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# In Defense of Looting with Vicky Osterweil

Vicky Osterweil & The Final Straw Radio

28 February 2021

**TFSR:** Thank you so much for agreeing to come onto The Final Straw. Would you introduce yourself for listeners with any information about yourself you would like them to be aware of?

**Vicky Osterweil:** Sure, yeah, I'm so glad to be here. I'm a listener of the show so it's very exciting. My name is Vicky Osterweil, I'm a writer and editor and agitator. I'm based in Philly. I also run a podcast with my friend Cerise called *Cerise And Vicky Rank The Movies*, where we are ranking all of the movies ever made. And I also this new book that came out last year, *In Defense of Looting* which I know we will be talking about. So I write, I do the podcast and things, I'm around.

**TFSR:** That's amazing! Is your podcast available on all of the things or a certain streaming app?

**VO:** It's everywhere, we are also on Soundcloud and all the podcast apps. If you like movies and two anarchist girls talking mostly about movies with their perspective, it's a good show for that.

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**TFSR:** That sounds exactly like what I want to be listening to right now cause everything is so weird. But as you said before, we are here to talk about your recently published book *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* which was published by Bold Type Books in August 2020, but I'm also curious to hear about your other written work, cause you've written pretty extensively before that. Could you talk about some of your other works, topics of interest to you, and what initially got you into writing and eventually being an author?

**VO:** Totally. I've written a lot about movement politics, anarchist politics, I've done a lot of organizing with an eye toward street movements, I've done a lot of writing, reportage, but not like a journalist, I don't have training for that, so it's a combination of theory and activist report back. I also do a lot of culture writing – about movies, video games. I was writing pretty extensively for a few years in Real Life magazine, it's a great magazine about a sort of tech critique, about the political economy of video games, and how that played in the Trumpism, this resurgent fascism and stuff. So I'm all over the place in terms of writing, I've done some art writing as well, but I think mostly it's culture and movement politics.

In terms of what got me into writing, I was a big reader growing up, I thought I'd be a writer of novels and poetry, but I also liked reading movie reviews and that was how I stumbled into getting paid to write. I eventually was part of the early editorial board of the magazine *The New Inquiry*, an online magazine based in New York, and I was an editor there for many years. I still help out when I can. That shaped my writing into a non-fiction direction, and that also had to do with why becoming an author was an adaption of an essay I wrote during the uprising in Ferguson. Writing is a muscle and at this point, my fiction and poetry muscles a little atrophied. I sort of wish I could have some of them back honestly, but at this point, I write history and non-fiction, it's where I'm most comfortable. This is how I ended up here.

veloped and they just have reemerged with this techno gleam that makes them seem new. There is also this continuity.

**TFSR:** It's so evil, I don't know.

**VO:** Yeah, it is exhausting, it obviously does make one want to take a nap.

**TFSR:** It does! Absolutely, and I think that is a perfect reaction to something like that, like "No, fuck you, I'm going to take a nap now". Where can people see your past body of writing and learn more about, keep up with you? Do you have a social media presence that you want to shout out or anything like that?

**VO:** Yeah, totally. You can follow me on Twitter. I'm @Vicky\_ACAB because all cats are beautiful, obviously, and I like movies a lot, so you can find me on Letterboxd I'm @nocopszone and then @ceriseandvicky on Twitter. That's the podcast if you're interested in the movie side of things.

**TFSR:** I'm gonna be looking at that podcast, so then thank you so much for your time. This was such a delight and a pleasure to get to connect with you digitally. Is there anything that we missed on this interview that you'd like to give voice to in closing?

**VO:** No, just to thank you for having me in, and it's been such a pleasure and I look forward to meeting and talking to many more people. I guess I would just say people like me who write books, we're just people, just reach out, I'm really excited to talk to you, comrades, just talk to me, I'm friendly, I promise. I'm just some random person, too. Anyone can do it. Anyone can do this work and there's a lot of cool and social status that gets built up and intimidation. Don't be intimidated. We can do this ourselves, we can make the world we want to see.

**TFSR:** Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day, and this was such a delightful conversation. I can't wait for people to hear it.

**TFSR:** That's amazing. You mentioned you are an anarchist. I personally love that. Would you speak about your process of radicalization?

**VO:** Totally. I think I'm a middle millennial, like a lot of white kids who are anarchists now. At that point, I got introduced to this politics through punk, but I was always a big reader and a big nerd, so I was also reading books about punk, that was also how I got introduced into this politics, also through movies. I was lucky and I didn't have to have really horrible life experiences that forced me to radicalize early, so I think about it as being activated rather than radicalized. I was already identifying as a radical and then in 2011 I happened to be in Barcelona during the movement of the squares that was there. I've done some activism back home, I've been involved in housing struggles in 2008-09 in New York, but that experience of encampment movement in 2011 in Spain also coincided with my first professional writing gig. I got paid 50 dollars to write five paragraphs about it. So it was a funny moment. Then I came back to the US pretty convinced that it was going to happen here and threw myself into organizing what ended up being the beginning of what would be Occupy Wall Street.

