“The People Are Still There”: Disrupting White Supremacy In and Beyond the Occupied Protest

by

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Introduction

One of the most prolific aspects of Seattle’s protests in the wake of the murder of George Floyd was the Black Lives Matter mural, made in the neighborhood of Capitol Hill. If I showed you a picture, perhaps you’d recognize it: it stretches between the median of a roadway and across an entire block, each letter a mural in itself designed by sixteen different Black and Indigenous artists in the Seattle area. Inspired already by the original Black Lives Matter street murals in Washington, DC and Charlotte, North Carolina, this mural, and the iconic aerial photo of it, went to inspire other artistic renditions of protest around the country.

The story of the mural does not end with the protests of 2020. In fact, nor does the story of the protests themselves end with their official dismantling, but more on that in a moment. Even after the police had erased all other evidence of an uprising in the neighborhood of Capitol Hill—for sandblasting graffiti from the walls, after discarding constructed altars and barricades alike—the mural at the heart of the neighborhood remained.

This is part of the story of that mural’s life after the protests, as narrated to me by Takiyah Ward, one of the artists who first envisioned creating the mural.

In July of 2020, as the collective of artists who created Capitol Hill’s Black Lives Matter mural was working with the city of Seattle to preserve their art, Takiyah Ward received a phone call. This phone call came from a representative of the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), who was
involved in the preservation of the mural due to its positioning on a major roadway. According to this phone call, a group of people had arrived in Capitol Hill with the intention to finish preserving the mural themselves, and the city had signed off on it. This, however, came as quite a shock to Ward. The truth was that none of these people attempting to seal the mural were part of the collective who had first created it, and it seemed that none of them had bothered to inform her about their efforts. Racing to the scene, she found it as her SDOT contact had described it—a group of artists within the community were working to preserve the mural, sealing the art onto the street with an oil-based sealer.

This is a story of cooptation. When Takiyah Ward approached the group working on the mural she and her fellow artists had created during a charged period of protest, she was met by a white woman and a Black man who tried to defend their decision to work on the mural without the original artists’ permission. In doing so, the two leveraged their experience of privilege over her, as a Black woman, to stake a claim on a work of art that did not truly belong to them. Far from accepting the expertise she would have as one of the original creators of the work, these two apparent leaders of the rogue group attempted to “whitesplain” and “mansplain” to her how the mural actually belonged to the community as a whole. Implicit in this defense, of course, is the false notion that the mural did not truly belong to her.

Meanwhile, this rogue group had included police officers among their number, who were also working to seal the artwork against the elements. Not only had the work to preserve the mural been forced out of the original artist’s hands,
but it was now being used as a photo opportunity for the city’s uniformed officers. The mural was initially designed and executed as a collaboration among Black and brown artists representing their commitments to a protest movement opposing police brutality. And yet the mural was, in this moment, being forcibly repurposed into an artwork rehabilitating the image of police, under the actions of those not adequately recognizing the axes through which they wielded power.

This is a story of defacement. While the rogue group attempting to seal the mural against the elements had chosen an oil-based sealant, the art itself had been created using acrylic paint. Without properly matching the sealing agent to the artwork’s original medium, as the artists would have been able to do, this attempt to preserve the mural only served to further damage it. More than this, the attempt to seal the mural came after it had already been in place on the ground for weeks. Without considering any necessary cleaning or touch-up process, the group had sealed the mural in along with the dirt, grime, and debris it had begun gathering since the moment the paint dried and people began to once again walk that part of the road.

And yet, this is not the end of the mural’s story. The actions of this group transformed what was initially planned as a preservation effort into a removal and repainting effort, but did not succeed in completely destroying the mural or its significance to the history of Capitol Hill. After a series of repainting and retouching efforts, with the most recent spreading out over the summer of 2022, Capitol Hill’s Black Lives Matter mural continues to occupy its original place, right in the center of things.
This project centers on the occupied protest of Capitol Hill, and the work of both Seattle’s Black communities and their allies in the fight for racial justice. Beginning with a span of about one month in the summer of 2020, these protests upturned the normal approach to responding to systemic racism and police violence, in a way that is still being negotiated and transformed today. The Black Lives Matter mural on East Pine Street is but one, albeit notable, example of this.

The story of the mural takes place within an interstitial, even liminal, time period. Positioned both after the official lifetime of the Capitol Hill occupation and before the time of my own research during the summer of 2022, this particular moment emphasizes the interplay of past, present, and future that continues throughout this text. The story of the mural’s first disastrous restoration effort reveals how political work which began during and within the occupied protest continues even after the official dismantling of that space. Moreover, it continues in a way that aims to negotiate and transform the future. Just as the mural can still be seen in Capitol Hill, so too can other projects. These efforts to confront and oppose the ubiquity of white supremacy in American law and culture trace their roots back to the occupation, while projecting their aspirations into a future free from these oppressive systems.

