



**RHYTHM  
AND RITUAL  
COMPOSING MOVEMENT  
IN PORTLAND'S 2020**

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Cover photo: protest on Portland's Burnside Bridge, June 2 2020.

MORNING ARRIVES. THE SKY IS A LOOMING GOLDEN RED, DULL WITH MURK. Movement outside means using the gas masks originally acquired for tear-gas—as long as they're also rated for particulates. It's hard to breathe. So Portland's taking a breather. But Portland's uprising is also already pivoting to mutual aid, refitting protest practices to support evacuees and houseless folks wracked by wildfire smoke.

When the rain comes and the smoke clears, the street actions will return. But for a moment, a reflective mood sets in. What has happened? What have we learned? What might we try to improve?

This document shares one such set of reflections. It has been shared widely to solicit feedback, but it does not pretend to capture every aspect of what has happened—and of course, many will diverge on exactly what to do next. The goal here is to model an open-handed, non-purist, and practical mode of thinking seriously about our situation.

First, a sobering thought: *this is for real*. The continual stacking of ruptures in 2020—Covid, the uprising, fires, Trumpism: we live in deeply unpredictable conditions, and we all know it. It's scary. It's also an environment in which, at the very moment that impending doom feels like it's pounding towards us, actions matter more than they ever have before. And *our* actions in particular, i.e., the actions linking each of us into practices of revolt, all of which are rooted in one way or another in the illegitimacy of existing forms of power. This is an expansive “we”, made of the many different kinds of people moving in different directions in response to this moment. But this “we” is also specific: it's a fabric of living relationships, here and now. It's fuzzy at its edges, overlapping and linking with many who don't see themselves as radical, which is one of its strengths. What brought us together is “fuck the police”. But from there, we have continued in many directions. Our intention in what follows is to explore this “we”, and how we can embrace the complexity of its power.

### A rapid newsreel of Portland's uprising

*A black-and-white flickering countdown, then the title screen: Portland's Uprising!*

In the first days after George Floyd's murder, small protests morph into a massive march into downtown. Seething anger concentrates outside the Justice Center, whose doors are forced open and a small fire lit inside, followed by a night of rioting and window-smashing. City officials react on Twitter with outrage, imposing curfews; this emboldens us, as we commit to defying them every night by the thousands. Eventually, officials give way, but the chronically excessive violence of the police radicalizes a large proportion of the crowd, many of whom are experiencing it for the first time. This results in a growing commitment to staying in the streets.

Over the coming days and weeks multiple actions take place daily all around town. A pattern emerges: on the east side, large rallies and marches led by a well-defined group who controls the mic—an agenda of reform; on the west side, downtown, a much more dynamic, decentralized, action-oriented crowd, apt to pull down any fence the city throws up. Both are Black-led, albeit in quite different ways.

Time moves on.

Rose City Justice, leader-group for the now-waning east-side rallies, collapses under internal and external tensions. The Portland Protest Bureau, frequenting the westside, absorbs some of their number. “Swooping” is born, quickly followed by swoop-resistance.

By July, the west siders are a smaller but hardened crew. The cat-and-mouse with cops through downtown becomes a familiar routine. People know each other not by face (masks) or dress (black) but by idiosyncrasies.

Then Trump’s ALL CAPS pronouncements leads to a heavy-handed public invasion by federal forces, which generates a massive influx of resistance. Thousands upon thousands, more every night, enraged at the sight of undercover van-abductions and munition headshots.

A new pattern emerges downtown: the dance of the two demos. The Portland Protest Bureau corrals a crowd in front of the Justice Center with high-powered mics, while others wait next door at the Hatfield federal courthouse for the action to start: fireworks, fence-pulling, trashfires; barrage after barrage of munitions and teargas; leaf blowers and shields, retreats and advances. We win. The feds withdraw.

In a matter of a week the infrastructure of the uprising has grown by leaps: new groups provide on the ground resources, new “identity blocs” emerge within the crowd, including the Wall of Moms, Wall of Dads, Vets, clergy, teachers, and more. And while our crowds slim down when the feds move out of sight, thousands remain involved. The pattern now becomes a cycle of actions in a different part of town every night: the North Precinct, the Multnomah County Sheriff’s Office (also used by Portland Police), the police union office, and others.

As Portland becomes a national meme for the Right, we get accelerating harassment and assault by “chuds” coming in from the suburbs or across the country: driving at/through marchers, throwing pipe bombs and firecrackers, beating up on isolated protesters walking home, stalking people, and the like. Bullet proof vests emerge. Street medics start focusing on how to stanch blood loss. At one of the Trump-rally invasions, a right-winger is killed. Tensions, stress, and fear are high.

Still, we persist. The anniversary of the 100th day of action arrives. During the day, hundreds join three highly successful celebrations of Black lives and mutual aid in public parks, with scouts checking the peripheries;

at night, and despite heavy police presence reinforced by the state patrol, a thousand people contest the streets of East Portland.

Then with bizarre heat and windstorms the smoke rolls in, from fires burning right outside the city. Tens of thousands are evacuated. An uprising rooted in care for Black lives pivots its infrastructure to care for evacuees, the unhoused, the displaced, too.

Fade to black. This is not the end.

