



A letter from Minneapolis that engages with Fred Moten & others to think through the idea of “race treason” in last summer’s revolt.

“The revolt in Minneapolis was not simply a burned precinct or the calculated total of property destruction. It was *irreducibly social*, a shared experience of being together that challenged the racial arrangement of the city...”

# In The Wake Of An Erosion

Published July 26th, 2021 at *The New Inquiry*  
by the Liaisons collective.

Revised and expanded by the author for publication  
in *The Abolition of Law* (2022).

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

# In The Wake Of An Erosion

*Liaisons*

A Letter From Minneapolis

derstanding of race and race treason. It is this lack of comprehension that leads to the “white outside agitator narratives” that have become so familiar. Coming up with new ways of understanding our responsibility to fight against whiteness ourselves will be crucial to clearing the path for the multi-racial struggle for abolition.

– Nevada

out.<sup>8</sup>

This erosion allows us to see the prospect of race treason, again, not as relinquishment but as *recovery*, as *affirmative*. I believe this is necessary to understand the actions of white people in last summer's uprisings, including those of Dylan Robinson. It is only by seeing that white people have something to gain, not just to lose, by betraying whiteness, can we truly understand the potential to be found in *complicity*. It's no surprise that in their latest book *All Incomplete*, Moten and Harney invoke the same term Indigenous Action Media did several years ago in their attempt to address the poverty of white allyship in "Accomplices Not Allies."

Here I would argue that Indigenous Action Media did not go far enough in their reformulation of accomplices. By remaining attached to the subject or actor (ally/accomplice) rather than the act (complicity) they leave the door wide open for the exact same problems they sought to fix. The "accomplice" as the privileged subject relating to the less so, except instead of bringing signs to the rally perhaps they bring hammers instead. This recuperation could be most easily seen when a co-founder of the Women's March declares "we don't need allies, we need accomplices" before Lil Baby's performance at this year's Grammys award ceremony. This relation reproduces our racialization rather than undermining it. *Complicity* on the other hand, as Moten and Harney use it, subverts individuation, and can help us see how actions can't be reduced to the subjectivity of the actor. How could this complicity be better demonstrated than by one who lights another's molotov across the color line?

As Shemon and Arturo wrote last year, "the glue of whiteness can no longer be counted on" to preserve white people's "alliance with capital and the state" in 2020.<sup>9</sup> And while there is no guarantee that this fracture will persist, this could also be just the beginning of a longer trend towards fragmentation. In all likelihood, I think we can expect to hear more stories like Robinson's, to see more brave actions for black liberation from white people going forward. Actions that will remain incomprehensible to us without a qualitative leap forward in our un-

8. Idris Robinson, "How It Might Should Be Done," *III Will*, July 20th 2020.

9. Shemon and Arturo, "The Return of John Brown: White Race Traitors In The 2020 Uprising," *III Will*, September 4th 2020.

As the one year anniversary of the uprising approached, repression was in full swing. Many cases—particularly federal arson cases—stemming from May 2020 were beginning to wrap up. In one of them, four men were sentenced for the burning of the third precinct. One of these men is Dylan Robinson, a young white man who was alleged by the Department of Justice to have lit a molotov cocktail held by an unidentified black man who then threw it at the precinct, before lighting and throwing one of his own.

I am interested in exploring the actions Robinson has been prosecuted for as paradigmatic for understanding what many try to grasp as "race treason." Robinson is one of many white people, including myself, who have become deeply entangled in the fight for abolition. Yet contemporary understandings of race don't allow us to grasp the full meaning of these actions. This incomprehension is palpable in the outcry that Robinson was an outside agitator or even right-wing instigator, the possibility of his commitment to abolition rarely considered. Shemon and Arturo note in their essay "The Return of John Brown" that, unlike past periods of heightened black struggle such as in the 1960s, a new generation of white people are now "fighting and dying alongside black proletarians in the streets." This reality has to be grappled with, not ignored because it doesn't fit conventional narratives.



We have long inherited an idea of whiteness related to skin privilege, which correctly suggests that white people don't face discrimination because of their race and, because of that, have access to many more opportunities. Today, even the most radical approach to anti-racist activism for white people can only think itself as the relinquishing of this power. According to this logic, to betray whiteness is to give up the privileges it offers or to take advantage of them in place of non-whites who cannot. White people are relegated to self-sacrifice either way, motivated primarily by feelings of shame. But no one sets fire to a police station out of shame, nor does white privilege offer much defense against the consequences of doing so—of the two black and two white codefendants, Dylan Robinson received the longest sentence in the precinct arson case at 48 months.

