

Peaceful Protest, Outside Agitators, and the State: A Letter to BIPOC Comrades

It's been a week of intensity nearly unknown in our lifetimes. I, like many of you, have been glued to my phone for updates from the streets. I watched in both horror and unbridled joy at the images of burning cop cars and precincts, the gutted Targets and Footlockers. Joy because I think it is a beautiful thing to see such complete antagonism towards a system that has oppressed Black and Brown communities for so long. Antagonism not tempered by liberal notions of "peace" or "civility". But also horror at the images of the police shooting medics with "less lethal weapons" at close range, or shoving an old man backwards and walking by him without notice as he convulses on the ground. I watched. I beared witness. I allowed myself to feel the seething anger.

Hatred of the police is not a new feeling for me. And, yes, I said hatred. Not dislike, not distrust, not disapproval, but hatred. The individual people who wear the uniform too? Most likely I don't hate all of them, I believe that many of them wear the badge because they have been indoctrinated to believe that the police are a force for good in the world. But the common thread between all of them is that – in putting on the uniform – they have taken an oath not to uphold justice, but to enforce the law. They have taken an oath to enforce the law even when it is oppressive, violent, and inhuman, and they have agreed to suspend their own moral judgement in the process. I will never have any respect for that decision. So, yes, I hate the police and I despise any police officer who continues to wear that uniform and deny what it means.

I hate the police because my father grew up Indigenous in Saskatchewan (my mom is white). From a young age I was counselled that the police were not my friend and that I was never to talk to them. That is what the police legacy of beatings and starlight rides (look it up) and racism will do. My father and his entire family experienced the full force of police violence for being Indian in public. Natives in Canada don't trust the police. Three Indigenous people – including a 16 year old girl – were murdered by the police in Winnipeg in just 10 days in April.

I hate the police because I am an anarchist. My experience with the police has been the immense repression of my community because we don't believe in the state. I've responded to early morning calls of cops using a battering ram to knock in a front door, tossing in concussion grenades before dragging my friends, naked and ziptied, into the living room. I've spent months trying to pressure the prison into letting my Trans friend go after the cops revoked their parole for simply standing up at a public meeting and giving an anti-police speech. I've seen undercover attempt to infiltrate our circles to gain information on anti-pipeline organizing. And I've had friends go home with bruises and broken bones at the hands of riot cops in Montreal.

The police are not my friends nor my protectors. The police are a violent scourge on our communities. I have stormed down the streets on March 15th, organized demos when the police have murdered someone in my city, and spent days and nights on the steps of the police headquarters in Toronto with BLM. People ask me all the time what I would do if I was robbed. I've been robbed, I didn't call the police. Things are just things, I do not wish revenge on a poor person. They ask me what happens if I was attacked. I've been attacked, me and my friends fought back. They ask me what happens if I were raped. I am a survivor, I didn't call the police. Have you seen the statistics on how many times a rapist is arrested for the act? Look it up. It is my belief that handing someone over to the police is an incredibly violent thing to do and I would do everything in my power to get around it. That doesn't mean there is no situation where I would not call them (sometimes you are forced to), but it would only be at last resort and with a heavy heart. For it is still an unfortunate reality that the existence of the police has blocked the creation of other mechanisms for harm to be addressed.

I am often disappointed at people who believe with all their hearts that the police need to be abolished, but turn around and advocate for reform instead. Yet I understand why it happens. The cops have spent half their existence fooling the public into thinking that they are inevitable, that society would descend into chaos without them. They have spent the other half fooling us into believing that they do in fact prevent and solve crimes. So when they get caught murdering someone, in cold blood on the street in front of a camera, their main focus will always be trying to recapture their benevolent image and, when that fails, reminding us that they have guns and tanks and

impunity. Their counterinsurgency tactics are on full display right now. They are attempting to respond to the largest and most widespread anti-police uprising the US has ever seen. We cannot blame the police for acting in all the dishonest ways that are their custom, but we can blame each other for falling for it.

I understand that I will inevitably face criticism for writing this, that some people will say I should not weigh in on this issue because it is a Black issue for the Black community to decide. I push back on that, respectfully. Because I love this movement and because I hate the police and because I think both of those things are beliefs that I want to see spread beyond the Black community. Because I think critical solidarity is vital on all sides. Because I want to see this movement for Black lives win. And because I know that there are as many Black people that will agree with me as will disagree.

This is an open letter to all of my comrades in struggle. It is a plea to stop falling for state narratives that serve to disempower the people and confuse us in the streets. Of course it has bothered me to see social media fawning over the staged photo ops of cops taking a knee for a moment of silence or hugging a protestor. It has bothered me because those police officers – mere hours later – were teargassing and clubbing those same protestors and liberals choose to ignore that reality. What has bothered me more is the extent to which I see BIPOC comrades falling into the narrative trap of the “peaceful protest” and the “outside agitator”.

