

# Sustain the Riot

*From "Defund the Police"  
to Revolutionary Abolitionism  
after the George Floyd Uprisings*



Mask up  
*ftp*



**by**  
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**NOT ONLY DO WE  
DESIRE TO CHANGE OUR  
LIVES IMMEDIATELY,**

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**IT IS THE CRITERION BY  
WHICH WE ARE SEEKING  
OUR ACCOMPLICES.**



“Fascism has temporarily succeeded under the guise of reform. The only way we can destroy it is to refuse to compromise with the enemy state and its ruling class.”

— George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*



[45] <https://itsgoingdown.org/guard-locked-in-a-cell-during-disturbance-at-mccormick-correctional/>

[46] “Nigeria Sars protest: Prison break and gunshots heard as unrest continues,” BBC News, October 22, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54642947>.

[47] Sylvia Wynter. “No humans involved: An open letter to my colleagues.” In Forum NHI: Knowledge for the 21st century, vol. 1, no. 1 (Stanford: Institute NHI, 1994), 14.

[48] Saidiya Hartman. “The anarchy of colored girls assembled in a riotous manner.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 465-490; Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. *Rehearsals for Living*. Haymarket Books, 2022.

[49] Chua, “Abolition Is a Constant Struggle,” 128.

[50] Chua, “Abolition Is a Constant Struggle,” 136.

[51] Dean Spade, “Solidarity not charity: Mutual aid for mobilization and survival.” *Social Text* 38, no. 1 (2020): 147.

[52] Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin. *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition* (Pluto Press, 2021), 131.

[33] Obama, “How to Make This Moment the Turning Point.”

[34] CrimethInc., “Why We Don’t Make Demands,” May 15, 2015, <https://crimethinc.com/2015/05/05/feature-why-we-dont-make-demands>.

[35] The framework of Defund the Police aspires toward an “end goal” of the total defunding of police departments. However in practice, the demands proposed during the moment of the framework’s popularization (and after) mainly argued for reductions “by a specific dollar amount or percentage.” This strategy is suggested by Interrupting Criminalization in their #DefundPolice Toolkit (see pages 10 and 11). Pages 21-23 of the Toolkit compile Defund demands from across the country which primarily follow this formula (<https://www.interruptingcriminalization.com/defundpolice-toolkit>).

[36] See: “Welcome to the Party” and “Notes from the Rockford Rebellion.”

[37] Jackson, Blood in My Eye, 10.

[39] Jackson, Blood in My Eye, 122.

[40] True Leap Press, “Insurrectional Abolitionism (Part 2),” True Leap Press: Printing & Distribution, December 18, 2020, <https://trueleappress.com/2020/12/17/insurrectional-abolitionism-part-2/>.

[41] Charmaine Chua, “Abolition Is a Constant Struggle: Five Lessons from Minneapolis.” *Theory & Event* 23, no. 5 (2020), 131.

[42] Do or Die, “Insurrectionary Anarchy: Organising for Attack!,” The Anarchist Library, accessed December 31, 2020, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/do-or-die-insurrectionary-anarchy>.

[43] Do or Die, “Insurrectionary Anarchy.”

[44] <https://perilouschronicle.com/covid-19-list-of-prisoner-actions/>

## Sustain the Riot

The murder of George Floyd by the Minneapolis Police Department on May 25, 2020 sparked a summer of rebellions and mass mobilizations at a scale unprecedented in the US, with reverberations across the globe.<sup>[1]</sup> The image of the burning Minneapolis third police precinct set the tone of the ensuing rebellions—a display of confrontation with the police state with few comparisons in the contemporary era of urban revolt. The riotous character of the George Floyd Uprisings was the result of the rage sparked by the visible brutality of the murder of Floyd and accumulated frustrations after years of failed police reform following the first wave of the Movement for Black Lives. This combination of factors brought the question of prison industrial complex (PIC) abolition to the table of public discourse in ways never seen before. The spread of abolition revealed that it is not a coherent concept with a singular interpretation; multiple “abolitionisms” circulated during the uprisings, often in contradiction with each other.

