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# Abolition Is A Constant Struggle: Five Lessons from Minneapolis<sup>1</sup>

Charmaine Chua

What seemed impossible has suddenly become possible. After the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, after thousands came out of quarantine and into the streets, after the city burned, people began to see what many Black and Indigenous people have understood for a long time: the police must be abolished, not reformed. Reformist measures—understood as regulations to curb the seemingly peripheral exceptions of, rather than eliminate altogether, punitive prison-backed policing—had been the primary demands in the Twin Cities after the police killings of Jamar Clark in 2015 and Philando Castile in 2016. This time, abolition was in the air. A veto-proof majority of the city council vowed to dismantle the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD). The Parks Board, University of Minnesota, and Minneapolis Board of Education severed their contracts with the MPD. On the streets, mourning and euphoria mixed in the air. People greeted each other with “Fuck 12.”<sup>2</sup> Seemingly overnight, everyone had become a prison or police abolitionist.

What made these wins possible? And why now? As I write, the COVID-19 death toll nears 900,000 globally and each day brings a new onslaught of terrors: pending global economic collapse, corporate bail-outs, intensified state repression, increased housing precarity, police killings, right-wing militias, and wildfires abound. In their face, we are also witnessing a “counter-conflagration” of “fires being set *against* the state.”<sup>3</sup> When the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD)’s Third Precinct burned, the uneven geographies of economic inequality laid bare by the COVID-19 crisis became both a tinderbox for the uprising and a condition of possibility from which new abolitionist worlds grew. With real unemployment at nearly one-fifth of the US working population, 40% of renters across the US facing eviction, families receiving little if any economic relief, and months spent in social isolation, the rage in the streets of Minneapolis seemed to emanate from a mass of people whose wounds of abjection and exclusion had festered since long before the epidemic. For Black youth who experience both white supremacist state violence and dimmed prospects of a secure integration into waged work—felt even more acutely in a faltering pandemic economy—the riot expressed collective anguish on both a political and

economic register, against a state order that long ago exchanged the social wage for racialized violence and policing as plunder.<sup>4</sup>

This quick movement from lockdown to uprising was far from coincidental. The pandemic prompted a global revelation: capitalism, which has never sustainably provided for our collective needs, was laid bare as a system that distributes not daily needs, but uneven life chances. In the imaginative space opened up by the intensified revelation of capitalism's inadequacies, mutual aid networks flourished. Across the world, they attest to a mass re-imagination of systems of collective care. In Minneapolis, as stores and banks burned, many looters chose not to hoard but to give away: teenagers walked out of the looted Target with armfuls of diapers and food that they gave to families affected by store closures. Others stacked cases of alcohol and beer outside of looted liquor stores for the community to share, imagining (if only momentarily) through these actions what a world of plenitude for the many might look like.

The convergence of pandemic and riot have also exposed the fault lines of longstanding struggles over housing. In the US, as rent moratoria expire en masse and various arms of the police have helped to enforce evictions, even white liberal middle-class has begun – if only nascently – to understand what poor and working people of color have long known: that police violence plays a key role in dispossession, gentrification, and the protection of private property interests. Connections between housing struggles and abolition were particularly prominent in Minneapolis. On the day after the precinct burned, social workers walked into a hotel emptied out by the pandemic and the riots, and moved 300 unhoused people into the vacant rooms. It is noteworthy that this occupation was only possible because rentier capitalism had made a luxury structure available through its own failure to sustain an ongoing economy during the pandemic. The halting of the capitalist economy also yielded an army of organizers and activists unemployed or working from home during the suspension of business operations. In the late twentieth century, in the context of a mass transfer of industrial jobs to the service industry – which today accounts for two thirds of the US GDP – the majority of these volunteers were newly-unemployed servers, bartenders, and cooks.<sup>5</sup> Released from the chokehold capitalism usually places on our time, volunteers began to organize city-wide mutual aid networks. Their practical knowledge became a crucial resource for the labor of social reproduction required to run an occupied hotel, where activists coordinated cleaning shifts, prepared meals, and stocked kitchens for 300 residents 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

All of this was beautiful. Still, things quickly shifted, as we have often seen: where there are militant uprisings, counterinsurgent forces soon follow, seeking to delegitimize the force of these events.

Minneapolis city council President Lisa Bender admitted on CNN that a “police-free future” is largely “aspirational.”<sup>6</sup> Already, the city council has passed the buck to a charter commission that voted to delay the “dismantle” amendment from the ballot. Long-term police brutality activist groups in Minneapolis, including two Black Lives Matter chapters, responded to Reclaim the Block’s abolitionist victory and the city council’s plan by putting forth an alternative laundry list of 40 reformist reforms.<sup>7</sup> Scrambling to find an alternative to school resource officers, Minneapolis public schools quietly posted job ads for full-time private security guards.<sup>8</sup> In the sudden absence of the MPD from the streets, social workers, emergency responders, and even some community defenders have become quickly enfolded into policing work, issuing evictions, disciplining the unruly, and reinforcing existing class interests.

What does it mean to celebrate the abolitionist victories that have swept across the US today at an unforeseen scale, when they are met, as they have throughout the history of the racial carceral state, with forces that shape the marrow of repression and co-optation to fit new realities?<sup>9</sup> What infrastructures of care and repair flourish amidst the deadly failures of racial capitalism? The growth of abolitionist spaces amidst the suspension of the capitalist economy and organized state violence suggest, as Keally McBride writes, that “dreams of an alternative world are always critiques of the present one.” As responses to both the pandemic and the police, mutual aid projects reveal a core insight of abolitionist praxis: that violent death-making institutions can only be dismantled in tandem with the rebuilding of life-affirming forms.<sup>10</sup>

In this essay, I reflect on Minneapolis’ efforts to redefine abolitionist futures through projects of mutual aid and abolitionist world-making. Although we might rightly attribute the current global upswell of calls to abolish the police to the burning of Minneapolis’s Third Precinct and all that act of rebellion signified, this essay argues that we have as much, if not more to learn from preceding and ensuing local efforts to build an abolitionist infrastructure as we do from the spectacular act of the riot. In the aftermath of the fires, mutual aid organizers sought to engage Minneapolis residents in intentional, affirmative, and often fractious efforts to organize forms of collective care and provisioning. These acts of care—and the challenges faced in producing durable coalitions to sustain such work—provide an opportunity to reflect not only on the imaginaries and horizons opened by global demands for abolition, but also the enormity of the project of collective organizing required to enact such visions in the here and now.