And since then, everywhere I lived, I've been part of a variety of different movements, often with a focus on police and prison abolition. I'm less of a formal or formalist organizer, I tended to be more street action-oriented in my thinking and organizing. The movement often shaped what I'm working on as well. So when I say I'm an anarchist, for me that means anti-state all the way, anti-capitalist all the time, anti-oppression of all kinds. Also, I don't like organizing that imagines that we have to capture the state on our way to change, I'm really against that. Also, anarchist is just a descriptor that has come around to be the people who I most often find affinity and solidarity with. That is not everyone in my life by any means. I just think that other than anti-state and obviously anti-racist

and all the variety of anti-oppression politics, for me the question is about who I find sympathetic to move with, talk with, think with and fight with. What I have found over time is that it has tended to be anarchists, but certainly not exclusively, and there's been a lot of anarchists I don't like either, so it's more about a sense of sensibility that I recognize in anarchism at its best that I vibe with than a really strong sectarian commitment. As we talk about the book, for me, the most important historical body of theory and practice has come out of the black radical tradition in the United States and the Caribbean, and that often overlaps with anarchistic principles and ideas, but not always, and I think that combined with increasingly thinking through indigenous resistance. For me, so then to go again and circle back, a different claim. I also think that one of the ways that had really influenced me very early to think about was to think through and with movement as it happens or has happened. And to start from the principle that the people fighting for liberation know what they are doing and to try and learn from that, to study and move with the way that movement happens and has happened, and to learn those lessons. Again, I consider that a somewhat anarchistic tradition, but there are a lot of Marxists who have followed that as well and a lot of non-sectarian people who have followed these dreams as well. That's in a nutshell.

**TFSR:** Thank you so much for going through that. It's really interesting to hear how you talk about how it initially happened for you and how you were in Barcelona and the movement of the squares moment and your political progression over the years. And you said you were super convinced that that kind of thing was going to happen here. I hate the phrase 'the moment we are in right now' because sometimes I think that this phrase particularly is a little bit missing the point of seeing a political and historical continuity of what we are experiencing right now, to say like "Oh, this aberrant moment we are in", no, it's actually a pretty logical conclusion of a series

a podcast and a bunch of writing, and I freelance a lot. So, stuff comes out pretty regularly, and I do amazing interviews like this.

**TFSR:** Yeah!

**VO:** That's all stuff that I love and am working on that, but nothing more direct to plug.

**TFSR:** I think that we're so driven to work all the time and the myth of productive individual is something that is having poked more holes into, but I think for myself as also somebody who would identify strongly as being workphobic or a lazy, I so support it when people take breaks, I so support it when people just be, do fun things or do nothing or all the good stuff. So it's cool to hear you talk about that too.

**VO:** We think of it as like the puritan work ethic, but it's also the like Settler Colonial and anti-Black work ethic. Workshy is like a famously racist phrase that applied to indigenous and Black people. All these concepts are interlinked, the way that we think about this world of work and productivity and property is all connected.

**TFSR:** Absolutely, I think it was maybe in *In Defense of Looting*, but I read a synopsis of modern day of working-class work conditions. It can be summed up in the phrase "if you have time to lean, you have time to clean", which is a lot of us who work in the restaurant industry have heard this phrase thrown at us by managers and how that whole ethic of like "you need to be respectable and standing all the time and smiling, and all that stuff, has direct ties to what was enforced upon people who were being forced to work on plantations for free.

**VO:** Exactly. A lot of the early what we think of as modern management stuff like you're saying "if you have time to lean, you have time to clean", employee surveillance, all these things that we think of as like part of the neoliberal, whatever revolution in labor conditions, actually are traced back to the plantation, and you can see that it was precisely under those conditions that these "modern management techniques" were de-

In that period I've also transitioned and have really taken a lot of revolutionary gender thinking and trans thought more to heart as well. I don't even know how to begin to describe the deep change that has happened, but I think what I've really learned, if I were to summarize it as briefly as possible, is to trust movement, to study and look at movement, to try and take it as seriously as possible as it's going, and to see what people are saying and to listen, and that the basis of any learning about revolutionary process starts there.

**TFSR:** Absolutely, and you said at the comment about transitioning, speaking from my own experiences, also a trans person, there is nothing that will shape your view and solidify your view of the world more than being the actual embodied person that you are and not having I an embodied personhood that is gifted or foisted onto you by the state and the medical-industrial complex. That really warms my heart to hear that... I wanna like push a lot of love in the direction of people being their actual full embodied selves as much as is humanly possible.

**VO:** Totally and that discourse can be very frustrating sometimes, but the basics are that finding your gender and your sexuality, having those experiences be in line with your internal experience, I don't know how to describe it exactly, is incredibly liberating and is the basis for so much.

**TFSR:** Yeah, so huge plug for transitioning if that's what you need to do.

**VO:** It's never too late to stop being straight.

**TFSR:** Definitely! Yes, it is never too late to stop being straight. So are you working on any next project you'd like to tell listeners about?

