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 irreducible social, a shared experience of being together that challenged the racial arrangement of the city...”
a necessary component 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 Moten and Harney recently invoked the same term Indigenous Action Media did several years ago in their attempt to address the poverty of white allyship in “Accomplices Not Allies” (All Incomplete, 124). In Moten and Harney’s usage, complicity 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. 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. These actions will remain incomprehensible to us without a qualitative leap forward in our understanding 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.

Fuck Harry Jacobs, fuck David Steinkamp.² Free every prisoner now.

– Nevada
May 26th, 2021

² The federal prosecutors of Dylan’s and several more cases from the Minneapolis uprising.
“however much more softly” (Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, The Undercommons, 140-1). When it comes to the question of revolt, Adri-an Wohlleben put it well in the text “Memes Without End” when he noted that “last summer’s rioting… felt like the recovery of a type of qualitative experience that racialized bourgeois society has starved us of: a luminous and confident presence to a shared situation, rich with practical stakes, shared risks and mutual dependencies.”

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 out.

This erosion allows us to see the prospect of race treason, again, not as relinquishment but as recovery, as affirmative. I believe this is
way around—Moten suggests that it is white people who are actually “the socially dead” (Black and Blur, 280).

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” (The Universal Machine, 105). In other words, individuality is not the originary condition 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.

This might 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, 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. (41)

Understood this way, we might be able to reformulate race treason not as a relinquishing of power, but as putting an end to this self-mutilation. This is not another tired argument to put race aside to fight a common enemy, or to put class first; it is rather a call to recognize that the same systems of anti-Blackness are killing us white people too,
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, and white privilege often fails to offer much defense against the consequences of doing so.¹

Against this negative understanding of race treason, I want to use this as an opportunity to formulate an *affirmative* race treason, and I have found that philosopher and poet Fred Moten offers a compelling way out of the conundrum I’ve described. Against the grain of popular theories within Black studies 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” (*The Universal Machine*, 194).

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 in his essay “Knowledge of Freedom,” he writes:

> At stake, here, is the notion that blackness is a general force of fugitivity 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. (*Stolen Life*, 34-5, emphasis mine)

If Blackness does exist prior to the instantiation of the color line, as Moten consistently postulates, then racialization would in fact *invent whiteness* through the destruction of sociality, rather than the other

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¹. Dylan Robinson received the longest sentence of the four charged in the precinct arson at 48 months.

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Dear Liaisons,

One year ago, the so-called United States saw one of the most brilliant and unforgettable uprisings in living memory. It began right here in Minneapolis, when bricks thrown at the police the night after George Floyd’s murder quickly gave way to an open revolt that set a police station ablaze. Unrest erupted nationwide with this burning precinct as its guiding light, the aftershocks of which we still feel to this day. The story of this uprising is better told elsewhere—if it can really be *told* at all—so I hope you can excuse me for leaving this summary so brief.

One story that has not been adequately told is that of those who have faced legal repression for their participation in this revolt. As I write this letter, four men are in the process of being sentenced for their supposed roles in burning the 3rd Precinct, including Dylan Robinson, a young white man. In April 2021, Robinson was sentenced to four years in prison. The Department of Justice alleged that Robinson was captured on surveillance video lighting a molotov cocktail held by an unidentified Black man who then threw it at the building, before throwing one of his own.

In this letter, 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. 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.
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