## 1. Abolition Is A Horizon, Not an Event

Contemporary abolitionist theory and praxis draws its lessons from a long history of Black radical insurgency against the continuities of containment and capture, from rebellions against chattel enslavement and the Jim Crow South to women of color feminist theorizations of violence, and queer critiques of the rise of the modern carceral state. Recognizing the foundational anti-Blackness of carceral logics, abolitionist theory and praxis begins from the position that prisons and policing are not solutions to the problem of violence, but constitutive of its making. If liberal reformism views incidents of police “brutality” as exceptions to an otherwise just system of “law and order,” abolition posits that brutality is not an exception at all, but a core component of the normalized, state-sanctioned violence of policing.<sup>11</sup> To recognize this constitutive violence is to seek an abolitionist horizon that stops not at the dismantling of the institutions of police and prisons, but seeks to dismantle the entirety of oppressive systems that rationalize inequality and normalize white supremacist systems of containment and capture across multiple sites, institutions, and conditions of life.<sup>12</sup>

Understood in this way, Dylan Rodríguez argues, abolition is a call to think more broadly than a single institution, and to understand carcerality as a “logic of power” that generates multiple scales of carceral regimes including prisons, police, reservations, segregated cities, and so forth.<sup>13</sup> In this way, policing and prisons are abolitionist targets because they are at the center of “a series of institutions and practices that are predicated on the elimination of populations, the marginalization of persons, and the exposure to premature death of the many for the sake of the few.”<sup>14</sup> Prison and police abolition are thus not just about the prisons and police. They also seek the dismantling of racism, patriarchy, homophobia, capitalism, and other structures of domination, as first steps to creating what Angela Davis calls “new conceptual terrain” for “an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of our society.”<sup>15</sup>

It is worth considering where campaigns to defund the police sit within this understanding of abolitionist futurity. Recognizing that the police have become a “catch-all” solution to social problems for which they are poorly trained, defunding campaigns seek to shift money spent on racist policing toward funding for existing social services and alternative crisis-response models. At their best, defund campaigns seek to enact, within an abolitionist horizon, what André Gorz calls a “non-reformist reform,” a gradual effort to erode power and decrease the harm of carceral institutions on the long road towards an abolitionist future.<sup>16</sup> By diminishing the reach of the carceral state in this way, such procedural efforts can refute conceptions of abolitionist projects as idealistic or unattainable. They orient campaigns for change

away from symptomatic reforms that shore up police power, towards abolitionist alternatives that target the core violence of criminal law enforcement and offer other pathways to community safety.<sup>17</sup>

However, the emergence of “defund” as the uprising’s primary demand should give one pause, enfolded as it has already become into the reformism desired by the dominant system. At a euphoric June event at Powderhorn Park, thousands cheered as the Minneapolis city council made a historic public pledge to defund and dismantle the MPD. Yet less than two months after the city council’s pledge, an unelected and unrepresentative City Charter Commission voted to prevent a ballot measure to lower the number of police in Minneapolis. For many, this reversal was taken as a betrayal. For others such as community defense organizer Kieran Frazier Knutson, approaching abolition as an event winnable through a set of policy proposals is a necessary but insufficient goal: “our best hope for radical change does not flow through the city council or legislative process, but through building our own autonomous capability of resisting the police and building representative and accountable working class defense organizations to keep the community safe.”<sup>18</sup> Procedural strategies for abolition are thus potentially limited because they seek concessions from a state whose material interest is ultimately to protect the racial capitalist order and private property, which is policing’s foundational function.

Instead, Knutson calls for “building our autonomous capability,” understanding abolition as an ongoing world-making project that centers the participatory dimensions of community safety. Defunding the police is less an end than a prerequisite for a democratic constitution of the processes and institutions of collective life. The prospect that the abolitionist horizon enacts democratic practice draws from W.E.B. Du Bois, for whom the formal end of slavery would only be a nominal form of abolition if it failed to account for the continuities of racial chattel, settler-colonial, capitalist relations that persisted after emancipation. Abolition thus required both a negative project (the release from bondage) and a positive project: the creation of new democratic forms in which institutions and practices that previously entrenched slavery would be transformed into ones necessary for Black freedom.<sup>19</sup> For Du Bois, as for contemporary prison abolitionists like Angela Davis, abolitionism’s revolutionary promise is thus located not in an event, but through the participatory and radical reconfiguration of current arrangements of economic and social life towards meaningful freedom.<sup>20</sup>

Understanding abolition as a framework for building toward such a future thus requires recognizing that even *if* cities such as Minneapolis successfully dismantle their police departments, the genealogy of abolitionist praxis posits abolition not as an event but a horizon, requiring radical participation in a fight for meaningful

freedom, without relying on bureaucratic process to achieve its aims. This horizontal approach might push us to understand the unfinished nature of the abolitionist project not as a failure, but as what political theorist Andrew Dilts calls an “ongoing, dialectical, and fugitive project of mutual liberation.”<sup>21</sup> In Dilts’s reading, abolition-democracy “operates always in relation to both the world as it *has become* and the world that is *otherwise*.” it centers on pragmatic programs while expanding a utopian imagination as the basis for collective mobilization.<sup>22</sup> This means looking beyond the current hegemony of depoliticized notions of democracy upheld as political forms.<sup>23</sup> Seeing abolition-democracy as a horizon, not an event, requires following the radical implication of abolitionist demands, and organizing toward the dismantling of carcerality’s logic of power while participating in the making of new institutions grounded in logics of equality and freedom. In the midst of a pandemic, we can look to mutual aid communities for lessons in building the participatory forms necessary for an open-ended project of liberation.