### **Black lives**

Portland is notoriously the big city in America with the smallest Black population, just 6%. At its inception Oregon excluded Black immigration to the state by law. While World War II brought large numbers of industrial workers to Vanport shipyard, resulting in the growth of a thriving Black community, that community has been disrupted repeatedly by city planning: freeways, stadiums, convention centers, gentrification.

And by police violence. There is a continuous history of Black struggle in Portland, since at least the 60s. Mayoral candidate Teresa Raiford is not only the founder of the city's long-term street activist organization confronting police violence (Don't Shoot PDX), she's also the granddaughter of the targets of infamous race-baiting during the major surge of resistance in the 70s and 80s against cops killing Black men. Original Portland Black Panthers like Kent Ford have been on the streets regularly these last months. Another, Lorenzo, started Riot Ribs.

On the other hand, relative to other cities the established Black middle-class establishment is fairly conservative. In fact, it's conservative relative to most of Portland, even on issues like police. This means that Black organizations like the Albina Ministerial Alliance, which has shepherded incremental police reform efforts for decades, have been sidelined by the uprising. When Rev. Mondainé of the local NAACP chapter tried to hold an event to announce his July Washington Post article denouncing the protests as a "white spectacle", few showed up. The article was trumpeted nationally by appreciative right-wingers and centrists, but it fell flat locally. Why? Because while protesters are certainly majority non-Black (probably more or less in proportion with the population of the city), and "spectacle"

is not a bad word to describe how Portland's uprising has been used by national media, the experience in the streets is something different.

Portland is small enough, and the movement is big enough, that a significant proportion of residents either have personal experience of the streets, or know someone who does. And the street actions demonstrate a remarkable, complex, imperfect, but very tangible experience of Black leadership.

In particular, competing Black leaderships often disagree very palpably. Like most of the organizing in this period, virtually all of the key street-relevant Black organizing teams have emerged since George Floyd: Rose City Justice, the Portland Protest Bureau (which rebranded as Black Unity, following its mentors from Eugene), Fridays 4 Freedom, the Black Youth Movement, and others. In the spaces that organize without visible leadership teams, like the direct action events, individual Black leadership is similarly new, is at least as strong, and has become more and more visible.

Many cities report rapid and successful clampdowns against confrontational tactics, in which well-established and well-resourced liberal, middle-class Black organizations co-opted the narrative in the early phases of the uprising. We escaped that outcome, likely because Portland's version was less organized at the outset. By the time "swooping" (i.e., showing up to a radical-organized event, taking over its direction using megaphones, denouncing and diverting from direct action, leveraging white guilt) became a honed technique, a large core of people had already developed a strong sense of solidarity with each other in their practical opposition to a police force that had abused all of them, together, in the days and weeks before. This became the basis for the "counter-swooping" culture that consciously follows street-level Black leadership in more abolitionist directions.

It's been a rocky journey, of course. Many non-Black participants in the streets no doubt began as stereotypical progressives with more "Black Lives Matter" signs than Black friends, more familiar with college-style anti-oppression language than with the Black radical tradition. Mistakes have been made, big ones, messy ones, sometimes on a national stage (see: Wall of Moms). Nonetheless, over time, those holding down the streets have grown a committed practice of foregrounding Black voices and the

message of Black liberation (see: Moms 4 Black Lives).

This means that many White Portlanders have learned in quite practical terms that following Black leadership requires making choices. Black perspectives are profoundly varied. Those that speak loudest, in the media and from podiums, are generally amplified by collaboration with established interests. But in the street actions can be found a deep Black rage, dedication, and love that fuels a commitment to abolishing the forces that keep us bound. And ideas for how to do it, ourselves.

How do those seeking to act in solidarity decide what to do? Through this uprising, non-Black Portlanders have discovered they must by necessity make their own decisions. How? Based on their own experiences, needs, desires. The motive force must come from *their own* lives, but linked with Black lives in struggle.

Those that join together in the nightly direct actions do so because those Black feelings in the streets resonate with their own. Those interests and ideas align with their own. Along with Indigenous and Latinx and other people of color, White people in their thousands are beginning to act as co-conspirators on the long journey toward undoing the power of empire. And while structural racism means that much remains very different among us, and mistakes continue to be made, the shared experience of repeated collective brutality on the part of the police, night after night, deepens our relations.

All this places us, knowingly or not, within the frame of the generational lineage of the Black radical tradition. Among the many inspiring practices tellers of that tradition emphasize is the attention to culture, dignity, relationships, and practical experience at the heart of political struggle. In the Portland-story that follows, we discern ways in which those features are present here and now, as well. This, too, deepens our relations.

Where such connections lead remains to be seen. Developing a robust, resilient complicity against racism is very much an unfinished business, and a much longer story. But whatever else it has been, Portland's uprising (as elsewhere) has composed regular folk of many races, mostly working class and poor, led by Black radicals into direct confrontation with the pointy end of state repression, together. That's something.

## We got us

These new movements in the streets gather a wide variety of people. The experience of a hundred days and more of intense action together is frightening and exhausting, yet many people remain committed and engaged. Why is that?

We see two patterns at the heart of it. Firstly, not only are most of those involved newcomers to street action, but most of the key crews and collectives are new as well. Secondly, the emphasis on practical care for each other is present in an especially deep way.

