Insurrectional Abolitionism

Part 2 /// Vistas of Militancy Against the Police on a Midwest University Campus
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What’s in a name? Abolition, as a name, belongs to no one. Which is not to say that it belongs to everyone. Abolition inherits many names and so many other struggles. It is in itself a terrain of struggle. A terrain which, in the past few months, has become a tumultuous battlefield—perhaps ever more so than just months ago when we speak of survival pending Abolition.

Abolition points to the many forms of action that disrupt and erode carceral society’s instruments of capture and control. Instruments of capture and control that take on both legal and extra-legal forms. They express themselves through the economy of police, prisons, and property (constituted through racial capitalism’s surpluses) as well as a parallel racialized libidinal economy (constituted through surplus pleasure-pain and colonial moralisms of all kinds). The carceral reproduces itself beyond prison walls and police uniforms. As such, Abolition is a constant confrontation of the carceral far beyond those walls—it challenges the many cops amongst us and within us that decompose our relations, and ultimately weaken us and empower them.

Abolition is also creation. Creation of many worlds here and now (and still-to-come). Worlds that exist in and through the many cracks in the walls of the carceral’s “catch-all solutions” to our decompositions and missed encounters. Abolition is therefore also about redirecting and recoding our flows (pleasure-pains and collective capacities) away from the carceral and towards producing and reproducing these other worlds already here and still-to-come.
Within this, we encounter at least three different modalities, or flavors, that Abolition takes on today. Each modality, or flavor, has its own specific tactics and strategy. Each modality is different and not necessarily opposed to or mutually exclusive with any other. Here, “flavor” does not just evoke a sensation but it also evokes a science. Experiments both sensible and scientific.

Take, for instance, the experiments through which physicists realized that some quirky particles called “neutrinos” are not one, but three, at the same time. Three different “flavors” of neutrinos physicists call them. Neutrinos oscillate through their different flavors as they move. So, like a neutrino, that elementary particle whose mass is negligible and does not interact strongly with light (meaning it’s invisible and yet it is everywhere) Abolition oscillates through three different flavors as it moves through vast geographies and calendars (as the Zapatista compas say).

The three flavors of Abolition we have encountered are as follows: (1) autonomist (2) insurrectionary (3) and procedural:

1. **Autonomist Abolition** entails a strategy of *fugitivity* or constant refusal of the instruments of capture and their “catch all solutions” while, at the same time, building hyperlocal (though dispersed in undetectable networks) infrastructures for sustaining bodies (people, collectives, swarms) in resistance.

2. **Insurrectionary Abolition** entails a direct *confrontation* and antagonizing of the “big P” Police and its constant attempts to maintain order, while simultaneously attempting to liberate occupied territories.
3. **Procedural Abolition** entails winning and defending *non-reformist reforms* enshrined in policies that diminish the reach of the carceral state while simultaneously redirecting collective capacities towards social infrastructures that do not reinstate carceral instruments of capture and control.

It seems to us that Abolition today oscillates through these three different modalities. Each of these flavors, in their own way, disrupt and erode the carceral society’s instruments of capture, and, at the same time, create worlds here and now (and still-to-come). There are likely many more flavors than those we have encountered and enumerated in these short paragraphs. We invite the reader to test this out for themselves. But note that there are no recipes. Abolition is an ongoing experiment (without guarantees) that is nonetheless a matter of life-death, differentially, for all of us.

**On Insurrectional Abolitionism**

*a note from the zine editor*

*Insurrectional abolitionism is a term that describes* the everyday micro-level processes of refusal and defiance that scale up to large disruptions of and attacks on policing, criminalization, and the prison regime with a longterm goal—with immediate sentient stakes—of abolishing the prison industrial complex and eliminating the plantation societies that it scaffolds. Insurrectional abolitionism, in a very serious, militant way must wreak havoc on white property, pleasure, and paternalism, and nonBlack racist structures if they do not challenge antiBlackness as a paradigm of power relations as well.
Specific to the writings included in this zine, one can describe an *insurrectional* tendency in the movement to abolish the PIC already present in the disparate pockets of insurgency that took fleeting shape this past summer. These scattered sites and scenes of revolt can be generalized and connected through not theory but more collective militant agitation and action. Put quite literally, *insurrectional abolitionism* invokes the effort to *foster*—rather than impose or even “manufacture”—the conditions revolt against historical regimes of antiBlack and white supremacist carceral-police violence.

