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### **“What did you see? We didn’t see shit”: Dialectics of Protest and Resistance in Portland**

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University of San Francisco

**“What did you see? We didn’t see shit”: Dialectics of Protest and  
Resistance in Portland**

A Thesis Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Human Rights Education

By  
Annika Bratton  
May 2021

**“What did you see? We didn’t see shit”: Dialectics of Protest and  
Resistance in Portland**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

by

Annika Bratton

May 2021

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members,  
this thesis has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

Monisha Bajaj

May 1, 2021

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Instructor/Chairperson

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Date

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

Michael Brown. Eric Garner. Tyree Woodson. John Crawford III. Ezell Ford. Dante Parker. Tanish N. Anderson. Akai Kareem Gurley. Tamir Rice. Romain Brisbon. Jerame C. Reid. Natasha McKenna. Janisha Fonville. Tony Terrell Robinson. Meagan Hockaday. Mya Shawatza Hall. Phillip Gregory White. Eric Courtney Harris. Walter Lamar Scott. Freddie Carlos Gray Jr. Brendon K. Glenn. Sandra Bland. Samuel Vincent DuBose. India Kager. Jeremy “Bam Bam” McDole. Jamar O’Neal Clark. Corey Lamar Jones. Quintonio LeGrier. Bettie “Betty Boo” Jones. Alton Sterling. Philando Castile. Joseph Curtis Mann. Korryn Gaines. Terrence LeDell Sterling. Terence Crutcher. Alfred Olango. Deborah Danner. Quanice Hayes. Chad Robertson. Jordan Edwards. Charleena Chavon Lyles. Aaron Bailey. Bijan Ghaisar. Dennis Plowden Jr. Stephon Alonzo Clark. Saheed Vassell. Antwon Rose Jr. Botham Shem Jean. Anton Milbert LaRue Black. Chinedu Okobi. Charles “Chop” Roundtree Jr. Emantic “EJ” Fitzgerald Bradford Jr. Gregory Lloyd Edwards. Sterling Lapree Higgins. Javier Ambler. Ronald Greene. Elijah McClain. Atatiana Koquice Jefferson. John Elliot Neville. William Howard Green. Manuel “Mannie” Elijah Ellis. Breonna Taylor. Daniel T. Prude. Michael Brent Charles Ramos. Dreasjon “Sean” Reed. George Perry Floyd. Tony McDade. David McAtee. Carlos Carson. Rayshard Brooks. Dijon Durand Kizzee. Jonathan Dwayne Price. Marcellis Stinnette. Sincere Pierce. Angelo “AJ” Crooms. Casey Goodson.

Many of these names are familiar. Some of them may not be. This list is an incomplete memorial of Black individuals murdered by police since 2014, beginning with the murder of Michael Brown, whose death at the hands of police sparked massive uprisings across the country and changed the movement for racial justice in the United States. The Black Lives Matter movement, which began the year before in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman, became more widely known as racial justice movements spread in the United States.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Dissident action that criticizes, counters, or undermines the state is almost never given a significant mainstream platform to be heard from, and is instead represented solely on the terms of the system it criticizes (*The Guardian*, 2020; Jennings and Saunders, 2019). We the people hear about dissent almost entirely from the perspective of the state. An honest perspective on oppression and dissent cannot be developed if all information comes from the state. Additionally, the state presents dissidents as angry, riotous, and without rhyme or reason (*BBC*, 2020; *Associated Press*, 2020). While there is often anger, and even some disorganization present in movements that are so important to people, there is an intentional system, goal, and even collective education that protesters undergo to carry out these movements (McCrea, et al., 2017). This thesis attempts to “hand the mic” to the people in the streets, who are carrying out mutual aid, direct action, community education and care, to tell their own stories about the racial justice uprisings in Portland, Oregon during the second half of 2020 and ongoing into 2021 at the time of this writing.

In academia, the majority of scholarly sources are created by those who do not or will not identify themselves as a protester, and this scholarship takes an analytical angle that generalizes movements to mass actions and can overlook the individuals making the actions happen (Boykoff, 2007). Whether through media or scholarly work, we rarely hear about a social movement from those carrying it out. And there is much work in carrying one out. Protest carries high risk of physical danger, potential increased COVID-19 risk in the current period, legal implications, risk of losing employment and livelihood, and faces threats from both law enforcement and from groups with opposing ideologies (Friedersdorf, 2020; Ollstein and Goldberg, 2020). Both in media and academia, we need to begin centering protester voices when discussing causes, tactics, and so-called legitimacy of protests.

## **Background and Need**

In May of 2020, George Floyd was forced to the ground during an arrest, knelt on at the neck for nearly nine minutes, and killed. Floyd's murder sparked racial justice uprisings across the country, coinciding with quarantine, pandemic, and mass unemployment, and in some places across the United States, starting a fire of social unrest. Large scale and peaceful demonstrations in Portland grew increasingly dangerous for protesters as the police responded to marches, and particularly the stationary protests at the Multnomah County Justice Center, with increased violence. It quickly became a nightly and expected occurrence for protesters to be tear gassed, shot with rubber bullets, brutally arrested, or forced into snatch vans and disappeared (Levison, Wilson, and Haas, 2020). Federal officers arrived in the city to work in tandem with the Portland Police Bureau (Levison, 2020). Through it all, news media

outlets blared warnings about dangerous “Antifa terrorists” and cautioned people away from Portland altogether. Reports that have recognized the values and goals of the movement framed it in a context of “why can’t they just protest in a more ‘peaceful’ way...” (*BBC*, 2020; *Associated Press*, 2020).

Ultimately, the tremendous amount of labor and risk that the people of Portland have taken in the name of racial justice, antifascism, and community care have gone overlooked and have been demonized by those without direct insights into the movement. Protesters aimed to address issues beyond police brutality alone and organize against mass incarceration, immigration, and the police state as a whole (Rosa and Diaz, 2020). Because of the ongoing action in Portland, the majority of written records about this movement are via news sources and journalists. While many journalists, particularly independent ones, have done positive and impactful work during this movement, the journalistic nature of these pieces do not provide theoretical or historical context. The goal of this thesis is to provide context to the overarching research questions, while contextualizing this current social movement within the larger framework of white<sup>1</sup> supremacy and violent suppression of dissent in the United States.

## **Positionality**

At the beginning of this movement I had recently moved back to Oregon and was beginning to conceptualize my thesis. As my personal involvement in the protests grew,

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<sup>1</sup> **Capitalization of ‘white’:** While the style guide of the American Psychological Association recommends the capitalization of the word “white” when referencing the racial group, I will not be capitalizing the “w.” The capitalization of Black, Brown, and Indigenous aims to amplify voices of people within those groups and recognize the oppression that those voices have faced. This principle does not apply to white voices, who have not faced oppression in this way. While language changes and evolves, at this time I will not be capitalizing the “w” in “white” in my work.

I could not imagine channeling so much time and effort into a thesis project that was separate from what has become such a large part of my life. It is important context to this project to acknowledge that my involvement as a protester has drastically shaped my perspective on this movement and on the suppression of dissent, and that my identity as a white person means that my perception of events and issues is informed by my positionality. In writing this thesis I am attempting to center the voices of those who have been with me in the streets, and provide an analysis of these lived experiences in a manner that is as objective as possible.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

This thesis will collect oral histories from five protesters involved in the 2020 racial justice uprisings in Portland, Oregon. The purpose of this thesis is to center protester voices to shed light on the values and driving forces behind a social movement that has been highly demonized in the mainstream media, as well as to offer analyses of protester ways of knowing and learning that differ vastly from the colonial constructs of learning commonplace in the United States.

Particularly in Portland, media focus was often on the destruction of property that occurred near the time of the protests, utilizing the language of fear and danger to imply that the actual aim of activists was to harm the city and communities therein. Former President Donald Trump sent federal agents into Portland with the explicit desire to make an example of protesters, in a demonstration of state power attempting to quash uprising and severely punish protesters. Federal agents utilized “snatch vans” and targeted known activists specifically, demonstrating that their presence had less to

do with enforcing any laws or “protecting” the city and everything to do with removing from the streets people perceived to have influence and power in the movement.

### **Qualitative Research Questions**

This thesis aims to answer questions about the way protesters in Portland share information and dissent-related skills, and provide insight into alternative ways of knowing. Each participant in the oral history process answered interview questions related to their involvement in previous social movements, as well as personal insights into the victories and pitfalls of the current movement so far. By centering protester voices, a more authentic view of the movement so far in Portland is possible, because it takes away the often purposefully biased lens of the media.

The analysis of protesters’ oral history narratives provides information on key research questions: (1) What are the experiences of protesters who have been demanding racial justice on the streets in Portland since May 2020? (2) What motivates these protesters? (3) What have protesters learned from their experiences that shapes their ideas, worldviews, and future intentions for action?