The newness of the organizing means that people are much less encumbered by the successes and many failures of the long-term Portland radical scene. This allows people to be more open to each other, to new ideas and practices. In this way, through the dynamism and intensity of an extended moment of rupture, ideological or identity differences have caused less antagonism than in “normal” radical subcultures. And because people don’t arrive already highly identified with specific groupings, or with inter-group baggage, the profound bonding via traumatic and exhilarating experiences in the streets connects people generally to all the others present.

This openness and connectedness has been complemented by an organized attention to caring for each other. Some of this attention does descend from earlier waves of Portland’s radical movement, such as the street medic infrastructure (in which old school crews have been joined, sometimes uncomfortably, by many new groups and individuals) and the teams providing snacks (SnackBloc, joined by Snack Van, etc.). For the most part, however, heroically popular groups like the Witches (providing PPE, munitions protection, and other gear) and Riot Ribs (a free grilling phenomenon with a meteoric rise and fall) each emerged during the course of the current uprising, providing a bit of carnivalesque feeling during events, until the police arrive. Even familiar activist functions such as scouting, communications, traffic control, and the like have been subsumed under the mantle of creating more safety for participants (SafePDXProtest), rather than the “protest marshal” language that might have been used before.

In turn, this culture of care is more inviting to newcomers. For most

of this time, in fact, people have been largely generous and forgiving with each other. (This, in contrast with a pre-existing radical scene that has torn itself apart for years over ideological and personal rifts.) In fact, there's a specific group (PDX Comrade Collective) focused on holding a space for people to meet, make friends, and form affinity groups—every night. It can't be emphasized enough how important this openness has been for maintaining ongoing turnout in the hundreds, night after night after night. As some people are caught up in the court system, or pull back from trauma, others take their place.

This tenor of generosity is under threat, of course. Issues of patriarchal and racist behaviors are ongoing and must be addressed, and we don't have widely shared, successful models to draw from. Inevitable infiltration always stokes antagonisms, while exhaustion, fear, and loss come out in hurtful ways too.

After all, we are under pressure from racist assault and a staggering load of state repression. Wise practices through which to care for each other must be our first line of defense. This means growing our agreements around how we behave together, and making them stick. It means knowing all of us will make mistakes, and that those most likely to stumble are those most recently arrived, who are also those we must welcome and support in growing, most of all.

We got us.

### **Popular support**

Despite concerted efforts from the mainstream media, the conservative middle-class Black establishment, and the parodic national discourse, the protests in the streets remain broadly popular in Portland—far more popular than the police or the mayor. This is borne out by polls, as well as by the experience of walking down streets while chanting (or running back through those streets, chased by cops, tear gas, and flashbangs) and having neighbors cheer us on from doorways and windows.

Such popular support is by no means a given. In Portland, as elsewhere, black-clad anarchist actions with broken windows, graffiti, etc. are often disdained by nonactivists. Something is different about this time around.

Part of it has been the Portland Press Corps. This is the crew of journalists that has run in the streets with the actions, night after night after night. They began as a hodgepodge of freelancers, young stringers for the local weeklies, a few actual press employees, and a much larger pool of amateurs and livestreamers. But unlike almost all mainstream press covering protests past, these reporters have experienced much of the violence the protesters receive (if somewhat less targeted, and only then after repeated court injunctions). This means that they developed a sense of camaraderie with each other, but also with the uprising. As a result, they have both the capacity and the motivation to tell a deeper story than the simple “police press release + sign slogans + flashy photo” that too often comprises media narratives. And at least in part due to the corporate-driven hollowing-out of newsroom careerists, they became the essential source of copy for local and then national outlets wanting to cover what soon became a very big story.

There has been legitimate debate about the tactical dangers of broadcasting images that identify people to fascists and cops. Even as many reporters have become much better at protecting their sources by avoiding faces, generalized “anti-media” sentiment persists among some crews on the ground. But there should be little doubt that the uprising would be far more isolated if not for the clear, consistent (and remarkably accurate) story that the Press Corps has managed to insert into otherwise antagonistic platforms.

Yet even the Press Corps is swimming against the current of corporate media. For this reason, it’s been even more important that a wide range of “regular folk” (i.e., those outside self-isolated activist milieux) were radicalized by the experience of getting beat on by the Portland Police Bureau in the early days. Because of this, an even wider range of people linked by their networks have been exposed to an insider, personal view of what has happened.

Added to this has been the ongoing efforts to canvass neighborhoods impacted by protests, to do clean-up, to expand mutual aid to other communities, etc. While this has not been a centrally coordinated effort, and many individual actions have undermined it, we remain surprisingly *not yet* detached from the fabric of the city.

## Breaking police

Police are given license by the state to control, beat, and kill. But they cannot control, beat, and kill an entire population, as there's nowhere near enough of them. So they depend on the "cop in the head", the deference we concede, most of the time, to what we believe is likely to spare us from harm. If we are to "destroy cops", by which we mean, undo the system of policing, we need to develop practices that degrade the police's capacity to maintain this violent order.

