

# **Looting Back**

**An Account of the Ferguson Uprising**

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# Preface

Five years ago today, police officer Darren Wilson murdered Michael Brown, a black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri. Police officers kill young black men every day in the United States, but that day, people rose up to police and white supremacy. It's important to revisit the Ferguson uprising today, to try to distinguish between the events as they occurred and the ways they were mythologized afterwards, and to inquire about what they still have to teach us.

To observe this anniversary, we are publishing the complete diary of an anarchist from St. Louis who participated in most of the major events of the uprising. This is a valuable historical document illustrating the contradictions and tensions within the movement from the outset and posing important questions about what it means to act in solidarity.

There are countless perspectives from the struggles that emerged in Ferguson. In the future, we hope to publish other accounts, from other vantage points. Also, be warned that this text includes a tremendous amount of violence and tragedy.

In one passage, the author describes a harrowing scene on August 16 in which a friend was hit by stray gunshots. The text does not describe what happened to the friend afterwards, so we will do so here. For days, a bullet remained lodged in his heart as he lay in the hospital on life support at the threshold of death. Miraculously, he survived. He owes his life, in part, to the courage and generosity of strangers who helped to make sure he reached the hospital, as well as to all the friends who supported him through the arduous recovery process.

Others were not so fortunate. Six people who played an active role in the uprising have passed away in the five years since Michael Brown was murdered. Deandre Joshua and Darren Seals were both found shot inside of burned cars. MarShawn McCarrel shot himself outside the front door of the Ohio State House. Edward Crawford, Jr., made famous by a photograph showing him lobbing a tear gas canister back at the police who shot it, committed suicide. Danye Jones was found hanging from a tree in his backyard. Bassem Masri, a Palestinian American, is the only one among the dead who was not a young black man.

Some of these deaths took place under suspicious circumstances, but there is no need to seek a secretive conspiracy. The conspiracy is out in the open: it is the all-too-familiar workings of a society that dehumanizes, impoverishes, incarcerates, and kills youth of color by a wide variety of interlocking mechanisms. We remember these six people not as victims, but as fighters who joined hundreds of other people of all ages, genders, and ethnicities in making it possible to recognize this as the tragedy that it is and begin to take action to change it.

The struggle continues.

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# **Looting Back: An Account of the Ferguson uprising**

*The world is fire: a sun, hot, elusive, exploding and yet constant at the same time.*

*The world is water: carving millions of pathways through the land and our bodies, distinct and subtle, converging and diverging.*

*Confounding all algorithms, it violates all commandments, moralities, and religions, contradicts all political ideology, and constantly defies description.*

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# Ferguson

*Conversations blended together. Stress was more than a feeling; it was bullets ripping through someone's precious body, a vigil, gunfire, flames, police, a riot, tear gas, a mob, an argument, racial tension, and a pre-existing interpersonal problem, all of it boiling over at once.*

We lived moment to moment through those times. By day, we took over the streets in ways we had thought impossible. At night, we lobbed back tear gas canisters, threw rocks, fought off police and the activists who attempted to control us. At times, the cops, the preachers, and the activists lost all authority over what was going on; that was what opened the way to something bigger. It was a chance to confront all the people and systems that maintain a stranglehold on the world.

It was all so short, but it went on long enough to burn deep scars in me and in so many others. These are both a curse and a blessing.

The people who filled the streets of West Florissant, South Florissant, and Canfield after Mike Brown was murdered were driven by too many different motivations to summarize. We came out for Mike Brown, for ourselves, for a world without police and racism, for and against "whiteness" or "blackness," for freedom, for reform or revolution, for the riot and the loot, for the hell of it. It all depended on who you asked.

What follows are my observations of the events and the dynamics at play during the uprising. Much of this is derived from personal experiences during the first week and a half after the murder of Mike Brown in August 2014. I recount my participation in the rebellion from my vantage point, including my white racial coding and my anarchist commitments. Without a doubt, there are differences in perspective and lived experience that distinguish me from many of those I met—but there were also many things that connected us across race and experience. In many ways, our lives exceed the confines of racialization and political identity. In other ways, they don't, and many believe so fervently in those categories that they will use violence to enforce them.

Throughout history, people have responded in a variety of ways to different forms of control and domination—to colonization, racialization, slavery, and more. Some respond by making peace with their oppressors and cooperating with them. Others hide in the hills, making themselves inaccessible to those who seek to assimilate or enslave them. Others resist, collectively or individually. The point is to figure out what you want to do and find others who are doing the same. People who experience the same form of oppression will not necessarily react the same way.

I shared a multitude of enemies and struggles in common with many of the people I met. However, our experience of these enemies as well as our place in these struggles was



often very different. Repeatedly, black people who were unafraid of the consequences of throwing down chose to go much further than I did.

My experiences with the police and the world they enforce are often structured differently because I am defined by part of this world as “white.” But I have my own reasons to fight. I don’t only want to fight for freedom for others, but for myself as well. This perspective feels more genuine than claiming to fight for a large racialized group of people, people who have equally numerous and possibly antagonistic perspectives that I can’t speak for or homogenize.

# On the Political Exploitation of Death

It's easier for academics, politicians, media figures, and other dominant mouthpieces to speak for those who have been killed precisely because they cannot speak for themselves. At the same time, the creative ways that ordinary people resist in their daily lives are not given much attention. When this daily resistance becomes a mass rebellion, those who are afraid of losing their power or money seek to kill it. In an uprising, people come alive against the limitations and separations that are forced on them in their day-to-day lives. An essential function of the repression of rebellion is to enforce the boundaries that keep things the way they are.

Mike Brown's name was used both to disparage the uprising and to support it. Lots of people wanted to speak for him, to expand their platforms or suppress others' narratives. In doing so, they obscured the fact that people fight for a diversity of reasons, whether motivated by personal experience, or frustration with authority or oppression, or the realistic fear that what happened to Michael Brown could easily happen to them or their children. We didn't need to know Mike Brown to know that what happened to him happens daily.

It is not only the police who kill. The police are just the last line of violence and repression. School, family, capitalism, the church, and race itself produce most of the daily battles that people fight long before the police get involved. Often, the police enter the scenario when someone is perceived to be violating some kind of barrier.

The exploitation and murder of black and poor people built the foundations of much of what is called civilization today. We should not forget this, nor the prolonged and powerful resistance to it. This resistance often takes forms that are not considered part of the sort of "fair and civil discourse" in which we talk things out with those who oppress us. A classic example of civility is voting for those who oppress you. Those who control all the land and capital would prefer that we debate them peacefully than ransack the wealth they have—wealth they gained from our labor and the labor of people like us. The proponents of civility remain the greatest slave masters in the world.

In Ferguson, resistance to exploitation and murder took avenues that challenged the false peace of the "social contract" of civil society, the supposed agreement that we're all willing to live peacefully together in exchange for the supposed security and liberty provided by police and other state institutions. This contract was not created for poor people, but to protect those with power, capital, and property.

## August 9, 2014

I am at the ocean. I don't know how it works, but sometimes the water is so cold and then, for some reason, it's warm. Sometimes I find pockets of warmth. Something about the wind blowing either from the ocean or from the land heats the water, or so I hear from my favorite uncle. Today was one of the warm periods.

St. Louis lies across the country in another time zone. I'm avoiding the city, like I usually do in the summer. There are no beaches to swim at there, really no water to swim in unless you want to feed the flesh-eating bacteria. The air itself is toxic. If you ride your bike around, you're liable to encounter various horrible smells from off-gassing factories. Cancer calls your name. Not far from my home, there is a smoldering underground landfill fire that is heading toward a buried cache of uranium from the Manhattan Project.

It's hard to comprehend the ocean, this expanse of both nothingness and voluptuous life that flows and ebbs right in front of me. It's beautiful and I can't help but stare into it as far as I can. It makes me contemplate what's out there and then, inevitably, wonder about myself. This water has life beyond my imagination. The waves crash over and over upon themselves, feeding the next one and the next one and the next one. The water never tires.

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We gather our things and leave the beach for the day. At my aunt's house, I read the news from home. *Mike Brown, another black kid, has been gunned down by police.* My mind races through the countless posters we have made and wheat-pasted about people murdered by police. I think about all the times cops have fucked with me, arrested me, beaten me. I think about all the times my friends and I held demonstrations to support people—friends or comrades or strangers—who were beaten, locked up, or murdered by the state. I think of all the bullshit we've had to deal with from the police, never getting a chance to stick it to them. We've written letters to prisoners, yelled outside the jails, supported struggles inside prisons, broken things. Sometimes it was fruitful, but often it felt like a mere whimper. It always felt like we were yelling at a brick wall. Often we were.

I go on with my day, but first, I make sure to ask friends back in St. Louis about the killing. They have heard the news; they are going to a vigil that has been called in response. Hours later, they tell me how they stood around a bloodstained patch of asphalt with hundreds of people, many crying, trying to figure out what to do. The gunfire of angry people kept the police away for many hours. Eventually, in a show of force, the cops brought out the dogs.

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## August 10–11

*Black nationalist leaders Anthony Shahid and Zaki Baruki seek to pacify protestors on S. Florissant so that Ferguson Police Chief Jackson can speak. They fail and the chief leaves the stage. The police station is located on S. Florissant; this is where peaceful demonstrations, civil disobedience, and press conferences organized by activists and non-profits are happening. The two crowds—the W. Florissant rowdies and S. Florissant organizer types—are often at odds with each other.*

My emotions run wild, exaggerating and extrapolating. This ocean is an abyss that only grows darker once you stare into it. Now it strikes me as an endless expanse of cold water, a powerful force that could kill me with little effort.

The world is beautiful, or it could be, but it all just feels like a sea of misfortunes. On land, we're like an ocean of bodies, moved by waves and tides, a crowd in a space that is too tight. We push and pull against one another. Some of us eat; many starve. We all breathe, or try to. But there's not really any unity beyond this. Some people profit off others' deaths, and they breathe like the rest of us. Many of us struggle against it in our own ways, collectively or individually. But we tire easily—history runs its tide right over us and washes everything away. Is there no escape?

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Later that night, texts and calls come in. The streets of Ferguson are exploding. An unruly crowd is disobeying calls for peace. The police and the usual political organizations are at a loss. The police bring in reinforcements. They bring out the dogs like it's the 1950s in the South.

The old world of past black rebellion that we saw in black and white photos is in front of our eyes in full color. It never disappeared; it only morphed into something more powerful—the new ghettos, overflowing prisons in which slavery is legal, police murders, wage slavery, speeding tickets, gentrification, evictions. It's hard to imagine life in the 1950s. The 1950s days of fire, the 1950s water cannons, the 1950s dogs barking and mauling protestors, the 1950s lynchings: we think of them all in black and white, relegating them to the past. "You wouldn't understand the troubles back then. Things weren't as vivid then as they are now." I can't imagine the world before, but I know that people saw as vividly then as they see now. They fought tooth and nail. We will too.

The media talks about a vigil turned "violent." A friend calls me, in shock, describing what he calls a riot. People are angry. It's not a protest so much as a release. Cop cars driving through crowds while a gauntlet of people throw things and kick them. Friends tell me that some people in the crowd are firing guns, which has the effect of warding off the police.

Everything is getting smashed. Stores are getting looted. A chasm has been crossed, but from what to what I'm not sure. The local established black activist political organizations are perplexed and scared, ready to disown it. For a while, they will find people to blame for the riots, for going beyond the usual respectable protest methods.

This world is experiencing a moment of rebellion. The endless, monotonous waves of salt water are not so oppressive now. Before there were no exits; now some are opening up. But they aren't in the form of a designated exit door. They're more like rugged gaps in that unbreakable brick wall we have been knocking our heads against. You're free to leave now, if just for a moment. *Leave!* This is a moment, an opening, before our enemies kill, suppress, poli-trick, disperse, or arrest us. Hurry! The old world is behind you!

Cops mobilize to protect property and capital. Liberals scream about police militarization. The reality is that cops were attacked and a gas station was looted and burned. It should not surprise us that they react this way. Cops uphold class society; they are the first line of defense when we directly attack capitalist and state property.

## August 12

I've walked into something and I don't even know.

I will soon learn that lots of people are here to rebel. We're all taking advantage of the situation, because this situation doesn't happen every day. The demands of day-to-day life—bills, raising kids, rent, police, and the grind of work—are hard to challenge. We rarely get a chance to fight back.

Those who speak about “outsiders” alienating the “community,” including those who talk the radical talk about the “colonization” of such moments by outside forces, are often seeking to erase the inevitable conflict between those who want peace and dialogue with the state and those who want something else. A diversity of experiences and actions create mass rebellion. For some, anyone outside of Ferguson is an outsider. For others, anyone outside of North County (the conglomerate of suburbs around Ferguson) or outside of St. Louis is an outsider. For still others, anyone who is not black is an outsider.

There is something to explore in all of this. Is this moment the product of one “community”? Is Ferguson the only place, the only “people” who experience the police and the misery they enforce? There is no wall separating Ferguson from other places; the police do the same thing everywhere there are poor people. Ferguson is not a tight-knit family with a singular character; it's an alienating suburb where people are just as atomized by capitalist and state relations as they are in any other suburb.