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this thesis is a qualitative study by way of oral history interviews with subsequent analysis of the interviews (Hamilton, 2008). Eight interviewees were chosen through a snowball sampling method, beginning with two individuals that I trust and have a personal rapport with. From here, I asked participants to pass on my information to other protesters that they trust, in turn being able to vouch for this thesis to those who I do not personally know. The two priorities in

collecting interviews were confidentiality of those being interviewed and diverse sampling, with the majority of participants being protesters that I did not have a pre-existing personal relationship with.

To protect confidentiality, I kept no record of real names, contact information, or identifying details I was not explicitly authorized to share. Participants were asked not to identify themselves or others by real name during the audio recording of the interview. Pseudonyms are used within the transcriptions of the oral histories where appropriate, and the audio recordings were destroyed after transcription. The confidentiality of protesters participating in this thesis was so key, not because of the assumption that interviewees have committed a “crime,” or that protesters are inherently criminal, but rather because of the aggressive criminalization of protesters by the Portland Police Bureau, City of Portland, and even the federal government. Protesters have been (1) on the receiving end of criminal charges, (2) targeted by police brutality, (3) disappeared for days at a time by officers, and (4) terrorized by federal “snatch vans” (Shepherd, 2020). The safety and security of those who shared their experiences was paramount in this research.

A diverse, trustworthy group of oral history interviewees was prioritized for several reasons. Protesters within this current movement in Portland are diverse in demographic characteristics as well as varied experience with protests and social movements. For some in the streets, this is their first participation in a social movement while some have been activists in the community for years. There is also a diversity of ideological thought. Liberal democrats and anarchists have protested together throughout this movement, though the ongoing protests are sustained by the radical left fighting not only in favor of racial justice but also against fascism, capitalism, and the

carceral state. With a sample size of five protesters, I aimed to provide an accurate sampling of diversity in demographics, length of involvement, and ideology. The aim of this diversity in sampling is not to generalize protesters and experiences, but rather to understand the variety in experiences of those in the streets.

After conducting these interviews, the contents were transcribed and organized by discussion themes. Protester voices and experiences were coded for representative themes that emerged from the interviews, and selected quotes are presented in Chapter 3, which have been pulled after a broad analysis of the experiences, tactics, and lessons from those who participated. Each participant was asked a series of fourteen questions, inquiring about their personal involvement in the current movement as well as any previous experience, the way they “learned” to protest, encompassing safety measures and tactics as relevant, and their personal analysis of the movement so far. Participants were given the option to decline any questions and withdraw at any time, as well as the opportunity to share any information not addressed by the questions that they felt was important to note.

## **Limitations**

The primary limitations of this thesis were time, participant numbers, and participant safety. Within a project of this duration, it is impossible to give a completely inclusive overview of the movement, because no amount of diversity in interviewees can account for the diversity within the movement in Portland. The study is further limited by what protesters were willing to share as protests continue and persecution is high, because their role in the movement is more important than educating others on the movement. The study is also limited by the specific protesters willing to engage in

dialogue with me and participate in this study, as some individuals, especially those who have been engaging in prolonged direct action and had to take many personal security measures, cannot risk being in contact with a researcher at all. Also significant to these research findings is my own identity as the researcher. As a white, cis-passing woman, participants in this study may have had a reactivity bias in their interviews with me, and my identity may have influenced things that were shared or left unsaid.

### **Significance**

Protest and dissent are topics that are often written about from an aerial perspective. There are many significant and necessary sources that can only come from on the ground. This thesis is not one that should stand alone or is only applicable to a singular situation or movement. We learn the most about social issues and social movements by listening to the people the issues most directly affect and who carry out the movements.

Exploring and learning from ongoing movements also holds a high degree of educational significance. Studies such as this one can diversify scholarly, academic, and interpersonal knowledge and ways of knowing about protest and dissent. Furthermore, activists center some of the most revolutionary and effective models of teaching and community education. Social movements are based around shifting our way of knowing and understanding systems and phenomena, and are equipped with effective and creative ways to reach a diverse audience.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature reviewed here offers an overview of existing thought surrounding dissent and its suppression. The theoretical framework applied to this study centers Henri Lefebvre's (1968) *Right to the City*, while pulling from adjacent theories that together articulate an umbrella of theory that can be used to analyze the current events of protest and revolution around the United States, specifically in Portland, Oregon. The other literature surveyed here is separated into three categories, suppression of dissent, tactics of dissent, and concerns of dissidents. When placed in context with this sample of existing literature, the importance of this study centering protester voice and knowledge sharing becomes apparent.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This section includes a brief history of the Right to the City which includes Henri Lefebvre's 1968 original work calling upon the people to reclaim the city, an entity co-created by and for the people but derailed by capitalist commodifications of urban life. Lefebvre proposes to "rescue the citizen as main element and protagonist of the city that he himself had built" (page unknown). Lefebvre's work overlaps with and somewhat echoes Social Movement Theory, namely Collective Behavior Theory (Kowaleski, 1980). Collective Behavior Theory provides additional theoretical support for Lefebvre's claims, as well as providing more big-picture theoretical context. Collective Behavior Theory offers insight into the motivations and phenomena of groups of people taking voluntary collective action. These combined theories provide a framework of protest action ideas

and the broad agreement that citizens have the right to create (and alternatively dismantle) structures in place in the cities and spaces they occupy.

The foundational work that defines Right to the City is Henri Lefebvre's 1968 text, *Right to the City*. Lefebvre lays the foundational basis for a theory that has sustained social movements across countries and languages, his principles being adopted and repurposed in social movements across history. Lefebvre's original writing, in French, was created as a response to urbanism, and the inescapable existence of the "system." Ongoing systems of urbanism, wealth disparity, and the far-reaching power of capital have chipped away at, and continue to erode, the power of the communities that give the city its power in the first place. This foundational work is key to understanding many of the social movements in the years after it was written. *Right to the City* is widely appreciated by scholars, activists, and anarchists and provides insight into the lasting relevance of Lefebvre's qualms with urbanism and the structures of cities, none of which have been adequately addressed. It follows that current protesters still rely on this work for articulation of inequitable power dynamics and privilege.

David Kowalewski's work *The protest uses of symbolic politics: The mobilization functions of protester symbolic resources* (1980) directly applies Collective Behavior Theory to the actions of protesters and the use of symbols by dissidents, in contrast with symbolism used by the state. Kowalewski's work is groundbreaking in delineating between some of the most successful tactics of protesters that carry forward into today's protests, while also exploring why the state is often inept at countering effective symbolism or replicating this strategy to favor the regime. Collective Behavior Theory can be effectively applied to protest situations to illustrate why negatively privileged groups advocating for mobilization against a regime become such effective resource-

managers with adept skill for symbolism. Protest groups are at odds with the regime in power in a number of ways, but perhaps most significantly in terms of resources available to them. This forces protesters who wish to be effective to collectively develop resource mobilization techniques and utilize symbols to garner public support. These symbols differ vastly between movements. In the 2020 protests in Portland, common symbols utilized by protesters include the Black Lives Matter fist, ACAB/1312 terminology, the Elk statue, and imagery of Portland mayor Ted Wheeler alongside slogans such as “gas me Teddy.”

Ultimately, Right to the City and Collective Behavior Theory are the two lenses most frequently applied to discourse around protests and dissent. These theories span time, location, and social movement cause in articulating how and why protester behavior and beliefs trend in certain directions. It can also be argued that the common enemy of a capitalist and white supremacist system across varying social movements can further explain these overlaps. The following sections describe research into more specific methods of dissent, suppression, and driving forces behind dissent in the current movement.

### **Suppression of Dissent**

Scholars have documented how the U.S. government—despite its rhetoric around free speech—often intentionally and violently suppresses civil unrest, dissent, and uprisings. These findings are apparent in cursory views of media sources and social media, but are more deeply examined very directly by several academic sources. These include *Limiting dissent: The mechanisms of state repression in the USA* (Boykoff, 2005), which demonstrates the high degree of repression that political dissidents in the

United States have experienced, as well as the longevity of that repression. *What makes protest dangerous? Ideology, contentious tactics, and covert surveillance* (Rafail, 2014) examines the shifts in state surveillance in technique, prevalence, and predictability and in investigating a database with 400 social movement groups, finds organizational ideology to be the most accurate predictor of group surveillance. Finally, *Tear gas: An epidemiological and mechanistic reassessment* (Rothenberg, 2016) investigates the physical and medical impacts of tear gas on the body, and claims that the use of tear gas is unconscionable, efficient countermeasures for tear gas need to be developed, effective tracing to measure how much and when tear gas is deployed must be created and enforced, and limits on trade and manufacture of the substance must be developed. Taken together, these studies show the degree of violence the U.S. government is willing to inflict on citizens participating in social movements, as well as the consistency of this violence against dissidents, particularly those critiquing economic or racial inequalities.