Over the period of the uprising, through street actions, Portland's confidence and skill at countering the cops has consistently grown. At one level, we can see this in group responses to police orders: we are more resilient when attacked, don't pull back until forced, and return as immediately as possible. We use shield walls and fireworks to contest space, and sometimes just sheer numbers. Contesting physical space in this way also contests the legitimacy of the police to use violence to force their will. It contests the "cop in the head"—for those choosing to act directly in the moment, but also for those that are in the crowd, or watching from their porch, or on livestream, or even TV. This is a start. But what does it look like to actually interrupt the function of the police, more generally?

One approach has been to "poke the bear", i.e. to provoke police actions by means of graffiti, small fires, throwing water bottles and the like, night after night, even if it seems like they might otherwise ignore us. Why? To prompt as large a response as possible, as many hours of overtime, as many separate riot vans and dismounting and bullrushes as possible. The aim is to physically and financially exhaust the police. Police have repaid us for this in beatings, chemical poison, and countless arrests. But it has also cost the police, dearly. Like a form of industrial action that interrupts the "factory" of policing, it has forced the city to consider whether it wants to entertain serious concessions, or else double down on repression.

It's important to note that our successes have depended on clearly limited terms of engagement: no live fire, first of all, and some constraints on utter brutality. These constraints are not a given, of course. They result from a structural fear on the part of city officials and the police leadership that increased brutality against resistance will cost them more than they gain.

To maintain limits on repression we must make that fear real and make individual cops, and the larger structure, pay for their “excesses”.

We’ve had some success at this. We’ve seen political officeholders ordering limits on tear gas and reassign officers, we’ve seen the District Attorney drop charges, etc. But as the stakes have risen, and as it has become increasingly clear that this uprising will not fade without a fight, both the mayor and the governor have risked antagonizing their progressive base by giving both tacit and visible signals that fewer holds are to be barred. The cops have amped up the raw violence of their arrests, targeting people more randomly, intimidating and harassing even in the absence of anything remotely illegal. And with the recent long term federal deputizing of state (and now city) police, they are giving free rein to Trump’s US Attorney to throw the book at the dozens arrested every night. This approach represents a risk for the ruling order. Will they succeed in crushing the uprising before an even larger one rises in its place, one radicalized by the vicious experience of the raw fist of illegitimate power? This is something we have influence over.

## Abolition

Police abolition has transitioned over the last six months from a fringe topic of debate to the center. Slogans like “Fuck the police”, “No good cops in a racist system”, “Disband the PPB” can now be heard every day in the street. Various municipal legislatures (Minneapolis, among others) have stated their intentions to disband their local police force. Far more than ever before, the topic is on the table. Now we face the challenge: what can abolition mean in concrete terms?

Obviously, some of the techniques for achieving this goal are more or less clear: not only general moves like the overturning of economic injustices that drive most crime, but also more specific, such as new kinds of crisis teams to handle the majority of 911 calls that are not violent. But what do we do with violent, aggressive behavior? How do we address it? What does winning abolition look like?

Whether the city council enacts it or not, “we” as movements or as communities will need to create community security by direct action. Yet

in Portland's uprising (and in many other contexts), our movements have displayed significant weaknesses in doing so, even when we have "control" over the situation. A few notable local examples illustrate both the challenge and the opportunity this entails.

By early August, RiotRibs, an extraordinary practice of defiant food-borne radical love, was undone by an armed takeover led by a disgruntled participant. Many challenges contributed: the takeover was led by a Black man calling out relatively privileged activists who held purse-strings while houseless folks worked for free. But the takeover was itself called out by Black radicals for making a buck out of the movement, and turning violence on comrades. Many newly woke folks lacked clarity on how to follow Black voices, while still making critical choices among them. Others, clear on who to listen to, still had little idea what to do.

What *do* we do? Despite arguments on Twitter, and the fact that the police had largely abandoned downtown Portland to us, we were unable to solve the problem well. In the end, most of the RiotRibs crew skipped town, leaving the rest of us to awkwardly avoid the "usurpers". A couple weeks later, this failure came home to roost. One of the crew of aggressive young folks who congregated around the new occupiers of what had been RiotRibs, someone who assaulted people regularly, kicked an intervening bystander unconscious in a late-night attack that went viral, damaging our credibility both to ourselves and in the eyes of others.

Shortly thereafter, Michael Reinoehl shot a right-winger, and then five days later was himself killed by a federal task force. His is a complex story, but the various emergent narratives since his death share key elements. We all knew right-wingers were gunning for us, awaiting an excuse to attack and kill, but we hadn't worked out a clear, collectively-shared response to the threat. Instead, an ad hoc mix of self-protective measures emerged, into which Michael stepped early on as a self-designated "security" agent. Individuals had concerns about some of his erratic or patriarchal behaviors, but there was no context in which to address them. By his own account, Michael found himself arriving at the tail-end of a tense situation with little information and no support from a wider security infrastructure. He apparently felt that the pressure of "security" was on him, and made a choice that escalated the situation not only for himself, but for everyone.

What happened was tragic, not least because our confusion over how to relate to Michael undermined our ability to grieve and organize around his assassination by cops. He was part of our movement, and was also a flawed human, taking actions impacted by our movement's flaws. His actions were outside the implicit parameters most people in the movement act within; but we also have had no shared way to know what those are, no collective way to practice them. Remembering Michael, we are left with a gap, a missing piece, an unease. Because while we may not align with his actions, we share his fear of looming threat. We need to defend ourselves, our communities, our movements. To do so, we cannot rely on police; we should not become police. Another way must be found.

