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Reflections on the Ferguson Uprising

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In February 2015, after months of confrontations in response to the murder of Michael Brown, a number of anarchists from the St. Louis area gathered to reflect on their experiences in the streets, their role in predominantly black struggles, and the ramifications of arson and gunfire in protests. We had sent some discussion questions to get the ball rolling, but mostly they let the conversation take its own course, speaking with admirable frankness and vulnerability. The result is an important historical document, of interest to anyone who might one day participate in something similar.

This transcript originally appeared in the 12th issue of *Rolling Thunder*, which examines the movement that spread across the United States from Ferguson in great detail.

Introduction from the Participants

When we talk about Ferguson, it's imperative that we recognize that what became a beautiful uprising began with a tragic loss, a brutal murder. The endless list of those killed at the hands of the state in St. Louis and elsewhere stokes our rage and fuels our tears. But like those we saw in the streets of Ferguson, we refuse to turn this profound anger and misery inward on ourselves.

The issue of this rebellion, at the heart, is far from a simple one and therefore the answers to questions posed are far from straight forward. The editors of *Rolling Thunder* put together a compendium of thoughtful and critical questions—analytical and clearly posed from a distance. But because of the nature of our experiences where our lives were ripped open—exposing us to the highest highs and lowest lows—the discussion strayed far from the questions posed. Ultimately, we didn't answer very many of them.

We, who were in the streets together over the course of several months in some of the most intimate and exhilarating moments of our lives, had a meandering discussion. At times, we started with the questions; at other times, the discussion sparked some of our

own. We were more drawn to start at the heart—how does it feel to touch the edge of your dreams? How do you possibly return to life the way it was before? Who holds you when you cry?

Because we did cry: from the intense moments of rage to the unbelievable and unbearable beauty we witnessed and helped to create. Because we witnessed what often seems untouchable—witnessed the impossible—witnessed some of the hope that dwells in our deepest places, and we cried because we touched the edge of great, great loss. And this brought us to perhaps the most important question of all: after all you've been through, what do you still hope and dream for?

Background and Context: “I Was a Lot More Pessimistic before This”

Luca: [reading] “How did you see the future of the St. Louis area before this and how do you see it now? What are the long-term effects shaping up to be? What new social bodies coalesced around the rebellion and the reaction against it or broke it up?”

Masie: I was a lot more pessimistic about the world and St. Louis before this.

Cameron: I definitely was.

Emma: It was incredible to be going to things that you weren't trying to make happen. It was such a relief.

Luca: Yeah, it seemed like this place was in a malaise, like much of the country, but here particularly because of how this place is. And so it was totally unexpected.

Cameron: I didn't expect this to happen and it was amazing that it happened, but I'm also thinking, is this just the sort of thing that might just happen every twenty years and then we're just back to nothing happening in between? I'm just not sure that it's a thing that

stay and then the split second you decide to leave something happens and then you're like “No, gotta stay.” And that just happens all night long.

Raul: The collective momentum and anger and excitement when people are flipping over a cop car. It takes a lot of people, you really gotta give it your all. Every inch of space on that cop car was somebody trying really hard. It's just a really beautiful experience. And how excited people are when it finally goes over.

Vera: And then the cop car on fire with things shooting out of its trunk. That was really beautiful.

Masie: Yeah, I remember the first night of the riot. And being like, “Shit, there's a lot of people at that QT without masks on.” And then an hour later seeing fire and I was like, “Well... that's one way of dealing with it. Won't be leaving any evidence.”

[laughter]

Masie: Yeah, the first night of the riot I remember us all getting back together at the house and everyone being euphoric, like, “Did that really just fucking happen, oh my god!”

Emma: Well, should we say anything else, or... end it in some grand way?

Vera: That seemed pretty grand.

Vera: ...and handing out hot dogs...

Luca: Yeah, and all the kids who were there. All the times that there were children or were pregnant women... especially earlier in the day, and sometimes late at night.

Masie: I remember one of our friends saying... the second night after Vonderrit Myers was shot [Thursday, October 9th], she had her daughter there, and she was running around, doing all kinds of toddler-type things. She was hanging out with other children that age, and then our friend was talking to their mothers, asking them "Is this irresponsible of us to have kids here? You know, since it could get violent." And the moms were like, "It would be irresponsible for them *not* to be here. They need to be here, we need to teach them about this." I thought that was really awesome, really powerful.

Cameron: There was some child psychiatrist who came out on the news saying, "Do not take your children here. They haven't formed their reality of the world yet."

Luca: That's exactly why you need to take them there.

Vera: I was at Vonderrit's memorial one night, and there weren't that many of us there, but there was a woman there with five kids, and some asshole came by in his car talking about "another thug martyr," yelling all this racist shit. And then the people that were at the memorial attacked his car and were kicking it and throwing shit and he raced away.

And that woman was like, "That was so important for my kids to see that. To see people fight back. To not accept that sort of thing."

Masie: All the people hanging out of cars.

Emma: Oh god, like twenty people! On some car that could barely pull itself.

[laughter]

Vera: Yeah, there were a ton of cars cruisin' up and down West Florissant.

Emma: It was even fun when you were sitting in your car eating and you're like, "Well, I think we should go home now," but then we

will keep happening. Because it happened, like, twenty years ago, in 1992, and police have kept killing people for years and years.

Vera: We have to take into account what was happening just locally in St. Louis. Maybe riots like this only happen every twenty years, but things were happening in St. Louis that led up to it. Like the Trayvon march.¹

Luca: Yeah, this is an event on a continuum of events that start way back, before Trayvon Martin and before Oscar Grant, that maybe goes back to the 1992 riots in LA. And how do those things relate to Occupy or the Arab Spring or the popular consciousness of these mass social uprisings? They're interconnected, even though they're not connected in an obvious way.