**VO:** At the moment, I'm keeping it a little close to the chest cause, I'm a pretty lazy person. I love to not work. I'm trying to write a book about anti-work, but it's proving very slow, so maybe there will be another book at some point, hopefully in the next few years, but I'm not super concrete right now. I do

of all the shit sandwiches that we've eaten for many generations, some of us. But I'm wondering, as somebody who was in Barcelona that particular time, did you see any similarities to what has happened or what is happening now?

**VO:** Yeah, I think it does inform my perspective to some degree with a sense that we are in the middle of – and I think most people would agree with this on its face but don't actually center it – in the middle of an international moment of upheaval and revolt that is largely unprecedented, it has been centuries since we've seen anything like it. I think the period of the beginning of an anti-colonial uprising in the 50s through the long 60s into the 70s, in the wake of that there has been a long period of retrenchment and of course there have been powerful and important movements in that gap, but I think since the collapse of 2008 and more specifically at the beginning of uprisings in 2011, we have been in a decade of a really increased and intensifying struggle. In terms of where we are now, I'm a bit of an optimist when I say this, but I think we are at the beginning of the middle of a historical period. Something started in 2008 that I think the wave of neofascism that is still ongoing but hasn't quite succeeded in either precipitating a total world war or totally capturing the globe. There is obviously Modi in India, there are really powerful people, powerful fascists all over the world, obviously in Brazil as well. So it's not just to downplay it, but that fascist moment globally was the back-swing of a decade of struggle and change. I think capitalism is in a really deep crisis that is going to involve a transformation of the nation-state as it exists, labor as it exists, and the ecological moment is utterly unsustainable and disastrous, to say nothing of the pandemic. All of which is to say I think we are at the beginning of the middle of what could be a revolutionary process, there is certainly going to be an evolutionary process for society. Society in 20 years I think will look very different from how it does now or how it did 20 years ago. That's not necessarily for the better, but it is going to be very

different in some ways. There are also continuities and a way to hold both of these things in tension, that there are these long continuities that we are also just a shadow of 1492. We are still living through the apocalypse of Settler-Colonial genocide on this hemisphere. That moment is one historical moment that has built to this point of total ecological destruction and the role of anti-blackness and slavery in the plantation in that is so important.

I think another way we could think about where we're at right now, particularly in America, is a third reconstruction we are in. So, obviously, the first reconstruction is the period of the Civil War. The general strike of the slaves, as Du Bois called it, that really lasted from the 1850s through the 1870s. As Saidiya Hartman has pointed out, tragically failed to truly upend race relations, but threatened to for this thirty-year period of revolutionary upheaval, driven by formerly enslaved people almost exclusively. And then, of course, the second reconstruction is often the civil rights movement, which extends from 1945 up through 1975 and the repression of the movement that happens then. So, again, speaking optimistically, I think we're in a third reconstruction, the George Floyd uprisings last year were, by some measures, the biggest in American history. Certainly the largest uprising since the long hot summers of the 60s. 1964-68, but probably were on par in the United States with a historical shift of that magnitude of the civil rights movement, of the Civil War. And I think that that is exciting and frightening and necessary and is also in response to ends combined with global trends in ecology and capital that we're witnessing.

**TFSR:** Yeah. I think that that's a very interesting take on "the moment that we're in" and based in history and very well-considered, I thought. So, you brought up the summer of 2020 with the George Floyd uprisings and the uprising in defense of black life and black lives and the timing of the book's publication was smack-dab in the middle of that summer. I know that the book was in the works for quite a number of years be-

giants, but also the rioters and the looters and the maroons and the indigenous fighters. All of them have given us this beautiful body of knowledge and possibility that the state and capital have failed to fully suppress, and we can access it, and people are working to do that.

**TFSR:** Absolutely. The book came out last year and you began it's in the midst of the Ferguson uprising of late summer 2014. Since the publication of the essay and then the book, have you had your thinking supported or shifted by anything you've seen unfold in the world?

**VO:** Absolutely. My thinking was so deepened because of the movement in Ferguson. I started on this practice of research, which led me to all of this history and this black radical tradition. Before I had read Du Bois and a few other things, but really diving into this body of work, discovering really carefully, reading through some people like Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman Sylvia Wynter, Ida B. Wells's work – all of these people from the 60s, Rosa Parks and Gloria Richardson, there's so many people in America and abroad, like Paul Gilroy and Sylvia Wynter obviously is Caribbean. But there is this huge deepening of knowledge that I was spurred onto because of Black Lives Matter in 2014-2015, because of the rebels of Ferguson, it has totally changed me. Since then also I've been involved in a lot of prison abolitionist and police abolitionist work, again often driven by the families of the people who are incarcerated, and that has deepened my understanding and my knowledge. Standing Rock and the various indigenous fights, particularly in so-called Canada, they've been so powerful of the last few years have also forced me to really reckon with the indigenous roots of all European philosophy and the way in which so much of leftism and European enlightenment thought is built on indigenous theorizing and black theorizing that has been captured and made invisible through the white academy. So in many ways, I've engaged over these years with such a huge body of work.

extent, the book turned into kind of the history of the last 200 years. The last 200 years of United States history. That's what the book ends up being, for better and for worse. I think there's some strengths to that, and that means that I've glossed over a lot of stuff in, and for people who are well-versed in this history there's probably a lot of repetition that they're familiar with my book.