## **2. Housing Deprivation and Incarceration Are Two Sides of the Same Coin**

The morning after the Third Precinct of the Minneapolis Police Department burned, as ten thousand National Guard rolled into the city, people living on the streets faced the prospects of a strictly-enforced curfew, the heavy presence of white supremacists, and food deserts as stores shuttered amidst riots. “It was terrifying to be out at night,” Iman, a woman who has been unhoused for four years, told me: “I was just looking for shelter, and the army shot me with rubber bullets.”<sup>24</sup> Sage and Zeb, two outreach workers and community organizers who have fought the housing deprivation crisis for over a decade, heard that the midtown Sheraton, a hotel at the center of the uprising and one mile from where George Floyd was killed, was being vacated that afternoon due to safety concerns.<sup>25</sup> They had a two-hour window between a vacated hotel and the owners closing the doors. Faced with the paucity of the city’s official shelter efforts, which long pre-dated but became especially apparent during the uprising, they made a plan to occupy the hotel. They gathered a group of unhoused people and community organizers, spread the word via bicycle and word of mouth, and walked into the Sheraton to negotiate with the hotel owner. They informed him that they intended to stay, and raised enough money to rent a block of 20 rooms. By that evening, 150 unhoused people had heard the news and come to the hotel seeking shelter; by the next day, all 136 rooms had been filled; by the weekend, there was a waitlist of over 400. “We expected it to be a flash in the pan; that everyone would get cleared out in the matter of 24 hours,”

Sage said.<sup>26</sup> But together, organizers and residents held the hotel for fourteen days.

Most of the people who walked into that hotel knew that the occupation was never going to become a long-term solution to homelessness, but all were there to reimagine what was thinkable. Over the next two weeks, a ragtag assortment of volunteers streamed into the hotel, filling cleaning, laundry, community safety, and kitchen shifts day and night. The first week had a euphoric quality to it. Formerly unhoused residents wandered the lobby with smiles on their faces; they would ask for two dinners and several packs of M&Ms, and be given them. For people accustomed to being treated with an attitude of scarcity, the sanctuary hotel, as it came to be known, was a place of plenitude. Banners flew outside declaring “housing is the cure.” Volunteers entered the space on the agreement that the resident-centered environment would be grounded in principles of harm reduction, autonomy, mutual aid, anti-racism, and abolition. No cops were called. Instead, a safety team was on hand to respond. People were free to make choices about engaging in risky behavior, and medics would provide supplies and education to lessen the risk of injury or infection. While grocery stores around the metro area had been either looted, closed due to the pandemic, or burned down, dinners and food flowed into the kitchen supplied by restaurants, bakeries, and anarchist kitchens run out of closed storefronts across town. At meetings, residents set community agreements, signed up for security and cleaning shifts, and helped in the kitchen. “It was the first apartment I never had,” Iman told me. “I treated it like I was going to live there forever.”<sup>27</sup>

If, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore has taught us, abolition is not only about “absence” (efforts to dismantle death-making institutions) but about “presence” (building life-affirming and life-enabling communities in their place), the crisis of homelessness is one of the most crucial fronts in the fight for abolitionist futures.<sup>28</sup> Although the sanctuary hotel only offered a temporary response to a much deeper crisis, mutual aid efforts that build solidarity between the housed and unhoused expose the social vulnerabilities laid bare by the conjunction of the pandemic and the uprising. Rendered subject to racialized policing and invasive vagrancy laws, systematically excluded from stable housing by an urban accumulation strategy predicated on predatory real estate, and made especially vulnerable to premature death during a global pandemic — where, to borrow a Minneapolis initiative’s turn of phrase, they “can’t stay home without housing” — homeless populations are at the intersection of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls the organized abandonment and organized violence of the state.<sup>29</sup>

Housing deprivation and incarceration are two sides of the same racial capitalist coin.<sup>30</sup> Sharp increases in both phenomena converged in the latter half of the twentieth century as surplus populations were



kept from access to public space, social mobility, and wealth in a period marked by declining rates of profit, rising unemployment, inflation, and economic restructuring. Although full employment, the elimination of slums, and a guaranteed basic income were central demands of the 1963 March on Washington, racial capitalism's function in the civil rights struggle was to resolve the problem of rebellious surplus populations not through economic security, but increased investments in punitive policing.<sup>31</sup> In Minneapolis, where Black people had been systematically excluded from most parts of the city by racial covenants, denied access to jobs, and heavily policed, two riots flared in 1966 and 1967 against employment discrimination and police racism.<sup>32</sup> Exploiting racial and class insecurities elicited by the crisis of Fordism, politicians whetted social antagonisms by creating moral panics around race and crime, and producing the city as a securitized space.<sup>33</sup>

Housing deprivation stemmed from a shift in this period toward urban accumulation strategies that rested on real estate capital. Amidst crises of profitability and rising labor unrest, firms in the US offshored manufacturing leading to deindustrialization, rising unemployment, and the rise of real estate and finance as major urban power blocs, seen as key to the rebuilding of urban economies.<sup>34</sup> From 1960-70, 2.1 million white people left cities for suburbs, while 2.6 million Black people moved into neighborhoods emptied by white flight. "Urban renewal programs" prioritized private accumulation over public housing, and Housing and Urban Development authorities justified the lack of large-scale low-income housing construction in terms of the lack of reasonably-priced land, rationalizing disinvestment through terms already set by the logics of private accumulation.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, racialized policing and vagrancy laws sought to displace people and deteriorate their working class neighborhoods in order to produce their vulnerability to future speculation and investment. As Jordan Camp argues, the combined violence of racialized policing and organized abandonment should be understood as the "logical result of a half-century-long political project bent on destroying the welfare state, criminalizing dissent, and expanding militarized policing, prisons, and the security apparatus to violently consent to the abandonment of the social wage by capital and the state."<sup>36</sup>