In 2007, Jules Boykoff surveyed historical trends in government suppression of dissent and explicitly articulated the trends of violent suppression across recent history of social movements, the tactics of which are still seen today. Boykoff's comparative analysis demonstrates that four main social mechanisms create repression of social movements: (1) Resource Depletion, (2) Stigmatization, (3) Divisive Disruption, and (4) Intimidation. When taken in context with one another, these four mechanisms illustrate the purposeful and intentionally subtle ways that the United States represses social movements. Resource Depletion, a mechanism by which the state erodes both human and non-human resources of social movements, including money, time, and civic skills, decreases the longevity of a movement and its participants. Stigmatization discredits individuals and ultimately the group as a whole by tying social movement groups to

unsavory characteristics in the public's eye. Divisive Disruption mechanisms move beyond the somewhat inevitable infighting and predictable disagreements within a social movement to an intentional fracturing and dismantling of a group. Intimidation, which operates both at the individual and collective level, forces participants to consider the looming threat of consequences for their involvement in dissent. These mechanisms of suppression relate to the work of Patrick Rafail (2014) on the surveillance of social movements as a subtle and less visible means of suppression.

Rafail's 2014 study, *What makes protest dangerous? Ideology, contentious tactics, and covert surveillance* addresses social movement group surveillance. Rafail's work utilizes a database of 409 social movement organizations active in Philadelphia between 1996 and 2009. The study analyzes the likelihood of surveillance based on a number of group characteristics. After the September 11 attack, predictors of group surveillance shifted dramatically, namely resulting in previous cases of contentious behavior being a less accurate predictor of surveillance. Rafail concludes that social movement group ideology, rather than previous behavior, is the most accurate predictor of whether or not a group will be a target for state surveillance. These findings illuminate the reasons why a social movement might be vulnerable to the mechanisms of repression that Boykoff discusses; groups with ideologies that are perceived to directly threaten components of governmental power in the United States are more likely to be targeted by that very government. Finally, scholars investigated the very tangible violence that dissidents often face at the hands of the state.

Rothenberg, Achana, Svedsen, and Jordt (2016) expand on the specific violence the US government inflicts upon dissident citizens in their 2016 study on the effects of tear gas on the body. Rothenberg and colleagues studied the physiological impacts of the

commonly-deployed riot control agent CS gas, often referred to colloquially as tear gas. Tear gas was made illegal by the Geneva Convention for use in warfare, but remains a common weapon of the U.S. police against crowds, protests, and riots. The study explicitly outlines the physical and medical impacts that tear gas has on the human body, ranging from pain, to ocular injury, cardiovascular impact, and even death. Rothenberg, et al. (2016) discuss the increased use of riot control agents on civilian populations, examine the epidemiological effects of tear gas and pepper spray, and offer recommendations for future action. The scholars articulate why tear gas should not be used against protesting citizens, because of the lasting physical and psychological damage it inflicts.

In summary, research demonstrates that the United States government is particularly willing to exercise overt violence as well as more subtle mechanisms of repression to curb dissent and dissuade participants in social movements, particularly those deemed to pose an ideological threat to the state. Boykoff's (2007) work articulates the subtle and intentional social mechanisms that have stretched across political eras in the United States and continue today. Rafail (2014) illustrates factors that may predict a social movement being on the receiving end of these mechanisms, namely surveillance. Finally, Rothenberg et al. (2016) expound on the violent and injurious nature of tear gas, commonly deployed against protesters in the streets. Taken together, this body of research justifies the assertion that protesters, particularly ones whose tactics involve protesting in the streets, are at high risk of violence and suppression at the hands of the United States government.

## **Dissent in the Current Era**

Tactics of dissent inevitably vary greatly between social movements, depending on participants in said movements and their ideology. However, research demonstrates that there are key strategies and approaches used by protesters across issues to counter attempts at suppression, better achieve movement aims, and maintain the safety and often anonymity of those present. Particularly, trends in protest tactics have evolved along with the internet age, resulting in phenomena such as social media organizing and heightened risk of surveillance, as well as disseminating information to a broader audience more quickly. Researchers explore these trends in strategy, including McCrae, Meade, and Shaw, whose 2017 study examines solidarity between protest movements and community development actors and potential for growth. Penney and Dadas (2014) zeroed in on social media organizing, namely the use of Twitter as a platform for communication and organization during the Occupy Wall Street movement. Finally, Clough (2012) isolates the modern increase in awareness of dissident groups and their activities, exploring the way that anarchist groups specifically are perceived as being highly emotional by the general public. When taken together, these studies articulate the current reality for protesters in the United States, and the necessity for solidarity and sound starting tactics.

*In Solidarity, organizing and tactics of resistance in the 21st century: Social movements and community development praxis in dialogue*, McCrae, Meade, and Shaw (2017) articulate the often-present tension or lack of communication between protesters within social movements and community development actors. McCrae, et al. explore the problem of lacking or miscommunication between social movement groups and community development actors, which often results in misunderstanding mutual

goals that both parties may share. Ultimately, although there is diversity of tactics and strategies, community development actors and protesters often align in values and goals. Efforts of solidarity between these factions could improve the effectiveness of both and render each less vulnerable to suppression. These assertions relate to specific strategies used by dissidents, such as those outlined in Penney and Dadas' 2014 study *(Re)Tweeting in the service of protest: Digital composition and circulation in the Occupy Wall Street movement*.

Penney and Dadas (2014) analyze the use of Twitter as an organizing platform for protesters in the Occupy Wall Street (“Occupy”) movement. Social media as a tool for activism is a very recent phenomenon that develops more with each social movement in the contemporary era. Particularly surrounding the Occupy movement, conflicting reports claimed varying levels of effectiveness and safety of Twitter organizing. Penney and Dadas, through a mixed methods study with protesters directly involved, provide an analysis that demonstrates social media is an effective organizing tool, though one that is not without risk. Twitter runs the risk of being highly surveilled by law enforcement, as well as the potential to be traced to certain users and devices. However, the fast dissemination of information is one of the characteristics that makes it such an effective platform. Protesters can share information quickly to one another, and the rapid spread of information makes the movement more accessible for citizens who sympathize or want to be involved, but may not physically be in the streets. In this way, social media makes social movements more accessible for those with disabilities, chronic illnesses, or safety concerns. The use of a public social media platform also makes the individuals and message more widely viewed by the general public, outside of the lens of mainstream and state-controlled media.

Clough's study *Emotion at the center of radical politics: On the affective structures of rebellion and control* (2012) analyzes the perception of dissident groups by the non-affiliated public. Clough examines the role of emotion, as well as the reputation of emotion, and the role they play in perception of anarchist groups specifically. The perception of anarchists as highly emotional or driven by emotion can be a positive and negative perception in turn. The emotionality of anarchist groups can be a tool to garner more support or draw in sympathetic outsiders to the fight for causes they align with, but can also be used by the state and opposing groups to elicit imagery of anarchists as emotional to a fault, illogical and unorganized, and childish. Both positive and negative propaganda around anarchist groups tend to center emotionality within different contexts- anarchists advocating for mutual aid solutions and collective action to protect or benefit a community will likely use language and symbolism that appeals to our emotions. Those spreading negative messaging about anarchist groups will rely on that existence of emotional messaging and motivation in order to paint their adversaries as weak and unintelligent.

In summary, research demonstrates that resistance to the state often looks very similar, but varies by location and social issue. As technology develops, so do dissident tactics, which is why platforms like Twitter have so much success for organizing purposes. These authors add to a body of research that suggests protests and dissent require organization, planning, and effective tactics to see success in almost every case, but methods of sharing information and passing it along to other activists, as well as the content and context of that messaging are prone to variation and are often tailored to the needs and preferences of the protest groups in question.

## Concerns of Dissidents

While there have certainly been trends across history of sustained instigating factors for a variety of social movements, it is often true that there are a multitude of concerns for a given group of protesters. But many social movements can point to a moment or event that served as the spark for the larger movement. The current and ongoing nationwide uprising consists of many issues: namely, the United States is in the throes of converging pandemics, evictions and houselessness have skyrocketed, and the threat of fascism in the federal government looms. Ask almost any American protester though, and they would point to the murder of George Floyd as the instigating event for the current movement. Outrage at police brutality and the deeply ingrained racism in the United States is over and over the instigating factor. Researchers have demonstrated the extreme bias of police violence and examined ways to tackle these issues (Schwartz and Jahn, 2020). Rosa and Diaz illustrate with their 2020 research that it is not merely enough to provide BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) access to institutions that uphold white supremacy, but that instead those institutions must be dismantled and replaced to truly move forward in solving the root of the problem. Schwartz and Jahn, in their 2020 study, specifically map trends of police brutality across metropolitan areas in the United States. Finally, Bolden's 2020 study examines the influence of Black liberation movements and Black Lives Matter on the perception of Black studies and related fields in academia.