Against this negative understanding of race treason, I want to use this as an opportunity to formulate an *affirmative* race treason. I've found that philosopher and poet Fred Moten offers a compelling way out of this dilemma. Against the grain of increasingly popular theories within black studies such as Afro-pessimism that have posited blackness as the imposition of social death with no substance prior to racialization, Moten suggests "that black life—which is as surely to say *life* as black thought is to say *thought*—is irreducibly social."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond this, Moten understands this imposition of not social but *political* death as instead a *response* to the social life of blackness. Analyzing the thought of W.E.B. Du Bois, Moten writes:

"At stake, here, is the notion that blackness is a general force of futurity that racialization in general, and the more specific instantiation of the color line, exacerbate and focus *without originating*. Such focus could be said to create the condition wherein blacks are privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of blackness."<sup>2</sup>

If blackness does exist prior to the instantiation of the color line, as Moten consistently postulates, then racialization would in fact *invent*

1. Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Duke, 2018), 194

2. Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Duke, 2018), 34–5, emphasis mine.

geois society has starved us of: a luminous and confident presence to a shared situation, rich with practical stakes, shared risks and mutual dependencies. An opportunity to express our non-belonging to the dominant historical order. Before we can betray our ascriptive identities, we must first put an end to that *treason to ourselves*, that ceaseless betrayal and mutilation of our senses demanded of us by the 'sensory religion' of Empire."<sup>7</sup>

7. Adrian Wohlleben, "Memes Without End," *III Will*, May 16th 2021.

Who could describe being among the enormous crowds of rioters and revelers last year in any other way? With the police forced into a defensive posture or simply absent entirely, Minneapolis was transformed by the collective power of the uprising. The same streets I always walk down became the site of a festival of looted goods, revving engines, and fire. Every wall, once private property, was made into a canvas for the artistic output of the ensemble, welcoming us back to the world. Against the long-standing segregation of the city—both spatial and social—the uprising was one of few, if not the only, space in which this mutual presence could be felt across racial lines.

The revolt in Minneapolis was not simply a burned precinct or the calculated total of property destruction. It was *irreducibly social*, a shared experience of being together that challenged the racial arrangement of the city, whether enjoying looted goods in the Target parking lot or dodging rubber bullets outside the precinct. We exchanged tips on how to fight more effectively, ran for cover together, or just shared conversation with people we would likely otherwise never meet. The uprising not only fought the police enforcement of anti-blackness, but its ontological basis as well.

The revolt didn't—and can't—suddenly undo the effects of racialization's centuries-long entrenchment, but it can open the door to eroding these effects. This erosion was palpable in the streets last summer, as the sociality of the uprising spilled across these borders. This also helps us understand why the reinscribing of racial division was a core element of halting the uprising, as Idris Robinson has crucially pointed

which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform *himself* into an animal.”<sup>5</sup>

This is not another tired argument to put race aside to fight a common enemy, or to put class first. Nor is it to deny the material benefits of whiteness we call privilege. Instead what I want to argue is that these benefits can only exist within a certain order of the world, and this order is defined by this ontological abuse Moten describes. The same systems of anti-blackness are killing white people too “however much more softly.”<sup>6</sup> Understood this way, we might be able to reformulate race treason not as a relinquishing of power, but as putting an end to this mutilation.

In identifying Dylan Robinson’s actions as paradigmatic, I don’t intend to insist that race treason can only happen within the moment of revolt. It is certainly possible, and indeed necessary to discover forms of race treason that exist within daily life and don’t only appear in events of rupture. Yet I will stick to the matter at hand—the George Floyd uprising—as I believe it offers us the most clear and visceral demonstration of this race treason.

When it comes to the question of revolt, Adrian Wohlleben put it well in his text “Mememes Without End.” He writes:

“To describe the experience of last summer’s rioting as ‘treason’ is to read it only through the ‘ban’ that structures the anti-black civil society it left behind, while passing over in silence the penchant that it *abandons itself to*. When we consider things internally, what could appear from the outside only as a betrayal of hegemonic norms often feels like quite the opposite. From the inside, it felt like the *recovery* of a type of qualitative experience that racialized bour-

5. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 2001) 41.

6. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 140-141.

*whiteness* through the destruction of sociality, rather than the other way around—Moten suggests that it is white people who are actually “the socially dead.”<sup>3</sup>

Moten goes to great lengths throughout his work to articulate how the sociality of blackness undermines the possibility of subjectivity and individuality that is constitutive of what we understand as Western ontology, which is inextricably bound up with whiteness. Moten claims that “slipping inside oneself is understood, properly, to be a function of abuse rather than the originary condition that is elsewhere assumed to be the ontological foundation that requires everyone else in the world, ultimately, to be understood as a stranger.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, individuality is not the origin of being but rather an imposition that separates us from each other so that there is an “other” to speak of. By recognizing this as abuse, we can imagine whiteness not as a privileged position for humanity to attain equally, but instead a mutilation of a common sociality that we must be rid of.

In the above quotation and elsewhere, Moten has differentiated between blackness and black people, the latter simply having a “privileged relation” to the former. If we see whiteness as this metaphysical regime of individuality, and I should remind us also *property*, then we can likewise see whiteness not as synonymous with white people, but rather that we have a more strongly predetermined relationship to it. This allows us to think both how white people can sever this relation (i.e. engage in race treason), and also how non-white people can and often do also have relations to whiteness that clarify all what prevalent notions of identity obscure.

Now, this might all sound unusually sympathetic towards those who are accustomed to the privilege of an anti-black settler society. Yet even Aimé Césaire made a similar claim in his seminal 1950 text *Discourse on Colonialism*, when he wrote:

“[C]olonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest,

3. Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Duke, 2017), 280.

4. Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 105.



GOOD  
COPS  
ARE  
DEAD  
COPS

Welcome back to  
the WORLD