We might look at to a commonly cited definition of “insurrectional anarchism” for guidance as to how an insurrectionary orientation and approach to cultivating abolition might take collective flight and form. That is, a militant insurrectional approach to abolishing the prison industrial complex would 1. refuse all forms of mediation between state and the mass struggle; 2. prioritize and create the conditions for proletarian self-activity to flourish through the removal of all state-sanctioned “experts” & “specialists” (most importantly erasure of white and petty bourgeois managers in movement spaces); 3. organization is not treated as a goal/end unto itself but rather is to be primarily for attack against state and capital.

Moving out of the Summer of 2020 and into the long winter of 2021, we see an ongoing protest movement working across different sites and social scales to “Defund the Police”, while on the other hand the forces of uprising that have risen in the George Floyd uprisings—a complex, ongoing, and related articulation of insurgency that is relatively autonomous from the managerial forces that corrupt abolitionist initiatives that embody an obstinate “proceduralist” orientation to anti-carcceral movement.
The rebels in the streets are out there often on their own accord, not tied to a particular “politic” or “line” and it’s very refreshing to see people simply taking it to the state without the pretense of “correct” “ideology.” The uprisings have fucked with the hegemony of the proceduralist modality in a beautiful way, showing us a glimpse of new vistas where abolition can make and take flight. What is important today is to understand such unfolding contradictions as they appear in a rapidly changing social-historical context and adapting carceral landscape.
Excerpt from *The Insurrectional Project*

By Alfredo Bonnano

Why we are insurrectionalists

Because we are struggling along with the excluded to alleviate and ultimately abolish the conditions of exploitation imposed by the included.

Because we consider it possible to contribute to the development of struggles that are appearing spontaneously everywhere, turning them into mass insurrections, that is to say, actual revolutions.

Because we want to destroy the capitalist order of the world which, thanks to computer science restructuring, has become technologically useful to no one but the managers of class domination.

Because we are for the immediate, destructive attack against the structures, individuals and organisations of Capital and the State.

Because we constructively criticise all those who are in situations of compromise with power in their belief that the revolutionary struggle is impossible at the present time.

Because rather than wait, we have decided to proceed to action, even if the time is not ripe.

Because we want to put an end to this state of affairs right away, rather than wait until conditions make its transformation possible.

*These are the reasons why we are anarchists, revolutionaries and insurrectionalists.*
On October 17, 2020, a small group of us, all students at Northwestern University, attended our sixth (and certainly not last) demonstration to abolish the police on campus. Our crew, masked up, faceless, anonymous, showed up in solidarity with—but also unaffiliated from— the courageous organizers of these daily marches. These marches have been organized by radical Black abolitionist students, highly skilled and razor-focused, both from undergradu- ate and graduate positions, all working in solidarity as #NUCommunityNotCops. This action- oriented project has the potential to continue gaining momentum as they co-build a movement with campus workers (service, staff, and non-corrupt faculty), collaborating with other networks across Chicago campuses, and connecting with grassroots community activist groups. This is a rather exciting development in the Northside of Chicagoland/ Evanston suburban terrain. Last Saturday night has revealed new avenues for insurrectional abolitionist practice and a broader horizon for prison-industrial complex abolitionism to be fought for on university campuses.

What the evening of October 17th made crystal clear is how the strategy of escalating conflict with administrators, provosts, presidents, and their guardians has been a consensus-based solution shared by growing numbers of students at Northwestern, across Northern Illinois college campuses, and throughout the Midwest. Everyone attending these marches expressed a sense of joy in the process of experimenting with and learning how it feels to be ungovernable and how to keep people safe in the streets. The protest
leaders are not managers, instead speaking from an abolitionist stance: they understand that abolition does not mean pacifism but the end of all forms of systemic state and interpersonal violence by any means necessary.