Understood through these histories, the racial and class structure of housing deprivation is far from arbitrary or accidental. Rather, as Craig Wilse argues, "processes of extreme marginalization and dehumanization of unsheltered populations take place inside an economy and to the benefit of that economy."<sup>37</sup> Between 2015 and 2018, Minneapolis witnessed a 93% increase in the number of people who were unhoused and staying outside the shelter system. 50,600 Minnesotans, disproportionately Black and Indigenous, experienced housing deprivation in 2018.<sup>38</sup> As rising prison populations are left with few options on

release, many end up unhoused, either inside or outside the shelter system.<sup>39</sup> These systems are inhospitable environments for returning residents, subjecting them to carceral forms of surveillance, policing for minor infractions, triggering activities such as drug usage, and in the COVID-19 pandemic, have become sites of rampant contagion.<sup>40</sup> The carceral and real estate state pursue urban renewal through the securitization of public space, linking policing and prisons with the slower violence of dispossession and displacement entailed in the making of real estate markets.<sup>41</sup>

To situate abolition and housing as complementary projects is to recognize that the terms of safe refuge for the many have been foreclosed as housing became transformed from a social wage into a commodity—a process that, to recall Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism, readily exposes specific populations to premature death.<sup>42</sup> Housing deprivation and incarceration are co-produced as the wages of carceral racial capitalism. In the face of the pandemic, facing historic levels of eviction nation-wide, organizers have increasingly linked the Black Lives Matter movement and the abolition of the police to the right to housing and the cancellation of rent.<sup>43</sup> Analyzing these two structures together puts movements for housing at the center of reparative anti-racist work. As health outreach worker Sage put it, “Housing is the place you pay rent; it’s home; it’s family; it’s generational wealth; it’s displacement; it’s settler colonialism; it’s the great migration, it’s the right to take up space, to have a claim to place and belonging. Housing is our atmosphere, so it is inevitable, and crucial to struggle for abolition in the place where these intersections sit.”<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Mutual Aid Projects Expand Our Imagination of What Is Possible

We can extend the links between housing and abolition even further. If the long abolitionist project is not just a practice of dismantling, but a “radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice,” we are invited to think of housing not just in terms of its exchange value under capitalism (the transformation of housing into a commodity) but its use-value as a life-nurturing, safe place of refuge.<sup>45</sup> Housing is a site where care and reproductive work can become crucial sites of anti-capitalist, abolitionist transformation. After police evicted the residents from the sanctuary hotel, organizers helped unhoused residents move to a park two blocks away, setting up two tent sanctuaries that eventually grew to house and feed over 500 unhoused people. Over the course of two months, a majority of the city’s mutual aid operations seemed to focus on feeding, clothing, housing, and advocating for longer-term solutions to the housing crisis. As an emergency response to displacement have become necessary, new solidarities have been forged between

housed and unhoused residents in Minneapolis. Organizers communicate across multiple text loops about mutual aid requests across over twenty encampments. Volunteers respond within minutes, giving unhoused people rides to the doctor, filing stimulus check requests, mobilizing for eviction defense, repairing tents, and more.

Many of these same people, often unemployed service workers, face evictions from their own homes. Mobilized across differently situated forms of housing precarity, organizers reflected that the community's coalescence around these dynamics seems to result from an uneven but nevertheless shared sense of vulnerability to the conditions that reproduce housing inequalities. The conjunction of the pandemic and the uprising have thus exposed what Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor frames as the fundamental difference between the interests of real estate and home, "one a commodity and the other intimating a place of belonging."<sup>46</sup> This sense of solidarity through vulnerability is at the heart of mutual aid. Nazra, a community organizer at two tent sanctuaries in Minneapolis, said:

Without pretending that we are equally vulnerable, our organizing made people see that being housed isn't a reflection that we have escaped the same violent and abusive system our unsheltered neighbors are in through merit. The system has placed a lot of boundaries between housed and unhoused... but we are much closer than real estate giants, and landlords. From that recognition, we can build those communities that we all want to be part of.<sup>47</sup>

Beginning from the fundamental insight that the systems currently in place are not meeting collective needs for survival, mutual aid begins from a position of solidarity, not charity. As Dean Spade has argued, whereas reformism or policy work is often demobilizing, providing no direct material relief, and "[changing] only what the system says about itself," mutual aid provides a transformative alternative that seeks radical change through new ways to redistribute material resources, practice democracy, and mobilize people for ongoing struggle.<sup>48</sup> Recognizing that systems of domination have often sought to channel dissatisfaction in ways that are nonthreatening to those systems, resistant left movements have rallied around horizontal mutual aid in order to both dismantle and challenge existing structures of oppression, and to build an alternative structure for meeting people's needs.

Reflecting on the massive scale of mutual aid pulled together during the uprising, including running a 136-room hotel for two weeks and building resident-centered tent cities stocked with food and services for two months, community organizer Terrance said that mutual aid both alerted people to the state's neglect and "expanded our sense of what is thinkable in this crisis." If it was possible to take

over a hotel, turning a luxury structure into a large-scale autonomous zone, “it suddenly became possible to imagine that the space and resources are there, that everyone deserves housing.” He explained:

Nobody assumed that we are going to fix homelessness in two months. We were responding to an emergency. But the promise of mutual aid is to shock us out of accepting the normal. It temporarily reverses the pervasive environment of precarity and scarcity, and provides the base conditions for hospitality, connection, and solidarity. These are things that generate deeper empowerment, not resource management and governance. Mutual aid doesn't try to fill the gap left by a racist capitalist state, but it calls attention to *why that gap is there*.<sup>49</sup>