In her introduction to the 2005 anthology *The New Abolitionists*, Joy James reveals that the existence of multiple competing abolitionisms has been a longstanding contention within the project. She argues that abolitionist discourse is deployed by the state, the “non-incarcerated academic/advocate,” and the “prisoner-

slave”/“captive insurgent” to achieve conflicting goals.<sup>[2]</sup> Her analysis focuses on the difference between the abolitionisms of the captive insurgent and the non-incarcerated advocate in how they relate to the state. James argues that the abolitionism of the advocate (informed by academic and non-profit directives) distances itself from revolutionary struggle and presents abolition as achievable through incremental “non-reformist reforms.”<sup>[3]</sup> This approach presents the state as willing and able to grant abolition, obscuring the ways in which “anti-Black, racial-colonial logics of militarization, criminalization, and patrolling are central to the construction, reproduction, and institutional coherence of modern social formations.”<sup>[4]</sup> The captive insurgent’s abolitionism centers the conditions of state violence in a refusal of pragmatic compromise with the state, seeking the abolition of the state itself through revolutionary struggle. In her 2019 lecture “The Architects of Abolitionism,” James furthers this analysis, arguing that the 1972 acquittal of Angela Davis marked the transition from the “revolutionary era” to the “reactionary era.” Through this transition, advocacy/academic abolitionism became the dominant trajectory of abolitionist discourse, displacing the revolutionary abolitionism of the captive.<sup>[5]</sup>

James provides a historical context to examine how abolition took on different forms as the framework became popularized during the George Floyd uprisings. Three modalities of abolition

- [19] <https://secure.everyaction.com/eR7GA7oz70GL8doBq19LrA2>
- [20] <https://blacklivesmatter.com/defundthepolice/>
- [21] <https://defund12.org/>
- [22] <https://8cantwait.org/>
- [23] Olivia Murray, “Why 8 Won’t Work: The Failings of the 8 Can’t Wait Campaign and the Obstacle Police Reform Efforts Pose to Police Abolition,” Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review, June 17, 2020, <https://harvardcrcl.org/why-8-wont-work/>.
- [24] <https://www.8toabolition.com/>.
- [25] George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1990) 118.
- [26] Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 120.
- [27] Minkah Makalani, “Black Lives Matter and the limits of formal Black politics.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116, no. 3 (2017): 534.
- [28] Candice Bernd, “‘Defund Police’ Doesn’t Mean Hire Private Guns – But Cities Are Doing Just That,” *Truthout* (September 1, 2020), <https://truthout.org/articles/defund-police-doesnt-mean-hire-private-guns-but-cities-are-doing-just-that/>.
- [29] Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction*.
- [30] Nick Brady. “Black Ether: Rioting, Negativity, and the Political, (Virtual Colloquium hosted by Bucknell University on April 12, 2022.)
- [31] Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*, 135.
- [32] Stephen Dillon. *Fugitive life: The queer politics of the prison state.* (Duke University Press, 2018), 31.

[9] Anonymous Contributor, “Cars, Riots, and Black Liberation: Lessons from Philadelphia’s Walter Wallace Rebellion,” It’s Going Down, November 26, 2020, <https://itsgoingdown.org/cars-riots-and-black-liberation-lessons-from-philadelphias-walter-wallace-rebellion/>.

[10] Anonymous Contributor, “Notes from the Rockford Rebellion: Black Revolt in the Rustbelt from a New Afrikan Anarchist Perspective,” It’s Going Down, August 21, 2020, <https://itsgoingdown.org/notes-from-the-rockford/>.

[11] [https://twitter.com/MnDPS\\_DPS/status/1266865889552588801](https://twitter.com/MnDPS_DPS/status/1266865889552588801).

[12] Michael Loadenthal, “Tracking Federal Cases Related to Summer Protests, Riots, & Uprisings,” The Prosecution Project, December 22, 2020, <https://theprosecutionproject.org/2020/10/29/tracking-federal-cases-related-to-summer-protests-riots-uprisings/>.

[13] Anonymous, “Welcome to the Party.”

[14] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (New York: Beacon Press, 1995), 72.

[15] Anonymous, “Welcome to the Party.”

[16] Barack Obama, “How to Make This Moment the Turning Point for Real Change,” Medium (Medium, June 1, 2020), <https://barackobama.medium.com/how-to-make-this-moment-the-turning-point-for-real-change-9fa209806067>.

[17] Roudabeh Kishi and Sam Jones, “Demonstrations & Political Violence in America: New Data for Summer 2020,” ACLED, December 11, 2020, <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>.