SATURDAY WAS LIT

The crowd converged at the Foster-Walker complex, a building on the westside of campus. We first discussed community norms, such as: do not cross the people in front, you don’t know the route; do not police each other allow people to react how they want to; protect each other from cameras within the march and from Evanstonians and cops; try your best stay within the bike and white people perimeter; if an arrest happens do not scatter, etc.

The group began marching west down Ridge avenue, toward NUPD headquarters. Almost immediately, black flags began waving alongside the marchers, and tags on corporate chain buildings flowered up rather quickly. The CTA station we passed on the way was heavily tagged up and the march circled up to block the intersection in front of NUPD HQ. Folks put more graffiti in the street in front of the building—some of it was already there from our march a week prior. A small American flag was burned in the back of the group.

People tagged the building up, and formed a barricade in front of the cops positioned inside the HQ, so our people could not be seen. Some comrades spray painted over the blue light security cameras, while others danced and enjoyed the music. From there, the organizers reminded people this was an abolitionist march and that we were in solidarity with all people facing repression and state terror in Nigeria. It was in this moment that we understood that the fight to abolish police was not siloed in Evanston, and
not even in Illinois, but that our militant and abolitionist struggle against NUPD was connected to the struggle to abolish SARS in Nigeria—a call to international solidarity against antiBlackness globally, in all its forms.

The march eventually moved to downtown Evanston and its war memorial (sadly no one tagged the memorial) but more graffiti in the streets began saturating the area. On the way past the memorial, we passed a strip of businesses that got tagged including the cop-loving SF chain Philz Coffee. Fuck Philz. From downtown Evanston, the march began to move closer to campus. On the way to campus, two parking meters were smashed, a large Chase bank sign was completely shattered, the street-facing windows of the Whole Foods near campus were significantly tagged up, defaced, and a whole panel of windows were shattered.

Once we got to the front gate (“the Arch”) of campus, someone tagged the NU university sign with abolitionist messaging. When everybody arrived at the arch, they tagged it the fuck up. We ripped down the president’s condescending “we’re N this together” banner, and burned it while the crowd danced to “burn baby burn.” Someone said over the mic asked the streets, “How can we be in over this together when service workers are being laid off without pay or not being given hazard pay?”

Full of joy and energy, we then walked to the University president’s home. While on our way, we slowed down in front of the university’s “black house” to chant, “we love you.” But as we continued towards the president’s mansion, passing through the surrounding wealthy residential neighborhood, we chanted “I didn’t get no sleep cause of y’all, y’all ain’t gonna get no sleep cause of me.” An old white man walking his dog tried to film us at this point, but he got booed and the crowd forced him to stop snooping. Nobody in that neighborhood can say that they didn’t hear us.
The march arrived at the president’s mansion, where we left our mark, using the sidewalk as our canvas. To nobody’s surprise, this is where the cops arrived in very heavy riot gear, with K9 units and a paddywagon—protecting the university’s private property and hoping to frighten the crowd into submission. But they still did not have enough units for a crowd of our size. The cops were, to say the least, overwhelmed.

Again, to nobody’s surprise, the police northward (above downtown Chicago) are ill-prepared for a mass insurgency out in the streets. Countless times over the last three years both CPD, Evanston PD, and NUPD have proven to not hold the numbers northward to actually stop any sizable demonstration. With this in mind, what can we plan for and what can we do in the future? The Whole Foods could have easily been looted and all the students fed for the remainder of the quarter.

The presence of police in front of the president’s mansion did not deter us from doing some creative landscaping of our own. We left the burned banner, a symbol of our rage and discontent, in front of Morty’s castle, spoke a bit more, then dispersed.

**ESCALATION IS “TIMELY”**

Escalation is something that occurs organically and can be manufactured in the early stages of a revolutionary conjuncture. Revolutions are processual phenomena, as they happen in phases not as events. Moreover, the overthrow of one administration in power does not eliminate an entire repressive governing edifice. And as many of our comrades have been saying for ages, to abolish the police on a university campus is an impossible feat because the university is in fact the police. Thus we resist actively and with the information we gain, brace and prepare for reaction.
Comrades in Michigan speak of the generative aspects of “tensions” between people of different workplace status, positionality, access, and sense of class belonging. At a grad student action in southeastern Michigan, the “introduction of abolitionist demands and non-reformist reforms, as well as the tactics and actions proposed to achieve these demands, soon became a point of tension.” That tensions always already “exist within coalitions,” is clear, yet some such tensions result in “peace police”-esque denunciations of militant escalations that, when examined objectively, seem to be making more headway than any prior “negotiations” or “dialog” with officials, admin, and university donors has ever accomplished prior.