Mutual aid strategies advance the abolitionist imaginary by identifying structures that produce vulnerability, while widening the horizon of what and who is valued when we center anti-capitalist and abolitionist futurities. They also seek to build reparative models of justice grounded in accountability to the most impacted groups. The Minneapolis sanctuary projects have centered efforts to build power through resident-centered spaces involving autonomous decision-making structures, where residents determine community agreements and hold each other accountable to them. While many showed up initially to volunteer or make use of resources offered, organizers, both housed and unhoused, invite volunteers to turn from a service model towards collective organizing. In the process of organizing these horizontal spaces, Adam, an unhoused resident at Powderhorn Park and a citizen of Ho-Chunk Nation, reflected on mutual aid as a rejection of modes of settler colonial relationship: “There was no homelessness in America before 1492. We are here to provide people what they need, without the exchange of money, without putting people into debt. That’s how we did it before. That’s where mutual aid comes from. It will start with returning the land, returning the relations of plenitude that began in our relationship with the land.”<sup>50</sup>

These reflections raise the prospect that mutual aid can shift not merely movement aims and goals towards abolitionist horizons against the racial-carceral, settler colonial state, but also transform modes of relationship and forms of attachment within them. We might understand this transformation through the concept of “presentness” articulated by Fred Moten. Building on Gilmore’s notion of abolition as presence, not absence, Moten notes that “[abolition is] about being present in a different way, and building something present and *for* the present... in doing that...we exit the fucked-up here and now in the interest of making a new present that we enact.”<sup>51</sup> Moten’s reading of Gilmore simultaneously frames “presentness” as a mode of relation-

ship, a material infrastructure, and a proleptic temporality.<sup>52</sup> Mutual aid projects prefigure a world in which the work of caring and repair is shared as collective reproductive labor. In the process, modes of relationship are detached from homogenizing colonial and capitalist relationships, and are collectively remade through what Nick Estes and the Red Nation have called “a caretaking economy.”<sup>53</sup>

#### **4. Abolitionists Do Not Have All the Answers, But Neither Does Racial Capitalism**

I romanticize. It would be dishonest to say that all of this went on without a hitch. Abolitionist projects at the sanctuary hotel and the encampments that followed were messy at best, harmful to some at worst. By the second week, the dynamics had started to turn. While we strove as organizers to put the professed goals of autonomy, abolition, and mutual aid into practice, making the sanctuary hotel at least in ambition “the most radical harm reduction shelter likely anyone has ever seen,” volunteers and residents also brought learned practices of hierarchy with us.<sup>54</sup> “Whether we intended it or not,” Terrance reflected, “some volunteers operated on the assumption that they needed to maintain order and equality over food and supply distribution.” This led “to a false sense of solidarity that may have in fact been about class-privileged folks governing access to resources.”<sup>55</sup>

In addition, the grammar of abolition was new to many volunteers. Many did not already have developed critiques of policing and did not fully understand why it was so important to offer de-escalatory alternatives in situations where they might have otherwise called the police. Political education was hard to do in crisis-organizing mode, when everything felt like triage. Drug overdoses, everyday fights, and small crises seemed to crop up every night, often overwhelming volunteers. Some had decades of experience as outreach workers, but many had little to no experience working with people who regularly use drugs as a way to confront physical and mental illnesses and past psychological trauma. White liberal property owners who had first welcomed their “unhoused neighbors” to Powderhorn Park soon began to protest that the park had stopped feeling safe. Concerns about playgrounds full of used needles (a vast exaggeration) and second-hand cigarette smoke soon turned to more serious concerns about an uptick in sex trafficking in the park. And although hundreds were involved in the remarkable work of running a mutual aid project 24/7 at the occupied hotel and several tent sanctuaries for two months and counting, volunteer organizers, many young and white, most of whom had no existing relationships or experience working with vulnerable *and* predatory populations, were by their own admission ill-equipped to respond to the scale of need, trauma, and harm that had entered these spaces.

In the face of these challenges, conversations amongst community organizers often circled around fears that our own organizational shortcomings could be taken as evidence of the broad failure of the abolitionist project. If community defense units were not yet ready to keep neighborhoods safe from harm without replicating punitive policing; if sex trafficking, lateral and gang violence, and theft appeared to be increasing in the absence of the police, what conditions should abolitionists seek to build to reduce the need for such harms to occur?<sup>56</sup> And what would we do in the interim, faced with the reality of a world still organized through racial capitalist systems that proliferate cycles of harm and trauma? Were we ready for a world without policing? Did we have the infrastructures in place so that they were no longer necessary? These internal movement worries were complicated by common misunderstandings of abolition. Many Minneapolis residents, witnessing a seeming rise in gang violence and theft since the uprising, wondered if the lack of police presence was exacerbating crime, taking the lesson to be that a world without police would be a very scary one indeed. Such worries mistakenly conceptualize abolition as an immediate and indiscriminate elimination of the police, and the police as the primary institution that keeps communities safe. But the sentiment mistakes both what purpose the police serve and what the abolitionist project seeks.

First, the police have not always been understood as an inevitable force for preserving security, even though that is now taken for granted as a core component of the modern state.<sup>57</sup> A specifically punitive dimension to policing rose in tandem with a modern order seeking to protect private property and limit the prospects for the poor. As early as in Adam Smith's conception of jurisprudence, it was the job of police to enforce the boundaries and barriers of private property, evict the squatter, arrest the trespasser, and maintain expansive authority over the regulation of commerce.<sup>58</sup> Recent studies indicate that police spend a sliver of their time—four percent—responding to violent crimes, leading scholars to argue that the police do not deter harm, but impose a racial order through the intensified targeting of the poor—many themselves victims of violent crime.<sup>59</sup> Suzanne, a mental health outreach worker, noted that as one of six mental health workers treating a community of 400 people at the encampments, she witnessed sexual violence, shootings, and domestic violence at the sanctuaries, but “the police would show up and do nothing. Often, they just made the situation worse for the person experiencing harm.”<sup>60</sup> As such, many have argued that police serve not to protect security or safety but to secure capitalist property relations.