Cameron: Like, there was one guy at the Trayvon march who was getting pissed because we weren't marching yet. And he was quoting a Tupac song, "We riot, not rally." He kept saying that. When I saw him in Ferguson, I felt that there was definitely some kind of continuum.

Luca: Yeah, and because that rally that happened before the Trayvon Martin march was so official, there were all these senators and church leaders there that later were also connected to Ferguson. Even though that's a completely different population, there was some momentum connected in that way.

Vera: They tried to turn over a police car at the Trayvon march...

Luca: Oh, that's right...

Vera: ...and didn't know how to do it and people were telling them, "Well, this is how you could do it..."

¹ On July 14, 2013, there was a rally in St. Louis in response to George Zimmerman being found not guilty for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. The rally culminated in about 800 people marching through downtown St. Louis. Police barricades were moved and pushed through, graffiti was written on the back of moving buses, things were thrown in the streets. It quickly became the most notable anti-police march St. Louis had seen in recent history. This march took the cake until Ferguson, which took the whole bakery. A short article on the march entitled "The Storming of the Bastille" can be found at thedialectical-delinquents.com page of Ferguson coverage.

Luca: “And you should be covering your face right now...”

Vera: I heard those conversations happening. And then to see what happened in Ferguson... I do think there was a connection there beyond just our friends.

Luca: The other thing about how this related to St. Louis is that this place is really hard to live in, like a lot of shitty cities or rust belt cities in the Midwest. The quality of life here is pretty low. Even though cost of living is pretty low, too.

Masie: Should we list all the ways it's horrible to live here, so people don't feel inclined to move here?

[laughter]

Masie: Air quality, interpersonal violence... it's terrible.

Cameron: The police are... brutal. They're just terrible.

Masie: There's tons of Superfund sites.

Vera: So much poverty and crime...

Emma: You cannot swim in clean water.

Luca: The water's not clean that you're drinking either.

Masie: You're at least an hour away from wilderness. At least.

Louise: It's crazy segregated.

Cameron: Even the wilderness is polluted.

[laughter]

Masie: There's microchips you have to wear when you're here. Microchips under your skin...

[laughter]

Momentum and Limitations

Emma: Do you think people in general hope that when police keep killing people, people will respond again? Or is it just me? Do you think that there is that momentum? Even though we've seen people both respond and not respond to police murders since Mike Brown's murder?

Vera: I just hope that when it gets warmer that's gonna happen.

[laughter]

Cameron: He started just pouring gasoline all over it. And I was like, “This is not what I expected.” Normally when someone's running toward a fire, they're putting it out.

Luca: Going back to the people who the media made invisible out there... All the young women out there. All the young women on the front lines. Not backing down and not going home.

Emma: Yeah, even when they⁶ would be like, “Get the women out of here.”

Vera: Yeah, so many women were like, “Fuck that.”

Masie: I'm just gonna say it, I liked the party atmosphere down there and I liked smoking weed with those teenagers...

[laughter]

Luca: I had a night when it was like a block party [Thursday, August 14th] where I got high at the end of the night and it changed everything... I was just like, “This is so amazing.”

[laughter]

Raul: Yeah, you were texting me, like, “you gotta get down here! This is so amazing!” I texted Cameron and I was like, “So I need to get down there?” and Cameron was like, “Luca's really high.”

Cameron: Yeah, it's cool, but... maybe you don't have to rush down here.

Luca: It just made everything that much more surreal and that much more beautiful. It was so cheesy, but, it was just like, “Oh yeah...”

Well, it gives you pause cuz we'd been in it all week, like all week this was happening and happening and it was like, “No way, this is really happening, this is my real life right now.”

Emma: And it was awesome how the QT became a monument. Everyone was there taking photos of themselves and of each other.

Raul: And doing graffiti and having dance parties...

⁶ The Nation of Islam and the some elements of the New Black Panther Party were most responsible for initiating these calls.

them. “We’re telling everybody to go home and it’s just the crazy people who we can’t control that we’re gonna give you. That are gonna stay here.”

Cameron: And also it’s a great strategy for police, cuz they can just be like, “We can do whatever the fuck we want now.” Whereas before, there were clearly peaceful protesters, and they couldn’t. So they just mass arrest people.

Moments of Joy

Emma: We were supposed to talk about the wonderful moments.

Luca: Oh yeah... let’s do that.

Vera: One of my favorite moments was the night... it was the last night when we were all on Canfield [Monday, August 18th] and there’s that restaurant right there...

Luca: Red’s?

Cameron: The BBQ place?

Vera: Yeah, Red’s, I guess it was Red’s... and the cops were not coming down Canfield, so people were sort of playing with that area in between where most of the crowd was and where the cops were. And this kid lit a Molotov and just threw it into the middle of the street. And everyone was like “What!? Come on! Don’t waste it! Why the fuck did you throw it there?”

[laughter]

Vera: So he lit another one and poured a whole bunch of gas into Red’s and then everybody was like “OK, make this one count!” And so he runs up there again and throws it and lights it on fire... and everyone’s cheering.

Cameron: But then the fire went out and some person started running towards it with a jug of something... And I was like, “Oh, man, c’mon. He’s puttin’ the fire out.” And then it was just gaso-line...