Rosa and Diaz (2020) addressed the presence of institutional racism and white supremacy in the United States. Specifically, the authors explore how institutions within the U.S. promote and enable white supremacy, and how those institutions are vested with the power to do so in the first place. The study includes wide -ranges of well-known

and ongoing instances of discrimination and white supremacy being carried out; police brutality and murders, migrant detention centers, and mass incarceration. The ethnographic nature of the study proves the prevalence of racism and discrimination in these issues and beyond. By definition, these are not single-occurrence issues or isolated incidents, but rather systemic patterns that are embedded in U.S. institutions. Because of the repeated violence that BIPOC communities face at the hands of institutions such as the criminal justice system, police forces, and immigration enforcement, Rosa and Diaz are firm in their claim that it is not enough to reassess the forces of institutional systemic racism in the U.S., because reassessment so often revolves around providing equal opportunity and access to these systems to BIPOC communities. It is vital to include analysis of the inherent harm of these institutions in the first place. Racism and white supremacy are layered, intentional, and run very deep, and, in order to confront them, the institutions that serve no purpose but promoting white supremacy must be dismantled.

Schwartz and Jahn (2020) conduct a statistical analysis in 2020 in their study entitled, *Mapping fatal police violence across U.S. metropolitan areas: Overall rates and racial/ethnic inequities*. The study directly addresses police-related fatalities across metropolitan areas in the United States. The scholars utilize data accumulation from Fatal Encounters, a citizen science group fact-checked by paid researchers and shown to have more accuracy than state-sponsored reporting such as Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) and FBI reports. The data reveal that across all areas, Black people are 3.23 times more likely to be killed at the hands of the police than white people, and Latinx people are 1.05 times more likely (Schwartz and Jahn, 16). These statistics vary drastically by location, with certain regions of the U.S. having a 6.51 times higher likelihood of a Black

person being killed during a police encounter than a white person. Because of the high degree of variety in regional statistics, two findings become clear. First, there is a clear disparity of police violence towards Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations when compared to white populations. Second, the authors maintain that there is not a one-size-fits-all method for addressing this disparity. Clear differences in regions influence the dynamic of oppression to a high degree and in order to address police brutality and violence across the entire United States, the entire country needs to put in the work to reckon with area-specific issues.

In the midst of racial justice uprisings, public conversation turns more frequently to race, anti-racism, and institutional complicity. Bolden's 2020 article, *Let's keep it funky: Reflections on Black Studies during the Black Lives Matter uprising*, explores the influence that Black Lives Matter and adjacent movements have had on the way that Black Studies and related academic fields are perceived. Bolden explains that acceptance into mainstream academia is already a challenge for Black Studies, and with increasing criticism of racial justice efforts, it is under even more scrutiny. Bolden expands on the fact that Black art and Black resistance are not always linked, but more often than not the mainstream perception of each is inseparable from the other. In a white supremacist system, there will be overlap between resistance and art, but no other demographic group is cornered into equivalency in the same way Black art and Black resistance are. Racism is insidious in shaping U.S. institutions, and institutions are often intentionally shaped around white supremacy, including academia.

Research demonstrates the longevity and prevalence of white supremacy, which manifests in police brutality, mass incarceration, immigration policies, academia and more. Increases of overt and violent acts of racism being caught on camera and spread

more widely have caused a tipping point in action, with widespread racial justice uprisings emerging as direct results of these factors. Rosa and Diaz argue for dismantling the institutions that continue to uphold white supremacy, rather than making them more diverse or inclusive (2020), Schwartz and Jahn map out the statistical trends in Black people murdered at the hands of police across metropolitan areas in the U.S. (2020), and Bolden examines the impact the Black Lives Matter movement has had on the perception of Black Studies within academia. Taken together, this body of research addresses some of the primary concerns of dissidents in the current movement and illustrates both the immediate violence Black, Indigenous and other communities of color communities face as well as the institutional racism in the United States.

## **Summary**

This literature review claims that the United States government intentionally and violently suppresses the voices and objectives of dissident citizens, particularly when dissidents threaten systemic aspects of the state such as white supremacy and racism. Evidence that supports this claim includes the historical trends of violent state suppression (Boykoff, 2007), the consistent deployment of tear gas despite the well-known harm it causes (Rothenberg, 2016), and the likelihood of group surveillance being determined by social movement ideology rather than previous records of violence (Rafail, 2014). In response, protester tactics are ever evolving and responding to various modes of suppression and to changes in available resources, such as social media (McCrea, 2017; Penney, 2014). The ongoing issues of systemic racism and white supremacy in the United States force a boiling point of action, leaving citizens with no

other choice but to revolt (Bolden, 2020; Rosa, 2020; Schwartz, 2020). This claim and body of evidence addresses the ongoing protests and counter-protest violence at the hands of the police in Portland, Oregon by providing a larger contextual framework to understand these events not as isolated incidents of extreme protester or police violence, but rather as an expected pattern of citizens rising up against racism and in support of the community only to be quickly and violently suppressed. With my thesis, I offer a platform to the voices of protesters themselves, outside of the biased lens of the media, and analyze the ongoing efforts of resistance: how do protesters continue to adjust tactics in the face of suppression? How are these tactics shared between individuals and groups? How do we keep up the good fight?

## **CHAPTER III**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of protesters and dissidents in Portland, Oregon during the 2020-2021 racial justice uprisings. Protesters engaged in oral history interviews articulating their personal experiences with state repression, activism, and their unique experiences within this movement. This study, drawing from Social Movement Theory and Right to the City as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of protesters who have been demanding racial justice on the streets in Portland since May of 2020?
2. What motivates these protesters?
3. What have protesters learned from their experiences that shape their ideas, worldviews, and future intentions for action?

The narratives of interview participants, put in dialogue with one another around emerging themes and shared or varied experiences, constitute the findings of this study.

#### **Participants**

Five participants engaged in oral history interviews as self-identified protesters who had a high degree of participation in the Portland protests of 2020 and ongoing into 2021 to the time of this writing. Participant confidentiality preferences varied by individual. Some participants wished to share their name and demographic information while others chose an initial, pseudonym, or protest name to be their identifier in this

study. All participants live in Portland, engaged or continue to currently engage in active protests, and/or remain active in community mutual aid efforts.

The participants interviewed are as follows:

- *Jules Boykoff*: Professor of Politics and Government at Pacific University, long-time activist and academic researcher on the suppression of political dissent.
- *T*: Unidentified healthcare professional in Portland who participates as both a protester and protest medic.
- *Kent Ford*: Co-founder of the Portland Black Panther party in 1969 who maintains active involvement in social movements in Portland.
- *Demetria Hester*: Mutual aid organizer and activist whose most well-recognized projects include Wall of Moms, Moms United for Black Lives, and community love-feedings.
- *Beans*: Co-founder of Riot Ribs, a community-funded, community-feeding organization that raised upwards of \$300,000 in the four weeks it operated, and active protester.

This sample of protesters is by no means a complete sample of the people present and engaged with the 2020-2021 social movement in Portland, but the diversity of ages, races, genders, and political ideology and strategy represented in this study alone speaks to the overall diversity of those active in the movement. Each participant provided insight and experiential knowledge into their personal lived experiences in the movement, in turn aligning with or contrasting one another. The *Findings* section of this chapter places these experiences and perspective in dialogue with one another

## Research Findings

### *Whose Streets?*

The movement for racial justice that began in the summer of 2020 and reached across the entire United States brought an array of activists and protesters into the streets. Portland was no different, with marches attracting thousands of protesters into the streets, some for the first time. Participants in this study came from a broad range of backgrounds and prior experience levels.

Demetria Hester is a familiar name to most in the Portland activist community. She frequently speaks at marches, rallies, and vigils, and is a leading force for mutual aid action in the city. She speaks about protest and dissent as a necessary force that she is greatly familiar with.

It's always been a movement with me. I'm from Memphis Tennessee. So we've always been suppressed. And I've always had to try to question why we live the way we live. And it was because white people made it so we had to live that way. And I've always been taught that and I've always questioned why is it that white people can make decisions about Black people and we can't make decisions about our own selves. (Demetria Hester interview, February 7, 2021)

Demetria credits some of the longevity of this movement to the indiscriminate violence that protesters faced at the hands of the Portland Police Bureau and federal officers. Extreme and indefensible violence from the state garners social movement support from a wider range of people, even “outsiders” to the movement. “This summer, white people was out there feeling every single bit of the hate that we were feeling. That's why so many white people are still on board” (February 7, 2021), Demetria explained.

Professor Jules Boykoff also expressed the sentiment that overt violent suppression drew more people in. In his interview, Jules elaborated, “That’s the thing about repression is that it cuts in two directions. It can demobilize movements; on the other hand, it can galvanize movements. We saw a movement galvanized by repression this summer in a major way” (Jules Boykoff interview, January 10, 2021). Jules detailed his experience as a street activist and organizer prior to the summer of 2020, engaging in anti-war protests and action against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in the 1990s and onward.