At the same time, however, establishing this trajectory of antiracist work through time does not always run smoothly. As the example of the mural shows, efforts to recognize and confront white supremacy in society frequently faces complication or pushback. Beyond the temporal bounds of the occupied protest, the mural then became subject to the legitimizing project of policing, as well as
the reimposition of white supremacist structures in everyday life and interactions. This project, working to legitimize police violence and integrate anti-Blackness into an ontological normalcy, in fact defaces and erases any assertion that such systems are out of place. Despite this, the work of people committed to antiracist and Black liberatory frameworks of being extends past the immediate lifetime of tangible signals. Just as the mural and its message have lived beyond attempts at its destruction, so too do other efforts at reimagining worlds beyond the violence of white supremacy.

**A History of Resistance**

The occupied protest in Capitol Hill is not the first within the city of Seattle, but rather fits into another kind of legacy of occupations. This tactic of overtaking and occupying space against the wishes of governmental forces has been used in Seattle for decades in an effort to bring systemic issues impacting Black and Indigenous communities, as well as class-based inequity, to light.

In 1970, over 100 members of United Indians of All Tribes and others committed to their cause overtook Fort Lawton, a former US Army post in the Magnolia neighborhood of Seattle. After months of demonstrations and dozens of arrests, the Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center was built in 1977 to serve as a cultural space for Indigenous peoples in the Puget Sound area. In 1985, an eight-year occupation of the Colman School began. Black activists occupying the building refused to leave until the space was reallocated to become a museum and community center for use by the people of that neighborhood. The occupation
finally ended after an agreement was reached with school officials, and after some additional years of disagreements, the building officially became the Northwest African American Museum in January of 2008. In November of 2013, four people were arrested for refusing to vacate Seattle Public School’s Horace Mann building. This came as the culmination of protests beginning that August when the city announced plans to renovate the building and turn it over to an alternative high school program.¹

Seattle is thus no stranger to the use of occupation as a tactic for producing radical change to benefit certain communities. So, it should come as no surprise that the increasing visibility of police brutality across the country would bring about similar actions.

On May 25, 2020, Georgy Floyd was killed by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. As the recording of George Floyd’s murder spread virally across social media, protests began across the United States to oppose this profound instance of police brutality. Protests and vigils in memorial of George Floyd took place across the city of Seattle, as well. In the neighborhood of Capitol Hill, these planned actions frequently took place in or began in Cal Anderson Park, arriving at the East Precinct less than a block away.

The start of violent protest in Capitol Hill is emblematized by the “pink umbrella incident.” Although police had already engaged in violent retaliation

¹ This information was found in the archives of the Seattle Times. Their coverage of the creation of the occupied protest in Capitol Hill similarly tied the event to this history of occupation as a form of activism in Seattle. See https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/welcome-to-the-capitol-hill-autonomous-zone-where-seattle-protesters-gather-without-police/
against protesters as earlier as May 26, this particular moment became uniquely charged. On June 1, 2020, a protester within a group in a standoff with police opened a pink umbrella to act as a makeshift shield. In response, police then began firing pepper spray into the crowd. For over a week, police engaged in extremely violent methods in opposition to these protests, resulting in some protesters receiving long-lasting or even permanent injuries. As one interlocutor told me in an interview, the independent journalist Omari Salisbury, well known in Seattle for his careful coverage of the protests, was injured in violent attacks by the police. As of the summer of 2022, he is still awaiting surgery for injuries received in this first week of protests.

After this intense period of intense police aggression, however, the power dynamics of Capitol Hill soon appeared to shift. On June 8, after days of inflicting extreme violence against protesters to purportedly defend the East Precinct building, the police abandoned the area with little warning or explanation. It is at this moment that the protests in Capitol Hill shifted from marches and rallies to the seeds of an occupation. The barricades moved in by the city to protect the precinct building were moved and repurposed to block off access on certain streets. In this way “Free Capitol Hill” first came into being as a space seemingly liberated from the all-encompassing police violence of the previous days.

Not long after its establishment, the occupation acquired the name of Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ). Approximately two weeks into its creation, the space was again renamed, this time to Capitol Hill.
Organized/Occupied Protest (CHOP) through a general assembly model. The protest encapsulated about six blocks of the Capitol Hill neighborhood, centered on the precinct building and Cal Anderson Park. Within the protest, space was held for medical tents and mutual aid stations, stages were established for people to speak freely to the crowds, and an altar space was made to honor and remember victims of police brutality.