Luca: There’s also this question of guilt that plays into it, of how people respond if there’s a gun involved. The question of whether they think the person killed by the cops is guilty. But even that person on Minnesota² who had a gun, people still responded. Anyway, I feel hopeful. I don’t expect it, but the possibility feels much greater now that something could happen when the police kill someone.

Emma: And how do you think it will move beyond people responding only when the cops kill someone to responding to confront the shitty conditions of everyday life?

Masie: My hope is—tons of people gathering, being pissed off, spilling onto whatever major street is nearby, maybe confronting police and pushing them out...

Jane: ...burning the nearest QuickTrip...

Masie: Maybe people could just start doing that when they get an eviction notice or when cost of living is going up or food stamps are being cut. That would be my hope, but I’m not holding my breath for that to happen.

Luca: I think that’s one of things about the limitations of the riot. There’s this disconnect between people being in the streets together and larger or more nuanced social struggle. How does rioting lead to bigger occupations or general strikes or occupied neighborhoods or completely autonomous zones or neighborhoods where the cops can never go?

Because there are these other entities now. To answer the question of how the social terrain in St. Louis has changed, there are more activists now, these politicized people, and they’re still trying to find their way, and there’s more socialists and more Black Power nationalists or people involved in trying to get “police oversight.”

Cameron: It seems like there’s always going to be a disconnect between those people and those who are not organizers. It’s gonna happen, but during the months between August and November, I

² LeDarius Williams was shot and killed by St. Louis police on Minnesota Avenue in St. Louis city.

was like, man, I feel kinda pessimistic that people are not gonna react like they did in August. The energy was different between August and November. It was more passive, though there were flare-ups from time to time.

But then in November, that happened, and I was like, “Oh, there’s clearly some division or distinction or separation going on and I’m not even a part of that.” I’m not a part of any of those groups of non-organizer/activist people and I’m just as outside of it as the activist groups are. Maybe that also makes it seem like I think there’s some fictional group I need to penetrate and join. But I think that’s really problematic. There’s no inside I can join or a vanguard that meets who are the realest of the real. There’s just people, some who are organized in sketchy ways that I can probably never be a part of, some who just show up and fight.

But yeah, there’s gonna be activists and organizers doing stuff in response to these killings and I think that’s still good. But before this, they were doing the same thing, that is, they were making it their “issue,” but maybe with less people. And now it’s just another single issue. Sometimes I get depressed when I think about that. But then random shit happens, like the rioting in Ferguson in November. And I see people I don’t see at meetings or at the usual organizer protests attacking police.

I ran into some people on November 24 that I had seen in August on some of the crazier nights. They seemed prepared; it was a large group and they were just roving the streets and causing havoc. They seemed to have no interest in being peaceful.

“There Was a Lot of Recruiting Going on”

Masie: I imagine by asking about “social bodies,” though, they wanted to hear about what new people had come out of all this.

Vera: Like, there’s more socialists in St. Louis now.

Masie: Yeah, there used to be almost no Left in St. Louis.

night’s over.” Which sometimes, if the night’s over, then it’s a good time to do that. But sometimes it’s like, “Well, you made that decision for all of us.”

Emma: I do feel like the world that we dream of, and having those moments of uncontrollability or possibility open up, will entail violence. And so just normalizing that, being emotionally prepared for that, and dispelling the glorification of it or the romanticization of it.

There’s something too, though, in the dichotomy—or, it can feel like a dichotomy—that you either are militant or you’re passive. And the riot is crucial, but in a rebellion, how do you sustain this and how do you not make it just against police but against our whole lives? Yeah, we want a social revolution.

And somehow, for people who are supporting or don’t want to engage in the same way, there need to be spaces or other things they can do. Or when people are shooting guns and someone’s scared and has to leave, what else can they do? Or, you don’t want to stay in the middle of a confrontation with police, so what do you do to add something?

I mean, we need everything to be transformed. Every relation, everything. So there’s more than just fighting in that one way—even though it’s those moments where there’s violence that open up what we desire. And that’s brutal... and worth it. Or, you have to come to that for yourself—if it’s worth it to you.

Louise: It’s interesting how much the guns being around... that people having guns, sort of enables the Left and the organizers to blame everyone who does stay out on those nights, to be like “Here you go, cops, take these crazies, they must be crazy if they’re still out here. And they want to fuck all kinds of shit up and shoot everybody, so take ’em.”

And that really enables people to say, “These are the non-violent people, and these are clearly the crazy, violent people.” And that really serves them, to sort of sacrifice the people like that. I mean, especially on the night of the curfew, that really served

way it went. It created this deeply inhospitable environment where the cops would not come in because of guns.

Masie: And sometimes it was casual and it wasn't that scary. It was like firing a few rounds into the air, and the cops are gone. The police helicopters are gone.

Cameron: And then the night... it was intense that our friend got shot, but even then, it was just like, these kids have guns and they're smoking weed and just hanging out.

Luca: Right, that's just what it is. They're just everywhere.

Cameron: Some of us were talking to them, you know?

Raul: And the night of the verdict, people shooting at the cops was what instigated collective action. People were shooting off away from the crowd, and the crowd of people moved *towards* that. Towards the gunshots.

Vera: Intentionally.

Raul: And as they started moving toward it, intentionally, they started also smashing windows, confronting the police...

Luca: That moment that broke the tension... where everyone was standing around the night of the verdict for like 15 minutes [after the verdict was announced]... nothing's happening, we're all just standing there. Literally, there is like six shots fired and shit starts.

Vera: Someone actually said, "Well, that's gonna pop shit off." And it did.

Masie: Which doesn't mean you have to fire gunshots to make shit happen.