[18] <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>

emerged during and after the uprisings.<sup>[16]</sup> Two of the modalities have the potential to be directed toward a revolutionary abolitionism: *autonomous abolition*, which is aimed at building hyperlocal infrastructures as alternatives to the carceral state to sustain communities and resistance (mutual aid formations, survival programs, people’s assemblies, anti-repression formations); and *insurrectionary abolition*, which refers to direct action and confrontation with the state (rioting, looting, attacking state structures, taking territory, eviction defense). However *procedural abolition*, which relies on advocacy/academic logics of achieving abolition through non-reformist reforms to reshape state infrastructure, became the dominant modality represented in abolitionist discourse during and after the uprisings. Revisiting the process by which this occurred reveals the ongoing struggle to define abolitionism and clarifies the role of the state in the process.

The movement of abolition into popular discourse was opened up by the intensity of the insurrectionary elements of the initial days of the rebellions. Two processes led to the ascendance of procedural abolitionism as the most popularly engaged mode of articulating abolition: state counterinsurgency attempts aimed at quelling insurrection and directing its capacious critique into legible demands, and the emergence of “defund the police” which became a legible demand to direct at the state. The defund demand is animated by the gradualist advocacy approach of reforming the state

“toward” abolition. While it has been a galvanizing demand, it presents a series of pitfalls for developing a revolutionary abolitionism and conceals other methods for dealing with state violence. Focusing on furthering the insurrectionary and autonomist elements which emerged presents arenas of struggle to develop a more uncompromisingly anti-state pathway toward a revolutionary abolitionist project.

## ***Insurrectionary Openings***

The initial expressions of abolitionism appeared in their most riotous, demandless form through the burning of the third precinct and other elements of abolition-in-practice taken up in Minneapolis and solidarity actions which spread across the country. Insurgents directly attacked the state’s carceral infrastructure through smashing and burning police cars. They articulated the inability of the law to provide redress for state violence through setting fire to legislative buildings.<sup>[7]</sup> Insurgents engaged in direct confrontation with police, often overwhelming them and forcing them to retreat from zones in various cities. They engaged in fluid looting tactics, expropriating resources from corporations and redistributing them in the community.

These tactics represent a form of insurrectionary abolitionism taken up by largely unidentifiable, self-organized, primarily Black

## **End Notes**

[1] Analysts termed the George Floyd protests the “largest movement in US history” in terms of participation. (See: “Black Lives Matter May be the Largest Movement in US History,” New York Times, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.) The number of protests which occurred and their range was also considered unprecedented. (See this collection of data points from Cresote Maps: <https://www.creosotemaps.com/blm2020/index.html>).

[2] Joy James, *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

[3] Joy James, “Airbrushing Revolution for the Sake of Abolition,” *Black Perspectives* (AAIHS, August 12, 2020), <https://www.aaihs.org/airbrushing-revolution-for-the-sake-of-abolition/>.

[4] Dylan Rodriguez, *White Reconstruction: Domestic Warfare and the Logics of Genocide* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020) 44.

[5] Joy James, “The Architects of Abolitionism,” YouTube (Brown University, May 6, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9rvRsWKDx0>.

[6] Rustbelt Abolition Radio, “Tasting Abolition,” Rustbelt Abolition Radio, August 13, 2020, <https://rustbeltradio.org/2020/08/12/tasting-abolition/>.

[7] “Nashville protestors set fires, topple controversial statue,” Associated Press, May 30, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/nashville-tennessee-tn-state-wire-2e7f5b2a93025df5b4343fc14184842c>.

[8] Anonymous Contributor, “Welcome to the Party: The George Floyd Uprising in NYC,” It’s Going Down, June 24, 2020, <https://itsgoingdown.org/welcome-to-the-party-the-george-floyd-uprising-in-nyc/>.

articulated within “legitimate” politics limits the framework and constrains our capacity to be clear about what needs to be done. Abolition at its logical end is not just the abolition of police and prisons, or even the state, but the terms of order as we know it. Revolutionary abolition calls for “a sociopolitical infrastructure to intervene in every area of Black life” and prepare the people for the necessary confrontation to carry this destructive potential to its conclusion.<sup>[52]</sup>