One of the values that definitely drives me is the desire for justice. And more than that, I tend to root for the underdog. I’m talking about the historical underdog as well- who is taking the brunt of various forms of oppression in the past? Trying to do my part as a cis white male, relatively privileged individual, to sometimes put my body out there instead of those who have been experiencing that kind of historical and contemporary repression. (January 10, 2021)

Jules attended the protests on a nearly daily basis with close friend Kent Ford, also interviewed for this study. “From the beginning I attended the daily marches that Rose City Justice was doing and in addition would also attend the direct action events that were happening later in the night,” Jules explained their routine, “A lot of this stuff I was attending with my friend Kent Ford, and he’s 77 years old. He’s incredibly agile and he’s got loads more experience than just about everybody on the street out there, but he’s still 77 years old, so that kind of informed what we were going to do or not do” (January 10, 2021).

Kent Ford, founder of the Portland Black Panthers, has been invigorated by the resurgence of the racial justice movement in Portland. “I’m just glad that almighty God,

almighty Allah, let me live this long to see this. See and feel it and be healthy enough to participate in it,” he said in reference to his experiences the summer of 2020 and beyond, “It’s the Rainbow Coalition that Fred Hampton started back in 1969” (Kent Ford interview, January 11, 2021). Kent has devoted his life to activism, and has seen social movements and political struggle in Portland for years and years.

Despite the violence that he has faced over and over at the hands of police and in the streets, Kent is optimistic and proud of the progress that’s been made in this movement.

It’s a marathon, not a sprint. We had these things thrust upon us, we didn’t ask for it. And since it was thrust upon us, we had to take it to them. It ain’t gonna come from Salem, it ain’t gonna come from Washington, it’s gonna come from what we’ve been doing last summer, spring, and fall. It’s gonna come from the streets. And it’s real simple. We accomplished more from May [2020] all the way to the first hundred days, than civil rights has accomplished in 50 years. (January 11, 2021)

Kent points out that the issues he was organizing around in the 1970s are largely the same issues that protesters are rising up against now. “Number seven of the Ten Point Platform [of the Black Panther Party<sup>2</sup>] is that we want an immediate end to police

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<sup>2</sup> The Ten Point Platform of the Black Panther Party was released in May of 1967 and was as follows:

1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.
2. We want full employment for our people.
3. We want an end to the robbery by the white men of our Black Community. (later changed to “we want an end to the robbery by the capitalists of our black and oppressed communities.”)
4. We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings.
5. We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.
6. We want all Black men to be exempt from military service.
7. We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of Black people.
8. We want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county and city prisons and jails.

brutality and murder of Black people. And that was written over 50 years ago by some college students in Oakland,” he pointed out some photographs sitting on his mantle, “So when George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Jason Blake, all these murders happened, anybody with any balls would hit the streets” (January 11, 2021). The importance of mutual aid, a key component of the Black Panther Party through their widespread community-based food and health programs (Murch, 2010), has been central in the social movement in Portland, Kent pointed out. “It’s the people, you always stay on the side of the people” (January 11, 2021).

Often the most urgent support needs relating to the protests are medically related. T, a healthcare worker by profession, dedicates his free time to serving the community as a protest medic and providing medical mutual aid.

During the most recent activism, I have been going out on the ground as a medic for those people who are being injured by police. Occasionally the alt right or the extreme right counter protests as well also tend to have a lot of injuries. (T interview, January 11, 2021)

T described the level of violence that can be anticipated by protesters from the police and far right actors such as the Proud Boys, necessitating that medical care be present and readily accessible and protest actions.

But I’m also working on mutual aid and challenging how we deliver healthcare in our system, in our society. The industrial healthcare complex is harmful to a lot of people. It’s also not accessible to a lot of people. And not even just monetarily

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9. We want all Black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their Black Communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States.
  10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.

or physically accessible but also it's presented in a way that's incomprehensible.

(January 11, 2021)

T explained that his former protest experience often involved basic first aid for ailments such as heat stroke, or a minor scrape, but his involvement in the current social movement has forced him to adapt, "The first couple of times I showed up to medic I already had first aid stuff on hand but rapidly had to update my kit as violence escalated towards the activists. So my kit grew quickly to incorporate the needs of those who were injured on the ground" (January 11, 2021).

To be sustained on such an intense and high-risk level the movement needed strong organizing and protesters who were willing to come out again and again. Beans, an individual active in mutual aid and with experience in the black bloc<sup>3</sup> remembered their initial experience at the beginning of the summer.

I was there at the JC, the Justice Center. I think it was that Wednesday or Thursday night, and that's when it first really hit me, the intensity at which people would protest. Which was really empowering and really cool. From there it was going out every night, it felt like almost every single night because I was done with school and I hadn't gotten a job yet. So it became more full-time that's what I was doing. Every night I would go out and yell at the police. (Beans interview, February 9, 2021)

Shortly after the Fourth of July, a big night for the protests, Beans went to the aid of someone whose tires had been slashed by police near their apartment. "I paid for this random guy's tires and we started talking about what he did and what I did. I'm good

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<sup>3</sup> Black bloc is a protest tactic in which protesters dress in all black and obscure their identities as much as possible. Black bloc is typically associated with protesters engaging in direct action or protest activities that place them at higher risk for surveillance or arrest.

with numbers, and he was like a computer scientist or something. He was telling me about how the night before [redacted] and [redacted] were barbecuing on the side of the road near the Justice Center” (February 9, 2021); Beans had seen them barbecuing, and asked if they could help.

So Monday I went to Costco and spent like 500 dollars on ribs, hamburger meat, and barbecue stuff. And from there we just like took off and we started Riot Ribs, I guess. And that was a fucking shitshow. But that started it. And we raised over \$300,000 from the community and we fed people 24/7 for 3-4 weeks. A lot of people think it was a lot longer than it was, but in reality, it was only 3-4 weeks.

(February 9, 2021)

Riot Ribs was one of the most successful and well-known mutual aid projects in Portland during the summer, simultaneously feeding the community and raising money for the community. “All of the people who were at the park who kind of got absorbed into it, because we were using their space essentially in this park. A lot of the people that I became super close with were houseless at the time and they aren’t anymore” (February 9, 2021), Beans explained the community connection. After Riot Ribs was dissolved, Beans remained active in the movement, participating in other mutual aid groups, and now working frequently with Demetria Hester to fundraise for individuals in the community and cook food for various events, protests, and vigils.

### *Tactics and Repression*

Some protesters who took to the streets in the summer of 2020 had extensive experience dealing with violent state suppression, while some had to learn or relearn

protest tactics and find where and how they fit into the movement. T recounted the shift from clinical hospital work to being a medic on the street,

A lot of the skills [for protests] are very similar to a clinical setting. For me it was a conversion. It was just converting my skills- how those skills look like in a clinical setting in a hospital versus applying those skills to a similar situation in a different context. I've done things like eye wash outs in the hospital setting, but not for tear gas. And I've taken care of wound dressings and things like that, but they were surgical wounds or surgical incisions. Applying that to street medics really was kind of like converting it. How can my skills work for what's going on in this context? (January 11, 2021)

For those doing medical work on the ground, especially those who had prior experience in the field, some skills felt transferable or logical to navigate.

For other roles in the protest, there could be more of a learning curve. Beans discussed both the learning they witnessed and the learning they still needed to go through.

At the beginning it was really hard for me personally. I feel like I've done a lot of black bloc, Antifa "rioting," but before May, I would go to protests and I never wanted to be arrested. I was never front line I guess but I participated in it. When it came to George Floyd and everything was really elevated and I realized we had a lot more factors playing into our anger. And I feel like that got more people involved, which meant that there were more people out there that didn't have as much experience in the violence that police put out. It was so weird, teaching my friends how to protest. (February 9, 2021)

Even for young activists with experience, this movement carried a high degree of surveillance that was unfamiliar to many. Beans experienced a decline in mental health, feeling paranoid and going to greater lengths than before to keep their conversations and information safe from surveillance, like buying a burner phone. From their apartment downtown, they could see drones flying by the windows, and were acutely aware of the presence of the Portland Police as well as federal officers in the city.

For Jules Boykoff, with a background in on-the-ground activism and as an academic, scholarly knowledge explained the dichotomy of learning from fellow activists while also having access to scholarly resources for understanding trends in state suppression. “I learned [about tactics] on the fly at first, just from people who are there organizing protests and giving us ideas of what to do. I went to a bookstore that was in Madison [Wisconsin] that was a radical bookstore. I spent a lot of time, there’s a lot of activists and you would just have conversations with people and they would share security culture stuff” (January 10, 2021). Jules went on to focus his PhD studies into the suppression of political dissent, describing the opportunity to focus academic studies on this area as a “luxury.”

Kent Ford explained that the tactics he learned in the 60s are still applicable today, because they’re effective. “Like all of our lessons in life, we have to learn the hard way. The police shoot somebody, [we protest at] city hall. In those days back in the 60s, no questions asked. Police shoot somebody, police was right” (January 11, 2021). Failure to send a message, particularly in the face of police brutality and violence from the state, also sends a message. “So we learned it takes place on the street. Just like we did this summer. We didn’t ask for this, this thing was thrust upon us, you know? So we have to respond. If we don’t respond, who knows what’s next?” (January 11, 2021). Kent

described that as a Black person, safety tactics against the state were often second nature but there was learning to be done regarding the specific approaches of protest and social movements.