The Trap of the “Peaceful Protest”

Canada has seen a major outpouring of support for the Black uprisings in the US. Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets in organized protests – and one riot – in solidarity with the anti-police movement. But a consistent theme to these marches has been an obsession with keeping them “peaceful”. This happens for a variety of reasons: police pressure, liberal organizers, and fear. It is a frightening thought that you might call a demonstration and that the people that show up might outnumber your estimates and that those people might be angry and that their anger might spill over into property damage or theft. You might feel responsible. The police might claim you are responsible. People might accuse you of putting Black community at risk, “If the protest gets violent, the police will

crack down on BIPOC people!” And so you insist that everyone that comes follows the rules. You don’t want to involve the police, so you appoint marshalls to police the crowd for you. You shame anyone who strays from your plan.

Insisting that a demonstration in solidarity with the US rebellion remain “peaceful” is an attempt to protect yourself from criticism and harm through an appeal to state legitimacy, which has the additional effect of naming the riots you claim to be in solidarity with as illegitimate. True solidarity right now is justifying the riots in the US, even at personal cost. You have to ask yourself, what does “peaceful” really mean? To the police, it means lawful. It means not disrupting the current order. But isn’t that what we are demonstrating against? This is a movement saying “Fuck the status quo! Fuck the system that allows cops to murder Black people without consequence!” We have to be willing to not care what the police think of us. We have to care more about our own truth and honour than we do about middle class sensibilities. Ask yourself, is this a movement against the police, or just against police brutality?

I want to see more pushing back against the police and their control. When the police try to hold organizers responsible for the actions of every person that attends their public gathering, we need to refuse to comply. This is a tactic they use to download the responsibility of maintaining order onto you. Don’t do the cops’ job for them! This is made easier if you organize marches outside of organizations. Do it semi-anonymously. Say “we are a collective of Black and POC folks”. Wear masks. Make fake FB profiles or temporary pages to host the events. If you recruit marshalls to help with the crowds and keep people safe, counsel them to protect people from the cops and racists. Don’t ask them to stop protestors from escalating the pace and tone, or to stop them from yelling at the police, or to snitch on them for graffiti or other forms of action. When we gather together in large groups for marches and rallies, we do so to feel the strength that comes with our large numbers. Beautiful things can happen when we feel empowered as a collective. It allows people to push past their comfort zone, take risk, and feel supported. This is what we should be fostering.

We need to question our beliefs in non-violence and respectability. When we fear that we will bear the retaliation of the police if we

disrupt order, we have to commit to defend each other instead of talking ourselves out of acting. We should not be encouraging people to see themselves as victims, instead asking them, "What do you need to feel strong?" When we let ourselves be guided by fear, we make ourselves vulnerable to the second of two traps.

The Trap of the "Outside Agitator"

A glance through social media can paint a confusing picture right now. My feeds are ripe with people praising the riots, but also by people claiming that white anarchists are the ones initiating the looting and arson and vandalism. There are videos purportedly showing cops stacking piles of bricks at intersections, as part of a conspiracy to escalate the street action. It is absolutely infuriating to watch people looking for any reason why Black people didn't burn down their city instead of backing them up. I say this as someone whose community has twice been infiltrated by cops, the result of which was multiple people spending several years in jail: there is absolutely no reason for cops to leave piles of bricks on the street of an uncontrollable anti-police protest.

Yes, there is a limited history of deep undercover cops, working with crews and encouraging them to escalate tactics to press inflated charges. And, yes, there are most definitely undercover cops amongst the protests in the US and in Canada. But in this particular case, with the uprising so widespread and destabilizing and threatening to police control, the police are not going to hand over projectiles to Black people. It doesn't help them to seem out of control on tv, nor does it help them right now to have video after video of them using extreme force to quell dissent. This is one of the purposes of insurrection. To force the police to show their true colors, to demonstrate how much force they are willing to use on their own citizenry to maintain their authority. This is not going to help them increase their budgets. In fact, several municipalities are already slashing their funding. Besides, there are plenty of things to throw on the street.

It is almost comical to hear governors on tv talking about how these riots are caused by "outside agitators" while the infographic behind them shows there are demonstrations and riots in all 50 states. The border is closed because of COVID. Outside from where?