As I was finishing the conclusion of this essay on December 30, 2020, I saw the news that another Black person had been killed by police in Minneapolis, after all that had occurred there since May. Police murders have not stopped even as protests aimed at bringing attention to them have decreased in frequency. This constant state of urgency presents the need for formations and infrastructures to sustain attacks against the state, and to defend Black communities from further violence. As abolitionists aim to continue inviting people into engaging with the framework, it must meet the immediate needs of folks faced with death *now*. It must present methods of defense and attack that do not rely on a gradual withering away of the carceral state. A defunded police department can still kill. And for the police to actually disappear it will require much more than policy change; abolitionists have to make this clear.

masses.<sup>[8]</sup> This form of abolitionism was beyond what visible (Black) radical formations had the capacity to facilitate or organize; the most these organizations could do was publish letters arguing the validity of looting and rioting as tactics. This abolitionism was also unassimilable into state attempts at determining the terms of emerging abolitionist discourse, which is why it garnered intense repression from the state.

This insurrectionary energy persisted throughout the summer although with less concentrated frequency over time. Sparks of looting and rioting would re-emerge in response to new police killings throughout the summer in Atlanta, Kenosha, Rochester, Chicago, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. The process was well-described in an essay on the Philadelphia rebellion:

*Nearly every week since the beginning of this long, hot summer, a different city has occupied the center stage of this particularly American drama. Through this passing of the torch, the sequence of riots has dragged on for far longer than anyone could have expected. Every time it seemed as if the wave had finally crashed, another city went up in flames.<sup>[9]</sup>*

As the summer progressed, insurgents developed heightened self-organization and learned from and developed each other's tactics across locales.

While this mode of activity continued throughout the summer, state and radical sources alike identified the first week following Floyd's murder as having the greatest insurrectionary intensity.<sup>[10]</sup> Two days after the burning of the precinct, the Minneapolis Department of Public Safety tweeted that "law enforcement presence will triple in size to address a sophisticated network of urban warfare."<sup>[11]</sup> Cities across the nation established curfews and responded to the rebellions with highly militarized repression. Repressive tactics continued and escalated in different ways as the summer progressed, however the numbers of arrests and federal charges were concentrated in that first week.<sup>[12]</sup> On-the-ground reports from cities across the U.S. argue that the heightened repression of the first week of insurgency shifted the forms of actions people took in following weeks.<sup>[13]</sup> This repression sought to capture the emerging forms of insurrectionary abolitionism and bring them back into "the realm of accepted discourse."<sup>[14]</sup> Insurrectionary abolitionism represented a complete refusal of the legitimacy of the state and its accepted modes of political action. The state needed to contain this form of abolition and redirect it into proper procedure.

houseless encampments in Seattle. Stealing mutual aid resources such as water and food and targeting medics were tactics used to quell protests and occupations. Dean Spade argues that "We might understand mutual aid projects as frontline work in a war over who will control social relations and how survival will be reproduced, especially in the face of worsening crises."<sup>[51]</sup> Defending mutual aid formations will be a critical site of politicization and militant resistance to state repression.

## ***Revolutionary Abolition***

Abolition presents a range of means to attend to the space of the "not-yet" pending revolution. It enables questions such as: What does the world we want look like and how do we get there? What means of "getting there" are prioritized while others fall off the table? Which means captivate which audiences? Which ones facilitate us building alternative relations and forms of power *now*, not after the state gives us funding or a budget hearing? Which ones give the state more capacity to determine our lives and the scope of what is possible?

The analyses of captive insurgents such as George Jackson provoke us to move through an abolitionism that refuses compromises with the state and exceeds what can be achieved through reform . Adjusting abolition so that its desires can be

and mass participation which can proliferate—not bureaucratically order or control—resistance to the state. Sustaining the riot also involves constant revolt not merely in reaction to instances of spectacular violence. Mutual aid is a site where we can see the connections between the spectacular moment of the riot and the building up of revolutionary infrastructure in the everyday.