In terms of making those choices though, it also just happened somewhat naturally as I was doing the research. I would just find stuff that seemed really important to include, and then that would expand a section, and then suddenly that section would be a whole chapter. So I came very organically through the process of writing. One of the things that was really interesting was I thought I had read a lot of books, that I was pretty well-informed about history already before I set out to write this book. Discovering how little I knew was really beautiful and humbling and interesting. We don't learn very much about history in this country for good reason. So part of what informed me when I was writing about was that I was learning. I was learning so much during this research. I was learning so much. I knew so little of this, and everything that I learned, that I felt really changed the way I understood a period or a topic, I tried to put in the book.

**TFSR:** I love that, it's beautiful and also frustrating. Beautiful, on the one hand, because you are able to do this, but also frustrating because all of this stuff is so buried and you really have to hunt for it, but I think it's through books like yours and books like so many other folks that we can have access to all of this historical knowledge, which is so vitally important for understanding why we do the things we do, and why things are the way they are.

**VO:** Exactly. And these books are available. I hope my book functions as bibliography as much as anything. Other people have done such incredible, important work and it's a cliché, but standing on the shoulder of giants, not just the intellectual

fore that, ever since the Ferguson uprising when the pigs killed Mike Brown. Could you talk about the timing of the book, the book's evolution, and what initially led you to write and research the book?

**VO:** I started working on a book in 2015. I was actually approached by a publisher to turn the essay that I wrote during the Ferguson uprising, also called In Defense of Looting that you can see in New Inquiry. I was approached to turn it into a book-length study which I did over about 18 months and then for a variety of reasons, the original publisher who I was supposed to be with didn't do a very good job handling the manuscript, they didn't get at it for a long time, they didn't do it ever. It sat on the shelf for a few years until I got frustrated and moved it to the wonderful people at Bold Type. An editor there has since left, but Katy is really great. So we had it scheduled actually for October of 2020, it was its original pub date, and when things hopped off in May, the publishers decided to push it up as far as they could, which, with production schedules in the way that works, ended up being mid-August. So that's why the timing of it was very fortuitous. There's a footnote in the book, where I say that I'm doing final edits on this. I say the Third Precinct is on fire, it was like that at that point. Literally, the book had been basically finalized, and all I could do was get this little note in there and there's an error in it because I was literally doing it that night, with the live stream open on my screen.

In some ways, the timing of the book ended up being quite good because of this delay that happened and it ended up matching with the movement. It was very gratifying. In the book's conclusion, I talk about how there is going to be another one of these uprisings like Black Lives Matter against the police and the carceral state and white supremacy. It's very dangerous to make claims like that. As a writer, one is always very worried to do that, so it was good to have that happen. But obviously, that analysis just emerges from the

experience of movement over the last ten years, I was not alone in thinking that and feeling that it was certainly going to happen.

**TFSR:** That's so interesting, that you are very emblematic of where we were all at when the Third Precinct was on fire. You're rushing to get this out and you're experiencing all of these things, and while this very prescient book you have is being rushed to publication, it's very dramatic in a way. So, the reception of the book itself has been something that has gone all over the place and, for instance, when I was researching your topics of conversation for this interview, I came across a lot of really inflammatory, right-wing screeds related to your book. Would you talk about this and why they might have been galvanized in this way and also what the reception end of the book has been by non-enemies, comrades?

**VO:** Obviously, in the immediate aftermath, it was pretty intense. There were a bunch of doxing attempts, my family got harassed. My parents got harassed...

**TFSR:** That's awful.

**VO:** Yeah, there was a lot of transphobic and antisemitic harassment that I don't want to downplay, it was very upsetting. But also, it was very instructive. So the book came out in August. The movement was really at its height, the last week of May, the first two weeks of June. By August, it had started to peter out of the streets, the election was beginning to take on the anti-political power, to recapture the narrative, and I think what happened with my book was that it actually offered an opportunity for a lot of people who otherwise didn't want to be seen, to be talking down about this really powerful and very popular movement. My book provided an opportunity for a lot of leftists and liberals who wanted to distance themselves from the uprising because I was a white girl writing a book that meant that they could attack it without their actual racist... I'm not trying to say that people who attacked, who don't like my book are racists. That is not what I'm saying. What I'm saying

**TFSR:** It's hard to know where to go from that, but just to state that this is a thing that the state does and a thing that we also do to each other and not to say that anyone's a bad person or place a value judgment on any person or whatever. But just to be aware of it, this is a tactic that is extremely destabilizing is very important.

So the book itself goes through various points and moments and tendencies and tangents in history to support a logical reformation of how we think about uprising, riot, and various tactics associated with those events. Would you go through your process of choosing these historical moments in defense of looting?