Emma: Right. Without guns it's us versus them, and the enemy is clear. And then, I know that people with guns are still against the same enemy, but it is like, "OK, you have a gun, you have the power now too." And we should have the power, not just the police, but still, that's real. It stops you a little bit.

Masie: Yeah, it can... in these situations, where it opens it up and makes power more diffuse, sometimes when people start shooting, it's like, "And now we're all just running away, and the

Luca: And now there's becoming an established Left. It sucks!

Cameron: I was starting to have some real in-depth conversations with this socialist person, and then I realized that he's lobbying to get some alderman elected...

Masie: Goddamn socialists...

Cameron: And I was like, I was really into what you're saying, and now I realize all you want to do is get to a point where your political party is a contender. Which to me is a waste of time.

Vera: There was a lot of recruiting going on all around. At some point, it became like a political fair for the different groups.

Luca: Yeah, even that first week, by... was it Thursday [August 14]? When it was just like a street party. With the Christian mimes and all the wingnut preachers showing up...

[laughter]

Todd: And there was even that Christian rap circle.

Luca: The prayer circles.

Vera: The people who would walk between the riot cops and the crowd just saying "Jesus" over and over again.

[laughter]

Vera: But even the RCP [Revolutionary Communist Party]... they were there to recruit people and they did recruit people.

Luca: Oh yeah, they were there so fast.

Cameron: But we were there before them.

[laughter]

Luca: Cuz we live here! They're from Chicago! They had to come from out of town cuz there is no RCP in St. Louis. Well, now there is. Great!

[laughter]

Emma: People who have been arrested since the August and November events... some of us have gone to court for their appearances. And, yeah, the RCP is there, trying to recruit them. When we were there recently, they were trying to get people to come to some phone drive or something.

Vera: They were even trying to recruit us. They were like, “What’s your website? How can we get in touch with you?” I mean, not that they knew who we were, but... well, they do now.

Masie: It sucks, though, because, say you’re not involved in any group, you’re not some sort of politico, you’ve never been involved in any of this stuff before... The way people “get involved” in things is that they become activists or something. So unless anarchists are gonna do the anarchist form of activism, then what do we do? And also, how realistic is it for us to be frustrated with people who go to NGOs, or who go to these socialist organizations? Because it’s not as though they know obscure post-left theory or stuff that our friends have thought about and read for a long time.

I understand, too, that those theories come from people’s actual experiences of having to deal with this bullshit and being frustrated with it. So there’s that hope, maybe people will get disillusioned with activism and get more into the stuff we’re interested in. But then, maybe they’ll just write off *everything* instead.

Emma: Yeah, it did make me question going to court because... MORE [Missourians Organizing for Reform and Empowerment] is there, and the RCP is there, and I’m wondering, why am I there? Do I really want to stand in line next to these other groups that are trying to recruit this person? I mean, I’m not there because I know them.

So, yeah, it can be disheartening or something... that outside the riot or those moments I didn’t really make any friends. So I go to court cuz I hate prisons and I don’t want people to be abandoned when they get arrested, but then I don’t really know how we should...

Luca: Well, to overgeneralize and to speak as a “we,” I think we were really careful the way we moved through things not to be a group, not to be an entity, not to recruit, not to participate in a lot of the formal activist circles that came afterward, not to try to influence this building of the Left in St. Louis.

But in those moments when I was in the streets and it was overwhelming, or there were guns everywhere, I also had the thought that this is just what it’s always gonna look like. All these moments you’ve dreamed of, of the world changing and getting to be one that’s worth living in for you and the people around you, this feels like a stage that we will inevitably have to move through—and participate in if we want it to go a way that we want it to go. If we’re serious about the world changing, we have to adapt ourselves to the fact that maybe that’s the reality that we’ll have to deal with and learn to cope with. And maybe it’s just a matter of not romanticizing it. If enough of us have gone through it, we wouldn’t have the kind of fetishization, but maybe we could have a realistic acceptance that that’s what stands between us and the world that we hope for. Unfortunately.

Guns and Possibility

Vera: Do we need to take a break right now? I worry about this conversation being hard.

Masie: So... if people are using handguns, you might get shot, we realized.

[laughter]

Luca: We realized that’s real.

Emma: It could be your friend and not just some stranger. And it could be like a permanent loss from your life.

Raul: We shouldn’t fetishize it, but we also shouldn’t...

Vera: Avoid it.

Raul: Right, we can’t avoid it. We can’t control these circumstances either. They’re gonna come up. We can highlight the value of not bringing guns. But people are gonna do it anyway. So what are we gonna do?

Luca: Yeah, like, this question of the role of firearms. It’s hard to know what to say about them. But we all know they changed the

For example, I have a hard time not mouthing off to police, especially when I get really worked up. Repeatedly over the years, if I'm yelling in a cop's face, friends will be like, "OK, you need to stop doing that." I think it's partially for my own sake, but maybe partially for theirs, because they're the ones that will have to stay up all night to bail me out, right?

So is that just that experience multiplied by a thousand? Like, "You're going into an area where people are getting shot and almost killed. I'm the one that's gonna have to fucking bury you." I'm not gonna put that guilt on someone. It's just hard for me. Because in those situations, where people are just rushing out the door to go to the riot in North County, and I'm exhausted, and I need a night to not do anything, but it's like, "Well, realistically, I might be the one that has to bail them all out of jail and stay up all night." Does that make sense at all? I'm not telling people they shouldn't do those things, I'm just saying that's some sort of reality.