In reflecting on the initial riots in Minneapolis, Charmaine Chua argues that “they attest to a mass re-imagination of systems of collective care.” She continues,

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.<sup>[49]</sup>

Chua connects the relations of the riot to the practice of mutual aid, arguing that it “provides a transformative alternative that seeks radical change through new ways to redistribute material resources, practice democracy, and mobilize people for ongoing struggle.”<sup>[50]</sup> The proliferation of mutual aid projects in response to the pandemic and uprising were met with police repression. Police attempted to destroy and clear out community mutual aid spaces such as the Rayshard Brooks Peace Center in Atlanta and

## ***Counterinsurgency***

The state’s chosen discursive counterinsurgency tactics were to delegitimize insurgent forms of protest through creating distinctions between good/peaceful and bad/non-peaceful protestors. The state also aimed to delegitimize “who” was taking up insurgent actions by calling riotous protesters “outside agitators” that did not represent the actual community where the action took place. The “actual community” were the protestors who followed proper, peaceful forms of action. These discursive moves, as well as the deployment of curfews which created a peaceful/non-peaceful distinction by time of day, fractured what was reported as a synergy between “riotous” and “peaceful” elements for the first few days of rebellion. Staying outside past curfew signaled a type of non-peaceful confrontation that many were not prepared to support or engage in. The internalization of the state’s narratives on peaceful protest also led to protestors policing each others’ actions to ensure they did not appear too riotous (a process referred to as peace policing). Each of these factors led to the quelling of the riots and the dominance of peaceful forms of protest. The “bad protestors” who initiated the early confrontational actions phased out of participation in this stage.<sup>[15]</sup>

The riot and evasive looting diminished in favor of the mass march and frontal confrontation. Facing a state prepared for “urban warfare” with a “peaceful” demonstration meant folks made

themselves available for intense militarized police violence.

Unnecessary arrests, kettling, and injuries occurred because folks thought that by being peaceful they would no longer be engaged as enemy combatants. Instead of confronting the state like the “rioters,” “peaceful protestors” sought to be legible as subjects with rights who, in simply “making their voice be heard,” were not deserving of violence. Acquiescing to the state’s established terms of proper engagement, and disavowing or policing those who stepped out of line, changed the trajectory of the rebellions. This shift in the terms of state legibility would have significance in the realm of demands.

Barack Obama’s June 1, 2020 essay was a critical moment in the shaping of abolitionism as it was emerging as a popular language within the first week of revolt.[\[16\]](#) The essay worked in tandem with the previously mentioned counterinsurgency efforts to quell the insurrectionary abolitionism of rioting and looting. The state undoubtedly recognized the demandless praxis of abolition in the revolt and its total rejection of the state, and sought to reign this energy back within acceptable terms of political action. Obama, as the designated Black rebellion-queller due to his position in the Black political imaginary, was deployed by the state to present “real change” as achievable only through petitioning the state for policy reform. Obama framed “protest” as outside of politics and only a

of the attack is “the paralysis of the economy, of normality.”[\[42\]](#) The efforts to quell the summer’s rebellions show that “what the system is afraid of is not just these acts of sabotage themselves, but also them spreading socially. Uncontrollability itself is the strength of the insurrection.”[\[43\]](#)

The 2020 summer’s revolts truly spread socially across the country, sharing and developing tactics over time. A node in this constellation of revolts was an “unprecedented” number of prison uprisings which began in March 2020 in response to COVID-19 conditions.[\[44\]](#) On December 27, 2020 five prisoners at McCormick Correctional Institution in South Carolina attempted to escape and a guard was locked in a cell.[\[45\]](#) This abolitionism of the captive insurgent was largely disconnected from the narratives of the George Floyd uprisings. Supporting these kinds of actions will be necessary in furthering abolitionist praxis and better connecting anti-police energies to efforts to abolish prisons. The prison breaks in Nigeria during the #EndSARS protests present a template for thinking through the linkages between inside-outside revolt.[\[46\]](#)

As Sylvia Wynter notes, the riot “creates a real contradiction between structure and anti-structure, social order and man-made anarchy.”[\[47\]](#) The riot is not only a form of attack; it is a manifestation of the commons, a “rehearsal” of the communization of social relations.[\[48\]](#) Sustaining the riot requires extending momentary upheaval into everyday life. It requires infrastructure

community safe.”<sup>[41]</sup> *Abolition as objective*, rather than demand, removes state mediation and orients us toward creating abolition now. Abolitionism’s attention to creating alternative forms of organization and relation that counter the carceral impulses of the state make abolition a framework that is useful as a prefigurative politics for a revolutionary project. *Abolition as objective* attunes us to the ways in which people are already enacting abolition in both spectacular and mundane moments in order to further them toward confronting and smashing the state. The 2020 summer showed us that people are already ready for militant actions. Postponement only allows the state to recover and re-legitimize itself.