Even if people start off as outsiders, spatially or racially, that isn't necessarily permanent, either. Outsiders can meet each other. “Outsiders” can be just as rightfully agitated as those who are “inside.” They can learn from each other. And some who are assumed to be outsiders aren't outsiders at all. For instance, take white teenage kids who go to school in North County, many of whose friends are black. They might go to the streets of Ferguson for shared reasons; they might go there for their friends and even for themselves. Or take someone of any race who lives miles away, but shares family ties with someone who lives in Ferguson and is affected by the same police and the same racism that killed Mike Brown. There surely are differences in experiences and histories, but this doesn't make one an entirely an outsider. All political geography that designates “inside” and “outside” is about control.

For many people, from all around St. Louis and the US, what is happening in response to the murder of Mike Brown is an opportunity to finally seek justice, or to get even with the police or another enemy, and everyone has their own methods for how to do that. It is insulting to reduce all this to mere opportunism.

I meet some friends and we head up to Ferguson. It's a ten-minute drive from my house. The summer heat is at full blast, turning my mind to sweaty mush. We walk around; a friend recounts the events of August 9 and points out the places where things went down. We run into some people they knew from the previous days. There's some talk about the coming night and what's going to go down. My friend tells me stories about tear gas, about small crowds of people fighting what sounds like urban warfare.

Later, after the sunset, the atmosphere is tense. Not surprising, considering that folks collectively looted and burned the QT a few nights before. Some are terrified of the repercussions of the riot a few nights ago. They are looking for someone to blame because they are worried about what the police are going to do if we riot again.

We drive from the QT to a church on Chambers where Al Sharpton is speaking. The police are lurking in the shadows, blocks away—and possibly within the crowd—and there's a mostly male security force of Nation of Islam members (NOI), New Black Panther Party members (NBPP), and others out to contain the unruly crowd. They're trying to calm people, arguing with the ones who don't want to follow their rules. This is compounded by the fact that Sharpton is speaking inside the building 50 feet away from us. So no, there won't be any riot outside.

Still, where I am, there's got to be 500 to 1000 people on the street. It's getting dark and I'm not clear exactly where I'm at geographically.

Down the street, a group of kids are setting off firecrackers. People are chanting the now-familiar "Hands up, don't Shoot!" The later oft-heard "Black Lives Matter" chant has not made its appearance yet. It won't for a while, not until things calm down and become more palatable. At one point, the former leader of the NBPP, Malik Shabazz, gets up and calls out, "Hands up! Shhhoooot back!" The "shoot back" is almost a whisper, if you could even do such a thing on a megaphone, and it's pretty perplexing, not knowing who this man is.

There aren't a lot of white people around. In the first days, most of the woke white people left after dark or didn't show up in the first place. For the more politically sympathetic, it was because they felt it was not their place. Still, while not a majority, there are white people around, though not many of the easily definable or "respectable" white people.

Among supposed anti-racists, there's a lot of people re-invoking "whiteness" as a justification not to participate. This framework obscures the ways that a homogenous or reified notion of "whiteness" breaks down under scrutiny. The desire for a strict definition of "whiteness" is strong.

There's a group of men who have it in for my friends. They see us as instigators of the rioting, of the arson. One of them, Tef-Poe, has ties to the mayor of St. Louis and a column in a weekly tabloid. Every pale face they see is not welcome. This might be enough to make us want to leave. But the confusing thing is that this contradicts many of the other interactions I've already had in this big crowd, where my color, still forever present and distinct, does not necessarily mark me out as unwelcome, even if things are occasionally uncomfortable.

Who should we listen to? The people from the political intelligentsia trying to keep the peace? Or the people who are rowdy and have none of those connections?

A white friend is confronted by these men and accused of starting fires. A contradictory crowd forms; some people defend him, while his accusers surround him, pushing him and yelling. He leaves. Tef-Poe is yelling: "If you're an anarchist, get out! We don't want you here!" It's hard to know what to do. An unruly crowd is not the best place to discuss nuances. Yelling matches do not offer us much when it comes to understanding each other.

It's a rare thing to be in a crowd that is not seen as legitimate. Unlike a concert, a sports event, or the bustle at a shopping mall, where our experience is centered around consuming or spectatorship, this is a situation in which anything can happen. This seems to dismay those who want peace or a throwback to 1960s-style disciplined black militancy. The crowd is rife with anger, trauma, sadness, power plays, whims, and dynamics that I can never really understand.

The people who were yelling were erasing the mostly black folks who engaged in the rebellion. They are worried about the media portrayal that will re-entrench racist stereotypes of the black looter and the violent black criminal; this is why they feel the need to conceal the reality of what happened. Instead of challenging this stereotyping and describing the looting and fire according to a different narrative—for example, critiquing the structural violence of capitalism and property rights or pointing out that the same laws that protect property once protected the authority of slave masters—they blame the acts of rebellion on someone else or downplay them completely.

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Later in the night, at home, some of us argue with one another. The experience of being kicked out, of being singled out because of our whiteness and our anarchism, sparks a whole array of strong emotions. What are our motivations? Are they "pure" or are we just in it for adventure?

What is happening is real, it calls so much into question; it's more real than anything I have ever felt. We want to fight back against the police because that's what many of us have been doing for most of our lives. When others are fighting back, we can't just stand back and watch. We want to engage in social revolution, but this moment isn't something we can romanticize with shallow rhetoric. Our own limitations, our differences, our bad dynamics come out among ourselves for us to confront. And we should confront them. This scares me because it's not something I've ever really seen in my friends. In me. There's yelling, a temporary schism, then cooling off.

We confront age-old oppressions and personal insecurities: the nightmare of racialization, the alienation people feel on account of being left out or because of their assigned gender or lack of experience. It feels both horrible and necessary to open these wounds right now. This moment is not pure or glorious. It's the result of yet another vicious police murder that brings all the oppressive underpinnings of this society to the surface. It's no surprise that this brings up the real tensions that exist among my friends. Power and oppression rear their heads in every situation.

Later, I hear that police and rebels clashed once again in the night.



## August 13

The next day, I feel pretty hopeless.

If this is all that will happen—roving patrols of police imposing order from outside while a mix of old-fashioned leftist and black nationalist (NOI, NBPP) political organizations enforce it from within—I'm not too interested. They might as well be working with the police. Case in point: later, I see people posting photos of my friends on Instagram alleging that they were looters and arsonists on the night the QT burned and calling for people to report them to the police. Some of the people in the photos weren't even in town that night.

We hear on the news and on Twitter, Instagram, and other social media about the “outsider agitators” or “white anarchists” from St. Louis who started all this. People talk about it as if it's an organized group with a leader; in fact, some make allusions to a supposed leader. I read about black and white “community members” and police telling anarchists to get out, to check their privilege.

Those who seek to rule would rather treat us like children, would rather see us remain downtrodden and scared, easily rallied against invented enemies.

In moments like this, it's powerful to see people become much more than the usual identities that are imposed by the state, politicians, and even revolutionaries according to assigned race, gender, and ability. By taking action in such moments, people are refusing to be *defined* anymore. This is not to say that those imposed identities or (dis)abilities completely disappear—but a difficult path away from them can emerge, at least for a moment.

This is why many cannot admit that the rioting and looting is coming from groups of black, non-black, and white residents from Ferguson and beyond. Some of these, you could argue, are “community members”—but they are not the ones who matter in the eyes of the commentators, because they don't have any economic or social sway, or else because they don't fit into a preconceived conception of what an “oppressed identity” can do. Those commentators, be they liberals, black nationalists, white anti-racists, or old-fashioned leftist organizers, seem to see struggle as a matter of being victimized, in which we cower and look for an authority figure to save us—someone whose voice is heard more clearly than ours in the halls of power.

Whereas in Ferguson, in fact, struggle means an amalgamation of people (including a few anarchists) refusing to be victimized, defending ourselves, and sometimes taking the offensive against the police.

*If there were never anarchists in Ferguson, the police and political cults would have to invent them.*

## August 14

*It only took a day or two after the QT was burnt for the town to be invaded...*

Every wingnut political cult one could imagine is here—from the RCP, Socialist Alternative, New Black Panthers, Scientologists, anarchists, and Christian mime troupes dancing to inspirational music to militia groups like the Oath Keepers seeking, so they say, not to suppress protest but to protect “free speech” and private property. Alongside them, representatives of every media outlet are here spewing lies.

I learned a long time ago to rein in any assumption that I can manifest revolt merely on account of my political position. The flowery words I speak do not manifest revolt. Usually, my political cult has little influence when actual rebellion starts—and the same goes for all the other cults. This doesn’t stop the others from inflating their agency as they vie with each other to get in front of any struggle that surpasses them. That includes many well-worn political organizations with “revolutionary” pretensions.

The script plays out like this: politicians look for the revolutionary subject to harness in this moment—or else, in some cases, the reformist subject. For some Marxists, it’s the (black) working class; for some anarchists, it’s the (black) lumpenproletariat; for liberals, it is just (black) people regardless of who and where they come from. But none of them ever actually find this subject, let alone “organize” it, because you can’t find an abstraction. Historically, they seek to discipline and mold these “subjects” to their wills, whether via mythology disguised as theory, concentration camps, policing, propaganda, or violence. And if history is any indication, they usually fail miserably, though this does not stave off the resulting misfortune.

Looking around at the scene, it’s immediately apparent how problematic most of the other pre-existing political and religious formations are; they are all so quick to tell people what they *should* be doing. Dozens of groups from diverse racial and political backgrounds have descended on Ferguson to “help” or “save” people. It feels like a political and religious market economy, with everyone competing to be heard. There are groups getting into megaphone-powered arguments with each other, forcing us to listen to their competing tirades, each of which is really just someone’s glorified inner monologue.

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## ***The national media have been playing scenes of a violent and tense police siege of a suburb.***

Scenes from Ferguson are starting to have the effect of delegitimizing the police. A debate about the militarization of police is raging among politicians and in the media, both locally and nationally. Liberal patriots are outraged: “This is America, not Iraq.”

In a PR move, the Governor reins in the county police and temporarily hands over control of policing the protest to the Missouri State Highway Patrol. The St. Louis County and Ferguson police forces are comprised of mostly white officers. The Governor chooses a black highway patrol sergeant, Ron Johnson, to head the operations. Ron Johnson is from the area around Ferguson and is an incredibly nice guy—or would be, if not for his being a cop. Unlike the St. Louis County and Ferguson police, Johnson promises to allow people to protest, to heal, and to gather. This works like a Jedi mind trick on some people, but it doesn’t quiet other people down. Instead, it creates a slippery slope, a situation in which anything goes because Johnson wants people to “freely” express themselves, to have space to heal together. Little does he know that the way many of us choose to express ourselves and heal involves breaking a lot of laws.

W. Florissant, the main drag just a block away from the site of Mike Brown’s murder, looks something like a victory parade. The QT serves as a meeting point for people. There’s a large barbeque pit going. People are taking selfies in front of the burnt out QT. Kids are chalking anti-police graffiti into the parking lot. I see little kids with FTP painted on their faces. Everyone and their grandma is wearing a mask of some kind. People are dancing, there’s a drummer busting beats between obsolete gas pumps covered in graffiti. People are drinking, smoking weed. Cars overloaded with people inside and out are honking their horns unrelentingly, blasting music.

The crowd is huge. A vast cross section of black St. Louis is here, as well as a diversity of non-black folks.

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I wander through all of this, mostly on my own. Every few feet, something new is happening, unrelated to the last thing. It feels like an out-of-control party, a release after so many tense nights, like anything *festive* goes. “We burnt this shit down and we want to be heard, don’t fuck with us anymore... or else.” Today, the police have momentarily ceded us some territory. Conversations are taking place. I can’t count the number of times someone,

probably alluding to my whiteness, innocently asks me why I am there as I wander around the vast crowd. Every conversation is rewarding, a temporary melting of racial barriers.

There are soapboxers soapboxing, but they're on plastic milk crates... and instead of unamplified voices, they have megaphones—that oft-used tool of counter-insurgency—to yell over us plebeians. Crowds are listening to them. Some compete for listeners; I wander from one to the next. The Revolutionary Communist Party, the Nation of Islam, preachers, others I don't know. It's odd and kind of comical, in our atomized and digitized world, to see people doing real-life 1900s-style agitating.

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I get into an argument with a RCP member who tries to give me a paper. He's so damn beguiling it's creepy.

“Y'all are just vultures, a cult coming here to recruit for your party. It's sick!”

In a way that sounds charismatically cultish he lays it out for us, “We aren't a cult. We need people who study revolution. When you are sick, you go to a doctor who has studied medicine. When you need revolution, you go to those who have studied it for us!” So their leader, Bob Avakian is like a revolutionary doctor you call when you're sick. Like a doctor, he has the solution to your ill. It's particularly creepy but it also describes a lot of political ideology—theoreticians who are basically business managers who study human movement from above, in order to move us around like chess pieces.

I counter: “When I'm sick I usually don't go to the doctor. I have friends or family who can take care of me, I have a tincture that clears my throat, I can rest, I have all these people and methods and much more! It doesn't take just one person to heal you. They might make some contribution, but they are among many who help me. This is like what's happening right now.”

He can only give me an eerie smile. The conversation ends there.

Later, I run into some of the younger RCP people and we get into a similar conversation. It seems like they are a little more disgruntled now. I mention how odd and cultish their group is. Both of them are black. They tell me that they don't worship anyone, especially not a white European man. In my head, I'm hoping this means they'll quit the party.