Second, abolition seeks to end the use of punitive policing and prisons as the primary means of addressing social, economic, and political problems. This means acknowledging that the problems

police purport to solve are themselves produced through social institutions and conceptual frameworks that render some worthy of protection and others worthy of caging. Abolition is not therefore a call to immediately open all prison cells, but to pursue what legal scholar Allegra McLeod calls a “positive substitutive abolitionist framework” that would expand social projects that would prevent the need for carceral and punitive responses in the first place.<sup>61</sup> Abolitionists do not deny that harm takes place, but they do seek to understand how it is produced. As McLeod charts, a substitutive framework would seek to produce the conditions necessary for a world without harm, such as pursuing restorative models of redress, safe refuge for those fleeing violence, and alternative livelihoods for persons whose way of surviving under capitalism are subject to law enforcement.<sup>62</sup> We can also look to abolitionist feminist collectives like Communities Against Rape and Abuse and INCITE! Women, Gender Non-Conforming, and Trans people of Color Against Violence, who work for community accountability around sexual harm, calling those who would think of themselves as external to gender oppression into processes of shared transformative justice. Abolitionist praxis in this way orients movements toward meaningful transformations that address the underlying structures that cause people harm, rather than addressing their symptoms.

It has been the uncomfortable truth that at the sanctuary hotel and at the tent sanctuaries that followed, people were running sex trafficking rings. It has also been the case that in bearing witness to violence that is a condition of the normal for those long targeted by a domestic war on the poor, NIMBY neighbors have indicted abolition as the culprit for these harms (why didn’t the abolitionists call the police?), rather than the violent capitalist forms that create systems of patriarchal power, gendered racial oppression from which sexual harm proliferates.<sup>63</sup> Abolitionist movements will have to account for and organize toward the necessity of eliminating sexual violence and exploitation. Doing so, however, requires not discarding the promise of abolition but centering the analysis it makes available. What we do know is that the system capitalism has maintained is untenable. George Floyd’s death revealed the long histories that lead to this conclusion. The critical framework of abolition makes possible an analysis of how racial capitalism *causes* these harms, only to offer the liberal diagnosis that it is bad apples who must be punished, rather than the carceral system itself that should be impugned.<sup>64</sup> This is not to say that liberalism and capitalism are *not* utopian projects, but that they are utopian through a concrete reaffirmation of the current position. Abolition desires to imagine something more.

As defund and abolish campaigns proliferate across the globe, skeptics have (perhaps rightly) suggested that abolitionists do not

have all the answers to problems of ongoing harm. This may be so. Neither, however, does liberal racial capitalism. Writing in the context of the challenges presented to pan-Africanism by the presence of African dictators, Cedric Robinson wrote in 1996 that “our contemporary rapacious hyenas are not blameless but they did not organize the feast.”<sup>65</sup> This insight illustrates the duplicity of demanding that abolitionists have a step-by-step program for navigating the complexity of our social problems. It is worth quoting Derrick, a long-time anarchist abolitionist organizer, in full, who argues that this bait and switch must be rejected in order for meaningful freedom to be pursued:

The left gets asked to have a clear plan on what abolition will look like, but under current conditions, we make decisions all the time that push the dominant system forward. What if we made a collective decision, acknowledging they will be messy decisions, to move *against* the dominant system? What if we said, ‘Let’s center those to whom harm is done rather than vengeance against the perpetrator?’ Sure, there are people who are harming people, but you can’t restore order if that order is the foundational harm in the first place. As long as we have a capitalist system that encourages greed, and high wealth inequality, people hurting people are [sic] going to continue. We have to change the order.

## 5. Abolition is a Constant Struggle

It is difficult to write about the complexities and insufficiencies of movements into which hundreds of organizers have poured time and heart, enacting alternative infrastructures of care and repair together. The left is so used to losing that the impulse, when victories such as Minneapolis’s occurs, is to tell the story of unadulterated triumph. Yet to build an abolitionist movement worthy of its horizon, to generate a radical practice of dismantling and releasing the hold of carceral power on our collective lives, we must reckon with the length and scale of what Dylan Rodríguez calls “the long abolitionist project.” What are the unuttered, uncomfortable silences that do not make it out of movement spaces and into spaces of theorizing? How do we understand the promise of abolitionist critique and praxis without deflecting questions about existing harms we cannot look away from? How do we do utopian imagining within an abolitionist horizon in a still-capitalist society, and thus one still obsessed with instrumental tradeoffs (one’s safety is worth another’s sequestration)? How are we to formulate an organizing practice grounded in the recognition that abolition is a constant struggle, waged in battle after battle against the morphological, shape-shifting power of repressive state forces and legitimated state violence?



Without attempting to prescribe any answers, I offer these lessons as provisional provocations to think with. The social totality within which punitive policing and prisons sit is one that produces few options for those long targeted by the intersecting violence of settler-colonial, racialized and gendered, heteropatriarchal, anti-Black racial capitalism. But *even if* things were not perfectly in place when we woke to a new dawn of the abolitionist horizon, the Minneapolis uprising peeled the skin off a carceral state that has been ethically and politically indefensible for too long. The organizing that is ongoing in its wake, met by wave after wave of counter-insurgent pacifism, should remind us that, to borrow a phrase from Angela Davis, abolition is a constant struggle. A city council pledge is just one (monumental) victory on the long road to a police-free world; one that begins with the promised dissolution of police departments, but also recognizes that the abolitionist horizon is always ahead of us. This requires fighting, as Minneapolis organizations Black Visions Collective and Reclaim the Block do, to ensure that the police are not replaced with alternative forms of punitive policing; that during a pandemic that has made so many so precarious, we build strong communities grounded in relationships of trust; that elected representatives not be celebrated for performative politics but held to account, over and over again, in the streets; that we seek to reduce the harms that decades of criminalization have built into poor Black, Indigenous, and communities of color; that we build radical institutions and dispositions toward social reproduction and radical care; that we organize with an abolitionist praxis that, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore notes, asks not only *what* we leave behind in our visions of police and prison-free worlds, but *who* we leave behind.<sup>66</sup>

