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The 2020 Uprising: That's Not How It Happened

An overview of Mariame Kaba and Andrea
Ritchie's "No More Police"

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Contents

| | |
|---|---|
| That's Not How It Happened... | 5 |
| Chapter-by-chapter of " <i>No More Police</i> " | 7 |

organizers found themselves fighting uphill battles to defend and expand their wins when politicians began backtracking.” These sentences reveal the limitations of the revisionist history worldview shared in “No More Police.”

These campaigns did not merely ride a wave of “protest” — they rode the wave of ungovernability resulting from the burning of a police precinct and mass rioting. Politicians and big institutions have neither before nor since been compelled to feign support for abolition by mere “protest” alone. And, with credit due to those organized groups like (nationally) Critical Resistance and (locally) MPD150 building a rhythm for abolition in certain small circles before 2020, alongside militants and revolutionaries who have done so for decades, the wins of 2020 were not the result of “organizers” alone, or even primarily. They were the result of ordinary people who took the offensive without asking for permission from the state nor from activists.

While noting municipal task forces on policing as one example of this, the chapter could have been strengthened by including the two most visible examples on the ground here in Minneapolis. The first is George Floyd Square (GFS), which as of this writing has long been a delight for the Minneapolis establishment. Now devoid of its militant elements, mayor Jacob Frey, MPD, and their allies are simultaneously able to demonize GFS as a lawless, violent hub of disorder while also using it as a backdrop for the advancement of their own copaganda initiatives. Frey himself appeared at the 2-year anniversary vigil honoring George Floyd, surrounded with an escort of heavily armed Black supporters, members of nonprofits including Agape Movement (paid in June 2021 to dismantle the Square’s barricades) and MN Freedom Fighters. The square was used in fall 2022 as host for a forum for candidates for Hennepin County Prosecutor. And at the 3-year anniversary vigil, the new Minneapolis police chief Brian O’Hara stopped by for a photo-op, with no more consequence than some heckling.

The second example which the chapter could have discussed is the failures and limitations of the “Office of Violence Prevention,” the city government alternative to police advocated for by now-defunct abolitionist nonprofits Black Visions and Reclaim the Block. It too, has become a useful tool of liberals and conservatives alike, equally ridiculed while also used to repress and recuperate. Never having had any intention of preventing violence that flows from state power downwards against the people, it’s recently been renamed the “Office of Neighborhood Safety.”

Kaba and Ritchie do note that “A singular focus on city budgets doesn’t just leave defund demands open to being co-opted or quashed by the state; it also leaves us open to being overwhelmed by backlash and disappointment when politicians fail to keep their promises as soon as the political winds shift.” They continue, “Campaigns to shrink police budgets and power rode a wave of protest in 2020. But when the wave subsided,

That’s Not How It Happened...

Three years later, Minneapolis participants in the George Floyd uprising are consistently lied to from multiple directions about the reality of those inspiring, earth-shaking days in 2020 and their aftermath.

We hear the reactionary law-and-order narrative that the uprising was nothing but senseless destruction, leaving Minneapolis a barren wasteland and the police defunded (if only!). We hear the liberal fantasy that everything good that happened, including the storming of the 3rd precinct, was actually done by white supremacists. And also we hear the story advanced by many police abolitionists, such as in Mariame Kaba and Andrea Ritchie’s fall 2022 book “*No More Police*”, that it was organizers and nonprofits responsible for pushing abolition into mainstream conversation thanks to their petitioning, peaceful marching and meeting with city council members.

I picked up an early copy of “*No More Police*” before it came out in the fall of 2022, intending to determine which chapters might be best suited for study groups or political education of various sorts (I’ll get to that later in this essay), and what new materials or lessons had been incorporated since Kaba’s previous book “*We Do This Til We Free Us*.” But, as I sat in a park not far from George Floyd Square writing the first draft of this overview after several false starts, I had a hard time getting past my rage at the revisionist history that frames and permeates “*No More Police*.”

Flipping again through Kaba and Ritchie’s introduction and the foreword by Miski Noor and Kandace Montgomery, leaders of Black Visions—the both celebrated and side-eyed Minneapolis nonprofit whose leadership was, as I wrote my first draft, busy failing to recognize a staff unionization effort¹—I become paralyzed at the disconnect between the reality my friends and I lived, versus their telling of the uprising.

In their story, massive protests were augmented by a petition demanding defunding of the police. Then, “The movement in defense of Black lives achieved one of its first abolitionist wins: a veto-proof majority of the Minneapolis City Council supported an amendment to disband the MPD.”

