

UNTITLED

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I write this from the occupied lands of the Lenni-Lenape peoples, a region once referred to as Lenapehoking, where their stewardship of these lands as a meeting place for tribal nations throughout Turtle Island remains visibly erased from the landscape. In direct contrast, we do have James Logan, memorialized by Philadelphia urbanists in “Logan Square”, who manufactured a false treaty with the Lenape peoples, setting forth the conditions for Native displacement by violent European settler militias who played a crucial role in pushing the Lenni-Lenape away from their ancestral lands (Shurley, 2019). These militias, this structure of displacement of racialized populations still structures our existence today.

I write this from the *revitalized* West Philadelphia neighborhood of Powelton Village, where 42 years ago on August 8, 1978, the Philadelphia Police Department shot first into a home filled with men, women, children, and animals, later taking 9 members of the Black revolutionary MOVE organization into prison where many remained imprisoned for decades, charged with murder, criminal conspiracy, and a series of related charges for seeking to defend themselves against this police terrorism (Ebram, 2019). To this day, no officer or city official has been charged in what occurred that day, nor the state-sanctioned bombing of the reinstated MOVE organization headquarters pushed further west to 6221 Osage Avenue which took the lives of 12 men, women, and children that took place seven years later on May 13, 1985. Once again, this—state-sanctioned violence, neighborhood displacement, the upward redistribution of wealth, the spread of risk and precarity—still structures our existence today.

I write this after a weekend of action committed under two interconnected fronts of struggle: (1) That the University of Pennsylvania Police Department, under Maureen Rush’s direction, supported and reinforced the Philadelphia Police in the teargassing of families in the majority Black residential neighborhood of 52nd St. on May 31, 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic. There has been no apology offered, not a single note of institutional regret emerging from the campus in the terror that the neighborhood faced that day more than a mile from the campus. (2) That the University’s plan for reopening campus, which allows for a mass of students, faculty, and staff to return into an already vulnerable West Philadelphia, where Black and Latinx communities are disproportionately at risk and without guaranteed healthcare access. This decision, made without consulting and/or communicating to local residents, leverages ongoing death and continued dispossession as the off campus rental market-minded landlords follow the logics of the University in sustaining profit before community concern.[1] Return here again, Violence. Displacement. Extraction. Risk. It’s here. Today. Unevenly burdening the Black, Indigenous, and poor.

The militias were renamed the police, yet they seek, as they did then, to ensure the settler future. And they are enshrined by the interests of capital, wealth accumulation, and profit-seeking. Sanctified by the city officials and the businessmen who avail themselves that there exist no alternatives on which to maintain the world. Made sacred by dismissing and violently dismantling the societal alternatives historically produced, and persistently emergent, by those racialized as “others.” This is the structure of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000), which is sustained in the individual hearts of our shared American imagination.

These are the lessons in which we must learn as those interested in pursuing a radically new and just future. It requires that we must strike at the root. Through a deep focus on peoples’ history and ethnic studies, we understand that the police function to violently establish “order” on stolen lands, empowered through stolen labor, and maintained by stolen wealth. And the past is present (Baldwin, 1963). We can draw a relationship between the original displacement of the Native peoples from their lands, the amassed wealth that came to build a University designed by slaveholding trustees with the profits of a U.S. economy anchored in the enslavement of captured Africans[2] (Wilder, 2014). The present ineffectiveness of policing as a marker of safety is impossible when you see how much violence that they have initiated on the people, and the general condition of impoverishment and insufficient access to resources that they seek to protect and serve.

I have found my path to abolitionist praxis because it has meant not turning away from these truths. It has meant understanding that I maintain a responsibility to upend systems of violence, systems which uphold profit and “progress” for the few, while misery, precarity, and premature death for the many. It has meant that my first work as a human being is understanding and unlearning how I have internalized these oppressive practices while simultaneously investing in alternatives that center on care for the most marginalized. It has meant cultivating authentic relationships with the people around me to be able to generate a collective movement and horizon of liberation, tarrying with the internal struggles and everyday choices that those of us deemed deserving of an *elite* education are expected to reproduce these violences for our paychecks, stipends, our way out of the

crushing debt enforced on us within this system of racial capitalism. It means, everpresently, that in order to create the conditions in which we don't have to worry about police killings, human beings being forced into cages, and unending war, we have to take a stand. It means we can't expect these conferences, journal articles, dissertations, tenure tracks to do that work for us. It may just mean we will have to do away with those things, reckoning with how these mechanisms seek to anchor us to the current order, in order to make room for the work of liberation. It means we must actively work to establish our own comradeship (Dean, 2019) with the communities experiencing the brunt of these violences, acknowledging how they have already laid out the vision and blueprint for how deep and substantive the transformation must be to create a society based on care, compassion, accountability, and repair.

[1]After this writing, but two weeks before campus planned to open, the University of Pennsylvania decided to not invite students back to campus. This was the right decision and also generated new harms. Off-campus rentals began to soar. Housing insecure students, students experiencing violent home situations are now scrambling to find safety. Workers are unaware of what this means for their ability to provide for their families. Penn has yet to comprehensively address these issues while claiming it is upholding collective "health and safety." Furthermore, Penn plans to carry through the 121-officer private police force, the largest in the State of Pennsylvania, tasked to protect and serve a mostly empty campus.

[2] For more info, please engage with the work of the Penn & Slavery Project. <http://pennandslaveryproject.org/>

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