Much has been made of the fact that the occupied protest had no official hierarchy of leadership. Mainstream print media, and particularly more right-wing sources, in fact openly called for the razing of the occupied protest for its lawless, dangerous, and “anarchic” nature. In spite of this, the primary goals of the occupation, as a space arising from the protest of police brutality and systemic racism, remained relatively consistent. The three primary demands of the occupation were as follows: 1) Reducing city-police funding by 50%, 2) Redistribute funds to community efforts, such as restorative justice and health care, 3) that protesters would not be criminally liable. While other participants in the protest, such as the Collective Black Voices of Free Capitol Hill, expanded on and further specified this list of demands, the principle aims of divesting from policing in favor of community-centered and restorative justice approaches

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2 Of note is that many of my interlocutors used the various names for the protest interchangeably, or used the blended acronym CHOP/CHAZ. For the sake of clarity, I choose to refer to the protest space as a whole as the Capitol Hill occupied protest, lower-case. In cases where it is necessary to refer to a particular time period within the protest itself, such as the first days after the establishment of the occupation or the final days before its dismantling by police, then I will use the timeline-appropriate name, such as “Free Capitol Hill” or “CHOP.”
remained. As of the end of the protests, and even up to now, these demands have not been adequately met.

A timeline of the occupied protest of Capitol Hill would be incomplete without mentioning the multiple shootings that took place within or around the space in its last few days. In the last week of the occupation’s official lifetime, five people were shot in or at the edges of, CHOP. Of these five, two people died. These moments became active battlegrounds on which proponents and opponents of the occupation fought over the legitimacy of Capitol Hill’s protest space. Although at least one person wounded identified his attacker as a far-right infiltrator to the space, police narratives considered these particular moments of violence as demonstrating the threat inherent to the protest itself, necessitating their return to the space. Ultimately, the Seattle Police Department used these narratives as justification for the eventual sweep of the area on July 1, 2020. Over 100 officers, with help from the FBI, made arrests of almost seventy people over the following days.

The occupied protest in Capitol Hill only existed in physical form for less than one month. And yet, this moment cannot be sequestered in the past. Over two years after the dismantling of the protest by police, there are people still awaiting trial or suffering from jail time as a result of their participation in protests. The demand of the protests, that the city and state defund police budgets for the sake of reinvesting in Black communities, has not been met. And, equally importantly, there are still people working towards these goals now just as they were then.
Figure 1: The wall of the shelterhouse, a building in Cal Anderson Park at the center of Capitol Hill and the former occupied protest. This wall is covered in graffiti of different colors and proposing different messages. One message, centered in the image, strives to remind the viewer of the 2020 protests, proclaiming that “the East Precinct should’ve burned.” This message draws together the present moment of the image and a reading of the past, as it calls on the viewer to return to the time of the 2020 protests and question why Seattle’s precinct did not meet the same fate as the precinct in Minneapolis.

Disrupting the Normal of White Supremacy

My first exposure to the antiracist work within Capitol Hill’s occupied protest came in June of 2020. Although I was living across the country in Richmond, Virginia, my hometown had developed its own autonomous protest space, inspired in part by the apparent success of the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone. My fascination only increased as I began to dig into a flourishing digital forum, as social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram produced new
networks of information, understanding, and solidarity between protesters across vast distances.

Within this online world, a stark divide quickly became apparent: on one side, the active participants in Seattle’s occupied protest would regularly comment on the interesting and transformative aspects of the space. Through such accounts, I first heard of the No Cop Co-Op providing free food, water, and supplies to people engaging in the protest. I learned about healing circles being led by psychiatrists and counselors to support Black community members in processing racial trauma, and I saw posters made as the end-products of teach-ins, covered in multicolored ink and dozens of different handwritings. In contrast, reactionary media sources, as well as the then president of the United States, were intent on demonizing the space as dangerous, lawless, and miscomprehending of the necessity of policing. This was just the first example I saw of how protesters within Capitol Hill’s protests worked to creatively imagine ways of living outside of the dominant logics of white supremacy, even as the immense sway of white supremacy as a US institution was weaponized to discredit them.

Focusing on the occupied protest in Capitol Hill, Seattle, this text argues that antiracist and Black liberatory protests work to disrupt white supremacist institutions that have been “normalized…and rendered unproblematic” (hooks and Mesa-Bains 2018, 61). This disruption did not cease with the destruction of the occupied protest in July of 2020, but rather continues in the memories and actions of those involved with it. Through various methods of engaging with art, responding to police and state violence, and formalizing the practice of memory,
the efforts of the occupied protest to envision beyond the everyday harm of systemic racism continues even after the tangible spaces symbolizing these politics disappear. This project in itself aims to fit within efforts to mark antiracist and Black liberatory efforts as ongoing, even after the flashpoint moment of the George Floyd protests has ended.