So: "What does abolition look like?" is not an abstract problem. It is visceral, right here and right now. We have made progress on this problem, here and there, in different ways. But it is not yet enough. How can our commitment to autonomy and community security be woven together? Perhaps we begin by reflecting on how to address the sorts of immediate challenges above. Perhaps new practices emerge in the streets, or in occupied encampments. Perhaps we organize door-to-door in a likely neighborhood, and take over "first-responder" status ourselves, forcing the cops out block by block.

Whatever it looks like, it will be hard, full of contradictions, full of mistakes, and learning from mistakes, and then making mistakes again. But it's worth it.

In the remainder of this document, we use details of Portland's experience to trace a possible way forward.

### **A framework: us**

How do we undo the police? How do we wrench space for community security out of the fabric of violent control, as part of a larger momentum to change social relations? How do we not get crushed?

We suggest: by focusing on us. If we can continue to grow and spread tendrils of relation throughout the broader society, while also crafting stronger practices that grow our power to act in more encompassing and coordinated ways, then we are succeeding. On the other hand, no matter

how exciting or glossy they are in the moment, if our actions diminish us, if they attenuate our coordination and power, then we are losing, and need to change course or direction. This distinction, which assesses the ‘utility’ of an act in a practical way based on specific circumstances, rather than in an ideological way based on abstractions, allows us to sidestep and deactivate many of the false oppositions that often plague strategic reasoning.

For example, consider the familiar dichotomy of pressure politics versus direct action. On the one side, there are those who relate to their actions as techniques designed to push politicians or other decision makers within the system to change something; on the other, there are those who see action as a way of taking matters into their own hands. Is there a hard opposition here? If we consider the impacts of our actions over time, on our own power, we see that sometimes forcing decision makers to change policy can give us breathing room to grow, rather than be crushed; it can build the confidence of newcomers that meaningful change is on the way; and it can do so while avoiding the pitfall of reinforcing the legitimacy of those same elites. (Of course, it’s more common for such actions to serve as a prelude to co-opting us, demobilizing our support, getting things “back to normal”. But which outcome prevails has a lot to do with us.) On the other hand, when taking matters into our own hands, if we do so in such a way that a small group of “radicals” becomes alienated or disconnected from the thousands of others in the city currently participating in the uprising, we make ourselves easier to crush. And that’s not powerful.

This framework suggests that when struggling over tactics, priorities, and alliances, we focus on what, in a very specific situation, will most grow our power to act. Since the growth of collective power proceeds by qualitative leaps, it’s not an algorithmic problem; there is no simple calculus to follow. It’s never a straight line from action to outcome. However, we can make guesses and wagers mid-course about what makes most sense, without having an abstract plan in advance. It’s about remaining ‘alert’, and staying connected or in contact with the dynamic.

This is what it takes to become strong enough to create security without oppression. To abolish police.

## Composing movement

“Composition” is a recently evolving term for understanding how we grow our power to act, and how this becomes linked with other formations around us. Wherever a struggle draws all different sorts of people in, “composition” refers to the sensitivity, modesty, and tactical intelligence that can allow various segments, functions, and participant groups to articulate and coordinate well enough to act together without a single leadership, line, or identity.

For instance, in this uprising Portland’s ideological, generational, and subcultural scenes—usually self-segregating—have been drawn closer together in mutually-supportive ways. What makes this possible? While there is no fixed form to follow, a diffuse yet rich conversation has begun circulating in recent years over what works and what doesn’t.

One contributing factor has been the flexible use of slogans, which helps weave people together, even as they may be quite differently interpreted. “Black lives matter” itself is a supreme example. “Say his name! Say her name!” is at once a grieving cry, an educational tool, and a marker of solidarity. Shouting together puts our bodies in resonance. Nearly all of the distinctive slogans of this moment revolve around protecting each other, bringing us together. “What did you see? I didn’t see shit”, “Stay together, stay tight; we do this every night”, “We got us”. Yet newcomers will experience these phrases completely differently from veterans; for some they are a promise, while for others a reminder, or even nostalgia. As for what “this” is that we do each night, what “shit” we don’t see, and how exactly we “got” each other—each person will invoke their own referents.

Another factor is the density of shared daily experience. From *within* a shared context of action, choices that otherwise might seem aligned with this or that “ideology” or “subculture” become eminently practical and useful in ways that anyone on the ground can see. It’s blatantly obvious why black bloc is useful, these days. Moreover, this need not result only in uniformity: at various points other formations have adopted other approaches (such as the Mom, Dad, Vet, teachers, doctors, clergy blocs using other-colored outerwear) that interplay with black bloc without negating it either symbolically, or in practice. Instead, they become part of an eco-

system of support.

But our practical learning around composition has been perhaps most clear in regards to that hoariest of obstacles, the so-called debate between ‘violence and nonviolence’. Here too, the debate has been largely superseded in the streets. This is not to say that it’s been replaced by a simple, clear unison about burning everything down all the time. There have been contested moments, over and over, typically over fires. Was the fire at Mid-K Beauty Supply legit? What about at the Elk? What about at the Justice Center, where people were inside? Obviously, burning an empty precinct is fine. *Right?* Some people start a fire. Others discuss it, yell about it. Sometimes, a group tries to put it out, and sometimes succeeds. This is a much messier process than a definitive “yes” or “no”, appropriate for all cases, which would then be enforced by a class of protest police, or an anti-protest-police squad. In the streets, people change their minds. Practices evolve. What made no sense last week, seems eminently reasonable today.