## ***Sustaining the Riot***

Following the first few weeks of the uprisings, I was having a conversation with some friends when one shared that their neighbor had asked them “what’s next?” after the riots. My response then, and continues to be, is that the rush to move beyond the riot (referring to the broad range of insurgent activity) often lends to the procedural approach I have outlined—redirecting the energy of the riot toward making sensible demands to the state. Folks are tired of perpetual demonstration for the sake of demonstration. However, moving from demonstration to attack requires switching the aim and targets of mobilization. Rather than making an appeal, the aim

means for raising awareness for “proper” political activities of policy change and voting.

Obama aimed to write out the political interventions of the revolts and argue that “real” political action only occurs in policy advocacy *after* the revolt. While forms of insurrectionary abolitionism continued, they became overshadowed by peaceful protest-as-petition. In fact, liberal media and research groups attempted to write out the early stages of revolt and present the full summer of protests as “mostly peaceful.”<sup>[17]</sup> I argue that the popularization of abolitionism within this context, particularly through the demand to defund the police, conceptually traps it within the frame of state legibility and appeal. This process represents a longer trend in the trajectory of abolitionist thought wherein a procedural framework which aims at gradually reforming the state toward abolition has become dominant. It is important to analyze the logics of this procedural form of abolition in order to determine ways to press against it and work toward placing greater emphasis on the insurrectionary and autonomous forms that were also present during and after the uprisings.

## ***Defund the Police***

The concept of defunding the police as it has been articulated since the summer of 2020 has existed in the Movement for Black Lives-era

police reform/abolition discourse since at least the 2016 Vision for Black Lives policy platform.<sup>[18]</sup> This platform uses the language and framework of “invest-divest”: divest from the prison industrial complex and invest in community, social, and health infrastructures. The invest-divest framework re-emerged in the language of defunding first through a May 25, 2020 petition created by Reclaim the Block and the Black Visions Collective, two key formations organizing out of Minneapolis.<sup>[19]</sup> On May 30, 2020, the Black Lives Matter Global Network site published a petition for a national defunding of police.<sup>[20]</sup> By June 5<sup>th</sup> a website called “Defund12” contained email templates for people in cities across the U.S. to petition elected officials to “reallocate egregious police budgets towards education, social services, and dismantling racial injustice.”<sup>[21]</sup>

While there have been various interpretations of the meaning of defunding the police, what is most pertinent to this essay is the ways in which the demand was developed and pushed by self-identified prison industrial complex (PIC) abolitionists. Abolitionists who pushed the defunding demand argued against both anti-abolitionist dismissals of the demand and other abolitionists’ claims that it is purely reformist. They argued against the reformist critique and attempted to retain the demand as conceptually within the trajectory of working towards abolition. The logics supporting the framework of “defunding as a means

abolition should not be confined to a timeline that is contingent on the state’s response to our demands.

George Jackson argues that “the new revolutionary consciousness will develop in the struggles of withdrawal” from the enemy state and its institutions.<sup>[39]</sup> The lingering of state legitimacy even after moments of upheaval against the state will be a key target in trying to develop a revolutionary abolitionism. If revolutionaries were to move away from demands at this point, defunding is already in circulation by the people and state actors. The state’s cooptation of defunding and/or unwillingness to go through with it can be a point of politicization to redirect people to autonomous and insurrectionary projects. As stated in a ‘zine on insurrectional abolitionism, “If unmet political demands are indeed the entry point into learning the imperatives of holistic revolutionary transformation for millions during this conjecture so be it.”<sup>[40]</sup>

Organizers are already taking up this tactic. In Minneapolis, after a City Charter Commission voted to prevent the city from defunding and disbanding its police department, a local organizer, Kieran Frazier Knutson, responded by arguing that “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

uprisings.<sup>[36]</sup> Folks who have already engaged in a total rejection of the state will not be activated by the “long game” of petition-based campaigns. George Jackson argues that “anything less than an effective defense/attack weapon and a charger for the people to mount *now*...is meaningless to the great majority of the slaves...‘long range-politics’...cannot be made relevant to the person who expects to die tomorrow.”<sup>[37]</sup> People need to see abolition as immediate material interventions into everyday social life, not a process contingent on state budgetary cycles.