The point is to not only dwell within contradictions and let their synthesis or its impossibility reveal itself, as Black feminists like Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore teach us; we sometimes must also apply pressure within those moments of tension, and attack contradictory forces aggressively and head on. This means that if the President of a major research university tells students that he will never in his lifetime abolish the university Police, a statement that stands in diametric opposition to the demands made from those most implicated by police presence on campus, then you must believe that neither the president nor the university will ever sanction the abolitionist demand.

When coupled with escalating militant confrontations with the university’s social relations of production, capacities to govern us, and its co-monopoly on the legitimate use of force, the abolitionist insurrection on (and off) campus is proving it may not need demands other than total abolition at all. If unmet political demands are indeed the entry point into learning the imperatives of holistic revolutionary transformation for millions during this conjecture so be it.
However at some point we will not need demands any longer because we will topple the university of the colonizers themselves. Embrace nothing and nobody having control over the emergent movement in motion, embrace it, embrace no authority and embrace ungovernability. Embrace risk. By building and nourishing a sense of shared community and mass participation in this insurgency against policing on/off Northwestern University campus, these daily convergences—in both their formal and informal iterations—may serve as the catalyst for escalation of an insurrectionalist abolitionist process at colleges across Illinois, or perhaps the Midwest generally. What defines the insurrectional mode of abolition is its “direct confrontation and antagonizing of the “big P” Police and its constant attempts to maintain order, while simultaneously attempting to liberate occupied territories.”
A Different Relation to Authority

A close homie sent the invite Friday night, “Hey tomorrow, there is a night march, let’s go to this instead of some nasty party tomorrow.” My first reaction was... “hmm... I’ve been attending some of the daytime rallies. They have been pretty cool. The last night rally was pretty rad also.” For the first time during my stay in Chicago, I saw a black bloc and property destruction aimed at Chase Banks, Whole Foods Markets, and other symbols of racists capitalism. I saw, that evening, for the first time, how people in a crowd can move as a single mass in the night, and protect each other so others can take on more offensive risk. I think the key takeaway from that first evening was that offensives can be made; as in not only does an anti-policing protest have to sit back and be ushered by cops on the streets, defending itself into a corner. We can move however we want, given the right circumstances, preparation, and ultimately experience.

My reflection on the Hallow’s eve march through downtown Evanston brings me closer to a similar conclusion, however what differs from this day forward is the experience factor. We, students, grad and undergrad, and a few peers from campuses all over showing out in support, are learning. This is going to be an ongoing process, an experiment of sorts.

Through these short report backs, we can generalize a shared knowledge of tactics and possibility; we can share positions on “What is to Be Done?” And refute others authoritative claims over the path before us. The reportback is how we make momentary (and fleeting) coherence of revolt
for the sake of analysis. There is a stagnancy in coherence and intelligibility but there is also the need to plot points and map coordinates, a terrain of insurgency must be studied, and information must be shared.

Experience—concrete, lived, to be meditated on—thus defines the story of this past Halloween abolitionist demonstration at Northwestern University.
OVERVIEW OF THE EVENING

The initial assembly through which the march departed from met at a building on the southwest end of the NU Evanston campus. A group of about 20-30 students accumulated and slowly signs and shields started being spread by a few students in bloc from jump. As the crowd grew, two cars drove by blasting YG’s “ftp” and shouting “solidarity” and “woohoo!” to the students. Most people arrived from the very beginning in all black, as asked by the protest organizers. The crowd walked through two methods of de-arrest techniques before the march began. There was a slow ebb for a moment that forced the march to delay its start, due to some Biden supporters in front of the march, heckling the organizers and making it impossible for the march to move forward.

One point of consideration is the duration of the march’s initial convergence. By making sure everyone was “trained” briefly and supplied correctly, we were enabled to do some cool things safely as a collective mass. However, delaying the march for such a distended period of time allowed police to gather and rally behind the march and along its route. Police unfortunately shaped the trajectory of the march route early, but this could be avoided by either having multiple march starting locations, or pursuing a much more rapid pace and tempo of movement going forward.