While these practical contestations of tactics in the streets may lead to individual tensions, our sense is that they tend more generally to bring people together. Groups are not developing in isolated self-righteous echo-chambers; they are struggling, outwardly and inwardly, while remaining in active *contact*.

### Limited terms of engagement

Out of this street-level process, and without much real space for generalized debate about it, a specific repertoire of tactics developed in the first 100 days. We may refer to it as the “Portland model” of contesting space with the police. Broadly speaking, it includes:

*Shields, umbrellas, gas masks; Graffiti, smashing cameras, windows (of “appropriate” targets); Throwing water bottles and fireworks; Lighting trash fires, but not actually trying to burn down buildings (or even cars); Offensive and defensive use of lasers; Throwing paint balloons; Not Molotovs.*

Overall, the principle of selection consists in those things one can do that are unlikely to produce grievous bodily harm to humans. At one level, this

is a limitation. Once any such limits are put in place, it becomes harder to suddenly shift the repertoire to accommodate deeper forms of insurrection. On the other hand, insurrections that don't generalize and spread to other segments of society tend to fail sooner or later anyway.

In all likelihood, what makes the difference is *how much* of the broader support of people you need to keep with you at each phase, as well as what reactions this or that tactic will generate in the security forces, and how these will impact us. There's no universal rubric, and we can't know what impact this or that action will have in advance with any certainty. Still, the closer you are to things, the better you can guess. For now, the "limited terms" of the Portland repertoire have allowed us to push through the artificial wall of the "violence/nonviolence" stalemate. Despite chronic messaging from elites, most Portlanders do not appear to consider nighttime protesters to be illegitimate, as they probably would if they were actively hurting people.

### Community security

The way we approach such tactical questions has an analogous bearing upon how we think about developing community security. In each case, we are dealing with a process whereby street conflicts preside over the emergence of a *shared sensibility* regarding what is acceptable and unacceptable, that establishes agreements by identifying appropriate behaviors and maintaining these criteria in practice over a sustained time.

We have had some successes in developing such security norms, but they are fragile ones. Why? In general, we have been hamstrung by a lack of imagination regarding what "protest community security" (as opposed to protest policing) could mean—even *as* we practice it! We lacked a language through which to frame what we were doing, leaving us without any sense of how to reinforce our shared sensibilities when they came under sustained challenge. This explains in part why the more challenging experiences involving allegations of abusive behavior, such as Riot Ribs and Reinoehl, have been so hard for us to navigate.

The upshot of this weakness is that we need to take abolition more seriously than we have so far. We need to start practicing it now. Because

abolitionist community security protects our movement from internal as much as external threats; not only against infiltration, but also rape and racism. Such practices demonstrate to others that there's actually a path forward, something we could draw on in dangerous situations, and not just hot air. Most importantly, it increases our collective power: the more people we organize into community security structures, the more space we seize from the police. In fact, these provide a template for "reforms" that we can pressure politicians into, that (with work) result in actual long-term de facto CHOP-like liberated zones, even if these are non-contiguous and porous at first. In other words, if done effectively, addressing our internal shit could propel us towards an "endgame" with the city in which we are able to defeat the PPB and begin laying the seeds of its demise. We might fail at this, but it's at least worth trying on what it would look like to win. We've been used to failing, being crushed, then licking our wounds until next time. But there are other options. Our actions actually do change the fabric of social reality. Especially now.

### Caveats

At this point, an understandable objection might arise: does it even make sense to discuss abolitionist frameworks for community protection in isolation from all the other dynamics that attend a revolution or insurrection, such as mental health, housing, supply chains, and the like? After all, without the interruption and redefinition of the structures of capitalism that crush us daily, won't the chronic problems of our society doom any efforts to create a "revolution-in-one-sector"?

Yes, full success will require larger, more fundamental changes. But abolition, in particular, cannot merely be an idea that recedes beyond an ever-deferred horizon of the revolution-to-come while remaining inactionable in the present; it must also be an experimental practical force, here and now. In Portland, people are coming out every night and reappropriating the basics of life, they are answering the practical tasks that any insurrectional sequence will bring with it, including mental health and well-being, and they are doing so in a context of (limited) "war". This means we are already responsible for addressing security needs, as detailed above.

But how can we avoid ending up like those establishment nonprofits in Minneapolis, where “community security” is wielded as a means for elites to quash insurrection?

The difference is that it is *we* who develop a community security approach for ourselves. When the problem is addressed *autonomously* in ways that build upon the complex ties we frontliners have already developed with the broader community, including the agreements regarding our tactical repertoire noted above, we may still make mistakes. But when *we* do the “deciding”, we can change our minds, if we discover that the choices we previously made have undermined our power. “Security” as a problem functions as a *tactic* within the context of an immanent, experimental, local *strategy* oriented around the growth of collective power and action. It is not a value system imposed from outside by those who claim to “know better”.

How can we make decisions and enforce them, without reproducing the oppressions of the state?