When responding to state officials’ critiques and refusals of defunding the police, abolitionists argued that “defund was already the compromise.” Why lead with compromise in a moment of unprecedented insurgency? Why not present the people with the objective of total abolition and potentially force the state into concessions later rather than confining abolition “within the strictures of ‘pragmatics’”—“the domain of the possible...*determinable horizons and measures of certitude*”?<sup>[38]</sup> The pragmatic steps of non-reformist reforms are used to provide folks with concrete steps to see the possibility of achieving what is often dismissed as an impossible framework. Pragmatic demands are used to show that abolition can be worked toward now. But what other pathways to abolition can be presented to show folks that it is possible? What pathways immediately begin shifting our relations to each other and move us toward self-determination? The pathway to

toward abolition” are informed by arguments around the nature of reformist reforms versus abolitionist reforms. Abolitionist reforms are presented as those which aim to decrease the size, scope, and power of the prison industrial complex, while reformist reforms assume the inevitability of the PIC and seek to reform its management, accountability systems, and behavioral protocols.

The discourse between these two frameworks of reform played out in real time through the contention between the *8 Can’t Wait* and *8 to Abolition* campaigns. *8 Can’t Wait* was a set of reformist reforms aimed at changing police departments’ use of force protocols. The set of proposals was released by Campaign Zero (a group of celebrity activists who reached an elevated status following the 2014 Ferguson uprisings) on June 3, 2020 when demands for defunding and abolition were becoming more prominent. The project proposed the following reforms: ban chokeholds and strangleholds; require de-escalation; require warning before shooting; exhaust all other means before shooting; duty to intervene and stop excessive force by other officers; ban shooting at moving vehicles; require use-of-force continuum; and require comprehensive reporting each time an officer uses forces or threatens to do so.<sup>[22]</sup>

The reforms were touted to reduce police violence by seventy-two percent if all eight were adopted by police departments. After the release of the platform, police departments immediately began

sharing the list of reforms on social media pages, identifying the ones they already had implemented as ways of presenting themselves as leading the charge for police reform. However, the fact that many of the proposed reforms were already implemented across the country, especially in large cities that are notable for police violence (e.g. New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, each had seven of the eight policies implemented) diminishes the argument that these reforms actually reduce violence.<sup>[23]</sup> Abolitionists argued that the emergence of the platform during a moment of upheaval and the proliferation of abolitionist ideas was an attempt at redirecting the new terrain of demands to the same reformism of the previous iteration of Black Lives Matter protests.

A group of abolitionists released a response campaign called *8 to Abolition* on June 7, 2020 as a direct critique of *8 Can't Wait*, re-centering the argument for abolition within the growing discourse on policing. This alternative platform presented its own set of eight demands, each encompassing a range of policy changes “targeted toward city and municipal powers.”<sup>[24]</sup> Its demands included: defund police; demilitarize communities; remove police from schools; free people from jails and prisons; repeal laws that criminalize survival; invest in community self-governance; provide safe housing for everyone; and invest in care, not cops. *8 to Abolition* can be read alongside the #DefundPolice toolkit created by Interrupting Criminalization as a key document articulating the

call to defund the police emerged to say “we actually do have a demand.” Whereas the riots presented the impossibility of the state and its sanctioned modes of policy petition to grant freedom from police-state violence, the act of forming a legible demand to the state—a demand not even for total defunding but for specific reductions in budgets—shifted the terrain from expansive critique and impossibility to presenting a pragmatic policy demand that the state is argued to be able to easily achieve.<sup>[34][35]</sup>

The expansive critique and demandlessness of the riots present a way to more clearly define our relation to the carceral state and think through other “pathways toward abolition” that are available beyond those bound by state timelines. The “steps” toward abolition as presented by M4BL, Critical Resistance, and Interrupting Criminalization revolve around non-reformist reforms. The demandless insurrectionary and autonomous abolitionisms present a pathway to abolition *now* through creating new social relations. The articulated demand narrows the scope of what folks are fighting for to terms recognizable to the state and presents the state as being possible of granting what the people want.