Once on the route the roads on the southern side of campus were tagged up. Along with this, people early on were lighting off firecrackers here and there, hitting street meters, and tagging up signs. One person was tagging every five feet on the street while walking. It was impressive. As the march turned at the south wing of campus buildings toward downtown Evanston, the police camera units began scaling the sides of the march. Observers and masked up participants of the protest made ad hoc walls to impede their vision. Tags continued. Fireworks occasionally lit. The crowd eventually
approached a central hub of campus administrative offices. Students ascended on the stairwells of the office building in a cloud of spray paint.

A black flag was raised and waved by one student on the left side of the stairs while two other masked abolitionists lifted a banner up for all our co-marchers that read “Blood 4 Blood: Cops Off Campus: Black Flags Over Evanston.” This might be the more provocative aspects of the evening. To have a group of students, autonomously gathering, all believing and demonstrating their desire for the abolition of not only policing but the entire prison industrial complex is remarkable and historically noteworthy.

The black flag is an historical symbol of both anarchy and prison abolition. The banner drop was significant in that it sets a precedent both politically and anti-politically. It communicates both an expectation (“cops off campus”) and a threat (“blood for blood”). Soon after the march began moving further south into an area of the city lined with luxury hotels and local shopfronts that repeatedly dismiss, ignore, and in some instances aggressively harass the Black houseless community. While Evanston is superficially a city that passed a “reparations” ordinance, there is still an ostensible apartheid that defines the city’s geography. It is also important to note the march started off with a statement by the organizers explaining the history of John Evans, the founder of Evanston, and his participation in Native genocide and the University’s ongoing role in/as colonial displacement.

As the march proceeded, three blocced up folk lit road flares and others threw fireworks.

Spray paint continued and two trash cans were lit on fire as the march turned the corner into what would soon appear to be a police kettle. It was on this bend, by the Evanston library and just before Whole Foods, where
some students created a shield barrier between us and a grip of bike cops, several patrol cars, and K-9 unit. The students made a shield wall in the front, and on either end (front and back) used umbrellas to shield the group from cameras and police in every direction. We were surrounded, but the feeling was we would be alright. And we were.

Each time the police fired pepper spray at us point blank (from about 3-5 feet range), someone in the crowd would throw a brick. Real mortar bricks. At some, point a cop from the Northern Illinois’ special-unit got hit in the face with a defensive firecracker. Two bricks were confirmed to have hit officers, one in the forehead, the other at his lower legs. The crowd pushed its way to the Whole Foods where two or three people began uprooting plants and throwing patio tables and chairs into the streets. The Whole Foods northern storefront was subjected to more inspiring graffiti and a second window was defiantly smashed.
As the march made its way into the heart of downtown demonstrators continued to chant and march however the decision was made to autonomously disperse. As the students began yelling “We are dispersing!” the police continued to encircle and follow the students in every direction we broke off into. They continued to follow us all with cars, even while walking home and to our places of refuge for the night. They followed us with the guns, the dog, the cameras, the bikes, all of their silly shit until the last of us cleared out of downtown. At this point, the little crew that I roll with to these marches was already discussing the take-away points and key things to remember about the night. Below are just a few we came away with.

- they attempted to kettle but the weird streets actually helped
- some folks felt compelled to tag, the admin building and cops couldn’t do shit
- someone broke a window @ whole foods
- everyone covered for eachother, peace policing was not allowed and talked about initially and everyone followed

- Dogs were brought and were aggressive
- students were joining off the street and police were trying to divide the group
- folks showed up with Umbrellas and respirators and I felt like they felt even more protected with shields
- police pepper sprayed even though they knew two children under 12 were there and many unmasked students with only masks
MOVING FORWARD: NOTES ON A TACTICAL DECISION

One thing to consider is having a “false dispersal” in our pockets. That is, when we were yelling “we are dispersing” and the police become stretched thin following our dispersal, we can rapidly split and reassemble at a secondary meeting point. This is something that is rarely attempted, but could be quite useful and effective in an open arena like downtown Evanston. Another thing is if the march began at two or three different points or have a smaller action group somewhere else nearby ready to create a decoy.