Here too, we should bear in mind how the limited tactical repertoire emerged, since it testifies to a form of immanent “decisiveness” that emerged without ever being formally “decided.” But, as we also noted, such a process is of limited utility if it remains unspoken. For example, how do we ensure newcomers learn about it? How does this sort of decentralized consensus on practices interact with hostile newcomers, infiltrators, or organized groups arriving with their own agenda?

As shared practices emerge, we should develop a pattern of noticing them and making this fact explicit to one another. The more that shared affirmations and cultures can be communicated explicitly, even when they remain quasi-generalities, the better.

### Difference and decisiveness

The method of composition responds to a basic feature of our chaotic times today, namely, the implosion of mediating social institutions. For us, embracing a model of decentralization is a necessary reckoning with our times. Beyond the organizational considerations related to security culture or the dangers of political representation, we must recognize that, at a deeper level, the very meaning of struggle and revolution today is decen-

tralized in itself.

Contemporary movements are not coalitions between pre-existing political interest groups or organizations. Rather, today's movements gather singular individuals *in* their singularity, without fusing them into a formal whole. While the crucible of the streets will always produce new practical formations, which could (we pray) seed crucial new lifeways over the long emergencies to come, it is useless to ask our movements to fuse them into homogeneity here and now. For the foreseeable future, strength will come not by unity, but as agility amidst chaos. We must acclimate to a situation in which diverse people share common experiences in the streets while assigning very different meanings to them. The problem is not to gather all the atomic particles into a new mass subject, but how to develop a permeable and flexible space of action in which diverse bodies and desires can coordinate across their separation.

From this perspective, difference and disagreement is not inherently an obstacle, but can also be a resource and a source of strength. Diverse attitudes or positions not only create different pathways for newcomers to connect, they can also imbue our actions with a broader range of wisdom by providing experimental evidence and feedback as to what's working and what isn't. The question is not 'how do we sustain collective consensus across the whole movement?', but rather 'how do we cultivate the structures, attitudes, skills, and relationships that deepen our capacity to act in coordinated ways, even if we do so for different reasons?'

Where consensus would otherwise fail us, rhythm and ritual can help shore up consistency. "Stay together, stay tight" is a ritual, emphasized by the follow-up phrase: "we do this every night". We know it is a ritual when we see it bellowed full strength even by those that are new, or who cannot come every night because they have a different mode of life. We must create spaces in which such patterned relations can grow. We must notice them, cultivate them. Snacks, medics and self-care are important for nourishing individual bodies— but how do we nourish relations within and between groups?

Lastly, the model of the 'spokescouncil' that has been in use in Portland in various ways since the alter-globalization movement is emerging again today. We encourage such a council not merely to coordinate the familiar

“affinity groups”, which assumes that everyone organizes in more or less the same way, but also as a way to make space for very different modes of organizing. This requires skilled design and diplomatic renegotiation. To that end, such a spokescouncil can also choose not to make the need for “100% consensus” a stumbling block, but draw upon “open decision” frameworks whose goal is to strengthen various forms of decisiveness, the deepened capacity of people to act together with power. This approach allows groups to see who agrees on a proposal, to work to refine and broaden it, but also in parallel to support those that already agree to act on their agreement right away, even if others disagree. This increases the value for marginal groups to join, reduces the drag of debate over minutiae, and de-emphasizes the importance of controlling the stage.

However, a spokescouncil is not a magic wand; not only might there need to be different types of councils, but not every movement function demands such mediations, since many can often be resolved through more organic forms of relationship building. The aim here is to weave together not just “identities”, “sectors”, or proto-sovereignties, but the seeds of *kinships* that keep power close to home and rooted in the land they share with each other and the rest of life. Throughout the entire process, we must pay attention to more than just words, ideas, formalities; we should rather remain on the lookout for ways to honor and grow the links that engage convivial hearts & spirits.

### **Enforcement**

When no one has the monopoly on violence, but everyone is responsible to address harm, then “community security” is about people taking responsibility for their understanding of shared practices, and gathering support for enacting them among others. This can be a profoundly autonomous process. As we noted above in the example of fires set and put out, it’s something that is already happening in practice, but which would benefit from becoming a more explicit process. Doing so would allow for greater clarity as to how much support exists or is needed, making it easier to decide whether and how to intervene in this or that situation. What we are proposing goes well beyond the limited tolerance of “diversity of

tactics”, which often reinforces the separation of the parties involved. Our movements’ forms should not be like oil and water slipping past each other, but need to be coordinated and linked. The goal is not just to tolerate differences provided they take place in different places and times, but to develop intelligent ways to *compose a bloc* that draws upon the strengths of its various singular pieces. In this way our tactics do not simply *coexist* but actively complement each other. People will absolutely base their choices on their values and the kinships they are a part of, but discussions about best tactics should be as tangible as possible, rooted in a shared attention to the growth of our collective power and capacity, toward more care and not simply abstractions.

### Freedom

One objection to this approach to composition is the worry that it might constrain our individual freedom. We see this as a misunderstanding—and a dangerous one—of the kind of freedom we really want or need. ‘Freedom’ understood as unrestrained individual choice maintains its primarily virtual coherence only by virtue of the structures of capitalism and empire. The ‘freedom’ of moderns is an ideal tailored to the experience of the supermarket, of subcultural branding, of media-on-demand. Its perpetual transience—between cities, identities, occupations—has its purview exclusively within this highly restricted, palpably spectacular and increasingly digital realm. Even as it ‘feels’ itself to be infinite, it remains wholesale dependent on the invisible horizon of this political economic substructure.