Regardless, the RCP is useful in some ways. Unlike the conservative groups (like the NBPP or the Nation of Islam), they allow anyone who wants to speak to use their megaphones. They don't shame people for wanting to fight the police. They add to the chaos of it all. But fuck them and their cult all the same.

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At some point, a contingent of New Black Panther Party members walks through the crowd in a military line and takes the median of the street in front the QT. Some of them are trying to direct traffic, which is pretty useless because people aren't following their guidance at all. It's literally bumper to the bumper. It all seems like an act. They're dressed in garb straight out of the 1960s and '70s: berets, combat boots, flak jackets, leather jackets. They

line up in military formation and march in place. They raise their fists and chant “Black Power!” over and over. Some people chant it back, but most people just stare. I see a few others laugh. I get the sense that a fair amount of the crowd is put off by how out of place this group is. The clothing style and revolutionary discipline seem like a caricature. It feels fake, like they’re fronting in a crowd that is much bigger in scope than they will ever be.

The NBPP and the Nation of Islam have an “organized” approach that aims for some kind of strict discipline. They aspire to have authority in the crowd. Beneath their militant rhetoric, they maintain a conservative agenda. They preach homophobia, anti-Semitism, patriarchy, and racial separatism, and they aspire to black capitalism. They want black people to serve as cannon fodder for their cause. In this moment, all these authoritarian groups can do is scream into a void that no one can fill. Years later, when they appear in documentaries or run for office, they will be able to talk about how they organized during the Ferguson rebellion. For now, the cacophony of everything overpowers the possibility of a disciplined force. Still, these groups are tenacious.

The useless effort to direct the traffic on West Florissant feels like a ploy to show that they have some semblance of control when they really don’t. The people in the cars aren’t even listening to them. Basically, they ultimately aim to do state and capital better and be more just. They are in this scene to show people that they can do it better. The hope is that they will recruit people who will become enthralled by their discipline. In the days coming, their lack of influence will become much more apparent.

There are many, many others who are part of this vast crowd that are doing something totally different. They might not even be aware that the NBPP is performing for us because they are physically somewhere else where they can’t hear or see them—this crowd goes for blocks. It’s hard to pin people down or define them, because unlike the political cults that seek to distinguish themselves with fashion, banners, and insignia, most people are not in strict groups. There are some loosely defined groups—friends, family, relatives, crews—but most people aren’t holding their own political banner hoping to make a name for themselves. This does not mean people aren’t political, that they aren’t arrogant, or that they have totally “pure” intentions. Maybe if some had the chance, they’d try to form something similar.

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Media tents are everywhere. I see some famous news anchors whose faces I recognize, even if I don’t know their names. Is that... Anderson Cooper? They’re reporting live. I try to photo bomb them. Large groups of people are surrounding their tents. We’re watching TV in real life. Some big media outlet is interviewing Ron Johnson while we yell at them. He’s good with words, but whatever he says is not the answer to the questions and feelings we have. What could he answer to our satisfaction? He’s literally the badge and the gun that holds it all together. I can see the August sweat dripping down his face, and it’s especially shiny in the bright lights of the media cameras. He’s really trying to be a good guy. I saw Jesse Jackson walking through the crowd earlier, a large entourage following him. Later on at home, I see a video taken earlier at the McDonalds parking lot down the street of some guys confronting him, yelling at him to get out, to take his exploitative shit somewhere else.

There are uniformed police in the crowd; they are all black and seem to be only higher up officials. For the most part, they prowl around safely and get in conversations with folks. One black police lieutenant talks about how there's a need for more black-owned businesses, that if black people controlled their own economy, they'd be fine. They'd stop killing each other, blah blah blah. He makes some racialized generalizations about other ethnic groups he considers more business-minded. "The Arabs, they run a tight ship. They're quiet. Now the Asians, they work hard, and when they leave work to go home, they keep to themselves. You never see them! They don't do crime; It's like, where do they even live? You don't even know where they live because they are so quiet and unobtrusive. It's because they have something to do." People are laughing at his racial tropes.

Every once in a while, people yell at the police or throw something, but it's pretty chill. Not entirely a lawless zone.

Over the last few days, one of the most interesting developments is the number of people wearing masks. Unlike the fashion of the NBPP, masks seem to resonate with a lot of folks in the crowd. The facelessness of the moment, the lawlessness of the situation, and the feeling that what happened to Mike Brown could happen to many people here makes the masks come across as a statement against being easily defined and corralled.

The range of ages of people wearing masks is broad. Little kids, old people, moms, teenage kids. It's crazy.

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## ***the magical stoner sojourn.***

Night falls. I've been here for hours and it seems like it will never end. I'm starting to tire and lay down on the sidewalk to rest. A helicopter flies overhead and shines its spotlight on us. A lot of us flip it off and yell at it. A black guy laughs at the white kid—me!—flipping off the ghetto bird with his bird and offers me his blunt. I take a few drags and, and, and... whoa... The scene takes on a whole new atmosphere.

We talk a bit about this whole scene, bonding a little over our annoyance at the helicopter and how happy we are about the wildness of this night. Eventually, he gives me the rest of the blunt and heads off.

I'm walking through the crowd. The cars are still honking—they never stopped; it's pretty unnerving, amplified in my haze. Large groups of people are everywhere. A sound system is playing from a box truck reading "No Shoot! No Loot!" I read this as a subtle expression of support for the looting: if you don't shoot, we won't loot. People are dancing to hip-hop radio songs. Every once and awhile Lil Boosie's "Fuck the Police" comes on. The music keeps cutting out because people are streaming it from the internet. Every time it cuts out, the crowd goes wild jeering at the DJ.

I wander and stand around, soaking in all the impossible moments. I'm stoned: "I'm in this historical vortex and, man, I can't even conceive of what this time or space is. It's so vast!" Eventually, I meet up with friends. We go to the car and think about leaving. We are sitting in the trunk of the hatchback, talking about the scene, when a bunch of people in a car—well, inside and on top of it—stop in front of us and start to serenade us with some song that I don't know. It sounds amazing. We all laugh and smile. It's beautiful.

As the night wears on, the Nation and the NBPP try to impose their people's "curfew." It's a pathetic attempt at "community policing," and it doesn't work very well. They drag some cones in the street, tell people to go home, announcing that the party is "over." You've had your fun, now go to sleep. Lots of arguments ensue. Usually, in the end, people just drive around the cones. At one point, a man gets out of his car and throws the cone on the sidewalk and drives through. These wannabe police, just like the other ones we're fighting, don't really want us to dance.

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This moment was inconceivable days ago, but now it isn't. Black and poor people are not given space or attention in this part of the world. People are finally getting some power in their own way, in their own words, unapologetically, with a middle finger to the law, refusing to be just another #hashtag or death for activists to use. Instead of listening to the preachers and revolutionaries telling you to go home, instead of getting locked up, policed, or killed

for being who you are, you should be able to be who you are. How terrible that it takes a combative moment for many simply to be.

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## August 15

*No matter what the police do, it just enrages us.*

Today, it's clear that the more PR-savvy police higher-ups are battling to regain the legitimacy they've lost over the past few days. Like yesterday, they continue to walk through the crowds and mingle. Some cops even have the gall to say that we can *police ourselves*—that this is a space for grieving and the police should back off. They're admitting their lack of legitimacy, but also are still policing us by proxy by deputizing those who want to volunteer. By "policing ourselves," they mean letting political and religious cults like the NBPP and the Nation of Islam police us.

Ron Johnson makes an appearance later that day and we surround him. In a surreal scene, many people are singing his praises while many others are doing the opposite. We're screaming at him to get us some kind of justice. I can see that endless sweat rolling down his forehead. He's nervous and it is hot out, too. He can't answer any of our questions. The police killed Mike Brown, they murdered him, and now they want people to be calm and civil, to wait—to wait for something we all already know: that the cop who killed him will get the benefit of the doubt.

We're the crazy ones, the irrational, emotional ones calling for blood. The police are cold, logical, and legalistic. "I can't answer that. It's a process. You'll have to wait, let justice take its course—please—please—be patient until the grand jury is over," he says to us. Soon more people surround him and he starts to walk briskly back to his car. He's hot, he's stressed, but not angry, just scared—the longer he's here, the more incensed we might get. He's trying to keep our anger from spreading. We surround the car for a moment and its sirens buzz at us. Some of us continue to shout insults, asking him to release the name of the cop who shot Mike Mike, while others yell about how they want the cop put in prison. Some call for his death, for the cops to "bring him to us."

Contrary to the panned chant that one hears at certain demonstrations—"this is what democracy looks like"—this is definitely *not* what democracy looks like. This is a firm challenge to it. The democratic state has voted in and enforced some of the vilest acts in recent history, including the genocide of native peoples and chattel slavery of black people. Democracy and the avenues of political change it offers us have never really served anyone except those who own everything—including, in the past, those who legally owned many of the ancestors of people in this crowd.

Mob-like, we are asking for the head of the cop who murdered Mike Brown, saying that if we don't get an indictment, we'll shut everything down. There's a veiled threat of arson and gunfire implied. There is something very powerful about this. If the supposedly neutral justice system doesn't deliver, many places might burn. They tell us to let justice take its course, but we know it's just us in the end.

*It's amazing to be in a situation in which the police and those in power can't do anything right.* Right now, it's dangerous for them to think on their toes, because they can't do anything rash, even if they're getting attacked. They can't fight back in the ways that would be effective, even if they want to. They're being forced to follow a chain of command. In the crowd, we don't have one of those, at least not formally, so it's hard for them to manage us. They seek a leader to groom who could calm us down, a disciplined and predictable formation to stand off against, but they can't find someone to calm us down nor a uniform formation to strategize against.

This conflict cannot be stopped right now because there are *too many of us*. Without a doubt, this gives us some advantage. They must move slowly in this situation so as not to inflame us. But they can't help but inflame us simply by being there.

So today, they plead with us to wait for all the facts, to let justice take its course, to calm down, to engage in productive conversation. They tell us that they understand our sadness, our anger, our lives. What a trick: they're the ones with their fingers on the triggers that put some of us in coffins, the ones with the keys to the jail cells we find ourselves in so often. All the solutions they propose lead us right back to... them.

Last night was festive, but it was still tense. No one forgot that Mike Brown was gone. They're letting us congregate, letting us process our emotions in this space, but it's not enough to bring Mike Brown back. The police don't yet know how combative some of us want to be. We can never be satisfied because they really can't give us what we really want.

*They might have to bring back the tanks and tear gas.*

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Around noon, the Ferguson police release surveillance footage to the media of Mike Brown supposedly shoplifting cigarillos from a corner store, Ferguson Market and Liquor, blocks from where he was murdered. The grainy footage shows him slipping over the counter and grabbing something. The storeowner seemingly confronts him, but Brown pushes him away. Alongside this footage, they release the name of the cop who shot him: Darren Wilson, a man who lived a pretty uneventful life before this. The name doesn't make anyone happier, especially because of the release of the footage.

*Tonight, the police are guarding the market...*

The shopkeeper alleges that he didn't know the police were going to release the footage. He's surely afraid of getting his market looted again and maybe this time burned entirely. When they release the footage, the Ferguson police say that Darren Wilson had no idea about the "robbery" when he stopped Mike Brown on the street. He had merely stopped him for walking in the middle of the street. It's clear that the release of the footage is meant as a defense measure for Wilson, a way to delegitimize Brown.

Mike Brown was not an angel. No one is. Angels don't exist. People do what they want regardless of what the law says. Some of it might be reckless. Some of it might be for survival. Of course, it's hard to say what his motivations were. Whether he stole the cigarillos means nothing to me. If he did, more power to him—I value life and theft more than I value a capitalist business.

We surround the Ferguson Market, where the parking lot is filled with police. They've become used to us not confronting them over the past few days. All of a sudden, we surge towards them and they scurry away. We're chanting at them, yelling at them to get out. Some of them come to a low fence and they're climbing over it, scurrying to their cars. We're putting them in a place they're rarely in—it's comical to see. At some point, the chain-link fence pole breaks from the weight of their bodies. I laugh at the terror they feel. We're about to surround them, there's so many of us. They rush to their cars and speed off.

A minute later, in the distance, I see that the whole street ahead of me is now lined with police tanks full of riot police advancing towards us. They come closer and tumble out as quickly as they can in their full riot gear. Then, from the riot van, a piercing continuous BEEPING noise. Prepared, I put my earplugs in. I'd never seen—or rather, heard—these before. It's a Long Range Acoustic Device—LRAD, as they call it in police jargon. With earplugs, it doesn't sound too bad; anyway, no one is that fazed by it. It really just makes us more pissed and we just yell louder.

Ron Johnson's false peace is coming to an end. After all, some of us don't want peace. As long as we are here, they are going to need police to put this rebellion out. Riot police line up in front of us on Ferguson Road and W. Florissant. We're yelling at them, throwing things at them, charging them. An RCP member is either reading something or soap-boxing. It just adds to this chaotic moment.