**VO:** When I started out, I really was focused on the Civil War, the general strike of the slaves from Du Bois's Black Reconstruction, and then thinking through reconstruction after that, and the civil rights movement. They seemed to me the most relevant and important moments. When I started out, I was actually asked by an editor to include stuff about the labor movement at the turn of the 20th century, which I'm not sure... I mean I'm glad, I'm proud of the research I did, I liked the chapter that's there. I don't know that it necessarily fits fully cleanly in the rest of the book, even though I like that chapter on its own. I was trying to focus on looting as a tactic, the context in which it emerged, rather than just jumping from an instance of looting to looting. I think one of the things people who read my book have said to me was like "This book doesn't really like talk about looting even so much". And I think that's because the defense of looting is not describing looting. The defense of looting is describing how property and the law and anti-blackness and white supremacy are villainous, and that looting makes sense in that context to transform and attack those systems, rather than just saying like "Here's one place where looting happened, and it was good, and here's another place where looting happened and it was good", which of course, I do as well. But as a result, I ended up thinking through the 60s a lot, but to some



**TFSR:** Just to reiterate something that you said, making a really clear distinction between a cop infiltrating movements, which is something that does happen, and people within movements doing the work of the state is, I think, just crucial and a cornerstone to having any movement that is approaching a state of health or healthiness.

**VO:** One thing that is valuable to learn from revolutionary history is that there are gonna be infiltrators and snitches at every level and behind every form of tactic, unfortunately. The 1905 revolution in Russia, not to be too nerdy about this, but Father Gapon and the head of the left-wing SR terrorist organization were both Okhrana secret police plants. They were both secret police, but they lead this massive revolutionary movement that eventually led to the Bolshevik uprising 12 years later. It turns out now we found out that people very high up in the Black Panthers, all key were snitches. There are certainly police operating within our movements. It is necessary to understand that, but you cannot accuse people of it because, for example, the American Indian Movement, one of the ways that AIM got taken down was that infiltrator just started accusing everyone of being an infiltrator. That's one of the ways that infiltrators work as they sow the suspicion that other people are infiltrators and it leads to splits and violence. Unfortunately, we don't know who is going to prove or going to get flipped because they get arrested for a drug crime or a personal crime and do time or whatever, there's plenty of different people. But what we do know is that they won't necessarily destroy the movement nearly as solidly as paranoia about them will. They're just one tool the police have, they're not our most dire enemy. I don't know where to where to go from that really, except to say that in my lifetime, in this decade of organizing I've, never seen people successfully identify a snitch, but I have seen people blow up groups and movements and now put people in prison on the basis where they thought someone was being one who turned out not to be.

is the way it functioned in August of 2020 exclusively was as an object of hate for the movement that had just happened. My book became a very safe way to attack the movement, and so it had nothing to do with the actual content of the book in some ways, except that I think that the liberals who attacked it and the leftists who attacked it assumed that it was hot-take-ey, vacuous garbage of the kind they put out. They said it was dangerous, that it hadn't been carefully researched, that it hardly was in the process of years of activist experience and an amateur researcher, non-academic. I think they felt it was a target worthy of their disdain, which ended up, I think, really spreading the book. My favorite was a lot of right-wingers would share it on Twitter being like "Oh, she copyrighted it. Here's a link to download it for free". I was like "Oh, no, don't read my book, it is terrible". It also was very pleasurable in a certain way. I said that from the left to the far far right, within two weeks all of them had condemned it. From some socialist organizations all the way to like Newt Gingrich, all the way to V-Dare, Brian Schatz in Hawaii, literal politicians. And the way they unified and demonstrated what I consider a unified class fragment. I mean not to be too Marxist about it or whatever, but this class interest in private property was revealed very quickly by all these people condemning this book, and that was very instructive and interesting. So that was the enemies. Basically, I had one NPR interview and all of my enemies in the entire country drop their trousers and showed us what they wore, that was incredible.

**TFSR:** [laughs] I read about that, it's amazing!

**VO:** Very powerful, but honestly that was really the movement, that wasn't really me, right? I'm being cute, but as a result, a lot of reaction I've had from comrades was being like "No, this book is cool, it's interesting". I've been very gratified I've had a lot of great conversations like this one with people who read at. With the quarantine, I didn't get to do a book tour, so I didn't get to go to infoshops all over the country and talk

to people which I had been looking forward to. Getting to have some of those experiences even digitally has been very pleasurable.

I'm excited to start seeing real, engaged critique, people pushing against and through the book and the work in it. I'm excited to start seeing some of that emerge now. I think we're starting to get to that period. So I've been very gratified and received a lot of positive feedback from comrades, and it's allowed me to meet and talk to a lot of people all over the country, and that's been really exciting.

**TFSR:** I really loved the interviews that you and Zoe Samudzi did about the book, in the earlier days.

**VO:** Oh my god, I was so excited to get her to talk with her and it was such an honor. As I said, I'm a Final Straw fan, suddenly all these people, thinkers I'm so excited of want to talk to me and with me, and that's so gratifying. That really makes it all worth it.