This limited conception infects too much of our understanding of “radical” freedom. Dropping out, being in motion against the state, refusing identities or ideologies: as far as they go, they are all framed as being *against* the existing regime, tied to its limitations. By contrast, we say that the freedom to become something new, to travel beyond horizons and not simply between increasingly interchangeable versions of sameness, requires our participation in collective existence. At one level, this is just a recognition that the ‘individuality’ constructed by liberal capitalism is a mirage; things never actually work that way. We are relational beings through and through. Now more than ever, we are called to activate our capacities for

creative collective being. To face down security forces, to sustain mutual aid, to abolish police, we need deeply coordinated action. Such coordinated action demands new forms of motivation, new sources of resilience and strength—at least as much as it demands tactics and communications. We need to become new kinds of people, related as kin in new ways, with new cultures of being. How we do so is a matter (a “materiality”) of political economy, considered deeply enough to include the spirits that animate our collectivities. It is we, though there are many of us, and this ‘us’ is not one but is itself many— it is not ‘I’.

This is something we have explored in these last months of struggle in Portland. We have formed new ways of being related, not uniform but interconnected. This has been a source of our power.

#### A test case

The first Molly was thrown on the hundredth night. From the perspective we’ve been developing, it was a total flop. A small group had decided that it was, or should be, part of the repertoire. The moment we arrived near the cops, it was thrown with no warning. It landed short, burning two comrades and startling the crowd, whose panic was made worse by the massive police barrage that followed immediately. The teargas caught many off guard, as the escalation had hastened what normally was a fairly incremental process of its appearance.

What could have happened instead? Let’s imagine a sequence:

*People see someone preparing to escalate the repertoire in a qualitative way. Someone says, ‘Hey, that’s not part of our menu here, what are you doing?’ The person explains their intentions, if they want. People check in with at least the crowd nearby, so they’re ready, etc. Ideally, part of this would involve ensuring the safety of comrades.*

There are obvious concerns with this approach. Firstly, it runs security risks: people don’t want to be talking in a big group about this sort of stuff. Moreover, what happens if people in the crowd don’t want it to happen?

We need to imagine a culture of debate about potential tactical choices

that would not simply leave everyone to automatically default to personal preference. In such a hypothetical debate among groups and between them (eg. in a spokescouncil, but other modes can be imagined), the issue can be addressed: when/how is a given tactic considered appropriate? Such discussions would then inform both those considering using them, and those considering intervening. After such an open discussion, even if the escalation in question does take place against the will of others, at least they are less likely to be shocked. Moreover, this is a process that can test at least a part of how a tactic will impact the group's power of action—if it will turn off a lot of people, that might be foreseen.

No doubt there will be disagreements. Some may well say: 'You disagree now, but once you see how beautiful it is in person, and how the images of it circulate the globe over, you'll want to try it too!' Others may disagree strongly enough to keep an eye out in the streets, and intervene. It will be a contest of wills, of power, in the streets themselves, where the consequences can be more clearly seen. It has pitfalls. But it is better than refusing to address such disagreements at all.

### Looking ahead

There are no crystal balls. We don't know what is to come, how Portland's summer will evolve into the fall, the winter, the instability beneath everything right now. But this moment of reflection has deepened our awareness that what matters most, is us. Led by the Black radical tradition, may we pay attention to the weave that composes us. May our care for each other make the promise of "we got us" into a community security, something we can rely on when danger lurks—fuck the police. May we welcome newcomers, even as they stumble; may we reach beyond the usual suspects, even when it's awkward; may we grow.

Stay together. Stay tight. We do this every night.

Soon, the smoke will be washed away. Proud Boys will be back in town, the damp squibs. Friends and kin will have to make more decisions about how to support our Black friends and neighbors, how to cultivate shared protocols, how to be decisive. Historical conditions continue to evolve.

Perhaps, in a few weeks, thousands, and then thousands more outraged and frightened Americans will be flooding the streets. They will be asking themselves, asking each other, asking us: what can it look like to contest control of the streets, and win?

Let's see. Let's see, together.

*While Portland's uprising has been part of the general US #BLM movement, it has also been singular in many respects. Among its distinctive features are its continuing commitment to nightly action, the degree of popular support it enjoys from regular Portlanders, the rich new ecosystem of movement groups that provide it with its various functions, and the emergence of a popular, confrontational, fiery, but limited set of tactics. In spite of these impressive strengths, the uprising has struggled to develop a clear abolitionist vision or practice of community security, a fact which has generated a number of problems. To address this limitation, the authors look to the fabric of experiences that have become common in the streets, which they suggest already hint at a way forward. Beyond the more basic 'diversity of tactics' framework, they encourage the growth of a more robust model for composing popular power, capable of amplifying our decisiveness and increasing our capacity for practical coordination across differences. The path towards an autonomy-supporting culture is framed by a shared goal, namely, to grow the uprising's power to change life. It is this more general commitment, they argue, that allows us to navigate many of the false oppositions the movement throws up at us.*