Media photographers stand between us; there are so many cameras flashing that it's blinding. Most of the photographers are white, most of their subjects black. Fleeting thoughts rush through my head: is this really how these people participate—voyeuristically, through a lens? Their photos make good riot porn; maybe they do this to illuminate the problems of the world—but that's what every fence-sitter says! In the end, whether they like it or not, they act as a seeing eye of the state. Where do they draw the line? Will they ever put down the camera and help in the fight? Or are they in it for the prize, the prestige? And what about all their riot gear? Their new gas masks and the bulletproof vests that let them stay in the fray with fewer consequences. We need those more than you do, you fuckers! In hindsight, there should be more people who take their things.

People are posing for the cameras. No one knows what's going on; the police are flustered. We could get tear gassed at any moment, but it's like we're on the red carpet surrounded by riot paparazzi. Souls are being stolen for the perfect shot. But we're not movie stars, we're nobodies to be forgotten, stored on a memory card, identified by the police to arrest us later, maybe put in a random clip in some documentary, a coffee-table book or some DOJ report.

Still, the presence of these voyeurs acts as a physical buffer between the police and us. Liberals are freaking about how the media is being suppressed; this is one of the reasons why the police have been hesitant to take the steps they would need to take to control the crowds. (This... and how many people are carrying.) At some point, the riot police tell media to leave the area. This is a sure sign that they're going to gas us. Considering their PR image, they probably don't want to gas "neutral" reporters. Some are leaving and going behind the riot line, *but a lot of them are staying and it's making the police hesitant to shoot*. Goddamn, they really must want that photo.

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People are throwing water bottles. Glory be, from the anti-oppression heavens, a white ally is screaming:

*“STOP THROWING SHIT! The community doesn’t want this! They’re gonna kill us all! They’re gonna shoot us all! STOP IT!”*

They’re really distressed. I want to tell them to go home if they are scared, and that it’s totally fine if they are, I’m scared too. Right now, it’s not helping anyone. It doesn’t help to scream at us like we’re children. This is a tense situation. There is indeed the real potential that one of us could get hurt. Some people know this, but others might not because they are caught up in the moment. People are acting recklessly. Sometimes when we act recklessly, we open up new avenues... and new traumas.

A black man standing near me scolds the screaming white ally. He asks:

*“If you’re not ready to die, then why the fuck are you here?”*

It knocks me out. It’s not something I feel entirely, because I want to live on my feet, to follow a path that leads to collective joy, not collective death. But what he’s saying is real. People will be harmed in a struggle for joy, for a world without chains, and there will be death. Needless to say, it shuts the white ally up.

I’ve overheard people talking about death and talked with so many people over the past few nights about it, about confronting police, about spilling blood, about feeling pain. As far as I can tell, none of them are politicians, none of them claim membership in any cult. I don’t know who they are. But they are people who have chosen to be out here and I want to be around them right now.

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## ***A sign of social control is rearing its head. It's not coming from the police.***

We're in a standoff with the police. Wearing gas masks, they are pointing their assault rifles at us. Clips that are usually full of metal bullets are now full of—please god—rubber bullets. The peacekeepers are trying to calm us down. Black nationalists Anthony Shaid and Malik Shabazz, St. Louis City Alderman Antonio French, clergy, the NBPP, and the NOI are among them. They are making a human chain, but they're *not* facing the police, they're facing us, trying to fend us off from the police. Exasperated, they are yelling at us to go home, to get on the sidewalk, telling us that if we want the police to leave, we should go home. People are yelling back at them: "Leave? Why should we leave? We were here first! We want the police to leave first!"

There's a segment of the crowd that is not complying with anyone who is telling them to calm down, be it the police or the elected officials, the clergy, the obsessive anti-racist liberals and social media radicals who blame white anarchists for rioting, the so-called revolutionaries who are physically blocking our way to the police. The practical-minded fools, surely trying to save our undisciplined souls, are preaching their political or religious dogmas like broken records. They are telling us that we are endangering ourselves, that we are asking for it, that now's not the time, that we need to calm down because the community needs to heal and they don't want a riot. They always invoke their fictitious "community."

When groups like those blocking us can't get through to us, when we resist their pleas for calm, they redline us—our rocks, our violence, our trauma, our screams, our personality—out of history like a speculator who bought stock in uprisings years ago and is now reaping all the social and political capital that they can. Now they're trying to flash their power, trying to sell, sell, sell because the market is right and they have a good chance of coming out on top with more recruits and social capital, but some of the stock is still unprofitable, robbing them of extra profit. They need the epic black freedom fighter story, but not with the unrepentant non-homogenous blackness and crassness that comprised it.

On the internet, on the streets, on the news, people resort to the usual racial tropes: the black people in this crowd are criminals, thugs fulfilling stereotypes of lazy welfare recipients. Or, from a more liberal angle, black people are just standing there and the police are shooting gas for no reason—the outright desire for destruction and the acts of violence against the police is only represented by a couple of people.

Both an innocence narrative that pities black people and the revulsion with which people respond to unapologetic black rebellion are perspectives that resort to racial tropes. One perspective separates "bad" criminal black people (the insurgents, the ones who loot, the ones who aren't "protestors") from the "good" black people. The other portrays an eternally

victimized and homogenous black people who can't take the initiative and fight for themselves, who therefore are swayed by anyone, especially white people. White people have no place in this struggle unless they accept black leadership—specifically, the black leadership in front of us forming a physical and mental human chain to stop us from attacking the police who keep the world the way it is.

Not surprisingly, the police have picked up this discourse, too, leveraging both the criminal and pity narratives to their advantage. It's laughable. Ron Johnson, at one point, blames most of the violence and gunfire on the "Canfield Boys," a possibly mythical gang of black kids who live on Canfield Drive. The infamous St. Louis city police union spokesperson, Jeff Roorda, will later write a book called Ferganistan about his Ferguson experience, including invented stories about the "anarchists" who supposedly brought guns for people in the streets to use. It's laughable, that as an ex-cop, he ignores that this is St. Louis, where getting a gun—legally or illegally—is easy for most anyone. He also writes that white anarchists taught black people how to burn down buildings in a way that leaves no trace. There really is very little distance between the supposed anti-racists and the police.

It's scary that, in this situation in which people are fighting against race and class society, even those who are sympathetic to the fight want to re-impose the material and ideological controls of racialization and class. They will go so far as to re-victimize or criminalize those who are resisting the very institutions that make them victims and criminals: race, capitalist property relations, the church, the police. It's as if they don't want things to change.

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*There's a sense of urgency that I feel. I fear that if we lose this space tonight, we may very well disappear again back into the world of daily miseries. It's like we're being sucked down a drain in a whirlpool and we don't have anything to plug the hole.*

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## Early August 16

After a long period of tense negotiation, the police start to leave. We cheer, telling them to fuck off.

Now we're celebrating. They're pulling away, but before they've all loaded up, one of the pigs walking backwards to the van slyly rolls a tear gas canister and a flashbang grenade towards us. He grabs on to the van as it peels off. The grenade explodes and we scatter. We're all screaming. "What the fuck!" It was like a firework sending sparks every direction. My ears are ringing.

I run to a parking lot with a friend. Fifteen feet from us, I see a man put a gun out of the window of his car and shoot it up in the air. I hide behind another car. I come upon a mother and her crying child. He's shooting all the rounds in his clip. Interspersed, I hear the mother screaming—*pop! pop! pop!*—into a phone, terrified—*pop! pop! pop!*—of the shots, telling whoever to come get—*pop! pop! pop!*—them, get them the fuck—*pop! pop! pop!*—out of there. It scares me, too.

I've never been this close to gunshots on the street before. I hear them almost every day in my neighborhood, but they always seem far away; I don't usually stop to think about them. This man shooting is terrifying a lot of us, but it's probably making the police think twice about coming back.

Some people are making fun of others for hiding: "He shot up in the air, it isn't no big deal, y'all!"

A voice of reason responds: "I don't know what you're sayin' man, bullets do come down!"

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## ***If you see an opening, take it!***

As the police leave, some kids are smashing out store windows. The first to go is a beauty store. (The next day, I will see a news story that interviewed the owners of the store. Befuddled, they'll remark, "We wondered why people were buying so many handkerchiefs.")

Boards are coming off of other stores. A lot of people are getting excited.

A middle-aged black man catches my eye and starts to talk to me. He laments that people are looting *again*. He seems pretty lost about what to do. I tell him that I think this is all for the best. A woman behind me is screaming about how much she hates this place:

*"Ahhhhh, hell yeah! Fuck this strip!*

*Burn it all down,*

*I honestly don't give a fuck,*

*it's all a*

*buncha fuckin' bullshit anyway!"*

The *Ferguson Mart* gets it, but not without an internal struggle. The New Black Panther politicians and their allies—who media outlets later called "gang members"—are guarding the store, physically stopping people from getting in. One of them definitely has a gun. He's brandishing it around and people are running from him. This asshole values this snitch business for some reason. But like the true customers that we *aren't*, we'll take our business elsewhere, thank you very much! A few stores down, people are breaking into another liquor/convenience store, *Sam's Meat and Liquor*. The exasperated and outnumbered NBPP & crew are too busy guarding the *Ferguson Mart* to notice the crowd moving to another place.

Too scared to go in—also, I've neglected to bring a mask—I stand outside. Crowds are coming in and out of the place; some people are carrying more bottles of alcohol than I ever thought a person could physically carry. One of them falls right next to me. I consider drinking it, but, unsure if the police will raid this area at any moment, I decide I don't want to risk being caught with it. Little did I know they would never come that night.

The media are taking photos of those who are looting, getting their money shot. Friends go up to them and scream at them to stop—their photos are going to help the police make arrests. One member of the press talks about the First Amendment; another is shocked that we'd want to defend anyone's "right" to loot and commit felonious acts! The photographers don't want to leave. At some point, one of the people looting threatens to pull a knife on one of them. After that, they leave quickly.

For hours, people loot and drink. I see cars pull up, fill up, and leave. *Some even return*. I'm yelling at anyone I see who is not wearing a mask to put one on. Most people smile at me and pull their collars over their faces. It's not just young people or people that would fit the stereotype of "criminals" or "gang members," as the media and police want you to believe; it's a large cross section of people, both young and old. At some point, my friends



and I cross paths encounter some middle-aged guys and share a drink. One of them asks me what time it is, then stops me: “No, don’t tell me! Fuck, I have to go to work so soon...” The riot seems to stop time.

I was hungry and thirsty. I had a few drinks, ate some chips, gave some food and drink to other people—all from unknown locations, of course. Later on, the turn lane on the street will be lined with empty liquor bottles.

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It’s 4 am and I’m starting to get tired. Someone has tried to set fire to the Sam’s. I watch a small flame burn, grow a bit, then die down, then grow again. I start to think it might be a good time to go home. The crowd is small and I certainly don’t need to be standing near a burning building—bad optics. Some activists might click a random blurry picture of me smirking with—if you cross your eyes ever so slightly—what appears to be a lighter in my hand. But before the fire can spread, the NBPP and an alderman, Antonio French, put it out with some soda.

After a while, the small crowd starts what sounds like a protest chant, but it’s not like any I’ve heard before. “WAL-MART! WAL-MART! WAL-MART!” As people chant, we get into our cars. Many speed off really crazy and another car nearly hits ours. Surely many people are wasted. And like that, the strip of W. Florissant is cleared. I never learn whether people made it to the Wal-Mart.

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## August 16

The release of the footage of Mike Mike allegedly stealing from the Ferguson Mart inflamed a lot of us. The hands-off policing policy that had been instituted the day before the video was released has backfired. The festiveness of the last two days helped us gain more numbers, emboldening us—even though it's hard to know who this "us" is, anymore. This strategy of letting people blow off steam failed. It didn't stop us from doing what we wanted to do. The community police force who blocked us from the police last night failed to stop people from taking over the street, attacking the snitch business, and looting goods. I can imagine the hawks on the police force wanting blood now, chiding the more liberal-minded cops for not coming in guns blazing, for being naïve.

Today, the police hold their press conference and hang their heads, stern, poised, and befuddled all at once. *They're disappointed in us.* They are at a loss as to how to discipline us. They emphasize that no one's life was lost last night. It's the only victory they can claim: *they didn't have to kill someone.* They kill and imprison people every day and then scold us about the value of human life.

Later, there is a march organized by Mike Brown's family. Thousands are there. We march to the Ferguson police station. It's a long walk and the heat and humidity is too much for some to bear. When we get there, the police have already amassed to guard the station. We're yelling at them with all we can muster. People are calling the black cops Uncle Toms, saying how they're often worse than the white cops. For what seems like hours, we stand in the hot sun, sweating and getting burned, yelling at lines of stoic cops.

Tonight, the police want to impose a bedtime on us. Midnight curfew. At the press conference, Ron Johnson and crew thank the Nation of Islam and the New Black Panthers for trying to keep the peace last night. Governor Nixon is there, too. He authorizes the deployment of the National Guard if anything gets out of hand.

A few organized political groups, including Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment (MORE) in particular, call for people to violate the curfew, citing the fact that the police are violating our right to free speech. The state of Missouri declares that they are going to call in the National Guard.