Demetria Hester echoed this sentiment, expanding to explain that a successful protest is often more about the willingness to back up one another than it is about specific tactics.

I mean these are just things I've learned over a lifetime of being Black. It's about sticking together. These are just common sense really things. It's not even about learning how to protest, it's teaching people how to stick together and how to look out for each other. (February 7, 2021)

But in a movement with so many protesters not experienced with state repression, many people followed the lead of seasoned activists to learn how to protect themselves from tear gas, kettling, rubber bullets, and other violent attacks from the police. Demetria was at the time leading a group known as Wall of Moms, a protest group made up of mothers from the Portland area who would hold a line in front of protesters, arms linked. "We can't even produce the shit that they gave us and they put on us, the tear gas," Demetria said, "It's moms that lost their babies because of that. I had six periods in two months, who the fuck does that? I had to cut my hair because of that. It was falling out in fucking patches" (February 7, 2021). Demetria also suffered injuries from fifteen rubber bullet shots in one sitting, and was arrested. The tactics of the police informed the preparation of the protesters Demetria worked with.

Your helmet, your respirator, we just knew to have everything in our backpacks, we knew to have our gear on. We just depended on each other. And that's what it was all about, [it] was teaching each other how to depend on each other and how

to trust each other. Have a plan if something ever happened, because we knew that pushing back, we knew they'd charge us, we knew they'd hit us, they corralled us, they'd shoot us. We knew all of this stuff so we just planned around all of the things we knew they would do to us. (February 7, 2021)

As the summer stretched on, protesters became more readily equipped to defend themselves from the force exerted by the police, but numbers dwindled at times in the face of extreme state violence.

“I wasn't even trying to [get tear gassed], as you know, you don't have to try to get tear gassed, everyone does at a certain point,” Jules Boykoff recounted his experience being on the receiving end of tear gas yet again this summer. “I felt really sick after I got tear gassed this time, really sick, worse than ever before. What keeps me going is if you're not going to do it, how can you expect other people to do it” (January 10, 2021)? Jules maintains that people consistently being in the streets is one of the best approaches to remain firm against tear gas and other mass, indiscriminate modes of violence.

Tear gas is particularly reviled not only because of the inhumane effects, banned in the Geneva Convention for use in warfare but still legal in the United States to use against citizens, but also because of the unintended victims of the gas who may have not been in the streets at all. Kent Ford described the 100th night of protests, “We weren't running in circles, but we were running to evade the tear gas and the smoke grenades and everything else they were throwing at us. Now there's tear gas going in pregnant mother's houses, kids' rooms, and stuff like that” (January 11, 2021). Kent spoke of frustration felt by many in the streets about the difficulty of channeling energy and resources towards a common protest goal. Between variables in ideological approach

and tactics, and communication or lack thereof, many in the streets felt that actions were not as effective as they could be. Kent pointed out several weeks at the beginning of the movement that sparked confusion and frustration.

We need everybody. Direct action, marches, all of that. For the first several weeks we were getting frustrated. Why are we going to those police stations? When the guys in the union buildings are the guys who caused this? Well come to find out some middle-of-the-roaders paying these kids to be out there to run this stuff. But it ran its course. And then everything had to start getting real. (January 11, 2021)

Kent expressed great appreciation for the younger activists in the streets, but also gently reminded that these issues and tactics go way back. “Malcom [X] was telling us all this stuff was happening in 1960. If you want to get up to speed on things, and I don’t have to tell you because you were out there, you study these guys, you look at them. [James] Baldwin even said you can’t kill your way out of this. It’s inevitable” (January 11, 2021).

Violence that protesters faced from police often took insidious, more subtle forms as well. “I was arrested,” T explained, “And I won’t get into the details, but my experience in the jail, in the justice system, even for somebody like me, I had a lot of resources to help me” (January 11, 2021). T’s experience being arrested laid bare the intentional mechanisms of the justice system, especially regarding political dissidents. T described having the odds immediately stacked against him, how intentionally hard it is to pick yourself up after an arrest, regardless of whether or not you’re innocent of the charges. “They take your belongings away and disperse them out further away than where you are at. I couldn’t imagine trying to pick myself up if I didn’t have the

community and the resources that I did” (January 11, 2021). T also recognizes the degree of privilege he holds as a white protester.

Knowing that this is an experience that many Black people have regularly really hit me. I remember when I sat down and really processed it, it made me cry.

Realizing that so many Black people experience that on the regular as an interruption of their life, an interruption of their ability to seek happiness, their ability to create a life for themselves through the normal channels of how we’re supposed to make our lives. (January 11, 2021)

The precarious nature of fighting against police brutality and violence while risking physical safety as well as legal consequences is felt by many in the streets. “Personally being subjected to violence from the state and from the police was really hard for me. I’ve always been fine with losing a fight as long as the person who is using power is somehow affected,” T elaborated, “[This] was one of those instances where I couldn’t fight back. I wasn’t legally allowed to. And if I did, I would have had severe legal and long-term, my entire life, and potentially my career would be in jeopardy” (January 11, 2021).

Protesters also had to deal with loss of resources and attack of property from the police. Beans retold the experience of the park where Riot Ribs was cooking food being raided in the middle of the night, around five o’clock in the morning. “What happened is that the police and this company called Rapid Response, which is just a privately held company, goes in and sweeps everyone and then they put everything in these clear bags, these huge clear bags,” Beans explained (February 9, 2021). The contents of the sweep would end up in a relatively unknown warehouse in Southeast Portland, well away from the location of the sweep. Rapid Response specializes in sweeping camps of houseless

communities, and many of the people affected by the sweep in the park that Beans described were unhoused as well. “So I’m like this bratty white [person], well I don’t consider myself white but I’m white passing, and I go up to them. ‘Hey I left my stuff here this morning and I can’t find it, can you help me’” (February 9, 2021)? After being given the contact information for picking up swept belongings, Beans rented a U-Haul and went to the Rapid Response warehouse. “I made all the Rapid Response people pile all the shit back into my U-Haul. And then that night we got this big warehouse space someone loaned us and we reorganized everyone’s stuff. We made this whole spreadsheet so people could come up to us and we could search the spreadsheet” (February 9, 2021). Later that night, Beans’ friend and comrade was arrested for trying to leave an area that had been declared a riot zone in the U-Haul.

They slashed his tires because he wasn’t supposed to be there, how is he supposed to leave if you slash his tires? They pulled him over, there were three people in the van, they all got arrested and [police] charged [name redacted] with evading the police, some bullshit felony charge of running away from the police.

He was going five miles an hour in a U-Haul. (February 9, 2021)

New and unexpected forms of suppression towards protesters, such as the tire slashing that Beans described or the mass arrests that many experienced in the streets forced activists to develop additional tactics.

### *New Movements for Old Issues*

While the movement that began in Portland was unique and notable in many ways, it must be pointed out that this movement was part of a much larger, country-wide uprising, and that these issues being advocated against in these movements are

long-term, lasting, intentional products of white supremacy and settler colonialism. In different circles of the activist community, different aspects of the movement stand out as positive improvements or steps backwards. “This response was worldwide,” Kent Ford explained, “And because of this, they can’t get it back in the box. The multicultural, multiethnic rainbow coalition that Fred Hampton put together in Chicago back in the late 60s. This is what Fred tried to put together” (January 11, 2021).

“A lot of the other [social movements] have been leading to this,” T agreed in his interview; “the issues that are coming up in the activism that’s going on today are issues that a lot of Black and Brown activists have been crying out- and not even activists, Black and Brown people, have been crying these things out for so long. I would say that it’s different but it’s not new” (January 11, 2021). Most people involved in the movement recognize the longevity of the issues of racism, white supremacy, police brutality, and related concerns, but there are some disagreements about whether or not the movement in Portland has truly been a step forward or in the right direction.

Demetria expressed inspiration and frustration in turn. “The thing with Portland is, during the summer it was more of a glorification. People was riding the movement for fame. They wanted to get on TV. And it was so fucking irritating. It was the worst thing ever to have people once again profiting off of Black lives” (February 7, 2021). A scroll through social media in June of 2020 would show a wide variety of protest photo-ops, something that many activists think of as not only foolish but recognize as dangerous to protester safety. “You’re gonna put people in danger so you can get a photo-op? So you can be on the news? So you can tell your girlfriends that this happened to you? This is what we fighting against. And this is why we didn’t want to deal with white people because they do this every single time” (February 7, 2021). Demetria also recognized the

galvanizing force of the movement for people who may have been coming into the movement with little to no experience, and discussed how even in a city as white as Portland, strides for racial justice have been made. “It’s been a good exposure about who’s for the movement, seeing who just talk about it and not have any action. So it’s a wonderful thing that it happened, but it’s horrifying that it has to happen like that” (February 7, 2021).