I structure my interpretation of the disruptive capacity of antiracist action through the multifaceted application of aesthetics. Here, I use aesthetics both as object of analysis and as analytical framework. At its most concrete, a notion of aesthetics manifests itself in the tangible work of artists, graffiti artists, and memorialists working to physically transform the space of Capitol Hill. Through engaging in these tangible transformations, these actors work to unsettle the logics and power of white supremacy from where it flows into all aspects of living. Beyond this, however, aesthetics also make themselves known in the uneven distribution of power and perceivability (Rancière 2013). The effort to disrupt white supremacy and its imposition into the everyday and banal is itself an intervention at the level of the aesthetic, as it seeks to topple the construction of Black trauma and pain as hypervisible (and thus hyper-consumable) while state-sanction violence against Black communities remains unseen and unchecked.

Taking inspiration from Anna Tsing (2015), this work is scattered with photos meant to augment and reemphasize the argument of the text. Rather than being directly referenced in the textual element of this work, the photos and images included here are rather meant to serve as an alternative style within which to approach the argument. Through providing a small selection of my
attempts to “capture” visually the ongoing antiracist work in Capitol Hill, I aim to showcase the work of my interlocutors and subjects in playing with aesthetics as a generative force for disrupting white supremacy as a system which renders itself normal. At the same time, these images represent my own foray into the realm of the aesthetic.

Chapter 1 begins with a grounding in physical art, and the artists who create it, as an force for creating worlds beyond white supremacist violence. Both within and beyond the occupied protest, art and creative expression act as tools for imagining and practicing how to live outside of the everyday violence of a white supremacist state. Building on “the art of living on a damaged planet” by Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing (Haraway 2016; Tsing et al. 2017), the theorizing of art by my interlocutors as something sacred, and thus something that should exist outside of the binds of racial capitalism, also allows for the establishment of a Black humanity not subjugated by white supremacist hierarchy.

Returning to the case of the Black Lives Matter mural, I argue that uncertainty/indeterminacy and potentiality, affects in dialogue with each other, push the demands of the occupied protest into the present, even as the city attempts to erase such messages in the hopes of maintaining an aesthetics of liberal respectability.

Opening with the space of the East Precinct, once the flashpoint for violent encounters between police and protesters and later the ground zero of a radical antiracist protest, Chapter 2 interrogates how the state masks and justifies violence against Black and brown people. The state engages in prolonged and
ongoing warfare against Black communities, justified by the exclusion of Blackness from citizenship (Anderson 2021) which then renders Black people within the borders of the state as a perpetual threat. Although violence against Black communities by the state is ever-present, the state unevenly applies the notion of the spectacle (Debord 2014) to obscure its quotidian perpetuation of violence from view. People engaged in Black liberatory politics must contend with and unveil a haunting by a history of anti-Black violence actively obfuscated by the state, and by a precinct building whose current occupation remains ambiguous.

Chapter 3 discusses the formalization of memory in protest spaces through the production of memorials to victims of police brutality. Building from the notion of the trace as theorized by Édouard Glissant (2020), the creation of memorial objects and spaces provides as dual recognition and call to action for the viewer. In holding space for the victims of white supremacist violence, memorial practice thus confronts the inherent injustice to structures of policing, even as they attempt to render themselves ordinary. Even after the lifetime of the memorial ends—through the downfall of the occupied space, or the gradual decay of the altar—the call to remember persists beyond the physical object or place which prompted it, and provides a seed for imagining more just worlds. Means of challenging policing and other structures of everyday violence persist beyond the spaces that first contextualize them. For all that Capitol Hill’s occupied protest is no longer a tangible presence, its impacts—in uniting artists, in prompting memorial practice, in refusing to accept a greater good of policing—
still ripple outward into Capitol Hill, Seattle, and beyond. As people continue the work of making visible, unsettling, and denaturalizing policing and other manifestations of white supremacy, the more just world imagined within the occupied protest becomes more and more present in the lives people are living now.
Chapter 1: Creating Art and Imagining Life in the Occupied Protest

The traffic of East Pine is not new. Every day, people walk down this street. Perhaps on their way to work via the Cap Hill light rail station, or to walk their dog at Cal Anderson Park, or to get an early morning workout on the playfield. Perhaps some of them carry gardening tools with them, trowels and seeds and gloves, to contribute to the Black Lives Memorial Garden, while others bring tea candles and flowers to offer at the shrine to Summer Taylor.