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## ***Drops of rain. If the god of the Christian evangelicals exists, he clearly doesn't want us to be here.***

People talk about a gentle loving god and a jealous vengeful god—a god conflicted about giving us free will, because he is already aware of what will happen if he lets us act freely. We will violate his commandments. The last few days have demonstrated that. The gentle god wants to keep us safe—maybe using the rain to give us soggy clothes, to force us to go home so we can sleep in our blessed beds in the comfort of our homes, if we are lucky enough to have homes. God might tell us that we're fighting the good fight, but we need to do it with forgiveness, patience, peace, and love, or other keywords people use to signify civility. When we don't listen, he becomes both angry and pitiful. He deploys the representatives of his will against us. He threatens us with eternal guilt, purgatory, hell, sin, death, fear, thunder, lightning, prison, rubber bullets, tear gas, arrest, traffic tickets.

Talking about God's will used to be one of the ways that people justified genocide, slavery, Manifest Destiny, and submission. This sort of religious repression is waning in some parts of the world, but it is still very strong in others. In the US, the state and its laws are no longer described as representing the iron will of God. Instead, God controls us through self-imposed discipline.

The law and the various secular ways that it is enforced—police, drones, surveillance cameras, ankle bracelets, helicopters, prisons—are directly descended from the religious pursuit of purity and control. Like God, the law is above us, objective, with the cold and calculating formality of legalese. It can be both oppressive and repressive, depending who you are and how you act against it. It is born from fear, from the desire to direct the infinite possibilities of life into a few well-worn paths.

The law comes from the same tradition as the Lord, a set of rules intended to dictate behavior for the benefit of those who rule us—those with the most guns, the most votes, the most money. The law stands behind the police, warning us, using the velvet glove and chiding us in a language that alludes to our “safety.”

“Safety” is Orwellian doublespeak for violence. Tonight, the riot police warn us about the consequences of not following the curfew. *If you do not leave, you will be subject to chemical munitions and arrest. You can be here until midnight, and if you want to leave just before that, here are the routes you can safely take.*

Malik Shabazz is here again tonight to keep the peace. He's telling us to go home, roaming the crowd with his posse, trying to calm the people who react to his words. Shabazz is a lawyer. He's good at debating.

Over and over, he aims his megaphone at the individuals who are staying: "*We cannot guarantee your safety tonight. Come on, black man, go home, we aren't strong enough to fight them now! If you stay, they will arrest you and you won't get bailed out. You will spend 90 days in jail for this.*"

What? *We* can't guarantee your safety? Do we even know you? Who asked you to guarantee our safety? Are you sure you don't belong on the other side of the police line?

The aforementioned MORE has called for people to violate the curfew. For a while, the organizers argue with each other over their megaphones. Sadly, MORE eventually capitulates and starts telling us all to go home, as well.

The supposed revolutionaries and progressive politicians who claim to support the demonstrations pontificate and lie. They want us to go home, just like the cops want us to go home. The way they talk, they act as if they are the ones who brought us out here in the first place. They are used to managing the crowds at the demonstrations that occur in their activist bubbles. They see any crowd as a mass of bodies to direct.

*"Go home. Gone. Get. Git. Skedaddle. Beat it. It's not time for you to be here yet. We need to get all backroom deals, all the theatrics ready before you can come out and be part of the production. It's not the time yet."*

The rain continues and a lot of people leave. The crowd before was huge, now we are fewer. But there are still a lot of us. The clock strikes midnight and nothing much really happens. The NBPP party leaves, but not before saying, "This is your last chance, we warned you!" The representatives of MORE have either left or stopped speechifying. A crowd of us are ready for whatever. I'm talking with a few random people, asking what we're going to do next. Should we stay or go? Should we act like we're going to stay and then leave at the last moment before the police tear gas us?

The crowd moves back and forth towards the police line and away from it, throwing rocks here and there. The police intercom on their bearcat tank tells us that we have to leave or else we will be subject to arrest. Everyone is like, "*FUCK YOU!*"

I see a lone cop car come up from behind us. Its lights are flashing. Or else, I think they were—memory gets mixed with trauma and adrenaline at this point. Other people notice the cop car. "*They're coming from the back, they're coming up on us from the back!*" A lot of people start to run. I run back and meet up with a friend. I say that we should probably run for it and we take off down the road.

## ***one thousand emotions***

Someone in the crowd starts to shoot toward the police car—

I see my friend I think we're going to be fine just keep running don't look don't look just run I don't know where the bullets are coming from I just know we gotta run and take cover for a minute and then we can be OK we can all go home and rest and eat and sleep and love each other struggle snuggle more fight our battles and see another day laugh until we grow old remembering the moments the things we were proud of the things we regretted the ways we contributed to this beautiful ugly moment the ways we wish we could have but alive alive hearts beating breathing breathing still working forever to defy gravity

We're running he's right in front of me five steps away I hear his scream he's on one leg hobbling the other one in the air collapsing burning forever into a deep memory falling to the ground his stomach on the sidewalk screaming for an instant and then silence an inert body collapsed fetal position in pain shock a bullet to the heart

The gunfire is still happening I can't tell the line of fire I run over grabbing him the shots are firing still shots fired shots shots shots toward the police car fuck fuck get low get low over him turn into the smallest ball I can please don't hit me too hit the police hit them not me

On the ground covering him putting my mouth to his ear shocked not sure why but I'm whispering whispering in shock like I don't want to startle him asking what happened what happened are you OK please are you OK are you OK no response a moan I grab his arm shake it I look over and see muscle coming out of his leg an exit wound no blood but he's not responding not moving no blood anywhere

They run out of rounds I don't even notice

People surround me friends come up to me I say he's shot my friend asks by what was it a rubber bullet I look him in the eyes about to burst to lose it no a fucking bullet I want to cry to scream but I stop myself I can't lose it right now in this moment if I do he might die but I don't even know what to do

A protest medic comes up to me my name is I don't remember is it David Phil John Adam he says you're going to be OK can you tell me what's wrong can you hear me can you see me I focus on the medic I can't imagine he's ever been in this position he's probably only dealt with tear gas Maalox pepper spray rubber bullets but he's helping me center myself in the chaos that is what I need right now to lose composure could mean losing my friend I hear him moan what's wrong what's wrong we haven't stopped trying to get him to talk to us my stomach my stomach

The human need to help everyone wants to it's powerful it's meaningful but it's too much it's like we all want to help but we are all talking over each other we are all scared for my friend who is on the ground in pain dying

People are grabbing me pushing me telling me to do things I can't do I'm overwhelmed they're in the way everyone is talking at once I can't hear them all at once I can't tell how many people are around now they encircle me the medic my comrades and my friend who is passing away right before us the crowd wants us to move to get him out of here

A man yells at me he's pacing back and forth he yells over and over no ambulance is gonna come we gotta do this ourselves we don't need no fucking police we gotta do this ourselves we don't need no fucking police we gotta do this ourselves we don't need the police

## ***we gotta do this ourselves fuck the police...***

I'm telling everyone get back get back give us some space please please please the medic is lost this is out of his league a car pulls up behind us I ask him what should we do should we lift him is that OK will that kill him what should we do what should we do the medic doesn't know but he tells us to lift him we grab him the man who was screaming about the police pushes me away from my grip I fall to the ground the man grabs my friend and rushes him to the car with others

Another friend arrives in her car she screams put him in my car put him in my car no no no that's my partner that's my partner put him in my car no no no no put him in the fucking car a struggle ensues for his body and the man who was screaming is pushed away from our friend he ends up in her car the car speeds off the car leaves

Everything is amplified we are all pacing running around I wander inside myself lost what just happened to us our beloved friend it's OK there wasn't really any blood it's it's it's OK he's OK please no no no I just saw that I just saw I just saw I just saw that I can't get rid of that stop stop stop go away please please

But I can't have any privacy or safety in my trauma a police tank pulls up loud a monster blinding lights revving engine with pigs pointing their guns at us from the top I think you did this you did this all this fucking pain with your bullets tear gas batons jails prisons death I want it all to burn for it all to go down in flames with you all inside tortured for all the bullets you fire at us to explode to backfire into your mechanical hearts I hate you and the law you protect what you really are now is bare your gloves are off and some rebels in the haste of it all albeit with a lack of skill want to shoot back and give you back some of what we feel

A friend's car pulls up the doors fly open everyone I came with climbs in and now I'm sobbing sobbing body shut down we don't know where to go we don't know where to go in this place where is he going where did our friends go with him

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## ***war on misery***

I sit for hours crying alone and with friends terrified about what could happen you might die and I might have been one of the last people to talk to you before you went under I can only stare into space not thinking replaying over and over

I remember in the hours before how inspiring it was to be in this zone the police and us some of us in the back watching some throwing rocks some pontificating or scolding us

What are we doing what's the next thing we gotta do to make this rebellion go on forever

We talked minutes before you were shot I remember you were on top of a utility box one of those boxes that regulates stop lights you were talking to old friends new friends up there telling us what you saw the police were telling us to go home over and over we mocked them and thought about our exit strategy

The crowd moving back and forth relative to the police line I was a little bit scared but most everyone else was too so I didn't feel alone you comforted me from up on your vantage point we joked about the curfew with others how we were going to stay like we were never gonna leave put up a front like we got this you can't make us leave but really we're gonna leave because we only have rocks

Is it better to lose valiantly with a little bit of bravado or courage than immediately to admit defeat

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## August 17

I can't go back today.

I have never cried so much. I'm surrounded by friends who are doing the same. We all assemble at his house, sleeping in a pile together and crying, hoping that everything will be OK. We're trying to shake out the emotions and the moment the bullets were flying. It replays over and over in my mind, and all I can see is someone just a couple of steps from me falling to the ground. In shock, I stare into space, withdrawn from the world. I guess this is what it means to process trauma, to struggle to get back to some kind of equilibrium so I can navigate in this world.

Trauma builds inside of us and we don't get to work it out in a healthy way. Whether it's because we don't have a support network of caregivers or we don't have time to deal with it—something else comes along to knock us out again. Trauma also becomes normalized, making it easy to lose empathy for others because it feels like the world is full of traumatic histories and situations.

Later, I watch TV and see that people are attempting to attack the staging area of the police and National Guard. Folks are breaking up cement blocks to make smaller rocks, throwing Molotov cocktails. The police later describe this as one of the most intense nights they faced.

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The political power that comes from a barrel of a gun is not something to take lightly. The person famous for that turn of phrase, Mao, helped to bring about the deaths of millions of people. Yet leftists and radicals still rally around the cult of the gun. Guns are often seen as the strongest means of resistance—rather than just one tool in the vast toolbox of resistance that requires collective power, not cadres of revolutionaries.

In response to the events in Ferguson, there has been a call by some to take up arms, to militarize the struggle, to build an army, to get all the “lumpen” black people to be disciplined armed soldiers for the cause. This would give the state a more legible struggle, one involving generals and soldiers. This is exactly how the state organizes to defend its power every day—in militarized formations. We often see this strategy employed by people who want to wield state power over others themselves.

It might be necessary to employ guns for self-defense in the process of building the world we want. It might be inevitable. It is important to know how to use them in collective struggles, to get comfortable with them, just as it is important to learn how to steal electricity, how to work together to grow food or produce propaganda. We have to be multifaceted, to develop a wide variety of skills. But any effort to militarize armed struggle around the sole

use of guns will immediately end in failure, because in a militarized war, the state and its lackeys have more firepower.

I don't want reckless gunfire in which my friends and other rebels are shot by our own. Nor do I want disciplined military formations with their patronizing talk of defending "the people" as if they are something separate from us, above us, and we ("the people") should watch from the stands as they play revolutionary army. The "people" are not a mass to protect; we are active, creative, and smart in ways that do not always fit into the prescriptions of ideology or military strategy. Many of us defend ourselves every day without need of formal protectors. History shows those protectors are often more dangerous to us than the things they are supposed to protect us from. Cops are the perfect example of this.

Rather, we should seek to nourish individual and small group defense so it can grow into something bigger, acknowledging the diversity of ways people take action. Rebellious situations like the one in Ferguson help us to see each other. Some of us might bear arms to defend ourselves, but mostly the power of such a moment emerges from our shared determination to keep this space alive.

This struggle is populated by many different groups of people who are meeting each other and figuring out what it means to be in this space together as some of us learn how to defend it from police, how to sabotage capitalist infrastructure and carry out attacks on property. Some folks do have guns, but the police do not know who does, and that seems better than them knowing, because this makes it harder for them to pin down their adversary, predict our response to their actions, or plan the best way to repress us.

## August 18

The police really want this to end. They're trying every means at their disposal in their press conferences. They have a pastor awkwardly praying for it to end, they have Ron Johnson giving lectures about the value of peace and patience, and then—shaking their heads—they show the table of seized evidence from last night: Molotovs made from 40-ounce bottles, handguns, chunks of concrete, bricks.

Governor Nixon declares a State of Emergency and calls in the National Guard to protect the police command center. The police announce that they will not allow crowds to assemble, that all protesters will be forced to continue moving along the street or be arrested. However, the curfew on the city of Ferguson is lifted. Police block off W. Florissant to cars and set up checkpoints at both ends of the strip. Many of the side roads through the neighborhoods that lead down to the strip are also blocked off. This new tactic is aimed at those who had previously used the side roads to flood onto W. Florissant and escape once things got too hot.<sup>1</sup>

Early in the afternoon, the rapper Nelly arrives on the scene to tell people they have options besides rioting. Someone in the crowd shouts back: "You have options, you're rich!"