**TFSR:** Anybody who looks even slightly closely at the right-wing push back, especially after moments of popular uprising or insurrection, or even in moments after horrifying disasters like Hurricane Katrina. You can see this focus on looting and the looter and in many ways, it's wrapped up into this really horrific property worship and also equally, if not more so horrific anti-black racism. So I think that that is like something that we can't early understate. And we can't really overstate it, rather.

**VO:** Totally. The final chapter of my book is about how in the wake of the 60s and in particular with Katrina, but also the blackout rioting and looting in New York in 1977 and in the LA uprising in 1992, how looting became the perfect dog-whistle for precisely tracing and, more broadly, historically, it has functioned as a tracing of the relationship between property, whiteness, white supremacy and anti-blackness. I think, in the wake of particularly George Floyd, but even Black Lives Matter, a lot of what white Liberals even used to use as dog

get started. Holocaust deniers, for example, or anti-vaxer stuff, for example, or anti-masker stuff, for example, is all has really troubling right-wing roots.

**VO:** I think if it was only right-wing people doing it, it would be easier to argue with that. But part of the reason it's so important to talk about it now, if people remember during over the summer, in mid-June, Richard Brooks a twenty-five-year old black man was murdered in the parking lot of a Wendy's drive-through, and there were riots in response and Wendy's was burnt down and a bunch of "movement people", activists on the internet said: "Oh, my god, it's so suspicious, there was this white girl there, they combed through these videos, they identified this woman. They said like "She is an agitator. She's a cop, she's deep state", whatever they said about it. And then she was arrested with all the evidence provided by people on the internet and it turned out she was Richard Brooks's partner and she's facing decades in prison because internet sleuths decided that no one could genuinely want to burn down a Wendy's. It's so dangerous to think this way. Her partner was stolen from her and she was filled with a rage and a tragedy, and a frustration, and a desire for change that brings all of us into the street. But it was so direct and lived for her. And to then have "the movement" work for the police and put her in jail, and now everyone stopped talking about it. Everyone who's part of that stopped talking about it. They went silent, it hasn't been brought up again because they were working as police. And when you think this way, you are thinking as police. It's so important to understand that it's not just right-wing, that there is this big left strain of this stuff, and that this paranoid conspiracy stuff is fundamentally antisemitic, but also anti-black and is fundamentally about distrusting poor people and black people for knowing how to rise up or knowing what they're doing. And it's so important that we fight against that if we want to have a chance of not reproducing these violences.

And then it figures out a way to justify that presumption by saying “Okay, therefore, the people who started the fire must have been nazis”. It’s really backward.

Maybe this is gonna sound flippant, but it makes me think of there was this big movement, like a conspiracy theory to imagine that William Shakespeare didn’t write his plays, and if you look into this whole range of academic work about that... It actually just comes from a conservative commentator being like “Well, William Shakespeare was a poor, uneducated, queer guy. There’s no way this poor, uneducated weirdo wrote these books” and then, from there finding a way to explain how in fact he didn’t write it. That’s the nicest version of what I hear when I hear people saying that looters were white supremacists. You start from the premise that they’re not part of the movement, and then you figure out a way to explain that, and the state has really manipulated that. In September, there was this press release that came out from Minneapolis saying: “Oh we’ve arrested this guy. He was a white supremacist biker. He started the movement”. There hasn’t been a trial. There hasn’t been any more evidence given. I followed up on it a week ago, I couldn’t find anything. There is no truth to that, but it’s circulated. This idea is circulated that the movement was started by a racist, by a white supremacist. This is very effective for the state and it’s a struggle that we’re gonna face in all of our movements to come.

**TFSR:** Thank you for giving voice to this topic, because I felt a little hesitant to ask the question just because I don’t want to define the praxis and analysis of this topic by reactionary right-wing push back against it, but it’s obviously something that’s important to be informed of and be knowledgeable about and why people say what they say. And also the whole conspiracy theory-like universe that we are in right now that is very much aided and abetted by the internet. It is one which probably warrants several episodes of any radio show or podcast, but that’s very interesting how these conspiracy theories

whistles about crime urban what have you... A lot of those dog whistles have been proven to be what they are, which is dog whistles, right? Which is a way of saying racism without being racist. Looting has remained as a final dog whistle that’s available to people, even people “within the movement”, to express anti-blackness and ended as a defense of property.

**TFSR:** Yes – and that’s maybe a perfect segway into this next question I have – which is: because words have meaning and power and also legacies and things that we can point to that are true about them, would you talk about the origins of the word “loot” and “looting”?