Beans expressed a similar sentiment. “It’s very performative in Portland. Where I see a lot of my friends in Minneapolis that are still doing the work and it feels less performative. I feel like Portland is just a bunch of white people saying they care about things and then pretending to do something about it because that’s the cool thing to do” (February 9, 2021). In other cities, there is a necessity to rise up for racial justice, they explained, when there is a population of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color). “Because Portland is the whitest city, it’s really easy to lose track of why you’re doing things, because white people don’t have to do it out of personal necessity” (February 9, 2021). However, Beans’ perception of the movement in Portland isn’t wholly cynical. “This specific action lasted. The stamina that Portland has, the grit, the willingness. We were on day 100 and we kept going, we stopped counting the days because we couldn’t keep track anymore. That is super impressive from what I’ve seen. And I know historically that’s nothing compared to the 1960s” (February 9, 2021). Holding Portland accountable for the way that white supremacy and whiteness infiltrate social movements, while also recognizing the successes and positive aspects of those movements and actions is a key duality to hold.

Jules Boykoff believes that this movement held a key element of heavily pronounced direct action that was new for Portland, existing amid “more traditional mobilizations.” Jules said that,

That of course is not a new dynamic, it goes way back, but the way it played out in Portland was really interesting in the sense that I felt like there was more patience and play given to the direct action activists than typically. In the past it’s always been so easy for the powers that be, and even liberal activists in movements, to dismiss and deride the direct action activists. But in Portland they played such a key role in illuminating the violence of the state in ways that were really effective in terms of mobilization of liberals as well. When liberals would see the tear gas flowing and the cops attacking these direct action activists it actually galvanized more people to come to the streets. (January 10, 2021)

The presence of direct action in Portland was not without controversy, but Jules points out that the violent response to direct action activists helped illuminate to people outside of those actions exactly how necessary they are. People in Portland became more aware of the inherent violence of the state, both in terms of direct, obvious violence like that murder of George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, and in terms of gradual, out of sight violence. “A violence that some people might not view as violence at all. The Portland protests did a good job of reframing that quotidian everyday violence as actual violence,” Jules said (January 10, 2021).

A cruel, more humdrum than sensational, more gradual than instantaneous, and incremental violence of accretion that actually has cataclysmic ramifications that can actually shatter communities. Usually that sort of violence is framed as normality. But certain moments, certain activist moments, pierced through the

facade. And I feel like what we saw in Portland was one of those moments that pierced that façade. (January 10, 2021)

To anyone staying up to date on the news coming from the Portland protests, it was difficult to ignore the degree of violence the police were inflicting, much of which was brought to the forefront by protesters carrying out direct action. The duality of protest tactics present in the protests cast into sharp relief the willingness of the Portland Police and government officials to react with escalation, violence, and chemical weapons to any form of protest.

### *Obstacles*

Through the social movement, many clear demands were made by activists, including defunding the police and dropping the charges of all protesters who had been arrested. Goals of protesters also included less concrete and measurable outcomes. Protester demands were met with a variety of obstacles, most of which stemmed from white supremacy. “We’re all taught it [white supremacy], they teach you it in school and if you don’t agree they call you different,” Demetria shared, “This is why I fight. All these obstacles put in our way by the fucking system and they wonder how we get out. It’s because we unite together. We stick together, we know what y’all doing. We knew all summer long” (February 7, 2021). State suppression rooted in white supremacy makes a population complicit and desensitized to the violence that is necessary to protect it.

Jules expressed frustrations with neoliberal viewpoints skewing the perspectives on the protests. He believes that the biggest impediment, aside from the obvious repression was “local liberals who wouldn’t back folks putting their bodies on the line” (January 10, 2021). Obstacles to demands and goals also included disagreement on goals and tactics.

[Liberals] were all too willing to engage in a sort of ‘good protester / bad protester’ idea. That was a source of incredible frustration to see people who proclaim to agree we need to dial back the repression of police and proclaim to agree that they are in favor of Black lives mattering, then adopting the ‘good protester / bad protester’ dynamic as a framework for understanding these protests, which in turn is just muddying the political waters, making space for the police to attack protesters for acts of mere vandalism if that. One of the biggest impediments was the liberals out there in Portland and in the Twittersphere who basically, whether they meant to or not, helped change the atmosphere that allowed the police to increase the brutality of their tactics. (January 10, 2021)

The division of people involved in this movement, as well as outward disagreement of tactics gave the opportunity for police to escalate against certain groups of protesters, in turn allowing that violence to continue against all protesters. The demonization of direct action tactics also allowed the police to intentionally target certain activists and groups for excessive force, knowing that some protesters were perceived as “bad protesters” by some.

At the heart of it, most participants point to the U.S. government as the largest single barrier force for moving forward with protester demands. T pointed to the leadership of BIPOC people. “Black and Brown people have been feeling this their entire lives, we’re only just now listening. I know anarchists get dismissed all the time, because they’re just fucking anarchists. Well they’re right. The government is the biggest barrier to human rights” (January 11, 2021). The issues activists are rising up against during this movement are not isolated to police brutality and murder, though that was the sparking factor. Protesters are also working in their communities to end homelessness,

end incarceration, provide adequate healthcare, make education more accessible, and decolonize their communities.

### *Utopian Imagination*

In the face of so much during this movement, protesters need to have an idea of what the light at the end of the tunnel might look like, and be able to see a way forward. The participants in this study shared with me their realistic and ideal outcomes for this particular movement. Kent imagines a society without barriers, “I discuss this with the Professor [Jules Boykoff] all the time, and I keep coming back to: completely defund the police. Let’s put a complete end to homelessness. And college tuition, universal healthcare. Mind you now, if we didn’t have the amount of minorities in America, we’d have been having it” (January 11, 2021). These are the same objectives Kent was working towards when founding the Portland Black Panthers in the 1960s. But he believes we are beginning to see the multiracial coalition Fred Hampton spoke about being put into action.

The best is yet to come. Most of the reporters from the west [Europe/North America] want to know what’s next. You just take it each day. We don’t kick nobody to the curb, everybody is wanted and needed. They can’t indict us all. They can bring charges, but they got to prove it. They can’t indict us all and they can’t put us all in jail. We ain’t doing nothing wrong. Play it straight and keep hitting them. (January 11, 2021)

Kent is optimistic for the future of the movement and similar social movements.

Beans expressed a similar end goal. “My personal [ideal] outcome would be to abolish [the] Portland Police Bureau entirely. Abolish the United States of America

entirely. Abolish borders entirely,” they said, “Realistically, I hate to be the person that’s like ‘defund’ but that’s the only thing that’s palatable to white people. Not the abolition. That [defunding] is the most realistic thing, but is it actually helpful?” (February 9, 2021). Their vision of a society permanently changed is not an isolated one, and their concerns with the best way of getting there are shared. Jules considered, “I guess I’ve just been around long enough to see that this capitalist system that we have metes out incredible suffering upon the population. I feel like it’s just only intensified and more and more people are becoming aware of the issues with the capitalist system, the for-profit system” (January 10, 2021). But Jules’ concerns aren’t without optimism for a path forward. “I would say the best outcome would be even more people realizing that one of the prime culprits of white supremacy is capitalism itself. And I think there is a burgeoning movement in Portland of people that are seeing that” (January 10, 2021).

T imagines a world where police are replaced altogether.

We don't need police. Somewhere ahead of us is a society where the police and their violence, and prisons have been replaced with resources and care.

Artificial scarcity created by exploitative capitalism and enabled by systemic racism is the withholding of resources from marginalized peoples, and is the primary driving force of "crime" or survival by any means necessary.

Prisons are just slavery rebranded because it largely targets Black and Brown people and essentially exploits their enforced free labor and inhibits their personal freedom and autonomy. (January 11, 2021)

Abolitionist thought and language are so often perceived as an ideology of deficit and removal. But abolition is creative, and in order to destroy harmful white supremacist

systems the people must create entities that render the structures of white supremacy irrelevant and unneeded.

Demetria sees hope for a future of community support and continuum of racial justice efforts. “Like the Black Panthers all over again providing for our community because we know the government ain’t about to. Sticking together and being armed, because we can be armed. So that’s what we doing. 2021 Malcom X. By any means necessary” (February 7, 2021). The way forward, that serves protester demands, goals, and dreams is community support and unity, Demetria says.

One thing that is wonderful when you are the community is that you stick together. And when you don’t have anything and you gain things it’s so much better because you’re willing to share. You’re willing to provide, because you know how it feels to be right here. So if you’re right here, and there’s still somebody down here, you know how down here feels so you’re gonna help that person get from down here to up here. And then we all can make it together. It’s all about leveling together, it’s not about competition because nobody’s in competition. You’ve already won if you’re still fighting. (February 7, 2021)

You’ve already won if you’re still fighting.