As darkness approaches, the crowd swells and people begin to march in the streets defiantly. A standoff with the police line develops; rocks and bottles fly through the air. In response, peace marshals link arms and form a line between the crowd and the police, attempting to push people back off the streets.

Despite the efforts of the peace police, some continue to confront the police throughout the night. One woman rips a "DO NOT ENTER" sign from the ground and carries it into the road to face off with the police, occasionally setting it down to go back into the crowd to check on her baby. The police are almost enjoying this. They start to use their intercom to try to get us to disperse. As someone tries to pull another sign out of the ground, they warn: "IF YOU ARE DESTROYING OR REMOVING STREETS SIGNS, YOU WILL BE SUBJECT TO ARREST!" People respond with laughter. "IF YOU ARE HOLDING CITY PROPERTY, YOU WILL BE SUBJECT TO ARREST!"

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In the midst of it all, I'm sitting on a curb watching the scene with some friends. A black woman who happens to be holding a knife is speaking her piece to a part of the crowd

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<sup>1</sup> This part of Ferguson does not conform to a grid, making it difficult for police to patrol and giving demonstrators the upper hand. The streets are generally dark and confusing, and the residents of some of them are outright hostile to police—particularly Canfield Drive, the street where Mike Brown was murdered. When the police tear-gassed demonstrators, it was possible to retreat to the neighborhood. Some could just go right home because their yards were right behind the strip of stores.

watching and it's powerful. I'm sitting with some friends, a little group of white people. She comes up to us—still holding the knife—and starts to talk to us about how we all bleed the same blood. Over and over, we all bleed the same blood. If she cut us, she yells, if she cut us, *we'd all bleed the same fucking blood*. As she says this, she makes a cutting motion with her knife.

This discourse is so unlike what I have seen on the internet or in guilt-ridden activist circles. Sure, the truth is more complicated. The rich, the poor, the black and non-black bleed the same blood—but depending on your circumstances, you might bleed or get cut down a bit less or slower than the others. Still, some of these identity descriptors don't necessarily tell us that much about people and what they've been through or what they feel. In the midst of an active police state, this woman is not trying to create sympathy for the police or rich; she's talking about those of us who have chosen to be out here.

What is one to do with such comments? It's clear that white supremacy does not melt away just because a black person says we all share the same blood. The important thing is that a comment like this suggests the possibility of a fissure in the reifying category of "race" itself, which is a framework that gives more centrality to concepts and roles than experiences. In many political circles, the current racial analysis seems based on a totalizing political rhetoric that does not present a real challenge to the institutions that maintain a racialized society or the way of seeing the world that those institutions promote.

That discourse paints over the joyful or traumatic details of all the stories that people have around resisting those institutions. When I look at people, I have no idea what they have been through on an individual level; this reality can undermine nationalisms and ideology. These simple historical constructs we are given or forced to use to describe ourselves do not serve us. This is not to deny the existence of all the forces that privilege some people over others based on identity or ideology—it is to emphasize that we must be irreconcilably opposed to those forces, that we have to struggle against a world order that depends on imposed identities to go on enslaving and exploiting.

Racialization has created a nightmare that has origins in a nationalist—and therefore ruling class—understanding of the world. People are divided into supposedly homogenous groups under the banner of a state or an identity. The racialization and color-coding of people serves the same function—and using class as identity is no different.

On the one hand, we see the oppressive ways that the narratives and institutions of power have imposed race, constructing and privileging or disempowering different identities and relegating them to certain areas of activity. On the other hand, we see the glorification of race from those who have bought into racial nationalism—be it white nationalist, black nationalist, or nationalist in general. This mythology makes gross generalizations about everyone according to their "historical" ethnic roots, whether those are the "white" European civilizations of Rome and Greece or the "black" African ones of Egypt or Nigeria. The reality is more complicated. Most European societies are not really descended from Rome and Greece, and "whiteness" and "blackness" are very recent inventions. Most "European" or "African" serfs must have had little interest in being seen as Roman or Nigerian or for that matter "white" or "black." The ones who identified themselves with those constructs were

usually the ones who lorded over, enslaved, and exploited the others, colonizing people and forcing them into an enclosure of nationhood.

Civilizations write their narratives in the blood of those they rule through conquest and enslavement, a process that whittles down our being to the categories they force us into. The rulers of previous civilizations oppressed their populaces according to frameworks similar to “race,” but distinct from it. They too enslaved people and forced them to do their bidding, to work their lands, to build their infrastructure and pay their patronage, effectively forcing people to become something other than they were, eliminating their potential to be what they wanted on their own terms. We do a disservice to our ancestors when we look for nationalist or cultural roots in these bloody stories. We might be able to find regional identification, perhaps, but the problem of history is that it reduces us to what our masters say we are—not our actual lives and experiences. What they say we are is what creates the unrest we feel within ourselves, because we aren’t reducible to it and we can’t help but not be even when we try. Repressing these inherent contradictions requires police and prisons. It’s what they are for.

Taking all these details seriously is the opposite of all ideology. Creating an alternative political framework would be a vast undertaking; it would threaten all politicians who seek to represent. Not to be able to define large groups or give a narrative to “history” would undermine all political projects. What is the solution?

We aren’t history. We are caught in the crossfire of feuding factions; the rhetoric of some the anti-racists makes this clear enough. It is another re-imposition of being that appears different, but really isn’t.

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Allegedly in response to a rumor of shots fired, the police eventually fire a barrage of tear gas into the streets. People fearlessly throw the gas back, but the quantity of gas in the air makes it nearly impossible to stay on W. Florissant and we fall back towards Canfield. More canisters are fired, more tear gas fills the air, and some in the crowd work together in an attempt to set Red’s barbeque joint on fire with Molotov cocktails and gas. Some people are throwing Molotovs, but rather poorly. A kid gets one from a friend and throws it, but it’s an awkward throw and only flies 10 feet. We all laugh, like, damn, nice throw. Someone runs up to the building and throws one in, but the fire goes out. I see someone else running to Red’s with a container of what looks like water. He gets to the broken window and pours it in and the fire goes *whoosh!* Actually, it’s gasoline, not water.

A friend and I strike up a conversation with two people. They must be 18 or 20 years old. They’re asking us what our deal is. They tell us they’re gonna be out here tomorrow, that they hope to see us later, that we gotta get more organized, that we should all get gas masks and keep fighting.

The police are still telling us to leave. They drive up in their Bearcat, the equivalent of a Brinks armored car but bigger. They beam the lights of the Bearcat at us, but then someone shoots at it. We all scatter. As we go home, remembering the nights before, some of us yell, *If you’re gonna shoot, shoot straight!*

## August 19–21

To add to the misery, another black man by the name of Kajieme Powell, who is mentally ill, is killed by police in the Riverview neighborhood of St. Louis City. He went into a store and allegedly stole some drinks. A video comes out, showing him armed with a knife. The police arrive and shoot him dead within 20 seconds. Powell was more than 20 feet from them and the motherfuckers shot immediately. There are the usual calls for calm. Antonio French, the alderman whose ward is nearby, once again encourages us to let justice run its course. He even goes so far as to congratulate the STLMPD for being transparent and releasing the video immediately, in contrast to the Ferguson PD. This has the effect of placating a lot of people.

Finally, on August 21, for the first time since they shot Mike Brown, the police and their political counterparts succeed in imposing order. The number of arrests coupled with their slow learning curve has finally caught up with us. The cops have blocked more and more of the suburban side streets that gave us a tactical advantage.

Despite the intimidating police presence, we continue to demonstrate our anger and sadness by marching up and down the street. The police have parked their cars along the sides of the streets, creating a barrier that makes it impossible for us to get in the road. They've basically created a circle we have to stay in. Members of the Nation of Islam, church leaders, and liberal activists are helping them to enforce this. They are shouting and pushing people onto the sidewalks and away from police lines. Some small conflicts erupt, but none of them get out of control.

A young black kid is yelling at the clergy. "Y'all oldheads have been on this peace and love shit for forever and it's got us nowhere! The 1950s, you were on it! The '60s, the '70s, '80s, '90s, you've been on it, look where you're at now!"

## Tiring out

The eventual and inevitable exhaustion has finally arrived. During the next weeks, until November 24, there are a few notable flare-ups, but a general peace compared to those hot August days. The passion, anger, and power many felt has not disappeared entirely. But those of us who have to hustle, who can't be in the streets forever, are forced to return to work, to school, to childcare or eldercare, to coping, to whatever it is we do to scrape by. Unfortunately, this leaves an opening for those whose role in society is to handle management, reform, and representation. The narrative of the rebellion is increasingly taken over by non-profits, politicians, clergy, and some new activist organizations that have emerged over the past few months. Many of them have resources in the form of social networks or finances with which to continue and represent the fight that initially got ahead of them. The narrative becomes simpler. Much is erased. It's inevitable.

This is not necessarily malicious. Some will charge that these groups are getting rich off "the struggle" or mismanaging their funds. There were non-profits that were literally getting hundreds of thousands of dollars to spend to build their names. And yeah, some of it was George Soros money—he does fund organizations that counter unfettered rebellion. But those resources were not reaching random people on the street.

It was counter-insurgency in action. But this isn't a conspiratorial critique. This is about the role of non-profits and money. Most of us will never see any of the Ferguson money because money is finite and there will always be too little. Because there is too little, these groups rarely invest in anything or anyone that won't give them results and more brand power—which is to say, in most of us, with our plethora of problems: poverty, debt, prison, trauma, un/employment, eviction, and so on. *From a purely capitalistic standpoint, we are not a good investment.* Inside any economic model, our appearance doesn't make people with political power feel safe, whether it's because we're black, poor, were not educated in a respectable institution, or speak in a language that doesn't compute within the system. Often, what we say is alienating and seems unstrategic to those who learned their sense of strategy in a university. We're full of passion, a multitude of voices that cannot be commodified or compressed into a neat political constituency or issue.

In any real rebellion, there is no center to find, no center to fund. There is no coherent narrative, no single legitimate voice that represents the identity in question, no "most authentic" voice from "the frontline," no one who can speak solely in the name of "community."

Even when a lot of people know each other and have some sense of community or collectivity, there are still the usual challenges and atomization imposed by capitalism, racialization, policing, class status, the state and its politicians, and the day-to-day challenges of individual survival. This seems obvious, but it's useful to remember, because when things cool down and the professional activists become "the movement," when they make their

documentaries or write their books, you might wonder what happened to all the combative folks that you shared this moment with.

You might not be able to find us because we don't all meet in one big room. Nor do we often make it onto camera or into publications.

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## Buildup to the Non-Indictment

**September 10** — Organizers call for the shutting down of I-70 in solidarity with Michael Brown and to put pressure on the prosecutor to indict Darren Wilson. Police respond with an overwhelming show of force, with roughly 300 officers deployed. A crowd of protesters gathers in the street and boldly marches towards the police line in an attempt to break through and shut down the highway. The police succeed in stopping protesters from reaching the highway, but they are unable to calm the crowd; bricks and bottles are thrown at them. Police make a few arrests but fail to catch some of the culprits, who escape through the crowd into the surrounding neighborhood. One middle-aged woman exclaims to the crowd, “Start saving your shit, put it in a plastic bag and throw it at these motherfuckers!” and “Now is a good time to rob a bank!”

**September 23** — Mike Brown’s memorial burns in the early morning. Residents blame police or white supremacists. Throughout the day, supporters clean up and rebuild the memorial. Meanwhile, tension builds as word spreads about its destruction. When night falls, the streets are once again filled with people, this time without “peacekeepers.” Police are met with bottles and rocks as they force people off the streets and into the neighborhood. After a brief standoff on Canfield Drive, which the police are still too scared to enter during protests, shots ring out as someone fires towards the police. In the morning, two high-ranking officers complain about having to dive behind cruisers to avoid being hit.

**September 28** — A large crowd of protesters throws bottles and rocks at officers outside of the Ferguson Police Department.

**October 2** — Police evict a protest encampment that had been occupying an empty lot on West Florissant in protest of the murder of Mike Brown.

**October 4** — Protesters briefly disrupt the St. Louis symphony, singing “Which side are you on?”

**October 8** — Just before dusk, an off-duty police officer working for a private security company in a wealthy area of the Shaw neighborhood shoots and kills 18-year-old Vonderrit Myers. Within a few hours, hundreds of people have gathered at the intersection. Police offer the usual story that the kid had a gun and shot first. Many witnesses and friends claim that the “gun” was actually a sandwich Vonderrit had just purchased. The crowd’s anger grows. People begin to surround the nervous police officers, shouting abuse and taunts. The police, realizing that they are outnumbered and the situation is beginning to be unsafe, try to leave the area in their cruisers. People surround the cars, smashing out their taillights and the breaking the window of a detective’s car as he drives off.

One officer, as he hastily retreats, realizes one of his fellow officers is missing. “Where’s Joe? We’re missing Joe,” he shouts over and over to replies from the crowd that, “Joe’s dead, man, we can’t find him either.” After the police leave the area, protesters take to the street

and block traffic on the major boulevard in the area, Grand Avenue. A few minor scuffles happen throughout the night, with police attacked any time they approach the march. It is a sign of the climate in the city that when officers' cars are attacked, they flee the area rather than calling in backup. The city is clearly scared of escalating events and having a "Ferguson" on their hands.