This charts a long road ahead. Yet the history of Black liberation struggles teaches that police “brutality” is not an exception but the function of a fundamentally gendered and racialized capitalist structure. We might conclude with Frantz Fanon, who, in the context of the historical event of decolonization, reminded us that full liberation was an unfinished project: “Independence is not a magic ritual but an indispensable condition for men and women to exist in true liberation, in other words to master all the material resources necessary for a radical transformation of society.”<sup>67</sup> Genealogies of radical struggle remind us that the time for radical transformation has always been now, and its mode of radical critique is already available. To be accountable to the magnitude of promise of a world newly awakened to these abolitionist legacies, we are tasked with the challenge of making its insurgent futurity permanent.

## Notes

1. I am grateful all to the movement organizers whom I interviewed in the process of writing this essay, and to Andrew Dilts and Sina Kramer for the conversations that shaped this essay. The titular phrase borrows from Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016).
2. The phrase “Fuck 12” is slang for “fuck the police.”
3. Abolition Collective, *Making Abolitionist Worlds: Proposals for a World on Fire* (New York: Common Notions Press, forthcoming), 3.
4. Joshua Clover, *Riot Strike Riot* (New York: Verso Press, 2016), 180; Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism*, (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e) Press, 2018), 151–192.
5. Bureau of Economic Analysis report, first quarter 2020. <https://www.bea.gov/data/gdp/gdp-industry>. The report also notes that for accommodation and food services, real value added decreased 26.8% in the first quarter, reflecting the pandemic’s effects on decreases in food and drink services.
6. <https://twitter.com/CNN/status/1270170290635501569>
7. <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/06/08/minneapolis-reform-plan-would-require-insurance-for-officers>
8. <http://www.citypages.com/news/after-cutting-ties-with-police-minneapolis-schools-are-quietly-hiring-security-guards/571832701>
9. See Stuart Schrader 2019, especially chapter three. As Schrader uncovers, the US Office of Public Safety shaped counterinsurgency in decolonizing countries by consulting and training nascent post-independence police forces and exporting what they learned about the pacification of “foreign” populations to the War on Crime.
10. Keally McBride, *Collective Dreams: Political Imagination and Community* (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 4; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, keynote address, “Los Angeles for Abolition: Dismantling Jails and Building Liberation,” A Benefit for Critical Resistance, Los Angeles, CA, September 14, 2019; Andrew Dilts, “Crisis, Critique, and Abolition” in *A Time for Critique*, eds. Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 236.
11. Dylan Rodríguez. “Beyond ‘Police Brutality’: Racist State Violence and the University of California,” *American Quarterly*, 64, No. 2 (June 2012): 301–313.
12. I borrow the term “abolitionist horizon” from the activist common sense, but also from queer theorists who understand “horizons” as ways to think utopianly without over-abstraction. Drawing from queer theorist Jose Muñoz, Andrew Dilts suggests that horizons can be “strategies” for “interruption or disidentification with the current state of affairs,” and as a practical orientation to “what must come next... at precisely the moment when we might otherwise claim that justice has been achieved.” Andrew Dilts, “Justice as Failure” *Law, Culture, and the Humanities*, 13 (2), 2017: 189, 191.

13. Dylan Rodríguez, "Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword," *Harvard Law Review* 132 no. 6 (April 2019): 1575.
14. Eugene Wolters, "Michel Foucault, Prisons, and the Future of Abolition: An Interview," *Critical-Theory.com*, June 2016. <http://www.critical-theory.com/michel-foucault-prisons-and-the-future-of-abolition-an-interview/>
15. Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003), 108; Jeremy Scahill, "Scholar Robin D.G. Kelley on How Today's Abolitionist Movement Can Fundamentally Change the Country," *The Intercept* (blog), June 27, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/27/robin-dg-kelley-intercepted/>.
16. André Gorz, "Reform and Revolution," *Socialist Register*, 1968. <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5272/2173>.
17. This distinction between reformist reforms and abolitionist "non-reformist" reforms has been prominently advanced by Critical Resistance, an abolitionist organization founded in the 1990s dedicated to organizing against the prison industrial complex.
18. Kieran Frazier Knutson, Facebook post, August 7, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/kieranfk/posts/10221358898616034>.
19. W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, 2017 edition (New York: Simon & Schuster Free Press, 1999). Du Bois writes: "Slavery was not abolished even after the Thirteenth Amendment. There were four million freedmen and most of them on the same plantation, doing the same work that they did before emancipation" (169).
20. Dilts, "Crisis," 236.
21. Dilts, "Crisis," 236.
22. Dilts, "Crisis," 236.
23. See Joel Olson, *Abolition Of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2004), who theorizes the abolition of whiteness as a realization of anarchist forms of democracy that reject the depoliticization of bureaucratic forms; and Antonio Vazquez-Arroyo. 2010. "Democracy Today: Four Maxims" *Theory and Event* 13 no. 2 (2010). Vazquez-Arroyo writes, "once formalized...democracy has become an empty container or a shell in which anti-democratic practices are contained."
24. Iman, interview with Charmaine Chua, Minneapolis, June 17, 2020. All interviewee names have been changed throughout this article to protect their identities.
25. Sage, phone interview with Charmaine Chua, July 28, 2020.
26. Sage, interview.
27. Iman, interview.
28. Chenjerai Kumanyika, "Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition," *The Intercept* (podcast), June 2020. <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/>
29. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Organized Abandonment and Organized Violence: Devolution and the Police," *Critical Race and Ethnic Studies lecture*, Institute for Humanities Research, University of California Santa Cruz, November 9, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/146450686>