Louise: That's something that I've thought about for sure. When there is a sort of warrior culture where not everyone is going out and being a warrior, there are also the people at home who are going to experience the loss of someone and have to deal with that. And people who are always on alert that someone might be taken from them, or that they might have something really awful happen to someone else. I'm sure in Canfield, that's something that a lot of black women experience constantly. At any point, they could get a call that someone's been shot, someone they know. The element that's scary about some people being warriors is that it's not just those going out being warriors. There's also people at home.

Raul: It makes sense in the context of the anarchist movement that romanticizes rioting and conflict to highlight the downsides of that. And also, I can dream of and put together strategically in my mind a social revolution that doesn't look like that, or a moment where the world changes dramatically in a way that I want it to.

And that doesn't mean we didn't align ourselves. We aligned ourselves with people in the streets. But we walked away without having long-term relationships with people, because things were just happening in a moment rather than in this structured environment. We avoided that. You know?

In some ways, it was a benefit to us, in terms of not being identifiable too much by the Left... I mean, identifiable to put blame on us individually. But it does mean we haven't thrown our hat in the ring as far as trying to influence this thing that the Left is building. We haven't even been doing the things we normally do, like tabling or handing out newsletters. We've stayed away from that for a lot of great reasons, but at the same time it means we've missed out on being influential. Often, what anarchists have done in the past is to be an influence. To be like, "Hey shit's fucked up, shit's fucked up." Like pushing... but now we're pushing in a really different way.

Cameron: It also seems like a lot of the Leftist activist groups are in a similar predicament. They're not building. They're bigger, but I don't think they're really blowing up with people. The people still involved are those who have the stamina to deal with being political or being recruited, or being in long meetings.

Emma: I did realize, though, that it sucks that the people that maybe I'll have a real conversation with or build something with... it's cuz they're locked up, and then maybe I'll write them a letter.

Vera: Right.

Emma: And then, yeah, it's a less than ideal way to have a conversation with someone.

Masie: There are some anarchists in town who have gone the activist route. And it's interesting because some of them were invited to table at Antonio Martin's funeral, or maybe the dinner afterwards. And that led to one of Antonio Martin's family members reading stuff that we had written and stuff that other people had written about Ferguson, like, critiquing the police. And apparently the cousin was like, "I can't believe white people think this, I can't

believe a white person wrote this.” So they actually made this worthwhile connection.

Luca: Yeah.

Masie: So I don’t know what to do with that.

Luca: Well, it’s like, how do we do that more? That’s always been the question throughout this whole entire struggle, since August. How do we create long-lasting genuine connections?

Masie: And not just be proselytizing.

Luca: And not be trying to get dated....

Vera: Get what?

Luca: Dated. “Hey baby...” People were talking about getting people’s numbers so they could hang out or be friends. You know how many phone numbers I could have walked away with? But fuck that...

Pushing the Rebellion: “We Don’t Just Want a Riot”

Cameron: My solution to not being a part of the greater Left is to have autonomous events outside of it that are advertised. I mean, I think we’re still gonna fall into that no matter what we do. There will still be alienated relationships where we’re like “we’re the anarchists,” or “we have this idea.” But I think there are ways to mitigate talking to people like they’re recruits.

Another thing, I wish that... I think the most active thing we were able to do is when things were actually happening. When West Florissant was autonomous in some ways. Pushing that further—that’s what I think my role is. Making that space more powerful, cuz that’s where you actually have some real conversation.

Vera: But do you think we could have acted more or done more to continue that? Or could we have, like, been out there before

Care and Autonomy: “There Are Also the People at Home”

Luca: I think that we did do a good job of taking care of one another, especially that first week and the first couple weeks after our friend got shot. But it did come up a little bit in the dynamics of agency and power and who’s comfortable in the streets, and how close they could be to police lines. And people feeling ashamed of their fear for not being able to be where other people were. That came up some. But I think people tried to handle it really well.

I’m also talking about how I’ve internalized that, as someone who’s been an anarchist my whole adult life. And then having to go through and be so intimately connected to what happened to [our friend who got shot], and then trying to unravel all that for myself, you know?

And trying to figure out the ways this long-term trauma and violence impacted my own life. Looking at myself and trying to figure out where that trauma manifests, like when [in November] I was trying to be back at the intersection where our friend was shot. And like, knowing it’s time to leave, and not being frozen. Being able to function in a space where we’re surrounded by more gunfire and more literal fire than we were the first week. And being able to function, to be OK and feel comfortable in that environment or that terrain. But then to come back later and have to listen to a trauma therapist be like, “Yeah, it’s fucked up what happened to you. Really, really fucked up. And it’s not normal.” And just being like, “Huh...” It’s my own internal process around being “tough” or “hard.” What it means to grow up and spend your whole adult life within this culture.

Masie: I wonder too about when to tell someone maybe not to do something cuz it’s gonna affect them if it goes poorly, or when am I just like, “That’s their own fucking life. I’m not gonna tell them what to do or control them in any way.”

ple start snitching on each other. Like, “Holy fuck, now I’m facing all these years in prison, and I was told that I could handle this, and I can’t fucking handle this.”

Cameron: It also seems to oppose this dichotomy that you’re either the crazy one or you’re the respectable one, where you’re part of the movement or an organization. It ends up working out in favor of the organizations in some ways. There’s no other way to be that doesn’t fit into that dichotomy. There’s not an infinite number of possibilities of how to engage. It whittles everything down to a few choices.

Vera: Is that what you [Raul] were trying to say before? I’ve been thinking about what you said when you said, “We didn’t do anything, we just went home.”

Raul: Yeah, finding some other creative way of engaging if we weren’t gonna stay in the streets. I wanna hear other people’s thoughts on this, but I didn’t notice us having a warrior culture where we just expected everyone to be tough and not have to feel anything about that, not ever have to take a step back. Like, I know that that exists. Has existed for generations and does exist and has existed among us sometimes.