**October 9** — For the second night in a row, a large crowd gathers at the intersection where Vonderrit Myers was killed. The crowd marches down to South Grand and proceeds to shut down the on- and off- ramps for highway I-44. The police keep a safe distance from the crowd, trying to de-escalate the situation. Eventually, the crowd starts to march down Flora Place after one woman points out that it is the wealthy residents of that street that pay for the private security guard who killed Myers. As the crowd approaches Flora Place, the energy starts to grow—people bang on cars, scream at the residents, and blare air horns. Protesters steal American flags off of front porches and a few houses receive bricks through their windows. The crowd gathers in an intersection and burns the collected flags. The crowd marches back towards Grand Avenue, weaving through the neighborhood along the way. When protesters reach the main intersection, three cops boldly run into the crowd. The officers are immediately surrounded and shoved out. Within minutes, roughly 100 officers flood the area to rescue the three officers, spraying the crowd with mace.

Brief scuffles follow, but the crowd is mostly dispersed by the large police presence.

**October 12–14** — Under the banner "Ferguson October," activists call for a weekend of disruption in memory of Mike Brown and to push for an indictment against Darren Wilson. The weekend is full of demonstrations. During the day, protesters shut down or disrupt various events including political campaign rallies, the Rams game, and multiple Wal-Marts, to name a few. At night, people gather outside of the Ferguson Police Department.

The events of the weekend, while relatively peaceful, do achieve the goal of disrupting the normal flow of life in St. Louis and bringing attention to the case.

**November 17** — Ahead of the announcement about whether Darren Wilson will be indicted, Governor Jay Nixon preemptively declares a State of Emergency. National Guard troops move into the area and guard 43 locations across the city, including electrical substations, police stations, shopping malls, and government facilities. An eerie tension descends on the city as residents await the verdict while the National Guard drives the streets in armored cars.

**November 21** — Two members of the New Black Panther Party are arrested for allegedly buying pistols under false pretenses. It's an FBI sting operation. In the investigation that follows, police accuse the two of a plot to murder the prosecutor, the governor, and blow up the St. Louis Arch.

Later, they each pled to four federal felony charges and were sentenced to 84 months.

**November 23** — While people are still waiting for the verdict, protesters depart from the site where Vonderrit Myers was killed and march through South St. Louis. The march shuts down major intersections and disrupts traffic throughout the city.

## November 24

The days are tense leading up to the announcement of whether Darren Wilson will be charged. The city is on edge. It's easy to strike up a conversation on the street about the topic with anyone. In the courthouse, paying a traffic ticket, you might run into a guy who talks to you about strategy and what we should do next—"Idiots, don't tell the police you're gonna block the highway, just do it!" At a medical study, you might hear from the phlebotomist, who happens to be Mike Brown's aunt, "We as the family didn't go out there, we're didn't want to give any support or appearance of support to what went down." Or just walking around your neighborhood, it isn't uncommon for some random person to yell, "Justice for Mike Brown or nah?" All you have to do is put your hands up and that is enough.

I am a little lost. It feels like years have gone by; my eyes are dry of tears, my head and body are still full of shock, my hair is even starting to grey. Organizers have brought in many people from out of town, but where are all the rowdy people I ran with? The ones who defended themselves, who threw rocks and looted stores? They seem to have disappeared, the same way I had for those months. The trauma of what has happened is not lost on me. We do have to sleep sometimes. For a while, I don't expect much to happen when the decision comes down, because much of what has happened between August and November has been in the framework of civil disobedience; many have sought to scrub the riots from the narrative completely. But I am prepared for anything.

In the days before the announcement, Ron Johnson was on the news talking about how he had met with "gang members" who said they would keep the peace. He told the reporter confidently: "I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at what's going to happen." *Indeed.*

A coalition of activist groups forms to issue "rules of engagement," demanding safe spaces from police, that police should not wear riot gear, not use tear gas, or have rifles. The most problematic demand is "Every attempt will be made to pinpoint arrests so that only **individual lawbreakers** will be arrested. "Kettling" and mass arrests will not be used."

Part of me hopes that this rules of engagement thing is a trick to make the police as unprepared as possible, that our "safe spaces" would actually be bases for us to prepare our next moves against the police, if they agreed to our rule of no riot gear or rifles. But obviously, it isn't a trick. It seems odd to expect the police to comply with demands that are about keeping *us* safe. Why would they ever do that?

The disparity of their force relative to ours is not to be ignored. But we shouldn't be groveling and begging. Compared to them, we have few ways to defend ourselves, but the reality is that the state needs weaponry to protect its wealth and power because without them, things could easily spiral out of control. In August, people were shooting at them, throwing rocks, burning things, tearing things apart, and it could grow.

What is going on is not just a matter of over-militarization. When the police needed more military force in past rebellions, they just called in the National Guard, who sometimes fired live rounds—for example, in Detroit in 1967.

What we're seeing here now is a two-pronged attack, in which the police and their reformist sympathizers create rules and demands that separates "good" protestors from "bad" protestors. Intentionally or not, these "rules of engagement" serve to conceal the reality of the situation. The police have tear gas, rubber bullets, and riot gear for a reason: *we are a real threat to the wealth and supremacy they protect*. This fight is dangerous. It can result in trauma, arrest, and potentially death. Many of us were more than willing to take that risk. We are ultimately safer when we confront this reality and support those who want to engage in combative actions.

## November 24, Evening

*S. Florissant, Ferguson Police station*

I go down to the Ferguson police station to be there when the verdict dropped. No one in the crowd expects Wilson to be indicted. We have known what will happen from the very day the grand jury started. It is a stressful to wait for something you already know.

Eventually, the moment comes. The prosecutor is reading the verdict. Someone has rigged up a PA system to broadcast the speech. It's cutting in and out. I can barely hear it.

I see people shaking their heads. The verdict is clear: *no indictment*. Word is spreading through the crowd. Folks start to yell at the police line guarding the station. Mike Brown's stepfather is screaming for people burn the police station down: "Burn this bitch down!"

Some people throw things at the police. I heard later that the first thing thrown at them was a bullhorn. This has all sorts of meaning if you think about it. *We yelled at you for too long, this thing has proved to be useless*. The time for talk is over! At this point, there are only something like a dozen riot police there. Some of them start to back away frantically, almost tripping over each other. It is nice to see the righteous terror inspired by a crowd of angry people.

A woman comes through the crowd, sobbing. I try to comfort her. She screams, "We're so far from ever getting any justice! Why?" We hug. Another woman comes up and holds her. I let go just as CNN comes over to record this moment. I get in front of the camera and yell at them for being vultures, for not letting this woman have this moment in peace. They eventually leave. The antagonism towards the media is pretty strong. Earlier in the night, some media figures had been robbed and others had been threatened with violence.

Suddenly, gunshots ring out and people surge over to where they are. People run towards the gunshots. Windows start breaking all around us. Some peace police are trying really hard to guard the businesses. It's impossible.

While that is happening, a large part of the crowd is marching to a formation of riot police down the street to confront them. People start to break up blocks of paving stones, concrete, anything they can find to throw. The sound of rocks hitting riot shields is constant.

A cop car is parked about 15 feet in front of the line of cops, where most of the crowd is. Folks start to trash it. Windows are smashed and anything loose in the car is grabbed. I hear later that someone popped the trunk and took an AR-15 out of it. No one is stopping anyone; if anyone wanted to, they'd be outnumbered. Nearby, I hear two young girls yelling expletives at the police. One of them, embarrassed, says, "Oh, I'm sorry! I don't usually cuss. I go to church every Sunday!" They laugh, pick up rocks, and throw them at the cop car. There are numerous cameras around and they aren't wearing masks. I try to warn them, but they just shrug.

The police yell over the intercom "PLEASE STOP THROWING ROCKS! YOU WILL BE SUBJECT TO ARREST AND/OR OTHER MEASURES! STOP IT NOW!" People start to rock the car to try to flip it. "PLEASE STOP TRYING TO FLIP THE POLICE CAR, OR YOU WILL BE SUBJECT TO ARREST! STOP NOW!"

The cops are firing rubber bullets and pellets. Beside me, there's a man yelling; suddenly, he screams and covers his eye. A pellet has hit his eye, blinding him. As more pellets fly, we're rushing to pull him away to safety while he screams. Some people grab the man and rush him to the hospital. Later, I hear that he lost his eye.

At a loss, the police fire tear gas and beanbag rounds. As we run from the gas, I see an older black man asking younger kids if they're leaving.

*"You all leaving already? Or are you just taking a break and gonna go back for more? Yeah, take a break, but don't leave! Keep your strength. Go back for more."* Sage advice.

People wait until the tear gas dissipates and come back and throw more rocks at the line. The cop car is totaled and there is nothing really left for people to do but to try to flip it again. In response, the police shoot more tear gas, this time a whole choking lot of it.

Finally, the crowd disperses into neighborhood as the police advance towards the police station, firing gas into the side streets. Some folks loot a BoostMobile store and other shops. Further away from the police line, a trashcan is on fire. I run into some folks who are looting pricey hair extensions and getting into a car. I warn them about covering their license plates and they give me a smirk from under their masks: "This isn't our car, we're good."

My group decides to circle back to the police line where our cars are parked. We walk through the neighborhood. Someone near us pops off a few shots in the direction of the police, pretty nonchalant. In return, the police fire more gas. We loop back to S. Florissant, where the cop car is now on fire. It is a beautiful and rare sight. Later I hear that another police car behind it was set on fire too.

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## ***W. Florissant***

We get to our car and drove to West Florissant. As we pull up, people are looting everything. All the boards have been taken off the businesses.

As usual, photographers are taking photos of those looting. Some folks go up to them and tell them that they should stop for their safety. Two of the three stop, very nervous. I tell them, "Don't pull that shit where I leave and then you're back taking photos! We don't want people to get arrested later for this. This is for your safety and for the safety of everyone." Terrified, they leave. The other guy looks like he could hold his own against us. He tells us he isn't a snitch.

We walk down the street. Lots of alcohol flowing. Lots of consumer goods no longer being consumer goods. A group of what seems like middle-school kids comes up to us and asks if we want any candy, because their purses are too heavy. In return, someone offers them some fancy cognac and one of them yells that they are underage—and yeah, give me some!

We had distributed masks and gloves earlier. Spray cans are being passed around for anyone to use. Food and liquor are shared, fires are blazing. People are getting drunker and drunker. Cars are starting to get a bit more wild and out of control on the streets. It seems like as people go from one store to the next, fire is following.

I'm standing in the crowd. The fire is blowing up the night. The police and fire department can only wait until we get tired and those with guns move on or run out of bullets. Pop-pop-pop-pop! I hear the noise and scan my surroundings. I watch the fires burn. The flames are so high. What is normally a sterile and controlled reality is transforming into its essence: toxic smoke. The material that is burning came from the earth, violently extracted to feed capitalism and transformed into bullshit strip malls. We frequent these places, we shop and shoplift there; they hire us, they exploit us, they take our money. Now, it's a billowing cloud permeating the air. I remember the woman in August screaming for people to burn all this shit down. Her demand has been taken to heart tonight.

The police slowly move in as folks run out of things to loot. The cops are not doing anything other than protecting the fire department, who are not able to put out the fires on account of all the gunfire. Our group decides to leave and go to the south side of St. Louis, where other protests are going on. But the thing is... our car is the now blocked off by the police line at the Ferguson Mart. Too sketched out and maybe too incriminated to walk past them, we try to sneak through the neighborhood, wondering if we can make it through the line some other way. We find a street that might work, stash any stuff that might get us popped, and walk slowly towards the cops. They immediately tell us to turn around and fuck off. Our next option: *\*sneak across a train bridge that goes over to the other side of W. Florissant.*

We sneak through people's yards and run up the hill to get to the tracks. On one side of us, there are homes; on the other, a grocery store guarded by the National Guard. We walk behind a fence overgrown with vines that give us cover. As we walk, tiptoeing, avoiding rocks, stepping on the ties, trying not to make too much noise, we hear the soldiers talking among themselves. Eventually, I hear one of them interrupt: "Hey... did you hear that? Sounds like there's something over there."

Fuck. They're pointing in our direction. We all freeze, hoping they'll think it's just the wind or the general cacophony of gunfire and explosions. Finally, we start to walk, but again, we hear them murmuring about a noise on the tracks. Realizing how sketchy this all is, that we could easily be perceived to be making an attack on the grocery store and the police command center, we decide to head back to the neighborhood and figure out something else.

We meander around the neighborhood. There are really only one or two exits to the main street and cops with assault rifles are guarding them. We walk past a house with people outside; they warn us that there's a cop up the way. Generously, they invite us inside. As we all drink liquor together, we thank them for their hospitality and talk about what's going on. The television is on, showing helicopter footage of W. Florissant totally on fire. We see footage of the two cop cars on fire on S. Florissant. One of the people in the house is singing the iLoveMakonnen song "Tuesday," because it's Monday and he's wondering what's going to go up on Tuesday.

Next, we see footage of people blocking Highway I-44 down on the south side of the city and then, later, footage of people looting the pawnshop on South Grand, which is more of a bohemian neighborhood. Most notably, someone comes out with a crossbow. The South Grand protests have had a different character; they've been more peace-oriented. Some folks who are familiar to us from the previous months in Ferguson are there, including the box truck that reads "No Shoot, No Loot" on it. A friend tells me later that they are among the first people to propose looting, yelling and pointing at the pawnshop. They're in the wrong space, sadly. Later, I hear from friends that activist organizer types were going around attacking anyone breaking things or trying to loot.