30. I follow Craig Wilse in using the term “housing deprivation” instead of homelessness. As Wilse argues, the systemic nature of housing insecurity, operating through racialized subordination, is masked by the “objectifying work” that the term “homelessness” conveys. We might more accurately call this social phenomenon housing *deprivation*: the process of “[marking] out some populations for the probability of enduring a life without housing, denied the safety and health that a home helps secure.” Craig Wilse, *The Value of Homelessness*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 2.
31. David Stein, *Fearing Inflation, Inflating Fears: The Civil Rights Struggle for Full Employment and the Rise of the Carceral State, 1929–1986* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming).
32. MPD150, “Enough is enough: a 150 year performance review of the Minneapolis police department” (Minneapolis: MPD150, 2017). <https://www.mpd150.com/report/overview/>
33. Jordan Camp, “Blues Geographies and the Security Turn: Interpreting the Housing Crisis in Los Angeles.” In *Race, Empire, and the Crisis of the Subprime*, eds. P. Chakravartty and D.F. da Silva (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 300.
34. Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019), 46.
35. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 107.
36. Camp, “Blues Geographies,” 301.
37. Wilse, *Value of Homelessness*, 49.
38. Brian Pittman, S. Nelson-Dusek, M. Gerrard, and E. Shelton, “Homelessness in Minnesota: Detailed Findings from the 2018 Minnesota Homeless Study, *Wilder Research*, 2018, 7. <http://mnhomeless.org/minnesota-homeless-study/reports-and-fact-sheets/2018/2018-homelessness-in-minnesota-3-20.pdf>. Of the unhoused, more than one-third (37%) identify as African American, while only 6% of adults in the overall Minnesota population identify as African American. Similarly, 12% of the homeless adult population identifies as American Indian while only 1% of the Minnesota adult population identifies as American Indian.
39. Dylan Rodríguez, “Covid-19 Pandemic as Carceral Revelation: Toward Abolitionist Counter-War,” *American Ethnologist*, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://americanethnologist.org/features/pandemic-diaries/post-covid-fantasies/covid-19-pandemic-as-carceral-revelation-toward-abolitionist-counter-war>.
40. Madeleine Hamlin, “The Abolition Geographies of COVID-19,” *Society and Space Magazine*, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-abolition-geographies-of-covid-19>.
41. Stein, *Capital City*; Prison Couloute, “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people,” *Prison Policy Initiative*, 2018, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>. Cowen, Deborah, and Nemo Lewis. 2016. “Anti-Blackness and Urban

- Geopolitical Economy: Reflection on Ferguson and the Suburbanization of the 'Internal Colony'." *Society & Space* online. <https://www.societyand-space.org/articles/anti-blackness-and-urban-geopolitical-economy>.
42. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 28.
  43. See for e.g. Francisco Perez and Luis Feliz Leon, "Calls to Defund the Police Are Joining the Demand to Cancel Rent," *Jacobin magazine*, August 10, 2020, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/08/defund-the-police-cancel-rent-housing>; Jason Wu, "If Black Lives Matter, then Stop the Evictions," *Left Voice*, June 29, 2020 <https://www.leftvoice.org/if-black-lives-matter-then-stop-the-evictions>; Lisa Edwards, Jared Trujillo, and Jason Wu, "Why Fixing the Housing Crisis is a Black Lives Matter Issue," *Refinery 29*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/06/9890811/housing-crisis-eviction-black-lives-matter>
  44. Sage, interview.
  45. Rodríguez, "Abolition as Praxis," 1576; The Radical Housing Journal Editorial Collective, "Covid-19 and housing struggles," *Radical Housing Journal* 2(1): 9–27, 2020.
  46. Taylor, *Race For Profit*, 11
  47. Nazra, phone interview with Charmaine Chua, July 27, 2020
  48. Dean Spade, "Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival," *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (142) (March 1, 2020): 131–51, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971139>.
  49. Terrance, phone interview with Charmaine Chua, July 30, 2020. Emphasis mine.
  50. Adam, phone interview with Charmaine Chua, July 30, 2020.
  51. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The University: last words," online lecture, Thursday, July 9, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD\\_XU8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD_XU8)
  52. I take the term "mode of relationship" from Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).
  53. Nick Estes, "A Red Deal," *Jacobin Magazine*, August 6 2019. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/08/red-deal-green-new-deal-ecosocialism-decolonization-indigenous-resistance-environment>
  54. Zeb, phone interview with Charmaine Chua, August 3, 2020
  55. Terrance, interview.
  56. Mariame Kaba, "Solidarity not Charity: Mutual Aid and How to Organize in the Age of Coronavirus" *Democracy Now* March 20, 2020, accessed August 2 2020. [https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus\\_community\\_response\\_mutual\\_aid](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/3/20/coronavirus_community_response_mutual_aid)
  57. Allegra M. McLeod, "Prison Abolition and Grounded Justice," 62 *UCLA Law Review* 1156–1239 (2015) 1221

58. David Correia and Tyler Wall. *Police: A Field Guide*. (New York: Verso Press, 2018), 81.
59. Jeff Asher and Ben Horwitz. "How do the Police actually spend their time?" *New York Times*, June 19, 2020. Accessed August 5, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/upshot/unrest-police-time-violent-crime.html>
60. Suzanne, Interview with Charmaine Chua. Personal phone interview, August 2, 2020.
61. McLeod, "Grounded Justice," 1172.
62. McLeod, "Grounded Justice," 1172.
63. NIMBY is shorthand for "not in my backyard": the practice of objecting to the siting or occurrence of something perceived as potentially dangerous in a person's own neighborhood, especially while raising no such objections to similar developments elsewhere.
64. I am grateful to Chase Hobbs-Morgan for making this point and providing the insights that ground this section of the paper.
65. Cedric Robinson. "In Search of a Pan-African Commonwealth," *Social Identities* 2 (1), 1996: 161-8.
66. Gilmore, "Los Angeles for Abolition."
67. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004 edition), 233.