



*A Letter  
From  
Minneapolis*

LIAISONS

*Liaisons*

More than a collective, less than a world, *Liaisons* is an inclination, a tangent, a crossroads of confrontations, encounters, and links, with authors from across the planet.

[liaisonshq.com](http://liaisonshq.com) / [thenewinquiry.com](http://thenewinquiry.com)



be “community security forces,” only more deeply integrating the population into what the police do today.

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I wish I could write to you to offer some solutions to these problems, which will undoubtedly appear on your doorstep soon. But I don’t have any solutions. This transformation from righteous rebellion into fearful invasion happened over a weekend, over really a single day. By the time I realized what was going on, it was too late.

Instead, all I have is a warning, a smoke signal against an already dim sky. If those of us on the front lines were ready for the force of these discursive measures, maybe we could have prepared for them. The relative isolation of different social networks in the city participating in the uprising meant that we could not even begin to build the trust necessary to withstand the flurry of misinformation. Instead, we were caught on the back foot, unsure of what to say and with no platform with which to say it.

The success of this maneuver of displacement is already being exported to police departments across the United States. Just as they are experimenting with its deployment, so too must we experiment with our response. I look forward to finding out what works for you.

Love from Minneapolis,  
August 18, 2020

Dear Liaisons,

I write to you from “ground zero.” South Minneapolis. Just a short walk from what remains of the Third Precinct, where just over two months ago thousands of people wore the police down, forced them to retreat under a hail of rocks, and burned their empty station. Unlike many other places around the country experiencing flare-ups in the weeks since, the unrest that shook my city at the end of May has not returned. That is not to say that nothing is happening—far from it—but that the energy that catalyzed the massive uprising we’ve all experienced has been definitively snuffed out.

In the aftermath of the Third Precinct’s torching, as insurgent crowds showed no signs of slowing, I witnessed the state deploy extremely novel techniques to reinstate law & order when nothing seemed less possible. I am not talking of quantities of tear gas, or the National Guard, who arrived just in time to stand guard in front of the precinct’s smoldering carcass. No, the state used far more insidious discursive measures that effectively halted the uprising in its tracks.

In the early hours of May 30th, after crowds refused to be satisfied with the burning of *one* police station and had begun laying siege to a second, the governor of Minnesota held a press conference in which he claimed that white supremacists were coming from out of state to instigate violent riots. The mayors of both Minneapolis and Saint Paul quickly backed him up, citing false statistics from arrestees before quietly retracting them days later.

It is hard to overstate how effective this maneuver was. I hope that this letter can illuminate the various ways this accomplished the state's task of crushing the uprising, and help others elsewhere prepare for moments when this discourse is deployed against them as well. Reading the recent news that the police made similar claims in Richmond, Virginia, is evidence enough that I am writing too late. But still, it's better late than never.

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**B**efore expanding on the effects of this maneuver, I'd like to share a seemingly forgotten story from my city. To the extent that this story entails an encounter between white supremacists and protests against police brutality, it forms an important episode in the prehistory of the present moment, shedding light on how mobilizing the specter of white-supremacist violence has been so successful for the partisans of order, as if poking a stick in the scabs of an old wound. In 2015, hot off the heels of the Ferguson and Baltimore rebellions, large protests were also sparked in Minneapolis. Protesters began to occupy the lawn of the Fourth Precinct, just

dared to continue defying the curfew.

These armed patrols varied from neighborhood to neighborhood, from block to block, but effectively accomplished the same goals. In some areas, white homeowners might sit on the porches to be seen for the first time by their neighbors, whom they were intent on calling the police on. In majority Black or Native neighborhoods, armed patrols were set up by nonprofit organizations who considered themselves an extension of the protests, or at least in favor of them: examples include the NAACP patrol mentioned above, which collaborated with city-council members as well as armed Boogaloo Bois, and the AIM (American Indian Movement) patrol near the majority-Native neighborhood around Little Earth, which citizen's arrested a couple of white teenagers for looting a liquor store that had been broken into the night before. Patrols like these justified their actions along racial lines but in fact ended up primarily protecting white-owned businesses, corporations, and banks too.

It is only by proclaiming the violence to be the work of white supremacists—by way of this counterinsurgent, synecdochal displacement—that such a massive project could emerge so quickly and with such popular support. It even cloaked itself in the language of police abolition, as neighbors suggested that they were prefiguring what would replace the Minneapolis Police Department when it was abolished, with no concern for the fact that they were still enforcing the same laws. The truth is they are not incorrect in their assessment—the police abolition gripping the imagination of my city is merely the same law upheld by nicer faces. Instead of police, there might

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When the state laid the blame for violence on “white supremacists,” they very intentionally shifted the target of people’s anger from the systemic racism that led to the murder of George Floyd and countless others to relatively marginal extremist groups. With this displacement, the state resumes its role of protecting its citizens against such extremism, and undermines those whose rage against the police sparked the uprising in the first place. I have identified it as a discursive maneuver, and it is one that more precisely recalls the rhetorical figure of synecdoche, a movement from part to whole or whole to part. The location of white supremacy is displaced onto an *extremist part*—an assortment of bad actors—only serving to mask its true whereabouts in the heart of civil society as a whole.