(This is, of course, false: The council members present at that now widely-derided rally in Powderhorn Park did not support such a measure; as their immediate backtracking in the days to follow made clear, their pledge was calculated to quell the ungovernability of the streets. Every single council member present later voted for at least one measure that either modestly or significantly increased police funding.)

Reading this, I think of the long hours of toxic gas and “less lethals” endured by people posted up behind blockades made of shopping carts from May 26–28, 2020. I think of the courageous looting and arsons that enabled the 3rd precinct siege, by spreading “public safety” resources thin throughout the metro area. I think of Calvin Horton, murdered by a vigilante pawn shop owner, and Montez Lee, Dylan Robinson, and others still behind bars for their actions in those days.

I think of friends who held the George Floyd Square barricades during subzero nights the following winter, heeding the call “No Justice No Streets” only to be betrayed, pooh-poohed and even assaulted and exiled by organizers who gave up the occupation of the square the next spring. Then I think of how we took the streets after the murders of Dolal Idd, Winston Smith, and others — when many organizers so quick to claim credit for the Uprising were either nowhere to be found, or actively peace-policed us. At those demonstrations, the Police 2.0 groups (We Push for Peace, Agape, A Mother’s Love, and others) funded by the “abolitionist” nonprofits’ Big Victory (a few million dollars given to the city’s “Office of Violence Prevention”) assaulted comrades while screaming misogynist, homophobic and transphobic slurs.

care work. But both this chapter and “How Do We Get There?” fail to meaningfully discuss activities that are both not rooted in policy, and that directly challenge police power.

Minneapolis has not succeeded in reducing our police force by 33% because of legislative efforts, but by creating a hostile environment for the occupying forces. Though transformative justice and mutual aid may indeed threaten police power when rooted in total abolitionist practice, these things are not what motivated government to call in the National Guard to uphold the legitimacy of policing. Occupations, looting, and attacks on infrastructure were what did that.

The question of confronting state power is explored more in **Chapter 6, “Tricks and Tensions”** — which might be the best for sharing with your study group or poli ed circle (tho, perhaps intentionally, it lacks firm conclusions). The chapter begins with a lengthy discussion of different viewpoints on whether a non-carceral state is possible, or if states and policing are inextricably intertwined: “Does rooting out policing require dismantling states in their entirety?” The authors cite Klee Benally, William C. Anderson and others in presenting a case for “yes”, with Ruth Wilson Gilmore among those cited at length arguing no. Ultimately the chapter does not urge one particular approach, opting instead to settle noncommittally that “Regardless of where we land on the questions briefly explored here, as abolitionists it is essential to expand our imaginations beyond our current conceptions of the state.”

The “Tricks and Tensions” chapter also gives an introductory overview of some ways the state has used demands for defunding and “reimagining policing” for recuperation and co-optation. The authors write, “As the popularity and public currency of abolitionist demands increased, police, politicians and pundits also deployed pacification tactics to absorb, adapt to, undermine and dissipate the threat they pose ... including through the assimilation of organizers to the project of state bureaucracy.”

Indeed, two paragraphs later, the authors again place people under the boot of police violence as mere passive observers instead of potential rebels, whilst repeating a liberal telling of the 2020 Uprisings: “When police abandoned communities in Minneapolis to white supremacist violence in the midst of the 2020 Uprisings and deliberately slowed their responses to 911 calls to punish residents, people stepped up to keep each other safe.”

Here, we see that agency is given to police or policing functions only, not to people’s liberatory anti-policing actions: “police abandoned communities,” they say, where they could have accurately said “*hostile communities forced police to retreat*” instead. While a small number of freelance white supremacists did take advantage of the Uprising, the authors here ignore that the biggest white supremacist force in Minneapolis is the MPD; in forcing the retreat of police from neighborhoods, white supremacist violence (including regular, daily police harassment, arrests and incarceration) in fact went down.

People “stepped up to keep each other safe” from the remaining police forces (and then, from the National Guard occupation), from other city policing initiatives such as encampment sweeps, from the economic and physical insecurity of the intersecting capitalist and COVID plagues, and, yes, the occasional vigilante white power chud, too. Excepting those segments of the population already inclined to support police, we did not have to “keep each other safe” *from each other* in the way police and exclusionary neighborhood patrols claim to do.