Eventually, friends with a car find a way to get us. We cram into their small car and head to the city via a very long route. When we get to South Grand, it's general chaos. The police are driving Bearcats around, shining their lights on small groups and tear-gassing every intersection in all directions. They're trying hard to get us to disperse.

We run into eight or nine teenage kids, one of whom I met in Ferguson in August. Some of us shared some chips together on one of the nights the stores were looted. Initially, we sketch them out, but eventually the person I met months ago remembers me and we're cool. Invincible as children, they really don't give a fuck; it's kind of crazy. They talk about whether to loot a clothing store down the road, but I had seen lots of National Guard in the parking lot when I had driven by it earlier in the day. We convince them that it is a really bad idea. They agree and thank us for the heads up. I ask them where they are from and they all respond, "North County." They kind of regret coming out here; they wish they had stayed in Ferguson where things are still happening and the cops aren't doing anything to stop it. But it's pretty amazing that they decided to make the trip out here to express their rage.



Some of their folks start ripping up metal trashcan lids and throwing them at the nearest windows they can find. Luckily, when the police drive by us, they miss this, because they are so busy dealing with the crowd down the road. But after ten minutes, they pop out on us and we all run.

We head back down South Grand to where most people are. Lots of people have now taken shelter in a coffee shop that has been an organizing epicenter for the protests in the city. It is also one of the “safe spaces” that activists asked the police to respect. The police are now standing outside of it firing tear gas onto the patio. There’s something like a hundred people inside and the gas is seeping in.

It’s absolutely terrible, but it’s not surprising that the police are not concerned about safe space.

## November 25

Tonight, there is another rally outside the Ferguson Police Department. The crowd is much smaller than last night. It makes sense; a lot of people were up late and lots went down. But people are still angry and confrontational. The police and the National Guard have increased their presence in front of the police department. They are largely able to maintain control, rushing into the crowd and attacking people every time a bottle or rock is thrown.

Down the street, there is a presence of mostly white, armed militiamen, presumably the notorious Oath Keepers—comprised of former cops and military. They're hiding on the roofs of businesses, wearing armor and sporting assault rifles. I join some folks in yelling at them, asking them what they're up there for.<sup>1</sup>

After we spend a few hours standing off with the police, someone yells that we should go down the street to Ferguson City Hall. We quickly depart, leaving the surprised police behind. Having marched a few blocks, protesters round a corner and approach the unguarded city hall building. There is a lone empty cop car parked in front of it. Immediately, people begin to attack the building and the police cruiser. People break the cruiser's windows and attempt to flip it over and set it on fire while others break the windows of city hall with whatever they can find. By the time the police arrive with their armored vehicles and cars, the crowd has moved back towards the main street, South Florissant. A few cruisers have their windows smashed out as the armored vehicles shoot tear gas into the air.

As protesters make their way back towards the police station, there is talk of going to the mall to shut it down. Some protesters do that later in the night. The night is much calmer, but mostly because the National Guard is preemptively guarding stores, unlike the previous night.

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<sup>1</sup> I've been having an internal debate about these Oath Keeper folks since I first saw them mingling in the QT lot in August. It's clear that they are fucked up, but they aren't entirely the Nazi-white-supremacist kind of fucked as much as they are USA Constitutionals. They prefer to promote the commandments of the slave-owning founding fathers of this country. Most notable is the Oath Keeper line about the protection of private property and the "right to protest" that doesn't destroy said property. This line has traction among many people in this country. I have seen these mostly white militia folks spouting this line in largely black crowds and it has worked quite well on some folks. Later the following year, some of the members call for a hundred black men to march armed through Ferguson. In the end, the Oath Keeper leadership purged those who called for it. They still had the march, but it was just a couple of wingnut and conservative black militiamen standing in the rain. It's worth exploring the institution of private property and how it functions as the foundation of the class and race relations around us. It is clear enough when you realize that the institution of private property was one of the complex mechanisms that made it possible for slavery to be systemized and rationalized. The slave owners who wrote the Constitution surely had this in mind.

## ***Postscript 2019***

climbing dead bodies so you can get to heaven

Long lines of symbols like the ones you've been reading are often used to obscure flesh-and-blood bodies. Written and spoken words have been used time and time again to deceive and hide. The first writers were an elite class who helped the ruling class to keep records of their slaves, grains, armies, money, sovereignty, and power. Much of what is known about past states comes down to us from these scribes who kept records of state and religious affairs but not much about the day-to-day affairs of ordinary people. There aren't very many autobiographies of enslaved Egyptian pyramid builders, or of peasants in Africa, the Americas, Europe, or Asia—and there are relatively few from African slaves in the Americas. Scribes helped to carve economic records, laws, commandments, declarations, and myths into stones that many of our ancestors couldn't read, which were ultimately used to victimize them. The Word was sacred and people were punished if they sinned against it. A fictitious god who saw and *drecorded all*, another kind of historian keeping tabs on us, often played a role in these stories.

The world used to hold a vast multitude of different human traditions in countless different languages. We'll never know what that was like. Was it better? I don't know. The dominant languages that exist now are dominant because of a few power structures that wiped out other languages and cultures. It could be argued that the languages we speak are not ours—that in some ways, they are opposed to our interests, the products of a long history of whittling down. But being stuck with them, we also subvert them all the time, changing the definitions of words to become freer or elude the authorities.

Our stories can easily change with time and perspective. Memory is foggy, days and moments can get mixed together or split apart. Sometimes we discover crucial new details—possibly years later.

## ***The Curse of Ferguson***

It's become hard to say "Ferguson" anymore, seeing this name invoked by so many different people to make so many different points. Everybody wants a piece. The state, the police, activists, anarchists, black nationalists, Maoists and other political cults, they all have their interpretations. Most of these highlight a few spectacular, exaggerated elements and downplay the others to fit their framework, often from a very self-important perspective.

The legacy of the events in Ferguson has put some activists and leaders on a pedestal to be looked up to. There is widespread pressure to prove yourself in activist circles—and, to some extent, in anarchist circles, as well. How many battle scars do you have? How many civil disobedience arrests or media appearances? How victimized have you been? These are among the ways that some have built their militant cred. In August, some of those same people were out on the street trying to stop the looting, discourage defense measures, and suppress the general combativeness of those outside their circles. It's not uncommon to hear some people use the fact of having been in Ferguson as clout, to speak positively of burning cop cars—without referencing their own repressive actions—in speeches at universities like Harvard where no one can challenge them.

I've seen yelling matches between demonstrators in which both sides were shouting "I was there from day one!" in reference to August 9, 2014. How petty to try to climb to the top over the thousands of others who participated in the rebellion—people who didn't make the media sound bite, had no activist safety network, who were not non-violent, whose voices were a little too quiet or whose language was not comprehensible to those who wield institutional power. The truth is that there never was a coherent frontline. People look for names and organizations to build a story around, but that's not what the story is.

Ferguson has become a symbol. In reality, it's just one more place among many where fucked up shit is happening. It's a small suburb of 20,000 people tucked into a sea of 30 different municipalities on the edge of St. Louis City. Strip malls, segregation, suburban roads, flat and boring. It could be anywhere in the US. There is no defining spirit that you can attribute to this place. It's not a rebel territory that is constantly defended; there is no well-established collective culture of resistance. For some, it's just another hashtag. For others, it became a struggle laboratory.

For the state, what went down in Ferguson has become a workshop for the study of "race relations," crowd control strategy, and reform. The same thing seems to happen after every uprising in recent times—a federal or state report is put out about what happened and what could be done in the future. Reading the narrative of the police can be funny and useful because often, it frames the situation more realistically, although they still get so much wrong. If nothing else, they're not trying to conceal the combativeness of those who attacked them in the way that many "radical" politicians do.

For many academics and revolutionaries, what happened in Ferguson is something to shoehorn into grand narratives about a revolutionary subject, Marx, or anti-blackness. How frustrating it is when they use their incomprehensible jargon to speak about a situation in which many people passionately fought and we can't even understand it! It's as if, even though we were there, we weren't there in *their* narrative: we become chess pieces in someone else's grand theory, to be moved around only when it suits the player. If some of us don't fit the theory, the thinkers just erase us.

Some of their analysis might be useful, all the same, but it's odd how inaccessible it all is considering how seriously some of these folks take "white supremacy" and "anti-blackness."

## Revolutionary Narrative vs. Daily Life

Distrust of the police and the state has led some to develop conspiracy theories about why the rebellion ended. For instance, some people, including some anarchists, believe that some of the people who died in the years after the rebellion were revolutionaries murdered by the state or white supremacists. It is arguable whether most of those who have died would have called themselves revolutionaries. It might be more accurate to say they were people who were caught up in the rebellion but also had past lives that eventually caught back up to them.

St. Louis is a violent place, full of intergenerational trauma that can follow you for your whole life. When I've talked with (usually working class) people my age from here, it's not uncommon to hear about how much they want to get out of this place. There are always stories about a friend or family member dying from gun violence or drugs. There's a legitimate fear of being the next victim of the police and the street.

The story about revolutionary freedom fighters being repressed by secretive enemies distracts people from examining daily life in mass society. In our own ways, we all suffer the daily indignities of living in a highly racialized capitalist order, in which interpersonal violence, work, repressive family relations, homophobia, drug and alcohol addiction, depression, and desperation are widespread and often much more deadly than the police. Daily life is killing us, quickly or slowly. The police are often not the most dangerous threat we face. The fight is against daily life.

## ***The Low Murmurings of a Lived History***

Death is not always the absence of heartbeat. It's not always a bullet tearing your soul apart from your body. It is not always something physical. Another form of death is never being seen or heard because your existence is too obscure or complicated to be incorporated into anyone's social or political program.

Yet, to me, this is ultimately a strength. We should not be in a hurry to help anyone identify or oversimplify us. We confound every great narrative, every program. That's the struggle, in my view: to resist categorization, to build relations without trying to measure up to anything other than the measures we make ourselves.

After the whirlwind, the record slowly becomes set and fixed. Our enemies—the activists, academics, preachers, police, and politicians—recuperate the story they have so desperately been trying to own. The story that exceeded their grasp. They have all the time they need to do this—it's their job to repress and package rage into something palatable. Some are actually paid to do this; that part is not a conspiracy theory. For those excluded from this show, time passes, memory fades, bills need to get paid, kids need to be raised, the hustle continues.

The documentaries and books are written, with notable figures quoted. It hurts to watch. It's like the twilight zone: in the first part of the episode, we're at war with the ones who decried the rioting, but later on, they've rewritten themselves as the new "frontline" militants. We know the secret, but it's no use trying to express it, the events are too confusing and the megaphone voiceovers are too loud. The reoccurring memory of many of these people standing with their backs to the police telling people to go home haunts us. It's hard not to feel like a bitter broken record.

In the end, a disconnected "movement" was born, but it is smaller, less proletarian, and limited to theatrical slogans, specialized roles (activist, organizer, politician, white ally or "accomplice"), and trainings that ultimately lead us back the same terrible chasm. Many people recede because the drama and the false sense of community in this scene are not worth it.

I am often tortured by the past. I find it harder and harder to believe in what I remember in my heart. Those sleepless August nights, the overwhelming and inexplicable moments, only reside in a deep memory that is difficult to access. Still, it waits to re-emerge. When? Tomorrow? Next year? Decades from now? Never again? *What was all that really for?*

In left political circles, it is customary to celebrate the recorded militant ancestors, to look back on radical movements and rebellions, to name names, to highlight organizations, to tell the great story. But these stories are only told because they are visible, and useful to those who tell them. History is the overpowering voiceover, the scenes cut or exaggerated to serve political purposes. Everything else below is a mumbling you can barely hear.

Still—what those days in Ferguson did to everyone who lived them is *deep*. It comes up in countless ways that will never be reduced to documentaries or tweets. All the stories from the people I've encountered in court rooms, at parties, shows, protests, or randomly on the street—people who have unrepentantly claimed that they or their friends started a fire, that they were the first ones to bust through the QT door, that they looted the Foot Locker first, threw the first stone, or just that they were there. This sort of folklore is much more powerful than any book or written account.

It is only fitting that this has all become a sort of folklore. History is written from above and far away, seeking to synthesize a moment into some kind of grand narrative. Folklore, though it is also limited, is much more personal. It is often spoken, poetically and bodily—and the places we usually tell our stories are not in the halls of power or in front of cameras. Folklore resists the efforts of scribes whose job is to translate our stories for academic or state research. The memory that is both collective and individual is powerful, because it exists in the depths of our bodies—not merely as words, but also in our trauma, our power, our laughter, our love and rage.

In times when individual alienation seems to be ever increasing, when it is hard to connect with others, it feels crucial to find that collective memory, to resist the institutions that seek to frame what we experienced according to their own interests. In times of revolt, the fog of memory lifts, giving us a chance to remember our bodies and our agency, our ability to act, to break with the roles we have been given, to do and be the things we are told we never could.



find each other.



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anti-copyright  
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do whatever you want

CrimethInc.  
Looting Back  
An Account of the Ferguson Uprising  
August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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