The demand also disciplines the forms of movement folks can take up, redirecting self-activity into budget campaigns. Reports from several cities indicate that this shift in focus toward organizational bureaucracy led to the fading out of participation of the most rebellious elements from the initial days of the

not offer us actual defense and that the only recognition the state grants us when we “contest or exceed its order” is recognition as a threat.<sup>[32]</sup> Black folks must recognize that we already have a tenuous relationship to “citizenship”—we are a threat to order prior to any action we take. And if others want to join the party they have to be prepared to have their defenses removed and see the state as the enemy that it is. The logics of petition weaken an abolitionist analysis of our relationship to the state and leave us in a state of surprise whenever violence occurs. Assessing our compromised capacity to rely on the terms of policy and protocol calls for a different framework of abolition beyond procedure.

## ***Abolition as Objective***

The emergence and coherence of “abolition through policy demand” presented a tension with the insurgent/insurrectionary activity that was taking place on the ground during the first week of the 2020 rebellion. While the initial actions rejected a type of coherence, representing an unassimilable refusal of the state, a critique and desire much more expansive than that which can be translated into “specific laws and institutional practices,” the defund the police demand represented a type of legibility to the state.<sup>[33]</sup> As Obama was critiquing the lack of demands of the riot, it was as if the

logics of defunding and its associated demands due to the extent of its popular circulation and dissemination by visible Movement for Black Lives organizations. The range of demands presented by the campaign also reflect those presented to city councils across the country during and in the aftermath of the uprisings.

The targets of *8 to Abolition* are different from those of reformist reforms. It is interested in the reach, legitimacy, and power of police rather than the police’s behavioral protocols. It targets collective psychic and material investments in policing, seeking to redirect them towards infrastructural solutions for the social causes of harm, crime, and need. However, this framework does not fully depart from *8 Can’t Wait* in its proposal for a state-mediated project of abolition. It responds to a set of reforms with another set of reforms, and the assumed trajectory of abolition is through policy reform and state(-funded) institutions rather than autonomous forms of building power.

## ***Procedural Abolition***

The procedural approach delays revolutionary preparation—as George Jackson argues, “with each reform, revolution [becomes] more remote.”<sup>[25]</sup> It acquiesces to the state’s post-civil rights movement attempts to redirect Black insurgency into formal political channels rather than autonomous or riotous formations

and tactics—“reformism [is] allowed.”[\[26\]](#)[\[27\]](#) The presentation of abolition as being something the state can grant re legitimates the state as it attempts to delegitimize the carceral state. The approach relies on an assumption that the carceral state will “wither away,” obscuring the ways in which the state will hold onto its foundational relations of carceral violence. The state and the carceral state are inseparable.

Procedural abolition also does not account for the ways in which defunding or altering the institution of police could lead to the transferring of policing into new forms and even the “social services” that are the desired targets for shifted funding. For example, in the aftermath of the summer of 2020, cities that “defunded” their police departments quickly moved to replacing them with private security.[\[28\]](#) As Dylan Rodriguez argues with his concept of “white reconstruction,” reform does not *weaken* the state; it *sustains* and strengthens it with new forms that are made to appear less violent.[\[29\]](#) The state will use any reform to maintain its foundational commitments to white supremacy and anti-Black domestic war.

The popularization of procedural logics led to the use of petitions to try to address even these foundational dynamics of anti-Black violence. An example is the Movement for Black Lives adding a demand to their policy platform for the state to “respect the rights of protestors” in the aftermath of police violence against protestors

during the 2020 summer. They also released a graphic which called on readers to call their representatives to demand that they “end the war on Black people.” There is no petition that will get the state to respect Black protest when anti-Black violence—specifically anticipatory violence to prevent the fantasized Black uprising—is the foundation of the state itself.[\[30\]](#) Redress for anti-Black violence exceeds what can be petitioned for from a representative, however the overrepresentation of procedural logics constrains us to the methods sanctioned by formal politics. The procedural approach obscures what our real relationship to the state is, and frames state violence as an aberration that can be fixed rather than the expected response to Black movement. As George Jackson stated, “we will not succeed until we fully accept the fact that the enemy is *aware, determined, disguised, totalitarian, and mercilessly counterrevolutionary*.”[\[31\]](#)

The procedural approach engages the state as if Black people are in a “clientelist relationship” with the state rather than an adversarial one. It does not prepare us for the actual conflict that will be required to abolish the prison industrial complex or build infrastructure to deal with the state’s merciless forces that will respond to Black insurgency. Attempts to point out contradictions in police behavior toward their “citizens”—“they are supposed to protect and serve us, yet they do not respect our first amendment rights!”—fall short because they obscure the fact that “rights” do