for example, an organizer directs the crowd to march with the flow of traffic, refuse. When police create a route for marching, find ways to flow beyond those limits. If our goal is liberation, we must exceed the apparatuses that contain and govern.

The first two nights of unrest, May 30th and June 1st proved to us that we are here and that we are strong together. Now, we have to find a way to move beyond this stalemate and encounter each other again.

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# A MOVEMENT WITHOUT MOBILITY: POWER, POLITICAL SPACE, AND THE LINCOLN LEFT

We observed in our last piece that Lincoln does not have an organized “left” that is capable of productively directing the recent protests. It is not our intention to build one. Instead, the purpose of this blogpost is to provoke discussion regarding what resistance might look like in the city. We want to interrogate a few important questions: in what way and in what locations does power flow in Lincoln? Rather than attempting to “take space” in the halls of power, how can we imagine the disruption of power? First, before we can answer these questions, we must address the current strategies deployed by activists here.

The pattern is painfully familiar: a call to action, a sidewalk march, and finally a speech, given through a megaphone. Evidently, we are not the only people frustrated by this banal sequence of events. Do the police even bother to follow them at this point? More importantly, we have heard rumblings that Lincoln organizers are frustrated because their numbers have consistently declined since the beginning of the summer. “The movement isn’t over,” they shout into megaphones. Though our tone has been—and will continue to be—scathingly polemical, we would like to invite these young organizers to assess the situation and understand that their loss of energy is not merely due to a fickle public or lesser media attention. Rather, it is the political formation into which they have locked themselves (as we noted in our first critique, working with the police is another significant factor). Old activists have been stuck in this formation for years, and it appears the young activists are recapitulating the same mistake. The protest in Lincoln is most often organized around the space of the capitol building.

It is no surprise that the center spoke of Lincoln politics is the state capitol