This displacement makes room for a new alliance that appeared during the uprising, between social-justice advocates and anti-fascists on the one hand and vigilante law enforcement on the other. While police were forced to retreat, this alliance was forged with new neighborhood watch groups and citizen patrols protecting against the lawlessness of the riots. Armed patrols guarded businesses; smaller roads were blocked by citizens who performed ID checks after curfew and only allowed residents (and police) to pass, while many more stayed home in fear of vague threats of indiscriminate violence. Frightened citizens called the FBI to report out-of-state license plates, while others preferred taking to social media to spread rumors and report “sketchy activity.” Meanwhile, the National Guard had little trouble mass arresting the few who

a few blocks from where Jamar Clark had been murdered by the police just days before. During this occupation, which lasted about a month, there was one night in which a group of masked white supremacists showed up to “troll” the protesters. When we recognized them, I joined a group of protesters who forcibly escorted them away from the occupation. Once they were roughly a block away, one of them pulled out a pistol and opened fire at us. Thankfully, everyone survived.

Yet from then on, the fear of such attacks was mobilized by activist leadership to further entrench their security protocols. Wearing a mask became taboo, and grounds for eviction from demonstrations. Anyone who wasn’t following the rules—or even who looked like they might not follow them—was branded an “agitator,” conflating escalating protests with injuring protestors. For a time, “anarchists” and “white supremacists” were spoken of in the same breath.

This practice was never picked up by the state, as it was wielded effectively enough by activists themselves. Eventually, the incident faded from collective memory. In the years that followed, targeting masked protestors as potential white supremacists fell out of popular use. The rise of highly visible clashes between white supremacists and anarchists (or “anti-fa”) put to rest any lingering connotations. However, it appears this technique was noted by the state and would end up being deployed again almost five years later—but this time on a much more massive scale, with much direr consequences.

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I'm unsure if, from afar, you know how widespread the unrest was here in the first four or five days following George Floyd's death. While the first night conflict was focused primarily on the epicenter of the Third Precinct, by the second night fires were being set in all directions, with stores being broken into in many of the surrounding neighborhoods. By the third night, it was clear that people were driving around the whole metro area to loot stores in smaller groups—distance from the epicenter ceased to be any guarantee of security. While the precinct was under siege, the police were helpless to respond to unrest in the area beyond—something the intelligence of the uprising was quick to take advantage of.

In such a chaotic situation, spectators of the unrest had trouble comprehending it, familiar as they are only with the logic of representative protest, even amid its militant qualities. If people would drive up to a phone store on the other side of town from the riots, break the windows, and steal what was inside, onlookers might remark, "There were no signs of protest"—as if bearing a "Justice 4 George Floyd" placard made the difference between a legitimate and an opportunistic act.

The transition from "opportunistic" to "malicious" can then be more easily understood if the choice to target certain businesses did not make sense to others who witnessed the actions. The status of being a minority-owned restaurant was all it took for certain activists to speculate that a late-night looting spree on what is locally known as "Eat Street" was conducted by white supremacists.

In fact, there is very little evidence of white-supremacist involvement in the uprising. While the crowds of the first few days were immense and impossible to sort out politically,

the only right-wing participants of note were the "Boogaloo Bois."<sup>1</sup> However, already by the second day, this group was sidelined by the rebellion, reduced to protecting stores from the rest of the crowd intent on redistributing the goods inside. It was this same group, in fact, that collaborated with the NAACP to protect businesses later that week against vague "white-supremacist threats," despite being the only visible far-right faction to be defended against.

Given the scope of disorder enveloping the metropolis, there was no making sense of the cacophony of shattered glass and burning rubber. It eluded legibility. When the state announced that these were actually the actions of white supremacists, it offered its citizens a ready-made and legible enemy on which all excess could be blamed. For some, it was the white supremacists that instigated a riot from the very beginning (as promoted by an increasingly popular West Coast journalist). For others, white supremacists were only responsible for every attack that didn't make sense—on small businesses, on "Black-owned" businesses, on businesses far from the epicenter, etc.—while the targeted attacks on police and corporations were still legitimate. This latter maneuver proved especially appealing to those who could not fully denounce the uprising without losing their credibility—whether as leaders or as radicals.

And thus, the classic dichotomy of good protester / bad protester gives way to a new dichotomy adequate for our age: good rioter / bad rioter.

1. "Boogaloo Bois" refers to the advocates of a loose ideology of coming civil war (which they call the "boogaloo"). It appears to consist of a chaotic mixture of the ideas of the militia movement with accelerationism, and internally splits on the matter of explicit racism. Those who advocate a more "color-blind" approach supported participation in the uprising in Minneapolis based on an understanding of the police as a tyrannical force that attacks citizens with impunity.