But in this situation, I noticed us taking good care of each other. And like, fighting and coming home and crying together. And fighting and also taking care of our friends. And listening to each other when we couldn’t fight anymore (most of the time).

So I took a lot out of the violent and directly combative aspects of what we were doing, and I felt really supported in that direct confrontation, or war-like scenario, by my friends. I didn’t feel like I just had to try to be really hard. It felt like I could be brave when I could and then cry about it when I was done being brave so I could be brave again the next day.

the Leftists, before they started coming in and recruiting people? Could we have pushed the rioting further before they came in?

Luca: I think that one of the things that was coming up for a lot of us was that we got to act not as anarchists. We got to act as part of a larger social force. It was really refreshing not to be the ones to bring the fight. And so it’s interesting to think... do we have any ability to push that further than it went? I don’t know. It was a tide unto itself that we got to be a part of.

Emma: People were already pushing it.

Masie: The irony, too, is that what brought all the fucking Leftists, what brought everyone’s attention, was the rioting. It was like, we’re taking a step away from what people normally do. We’ve caught the nation’s and the world’s attention, and so of course all these fucking vultures come in...

Vera: And rewrite the story...

Masie: And then... pushing the riot further, what does that mean? Cuz a lot of the more militant sides of the rioting involved guns. Did we actually want more of that?

Cameron: I wasn’t saying I wanted to push the riot further, specifically, but to push the situation. The rebellion. It seemed like people were sort of making allusions that this QuickTrip parking lot was the space to be, there was talk of it being dedicated to Mike Brown, but then it got fenced in and it pattered out.

Even just the murmuring about that space becoming an occupation was spreading. Some of us who maybe are in this room or maybe outside this room had some say in pushing that. It resonated with people.

And another thing, in a more riotous situation, people are gonna be on the front lines. Some of us like to be on the front lines, but also, they’ve got it covered, so what do we do while they’re on the front lines? For example, all these cameras and journalists taking photos of people doing illegal stuff, what do we do with that? How do we make that situation safer?

Luca: Yeah, that's part of the learning experience. Watching it happen and participating for the first couple days and being carried away and not wanting to shape it. And then pausing and being like, oh wait, we don't just want a riot. Something a friend said to me when we were talking about what small ways we might want to influence it, "Remember, what we want is a social revolution."

It helped reframe that in my brain, because I was just watching it go for so long and thinking, "this is just amazing."

But we influenced it even in small ways, like with the addition of graffiti. That resonated. I remember seeing graffiti go up that said "we are ungovernable" and watching people read it back and laughing and nodding. Putting those little seeds of ideas out there, helping feed the fires.

Where It Came from and Why It Was Different

Louise: What we were just talking about speaks to the first question. "What made this different from other anti-police struggles that you've witnessed or heard about? Why did it go so far so fast?"

When you talk about it resonating with people, with the most immediate community, like in Canfield³ and the surrounding area... we're talking about people who already know that the cops are an enemy. And have for years and generations. Because of race, because there's so many white cops there and the area's majority black, it's really obvious that they're an enemy.

Masie: My take on police struggles in the past in St. Louis is that they fit into one of two categories. They're either these lone gunman-type attacks against police, which happen all the time, and then probably once a year or so someone actually kills a cop.

³ The apartment complex just off West Florissant where Mike Brown was murdered, and the original site of the militant street presence that produced the rebellion.

Luca: I think that's what I mean, too. I mean the overall rebellion, not necessarily just the rioting. I wouldn't not want the rioting as well, but I think it's really good to differentiate that the rioting is an element of a rebellion.

There is a warrior culture that's not talked about. When I said that earlier, I meant more of the ghetto warrior culture, but also like anarchist warrior culture. Like, that we're gonna go to jail, get the shit kicked out of us, people are gonna die, and you're just supposed to take it. It's just expected. It's just part of your struggle, and you're just supposed to suck it up. Like, I had to work through some of those ideas with some of my own trauma. That it's OK to be like, "This was devastating. It was awful and terrible and heartbreaking and hard." Working through that cultural idea that we have, that we don't address.

Emma: Yeah, that we've gotta be hard and militant.

Cameron: I also think about how there are other people who didn't come out because of that. There are so many people who were probably saying, "I don't wanna go out there. I fucking hate the police, but I'm not gonna go out there, because there are guns."

I don't know exactly what those people think, but I think it probably had an effect on people not wanting to be there, especially people that, because of their lives or their experiences, are opposed to a lot of the things in this world. I can't calculate it, but I definitely heard people saying that. I could see people being scared, screaming when gunshots went off, and crying. That's the warrior culture thing that's a part of that.

Luca: Yeah, people thought we were crazy to put ourselves in that situation.

Masie: I was gonna say that, too, about the expectations that these crazy things will happen and we'll just have to deal with it. There are people who can't deal with it, they realize that too late, and they just disappear. They just change their life completely, because the standard of what an anarchist is has been built up so much, it's like unchangeable. Or that's the reason why some peo-

we're not adding anything. We can go and try to push things somewhere else, you know?

Raul: But we didn't. We just went home.

Masie: Would it be upsetting to people if I talked about what happened to our friend who got shot? And the potential for that to happen in the future?

Emma: We didn't expect that to happen, so it's good that people know that's a possibility.