**VO:** Yeah, absolutely. Loot is taken from a Hindi word, the word “lut”, which first appears in a handbook for Indian vocabulary for English colonial officers. The word literally enters through colonizing police, basically, photo police. There’s this really telling word, the first recorded appearance of it in English. I’m is gonna quote here: “He always found the talismanic gathering-word loot, plunder, a sufficient bond of union in any part of India”. What that quote is saying is that the word “loot”, the idea of the relationship to property allows colonial officers to unify what would otherwise not be a unified people. The Indian subcontinent was not India when England got there. I mean, obviously, it emerges out of some historical conceptions but the state of India and the nationality Indian, which embraces a billion people and hundreds of languages and religious practices and cultures was imposed colonially. What is so interesting is that the word “loot” was already recognized from its very roots as a word that could describe a relationship to property that produced racialization, racialized Indian people, it was a sufficient bond of union in any part of India. So this idea of a deviant relationship to property that is projected onto racialized others by settler-colonial and anti-black society is present from the very first appearance of the word.

The earliest appearance of the word “looting” features racial epithets in it. The first time it appears refers to “Chinese

blackhearts” and “hirsute Sikhs”. From the very beginnings of this word, it has meant a deviant relationship to property, which is visible among racialized people. That’s what this word has always been. It has always been this word that lives at the intersection of white supremacy, colonialist violence, anti-blackness, and the imposition of property and property law. It makes sense to me. I mean that’s also just etymology but it makes sense that as a tactic as well, this tactic of attacking property has been given this word that has such a racialized and colonial history.

**TFSR:** Totally. When I read that in *In Defense of Looting*, it blew my mind because there’s another word that is in the common lexicon of coded racist language, which also comes from the Hindi and has direct ties to resistance to colonial violence in India. That word is “thug”. That was so interesting to me because I didn’t know about the etymology of the word “loot”, and it just shows to me as somebody who’s Desi myself, who is part of the Indian diaspora, it just called back to me how influential the British colonization of India is still, and is still worldwide. It’s very interesting to me. So thank you for bringing that to light and for talking about it.

**VO:** Yeah, doing research for a book is not often like super exciting, but when I encountered that in the OED, I did freak out a little, I was like, “Oh my god, this is so much cleaner than I thought it would be”. Sometimes you think you’re gonna have to pull something out, that’s really subtle. It’s going to be really complicated and you open the history books – that’s one thing studying history has really taught me – it was actually much more open and naked than you think, we just haven’t been taught it. [laugh]

**TFSR:** Yes, the through-line is so simple that it’s almost a little bit suspicious. How can something be so simply presented or rendered in language and society as these two figures of the “looter” and the “thug”? You touched on this somewhat before in the interview and also elsewhere extensively, but you write

the country. And the left was often trailing behind things. But that is different from them having nothing to do with the struggle or them not knowing what they’re doing or they’re just like apolitical or they’re criminal.

All of these ideas, I think, are just belied by the fact of the way that, over and over again, movements are borne by those actions. Movements are like the entire political nexus of the country is shifted by people looting and rioting, in a way that to think of Bill McKibben had *Earth 360* thing in New York in 2015 or something, where millions of people came out, no one remembers it. It had no effect. Not to disrespect the organizers and what happened there, but if we’re talking about real effective change which is what that claims to talk about then looting, rioting needs be considered. But also, by talking about criminality, talking about good protesters vs. bad rioters, we also do the work of the state of reproducing a label of some people are disposable. Some people are real political subjects and some people are disposable, and some people should be ostracized, and some people don’t have a voice. And that’s obviously a structurally anti-black and racist procedure.

The one that I think we actually will have to worry about now, though. So the outside agitator troop again George Floyd revolt, it didn’t really hold up because it was happening everywhere. People are joking, what is there, some Antifa HQ somewhere in Iowa sending out thousand of troops? It obviously doesn’t make sense, but what has, in fact, the state has flipped the script successfully, with the help of a lot of activists with the idea of the inside agitator, the white supremacist who has started the riot secretly, the police provocateur. This image became a very powerful counter-insurgent tactic over the summer. And I think what the “white supremacist started the riot myth” comes from is the exact same place as the like “They’re opportunists and criminals, they don’t know what they’re doing”, which is that it starts from the presumption that there is no way someone could start a fire and also believe in freedom.

them, they're not their neighborhoods, and there's this idea that, like OK, if the people who own those businesses aren't super-rich, then somehow they're also part of the community and then, when looters attacked them, they're destroying this community institution, whereas like what the research shows – and I think a lot of people experience the summer – both that black, indigenous and proletarian neighborhoods in America have a much higher concentration of chain stores, pawnshops, really exploitative businesses. But also that looters and rioters know what they're doing, the targets they're hitting. I mean, if people remember in Minneapolis, where a huge swath of the section of the city was totally basically looted and burned to the ground. There was an independent bookstore that just stayed standing through all of that. And we saw that in the 60s, too – some local businesses will be protected, others will be attacked. And that's because probably, if you live in that neighborhood, you go into that store where the prices are too high and you get followed around by the manager, and you know that one of the managers sexually harasses the employees, some of whom are your friends. It's this really backward way of thinking about what community and neighborhood look like.