When these authorities say "outside agitator", what they mean is "outside the Black community". They mostly mean white people. This is a story as old as time. When indentured Irish settlers and slaves joined forces to overpower their masters, the slave owners stopped giving the indentured workers jobs alongside them and brought them into whiteness by granting them overseer roles. This story has happened time and time again throughout history and it does show us that white people are not always sound accomplices. But it also shows us that white power fears collaboration between white and BIPOC people. The KKK put out editorials claiming that Black people were very happy as slaves and it was only white agitation from the North that was riling them up. This had the joint benefit of denying Black agency and sowing racial division. During the Civil Rights era again, this narrative of the white agitator returns. James Baldwin is quoted as saying on the issue, "When the South has trouble with its Negroes -- when the Negroes refuse to remain in their 'place' -- it blames 'outside agitators' and 'Northern interference.' When the nation has trouble with the Northern Negro, it blames the Kremlin". Deny Black agency, divide white and Black radicals. Rinse. Repeat.

Denying that BIPOC people are capable of rioting, or that they hold a proud tradition of insurrectionary action is a disempowering and unfounded assumption. It also helps the police by making arrests more popular later. The police can get away with criminalizing people if the bulk of citizens believe they are rounding up "outsiders" who came in and destroyed their community. But the overwhelming fact is that the state does not want radical racial solidarity.

Yet, there is one thing that the state wants even less than race traitors marching in the streets for Black struggle. It fears nothing more than Black (& Indigenous & Latinx) anarchists. BIPOC people who refuse not only the legitimacy of the police, but also the existence of the state. BIPOC people who cannot be recuperated, who cannot be won over with reform and inclusion into the system. BIPOC people who will settle for nothing more than complete autonomy. The state fears this so much that it will try it's hardest to convince you Black anarchists don't exist. So the narrative goes, "only white people riot", "anarchism is a white thing". Feeding into this, of course, erases the existence of BIPOC anarchists and antiauthoritarians of a variety of traditions. Let us never forget the Black anarchists of MOVE who, after being accused of killing a cop in 1978, had a bomb dropped on

their neighborhood by the police in downtown Philly. The police obliterated 65 houses, killed six adults and five children. Members of the MOVE 9, who were charged with the death of one police officer who attempted to evict them from their home with guns drawn, were sentenced each to 100 years of prison. The last of which, Chuck Sims Africa, was just released on parole on February 7th, 2020 after spending 41 years in jail.

So it's not surprising that my feed is peppered with videos of cops encouraging Black folks to hand over white people who they see as "causing trouble". Or that there are dozens of videos of Black people linked arm in arm to protect Target from looting, alongside videos of white skaters smashing out windows before being tackled. Am I trying to say that white people haven't overstepped in the streets? Or caused harm? No. But the narrative is being oversimplified towards a purpose. As an Indigenous woman, I can tell you that not all white radicals are friends. Some will inevitably let you down, they will make mistakes, they will miss the point. But it is a strategic error and a deception to blanket them with mistrust. I have even seen BIPOC (and white) folks lumping in anarchists with white supremacists as "people to watch out for" at the demonstrations! People have reposted conspiracies that the vaguely-promoted Toronto riot that was being circulated on social media was planned by Montreal anarchists who intended to storm Toronto and destroy it! BIPOC people have approached me to help marshall their events filled with fear that white people are going to come and start breaking windows. I need everyone to stop for a minute and think. Breathe. These are illogical beliefs. What does it mean when you are repeating the same lines that Ezra Levant is currently posting on Rebel Media? What does it mean when you are echoing ideas that the far right news source Project Veritas has been promoting for years? It is okay to be afraid. It is not okay to stoke racial and political division to the detriment of your movement because of fear. Think critically and choose your accomplices with care and conviction.

Some Perspective

It is okay to be afraid of the cops. It is appropriate to be afraid of the cops. Even if they aren't pulling guns on you, they have the ability to kidnap you off the street and drag you through a maze of violent bureaucracy that you have little control over. It is for this and so many

reasons that we need to keep fighting for their abolition. Part of this struggle is being smarter than them, seeing through their tactics of division and confusion. The struggle for Black lives is paramount. We must not give up. Ask yourself, though, what is your marker of success? Will you be satisfied with the realized demands of the 8cantwait campaign, if police violence decreases in your community by 72%? Are you okay with the 28% of police violence that will remain? Or are you indignant, are you enraged, are you furious enough to settle for nothing less than the complete abolition of the police and the world that needs them?

That struggle is harder and longer. It will be easier won with comrades who share your goal. Adopt an ethic of critical solidarity. Go your own way but build relationships strategically and align yourself with people who share common goals. Anarchists who hate the police for what they stand for and what they protect. Radicals – BIPOC and white – who can teach the technology of evasion: encrypted communication, online security, countersurveillance measures. Indigenous folks who have been resisting this state for 300 years. Neighbors who will make a commitment to not call the police. And those people in bloc who have spent decades honing the art of busting windows and breaking police lines.

**Keep fucking fighting. You're winning.
Justice for all Black people murdered by the police.**

**All
Cops
Are
Bastards**