Masie: Immediately after we'd found out he'd survived and for a few weeks after, I was hearing from people, "Thank god this is over." Which makes sense in some way, but in my head, I'm like, "Well, if shit ever gets crazy again, it's not like people aren't going to be bringing handguns to shoot in America, or at least in a place like St. Louis." This actually might happen to our friends in the future. We might fucking die in the future. Or..."

Luca: Or not even handguns. Like, state forces, you know? I don't think it was that far away from them starting to open fire on the crowd. Or, that was not out of the question.

Masie: Sure, but I don't think it was close, necessarily.

Luca: I'm just saying it wasn't out of the question. Like, if they'd gotten shot at enough. All it takes is one trigger-happy cop.

Cameron: This is something that other people have talked about, but this sort of glorification of these situations... where from afar and in writing you can write about how it was this uprising against police and the state and it was all just this crazy, beautiful thing and sort of glorifying it as if it's a movie scene. It's a very fragmented understanding of it. But there was a push for a while, and maybe still is, of people being like, "Oh yeah, rioting is really cool! It's the best thing!" And for me, I'm actually more interested in the actual rebellion, which encompassed a lot of other things. Like people hanging out and celebrating, or eating or talking or whatever. Organically organizing things in the moment. And then the rioting was a part of that. And maybe it was crucial to that. But...

Or it's these vigil-type marches or gatherings after someone is killed. Which maybe are meaningful or feel good to people at them, but also maybe it doesn't feel good to be at them cuz they're not that powerful, and outside of that, it doesn't really have a lot of noticeable effects. So, for example, the Scott Perry protests. Every year, the family of Scott Perry, who died in the city jail, protest outside the jail. And that gathering is meaningful, but I feel like outside of that, it's maybe not having a lot of effects.

And then there's all these people who have killed cops, like Cookie Thornton, Todd Shepard, Kevin Johnson. Culturally and sub-culturally, that can have meaning, but in terms of being an actual force that can change things, I feel like there wasn't a whole lot before Ferguson. Or Ferguson was all these different elements coming together and going beyond the limitations of those two things.

Jane: As far as it going so far so fast... the first day [August 9] I didn't think it was gonna get too crazy, but I think because of the police response on the second day, that's why people rioted. Cuz there were so many police. I don't think it was gonna get so out of control. People were just gonna march to the police department. I don't think it was gonna turn into a riot, but then people felt trapped and they had that energy.

Luca: So the question is, "Why was this event different than other anti-police struggles, why did it go so much further?" There are all these elements that we can try to put together to answer that question, like seeing this moment on a continuum of social uprisings, extreme repression, warrior culture (which is something that people don't account for too often)... to create the situation where people didn't back down this time. But I'm more excited about the notion that it's linked to all these other moments that create social uprisings, and it's just part of the social condition that we live under that this can happen.

Luca: Yeah, you can't make it happen, nor is it exciting to me to come up with a theory as to why these moments happen.

Emma: Right. Cuz it's uncontrollable...

Todd: I don't feel like anarchists should be trying to be political scientists. There's no formula for revolt. It's been happening for as long as we have history.

Luca: Yeah, as long as there's repression, oppression, there are gonna be these moments. We're gonna push back, it's part of who we are.

Race and Representation

Raul: Should we read another question?

Luca: "Was there a tension between the black insurrectional force that erupted in Ferguson and the construction of blackness as a positive identity within the existing social order that suffused the subsequent national discourse? Have you learned anything about how to engage with the existing forms of oppression without falling prey to repressive strategies of definition?"

[laughter]

Emma: I feel like I have a sense of what they're asking, but...

Luca: Yeah, we have to deconstruct this question before we can answer it.

Cameron: I think they're basically saying, "Was there a tension between this undisciplined force against the positive, respectable black community?"

Luca: I mean, there was this tension between the black insurrectional force and black forces of identity. I think that was playing out with people who wanted to loot versus Nation of Islam people guarding stores, or the woman guarding the Sam's⁴ being like, "This is not what we're about."

Vera: That phrase keeps coming to my mind too, "This is not what we're about." That kept coming up throughout all of our experiences there, that people would somehow take ownership of

⁴ Sam's Meat Market and Liquor on West Florissant Avenue, which was repeatedly looted during the rebellion.

Trauma

Emma: I've been thinking about the impact that violence has on us, and how it can be glorified within an anarchist subculture. Something about the rebellion, the uprising... even on the nights where there weren't guns, it was a war zone. And if we want to sustain, or to build, a culture of resistance where it's normal for that to happen... It seems like moments of the world that we want to see opening up will contain violence. I don't like the violence, but I like what the violence opens up. But how does that violence affect us? How can we sustain it and not become what we hate about the violence? Which can be theoretical or interpersonal, like how we care for each other.

Luca: One of the things that I've been thinking is that I still want this. Like, even though we went through this very real experience of violence, like maybe we're some of the very small pockets of people directly affected by the violence of that week and a half. I've been trying to make sense of that for myself, and realizing that this is still something that I want, even though that happened. I don't want it not to have happened. In any part of me.

Emma: We could have done without it, but it doesn't stop you.

Vera: Well, it may have stopped me a little bit. In November, when we were out there and there was so much gunfire, I was ready to go because of what happened. There was a point at which I was like, "This is real." There's this person walking down the street next to me with a beer in one hand and a pistol in the other just shooting randomly into the air. And that was enough.

Luca: Yeah, I'm not saying it didn't affect us. We were together in those moments [in November] where it was just like, "Yeah, let's go home. This is reminding me too much of what happened."

Cameron: We were standing in the same spot [where our friend was shot during the August riots].

Vera: It goes back to that idea that maybe we weren't adding that much to the riot. Maybe we don't need to be there because

Vera: You mean West Florissant?⁵

Luca: Yeah, West Florissant.