Another really common one is: they are opportunists, they're criminals, they're not protesters, they don't know what they're doing, they've nothing to do with a struggle. I hope that has been proven... Just the sheer size and widespreadness of the George Floyd uprisings, I think, really put that one to rest a bit, but there is still the idea that the looters are "not activists", are "not left". And I have a dual response. On the one hand, it's true, they're actually not the left. The left in the United States, which didn't really exist when I was coming up but certainly exists now, is like these very organized projects, mostly focused on electoralism and recruitment. And the people who were rising up over the summer weren't the left. They weren't the organizers, they were poor, black people and their friends and comrades across

about the radical reclamation of the figure of the looter. Would you expand on this topic?

**VO:** One of the things that was, I think, really powerful about the original essay that I then developed into this book was the claim that the first image in America of a black looter was an enslaved person freeing herself. That was informed by Saidiya Hartman's work *Scenes of Subjection*, where she talks about how the enslaved saw themselves as stealing away or even just having a meeting they refer to as stealing the meeting, which was the coy and ironic, but also deeply subversive way of understanding that once a person has become property, then any action that they take necessarily absurdly violates the very principle of property on which it's based. I just had a whole talk about this recently that people can see on YouTube called *Against Non-Violence*. One of the major ways in the last 60 years especially that movements have been managed and repression has functioned, is through this myth of non-violence, which I think crucially doesn't mean less violence, but is a specific ideology about a certain kind of controlled form of action that doesn't really violate the law. And one of the things that that has done has been to narrative-ize, in particular, the civil rights movement. In the 50s, there is the good non-violent thing in the South and in the late 60s, there was this bad, violent, militant black power thing in the North. That was mistaken, and that was too extreme. That's the narrative that we have, which is based on a few selective historical truths but is really just totally mythical. It's a totally made-up narrative and one of the ways it functions is to exile the looter from that movement and to say, when you talk about the civil rights movement and people who fought for freedom in the black freedom movement in the 50s and 60s, the image that comes to mind is the March on Washington or the freedom riders, or the lunch counter sit-in folks, all of whom were incredibly brave and powerful and who are due as much respect as they receive, I think, probably more, but part of giving them

more respect is recognizing that many of those people would then go on to participate in urban rebellions. Many of those people would protect themselves with guns and would fight back with KKK Night Riders in the South, as they were organizing to recognize that, for the vast majority of people in that movement, non-violence was a tactic that was effective sometimes or ineffective other times. It wasn't a philosophy and it wasn't a way of being.

So, if we recognize that and if we bring the looter back into the image of the movement, then I think we start to see, so the history I just sketched – good in the South, bad in the North. What that tends to do is actually skip over the years 1964 to 1968 very often, and the reason those years get skipped over, I think, is because they're a period in which there are 750 black anti-police riots and civil rights riots in the country, 750 in a five-year period. It's incredible: it's a mass uprising that in 1968 had brought the country so to the brink of a revolution that you then get the emergence of the Black Panther Party, DRUM in Detroit. But then also the American Indian Movement gets really militant, the antiwar movement gets really militant. We have this explosion of militant revolutionary struggle explicitly as such, and the reason that that happens, because they've been pushed by four years of increasingly large and common rioting and fighting and looting that has grown directly out of the civil rights movement. And there is another important point to make here: in 1963, Martin Luther King's Birmingham campaign starts non-violent, but it ends with days of rioting, torching police cars, throwing rocks back at Bull Connor, and it makes sense to consider Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 as perhaps the first large urban riot of the period. That history is totally forgotten and ignored.

So, if we talk about – and I think we should – the activists in Birmingham, the black folks in act in Birmingham fighting for freedom as this important pivotal moment in American history – which it was – we have to embrace the rioter and the looter

who was there and who was this core part of that movement. If we jump forward in history now, during Ferguson, during Black Lives Matter 2014, 2015, that wave of movement, people really disavowed rioters, they said rioters and looters aren't part of the movement, they are not acting politically, they are not really activists or protesters, when in fact, it was precisely rioting and looting that had brought the movement into existence. It was the basis of the movement. That tactic spread the movement and made it happen. So when I talk about reclaiming the looter or thinking through the figure of the looter, I am trying to trace a history of a form of resistance that goes back to the earliest days of the plantation, where black folks rejected property law, rejected white supremacy and the rules of whiteness by looting themselves by organizedly and openly stealing white property, namely themselves, and then attempting to imagine to live otherwise. And having that act of theft and looting as this first moment of possibility, this necessary first moment starts to really change the way that I think I learned to think about struggle and history. And if we see that that continues into the present of the looter, both in the slanders that reactionaries used to attack looting and in the figure of the looter herself and what she represents, then I think we can begin to genuinely embrace and learn from the revolutionary tradition in this country and this world.

**TFSR:** Yes, absolutely. We're all probably familiar with it, just through osmosis or passively consuming mainstream or right-wing media, but what are some examples of reactionary push-back against the looter and maybe some responses that you might have to those?

**VO:** Totally. I think, there are some common ones, like rioters are destroying their own neighborhoods. It's really common which I think is based on really misunderstanding how power works in the United States, but also anywhere, that geography is equal to power, people who don't own anything live in neighborhoods they don't own, those neighborhoods exploit