Decoys are incredibly effective and useful. So is deception. Kwame Nkrumah, revolutionary strategist from Ghana, writes of “deception” as a central component of guerrilla warfare and effective insurgencies. Students can take some lessons from the long archive of guerrilla warfare, which is accessible on a number of websites such as: The Anarchist Library and Marxist Internet Library. There is also an incredibly useful archive of literature on insurrectional mutual aid and strategy, which can enable all sorts of new horizons for our movement to grow and continue to mount a viable opposition to the capital “P” police. (Some places to begin are in this zines closing “further reading” section.)

Another point to consider if on the pace and tempo of a march like the one in downtown Evanston the other night. There are several really important anticapitalist marches that we can learn from, but one in particular that could set a model for future planning is the Anticapitalist march at the Occupy Oakland “General Strike” back in 2011. The progression of this march, which kept a quick pace and finished within a half-hour to forty minutes, blending back into the larger crowd of the General Strike, which overtook downtown Oakland with less confrontational marches
throughout the course of an entire day. Different setting but lessons from this march are indeed useful. (Lookup: https://youtu.be/ZqYM_fNsndA)

Essentially what is needed to pull off a march like this is not so much preparation in terms of overplanning but preparation in terms of: 1) logistics and 2) having a shared set of principles. With a rapid pace march, with its sights set in a principled manner on major corporate, military-industrial and prison-industrial complicit businesses and landmarks in Evanston, a real clog in the arteries of racist carceral capital can be made.

The movement at Northwestern University is indeed operating with a respect for a diversity of tactics, relative to the goals of each specific day of action that #NUCopsOffCampus hosts. The movement is also beginning to collectively understand insurrectional abolitionism as our desired flavor of choice. What we are achieving through active and militant revolt is truly unprecedented in these parts. What we are seeing is breakdown in the legitimacy of the university’s administration and its policing apparatus. We are also seeing more and more students actively disregarding the sanctity of property and ruling class space. It is important work that is as educational as much as it is a challenge to order through direct action. It is a revolting kind of pedagogy. Such an atmosphere of blossoming knowledge-in-revolt, embodied in our collective action as principled abolitionist student militants, means that we have a lot more control over the terrain of struggle than most of us even realize. These are the only conditions you really need to take the revolutionary initiative into your own hands.

I am not a protest organizer, so it must be repeated that these are just the ideas of someone who has made community attending these joyous gatherings. But I do think we all need to recognize some stake in imagining big when it comes to the potential, possible, and imminent horizon of the movement to abolish the prison industrial complex on Midwest college
campuses. If we say we are revolutionary abolitionists, then what exactly does that mean? And if we co-inhabit the University and you remain inactive in the struggles that define our time here, what in fact does that mean? Maybe we need to think about embodying a different relationship to administrative authority.

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11/02

FURTHER READING

Prisoners can request these titles from the distributor True Leap Press 408197 Chicago IL 60640

*Blood in My Eye* by George Jackson
*Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Y. Davis
*Assata: An Autobiography* by Assata Shakur
*An Updated History of the New Afrikan Prison Struggle* by Sundiata Accoli
*Black Liberation and the Abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex: an interview with Rachel Herzing*
*Destroy All Prisons Tomorrow* by Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee
*Ferguson and Further: Strategy in Anti-Policing Revolt*
*Insurrectional Anarchism: A Reader*
*Anti-Fascism and the Carceral State: An Interview with Lorenzo Ervin and JoNina Abron-Ervin*
*Armed Defense of The Black Commune and Community* by Black Autonomy Federation
*Political Framework of The Revolutionary Abolitionist Movement*
MILITANT ABOLITIONISM

Three major schools of thought permeated various segments of the American Abolitionist movement. These were: that dedicated to the use of moral suasion and nothing else; that which believed in moral suasion, or argument, plus political action; and that which believed in direct, militant action, in resistance. Members of the last school adopted at times, but not always, the methods of the first two as well.

Historical literature has neglected consideration of the last group. Its prevalence and importance demonstrate,
Cops off campus
Black flags over Equipart