Cameron: South Florissant was a little more mixed.

Vera: But yeah, every time I said, “Fuck the police,” there was some black person or group of black people around who would be like, “Oh my god, that white person just said ‘fuck the police.’”

Vera: And laugh at me!

Emma: Sometimes I was like, is it cuz I’m white or cuz I’m a woman?

Vera: Yeah.

Luca: It’s both, I think.

Emma: I didn’t know if other people who aren’t women also got that.

Cameron: I got laughed at for saying it. But I did get offered a joint once or twice after saying stuff.

Masie: I think people just thought I was a cop. And so I’m not gonna ask someone for their number right now or what their name is or if they’re on Facebook... cuz they probably think I’m a cop.

Raul: Sometimes people would laugh at me and repeat “Fuck the police” in my accent. I think we may have made a positive contribution in chipping away at the idea that white people don’t care about fighting the police. Or maybe next time, if things continue, maybe even years from now, there are many more people in the city who have seen white people willing to confront the police. And maybe that’s a step closer to us being able to link up with each other in conflict situations.

⁵ The two main roads where riots broke out in Ferguson are several miles from each other but are both called Florissant. West Florissant is the main road near the Canfield Apartments where Mike Brown was murdered and is the site of the famous burning QT. South Florissant is a more developed, racially mixed part of Ferguson where the Ferguson Police Department is, and where much of the rioting that happened after the November 24 announcement of the grand jury decision took place.

what was happening and make it like there was nothing else besides what they were experiencing. Like, how *they* were experiencing Ferguson was how it was supposed to be. So when someone would throw a rock at the cops, “That’s not what we’re about.”

That’s continued through to now. That’s consistently the conversation that comes up.

Emma: So is the answer to the question just “Yes”? Yeah, there was a tension between the peacekeepers who were sometimes black, and the combative black youth.

Todd: It’s also that people are trying to represent blackness or people who have faced police violence or young black people or “the black community,” and then there’s also the other side. But on that side, there are people who think that it’s morally wrong to loot or to respond in certain ways, and then there are other groupings of people who are not trying to affirm their identity in any way to represent other people. People who are just trying to riot, to act out their emotions.

Vera: And I think it does affect us, because the louder voices of the church leaders or other people who have some amount of power were trying to represent what the “black community” is all about, and we decided not to listen to those voices. We were listening or finding other people, who were maybe involved in the more radical things that were happening. Then we were called out for being racist or white supremacist, or people targeted us with that language because they said that “We weren’t listening to black people,” by which they meant black people with power.

Luca: Well, it challenges this idea of allyship. Traditional allyship. They say that we should be “listening to black voices,” but to them that means we should be listening to, like, church leaders, people whose ideas we would never align ourselves with under any other circumstances. We’re all the sudden supposed to be listening to those people instead of finding allies we actually have affinity with, who maybe want to fight in the streets. So instead, it

calls us in to question—“You’re being racist”—instead of allowing for a multiplicity of voices.

Masie: That traditional idea of allyship only makes sense if the only black people in your lives are those community leaders. If you look at black people as not being homogenous, then there is no singular “black voice,” there are all these different black voices, and you can choose who you want to align yourself with.

“Oh My God, That White Person Just Said ‘Fuck the Police’”

Emma: What is this second part of the question, repressive strategies of definition? Just these... identities?

Cameron: Using words to obscure things that are happening. Like the “black community doesn’t want this” or “this identity isn’t supposed to do this.”

Raul: I read that as saying, “How do you deal with the fact that race and racism and these very tangible forms of oppression are actually what’s going on here?” Definitely, that’s what this is about, that’s what people are responding to—without reinforcing those rigid identity categories. Like, did you find ways to engage with the fact that this is a struggle against white supremacy, without reinforcing those rigid identity categories? Without putting everyone in rigid boxes and homogenizing their experiences?

Vera: I can only think of that answer in terms of what we were *not* doing. Like, we were not doing what ARC (the anti-racism collective) was doing.

Todd: We were referring to that earlier, how we chose not to engage in typical ways that activists engage.

Cameron: Also, it seems like white radicals or anarchists being there had an effect on people in terms of their understanding of racial dynamics and personal experiences. I’d talk to a lot of people

who’d ask, “Whoa, why are you here?” being really perplexed and me being like, “I think about this all the time. I have some personal experience with police violence... It’s different, but it’s something that is pushing me to be here.” I think that blew some people’s minds.

Most of them were not political or had not read anti-racist theory. And the argument from an activist point of view is that they should be reading it, and if they were, they would realize that we’re actually a bad influence or something. Maybe that was a way we influenced things, by being there and not being pawns. Like, actually having thoughts and engaging people without being condescending.

Because sometimes, like that week in August, we were some of the only white people around. That’s pretty awkward, cuz of historical shit. And then for some reason, it became way more white. So that’s an interesting question, too, how did that happen...

Emma: You mean the Leftists being there made it more white?

Vera: Yeah.

Cameron: Did it become “safer” for people? Were there figures people could point to, to be like, this is the new leader of the radical movement and I can talk to them, instead of it just being alienating and scary in some racist way.

Vera: Well, OBS [The Organization for Black Struggle] got huge during all of this. That was part of it. That was a way people could engage and feel good about themselves as white activists.

Masie: Do you all feel like between daytime and nighttime the racial make-up was different? Because the few times I was there at night, I was like “me and my friends are the only white people here.”

Cameron: Yeah.

Luca: At the beginning.

Vera: And in November.

Luca: On South Florissant.