Centering alternatives to policing that are themselves rooted in policy and social control, rather than activities all people can participate in, demonstrates the limitations of a worldview in which change is mostly driven by select activists and organizers and the policy initiatives they advocate for. **Chapter 7, “Experiment and Build,”** gives compelling examples of transformative justice, mutual aid and community

And I also think of those (usually anonymous) militants who, despite repeated trauma and setbacks, are keeping up the drumbeat of resistance today — with graffiti and street art, through covert actions like attacks on police precincts and arsons against those responsible for camp evictions, and through political education groups that tell the stories mainstream leftist publishers won’t ever. They — not the nonprofits or the celebrity organizers — are the reason that despite an increase in MPD funding since 2020, MPD has lost over 300 officers, a 33% reduction.

If this litany sounds like I am bitter, it is because I cannot help feeling so. Seeing the rewriting of history here in Minneapolis has made so many of us feel that way. “*No More Police*” frames itself from the beginning around a false story of 2020 uprising. If you thought that this much-hyped book hitting stores in fall 2022 would center itself on something other than the analyzed-ad-nauseum events of the Uprising, or at least substantially address some of the most brutal lessons learned since then, sadly, you’d be wrong.

Let’s dive in to the book.

Chapter-by-chapter of “*No More Police*”

Thankfully, there’s still quite a bit of value in the book, mostly for those newer to abolitionist ideas, so long as it’s not treated as a definitive text.

Chapters 1 and 2, “Cops Don’t Stop Violence” and “We Are Survivors” are a fairly solid Police Abolition 101/102, useful for sharing with someone who isn’t quite there yet. The past two years have seen many similar pieces elsewhere to “Cops Don’t Stop Violence,” including by Kaba and Ritchie themselves; this chapter doesn’t bring much new to the discussion for folks who are already abolitionists. “We Are Survivors” is grounded in the authors’ own experience as

survivors of sexual assault and advocates for other survivors, with ample stories and history to effectively address the carceral arguments usually offered on behalf of survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence and other harms. It would be a good launching point for anyone wanting to improve how you approach and discuss police and prison abolition from a survivor-centric perspective.

Chapter 3, “Re-Form”, correctly positions reform as an enemy strategy; again, nothing new, but likely useful material to share with those unsure where to devote their anti-police efforts, or unaware of the history of reforms re-solidifying police power. Kaba notes that she was “once what she now calls a ‘police preservationist’, a term worthy of entering everyday lexicon to describe reformers. The authors say, “We became abolitionists in part by listening to people on the receiving end of reforms,” and as the reader can see from their stories of involvement in past reformist initiatives gone awry, this is clearly true. They skewer the idea of “community policing” and a “both/and” approach to abolition, writing “Abolitionists are called dreamers, but it is the promise of reform that works as a fantasy.”

The book starts to tackle some tougher questions with **Chapter 4, “No Soft Police,”** sometimes taking a deep dive but sometimes glossing over critical questions. The chapter begins with a cartoon highlighting the shared root of the words “police” and “policy”, asking “Have you ever been policed by an official who wasn’t a cop?” Their point is that other spheres of state influence like education, health and urban planning can also represent forms of policing. This echoes the calls of many total abolitionists who say *policING*, not just police, should be clearly named as the force we are up against.

Yet despite writing “Imagining a future without *policing* is not the same as a future without *police*,” the authors don’t fully make that logical jump into a frame that address all forms of policing and social control. Despite their solid criticism of

carceral social work, institutional mental health “treatment”, and child welfare systems, they leave out the nonprofit industrial complex and electoralism as two of the major sites of modern day social control.

Not coincidentally, these two sites are where many post-2020 self-proclaimed abolitionists conduct the bulk of their work, making this omission particularly troubling. And these sites of recuperation are largely responsible for how Minneapolis ended up where it is three years later: with a regressive city bureaucracy manufacturing “progressive” consent for rebuilding the 3rd precinct and the brutal status quo it represented.²

Despite making the Police/Policy connection, the pathways offered in **Chapter 5, “How Do We Get There? Towards a Police Free Future”** are mostly, indeed, policy ones. It’s rooted in the divest/invest, defund/re-fund framework, and is really more about how the authors envision an abolitionist future, than any concrete strategies for getting there. Participating in active, confrontational resistance to police and other forms of social control is treated only with an outside gaze, with at best passive participation advocated.

“Shifting core beliefs about public safety often requires more than talking. This can include experiencing or witnessing the full violence of policing,” Ritchie and Kaba write. “For instance, violent police response to protest can effectively shift perceptions among people who don’t experience the everyday violence of policing as it manifests daily in Black, Indigenous and Brown communities.” They cite summit protests, Occupy, BLM, Standing Rock and summer 2020 as recent examples of intense police violence.

Imagine if instead, they had framed these events as “*Experiencing or witnessing everyday people fighting back against police violence can help shift one’s core beliefs about the possibility of abolishing policing in our time!*”