## **Summary**

The interviews conducted and analyzed above are not a complete picture of the experiences of protesters, nor are they an exhaustive account of these participants’ familiarity with this movement. The accounts synthesized within this chapter are reflective of stand-out moments, big-picture thoughts, and conversation directed at exploring the three central research questions of this project. Engaging with these

activists, protesters, organizers, and revolutionaries about their involvement in social movements, experience with revolutionary education, and utopian imaginations of a way forward was a privilege and an honor.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to center protester voices in an analysis of state suppression of dissent, with a specific focus on the movement in Portland, Oregon that began in May 2020 and continued through the time of this writing. To accomplish this, interviews were conducted with five self-described protesters from Portland, their interviews transcribed, and an analysis of their experiences, insights, and perspectives was compiled. Existing research on protests and dissent often takes a broad analytical approach, or are confined to synthesizing the events of social movements after they have already concluded. This study aimed to provide an in-the-moment perspective from those in the streets protesting against police brutality and white supremacy.

#### **Discussion**

Participant interviews were put in dialogue with one another around five themes that emerged from each protester's account of their experiences in Portland. While there were similarities in observations and experiences in this social movement, there was often disagreement or tension between their accounts, particularly in the scope of what an ideal path forward will look like. One of the strengths of this movement in Portland is the diversity of thought and tactics that is present, but, as demonstrated in Chapter 3, this spectrum of ideology can complicate the outcomes of activism.

While sometimes the incongruity between ideal outcomes is held against the movement as evidence of disorganization or disagreement, the variety of solutions

imagined by those taking to the streets to protest and participate in mutual aid should speak instead to the movement's necessity. Liberation can take a number of forms and must be determined by those being oppressed. Uniting for the common goal of liberation does not necessarily require all activists to have the same vision of liberation, but rather a common goal of dismantling white supremacy and the harmful and oppressive systems that it has constructed to preserve itself.

Participants' responses to the fourteen interview questions asked of them showed insight into the three central research questions of this project. Research question one was: *What are the experiences of protesters who have been demanding racial justice on the streets in Portland since May of 2020?* The experiences of those whose stories are shared in this study were overwhelmingly violent. The violence these protesters experienced at the hands of police and/or white supremacist counter-protesters varied based on a number of factors, but all involved spoke directly to the violence of the repression those involved in this movement have experienced. The violence protesters faced was certainly not isolated to Portland, but the longevity of the movement as well as the degree of direct action that was present in the streets created a notable level of physical risk, in addition to legal implications and mental health concerns.

The level of violence that protesters faced in Portland must be considered within the larger context of Portland's demographics and those who participate in activism. As many of the participants in this study pointed out, Portland is a majority white city and therefore the activism that takes place, whether marches with neoliberal goals of peaceful demonstration or antifascist direct action, is attended and carried out by a large portion of white people. Demetria Hester pointed out in her interview that the violence white protesters faced at the hands of the police over the summer of 2020 galvanized

support for the Black Lives Matter movement, because for many white people, this was likely the first time they were facing this sort of violence and repression from the state. But Demetria, Beans, and Jules Boykoff all point out the opposing issue with so many white protesters in a Black liberation movement: a lot of activism coming out of Portland can end up being performative, dangerous to BIPOC activists, or receive short-lived support when sustained effort is necessary.

Protester experiences have also varied based on the identities of those interviewed, as well as their personal ideologies and protest tactics. T described the traumatic event of being arrested and placed his experience as a white man in contrast with the realities of arrest and police brutality that BIPOC communities endure frequently and regularly. Jules explained motivation to help alleviate some of the violence from marginalized communities in the streets, recognizing also that as a white man, the realities of violence that he and other protesters with various privileged identities endure is dependent on the choice to participate in social movements rather than a result of white supremacy imposing on their everyday lives through disproportionate policing and the system of mass incarceration in which BIPOC are over-represented.

Research question two was: *What motivates these protesters?* Protesters, activists, and organizers engage in social movements out of necessity to preserve the safety of themselves and their communities. Prolonged engagement in these social movements is an important aspect of movement success, which motivation plays a direct role in. All of the participants in this study spoke about involvement in social movements as a necessity and a responsibility, either out of responsibility of self-

preservation or a responsibility to their community and a necessary use of their privilege.

It follows that when speaking about individuals and events that inspired and motivated them to keep up the good fight, all of the protesters discussed their comrades, friends, and communities and the work they see those individuals carrying out constantly. Most of the interviewees named one another as sources of inspiration and knowledge. Particularly when pitted against continuous, intentional violence from the state, the support that sustains a social movement must exist between the activists within that movement. Many also described the joy of seeing people take to the streets, and the number of people who newly came to the protest scene in support of this movement.

Research question three was: *What have protesters learned from their experiences that shape their ideas, worldviews, and future intentions for action?* This research question carries the most implications for further research. Entire theses could be written describing exactly what these protesters have learned that will shape their ideas, worldviews, and actions, as well as what we will continue to learn as the movement evolves and continues. For some protesters, it seemed as though the experiences they have had so far in this movement are reflective of truths they already knew. This movement and the state repression it has received has served as a retraumatizing, reinvigorating, reconsideration of the oppression and violence that BIPOC communities face daily in the United States.

Kent Ford, Demetria Hester, and Beans spoke of the white protesters in this movement experiencing the violent state repression, likely for the first time, and the solidarity that has garnered from privileged groups, even amongst the performative,

liberal iterations of protest and peace policing.<sup>4</sup> Jules Boykoff and T describe the life-changing and galvanizing experiences of being white men on the receiving end of state violence from a white supremacist state. All of the participants learned and relearned patience within the process of a social movement, finding the victories to celebrate along the way, and enduring the marathon required to see the change.

## **Recommendations**

A project of this kind that engages the voices of those participating in social movements could always benefit from expansion. The stories of the five interviewees shared here are in no way a complete view of the experiences of protesters in Portland, much less the rest of the United States. Further research that centers protester experiences and voices would serve to further expand the understanding of how state repression looks on the individual level and explore the outcomes of state sponsored and state inflicted violence against activists. Additionally this would provide more information about protester resiliency, motivations, and the multifaceted models of education in the protest community.

Any additional research that includes protester testimony should utilize similar models of participant confidentiality and take necessary steps to ensure the safety of those sharing their experiences. Activists can be at risk to be targeted by the state well after direct involvement with specific actions, and any research carried out regarding state repression and suppression of dissent should be designed with the safety of protesters in mind as a first priority. My recommendation for further research would

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<sup>4</sup> “Peace police” is a term used to describe protesters who attempt to police other methods of protests. This is dangerous for all protesters involved and can also create negative perceptions of a social movement that is in-fighting.

include the suggestion that researchers studying these subjects through oral history and participant-based research are themselves involved with the movements they are studying and are part of the community they are surveying and interviewing. This builds on the collective spirit and reciprocity of these social movements and adheres to the principles of such forms of organizing, in direct opposition to the types of “extractive” research that many scholars pursue (Guadry, 2011).

Additional similar studies would be effective across cities and regions that had large-scale uprisings for Black liberation, and could be held in contrast with similar studies in regions that experienced smaller or distinctly different movements than most major cities did. Compilation and comparison of specific quantitative data regarding protester experiences could yield results with numerical data summarizing the likelihood of protesters facing certain modes of repression in certain areas in contrast with the demographics or tactics of those protesters. Other comparisons might align with one respondent noted to examine cities with more diverse populations to understand how Portland—a largely white city—compares in protest methods and approaches to areas where communities long the target of state violence have been rising up in response.

Further studies could also dive into the specific modes of suppression experienced by protesters in Portland and other cities. In Portland specifically, tear gas was used frequently on protesters, and on many occasions was actually expired, proven by protester collection and documentation of munitions canisters (Asher, 2020). Research into the long-term effects that protesters are experiencing after being exposed to such high levels of tear gas, and expired munitions is not only recommended but necessary.

Finally, the recommendation must be given to readers to participate and involve yourself in activism and mutual aid in your community. Movements are sustained by the people who participate in them, and change is made by sustained movements. Seek out the ways in which you can fight for liberation and against white supremacy.

## **Conclusion**

The work of activists is continuous, tireless, and as long as the current system stands, never done. This thesis has served as a brief and incomplete snapshot of certain experiences protesters lived during the course of the movement in Portland from May 2020 to the time of this writing in the spring of 2021. The capitalist system and the colonial, white supremacist roots of the United States means that this movement and others like it will continue until the system is abolished or transformed. There is a responsibility within academia to uplift the views, experience, and knowledge of those engaging in liberatory work and support social movements by documenting revolutionary educational praxis developed by communities on the ground.

The experience in Portland is simultaneously similar to and different from the movement for Black liberation around the rest of the U.S. The people in the streets are united by a common goal and facing state repression in every city, but the specific regional context, forms of suppression, and community identities alters the experiences to be unique and individualized. With utopian imagination, the people can envision any path forward and create it.

As Demetria Hester so aptly put it, “You’ve already won if you’re still fighting.”

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