Today, though, there is something different in the median of East Pine, something that makes you pause. A man wearing paint-stained coveralls, his hair in a sharp fade, steps off the curb and onto the open street. He raises a free hand—the other is currently occupied with a paint roller—and you see the traffic slow. The sea of bodies crossing this road parts to allow his journey, until he reaches the center of the road, already populated by another person, dressed similarly to him, and three five-gallon buckets clustered together on the ground.

He reaches the center of this road, and he gets to work. The roller passes through space in graceful arcs, traveling from trays of paint to the road surface and back, no energy wasted. You watch as the paint glides across the road surface like a figure skater on Olympic ice. You marvel at this; for all the times you have tripped and stumbled on these roads, over gravel or cracks in the pavement or your own feet, it has never seemed so smooth. The artist smiles, throws a joke
over his shoulder to the other person accompanying him, and not once does the paint stop flowing.

At his feet, something vibrant begins to take shape. A message, spilled out in purple and yellow and blue, black and red and green. “BLACK LIVES MATTER,” it reads. And for all the heavy traffic of this neighborhood, of this city, the world still parts around this message that people placed so lovingly into the ground.

The moment described above exists partially, across two different points in time. The Black Lives Matter mural on East Pine Street first came into being over the span of three days in June of 2020, at the height of the George Floyd protests and the life of the Capitol Hill occupied protest. The process of repainting and touching up the mural began and ended two years later, happening in increments over the summer of 2022. The scene above draws on both the recollection of my interlocutors of the mural’s initial creation and my own field notes and observations of the repainting process. In melding these two events, separated by the unfolding of two additional years, I aim to minimize the distance you, the reader, may feel from this period of recent history. The repainting of the mural stretching across East Pine necessarily mirrors and reiterates its creation, drawing forward the place and time of the 2020 protests from where it would otherwise be relegated to a spectacular and bookended moment in history. Its intervention is at the level of spacetime: traffic parts, crowds slow, people remember. And as this art transforms the city of Seattle, it exceeds and contradicts established structures.
that would have it, and its message of Black love and liberation, erased from the public consciousness.

Through an exploration of street art and graffiti as political art forms, I will demonstrate how the artists of Seattle rejected—and continue to reject—an aesthetics of respectability that erases the everyday violence of policing. This action moves beyond refusal into a realm of spatial and discursive transformation. Where notions of respectability aim to whitewash the streets of Seattle into an image of propriety in line with racist and classist norms, the work of Capitol Hill’s street artists during and after the summer of 2020 *disrupts* such norms. It does so through intertwining creation and remembrance, in places and through methods that undo the city’s attempts to totally define what Seattle should look like. This opens space for new possibilities of living that do not just involve artistic creation in spite of illegality, but rather include it as a premise for political meaning.

I begin this chapter with an exploration of art as a tool for living beyond survival. The art—and creative expression more generally—made within and surrounding Capitol Hill’s occupied protest provided a vision of reclaimed humanity for Black people and a freedom from dominant logics of racial capitalism, a vision which people are still working to realize. I then return to this chapter’s original subject, the Black Lives Matter mural on East Pine Street. One of the few large-scale art projects still visible in Capitol Hill from the days of protests, the story of this mural is one part of a larger story of artists working to maintain and keep alive the possibilities of creating that were made eminently
possible within the space of protest. Through this example, the ideals, potentialities, and commemorations of the George Floyd protests are still being negotiated and carried into the present moment, even as the physical space of protest or site of art is no longer visible.

“The Art of Living”

While the Capitol Hill occupied protest is/was more than simply art, the two are connected by a dual thread of critique and aspiration: critique, in that they exist in opposition and distinction with structures of racism; and aspiration, in that they work to imagine the shape of a world wherein such structures do not exist. Both act as driving forces in the ongoing process of, to borrow from the language of Catherine Walsh, creating, inhabiting, and widening the cracks in white supremacist thought and structures (2018, 83).

Consider, for a moment, a conversation I had with “Laina,” a community organizer, educator, and musician in Seattle. Like some of my interlocutors named in this work, I first heard of Laina retrospectively, as I combed through the written record of the 2020 protests as encapsulated in news reports. She was one of many people actively engaged in transforming Capitol Hill, through both individual and communal work, into a space that prioritized Black safety and joy during the protests, and I immediately reached out to her to see about scheduling an interview. During our second official conversation, when I asked her about the significance of art within protest during the summer of 2020, she told me this:

I mean, like—there’s a quote, I think it’s James Baldwin, about art and the artist. Art is culture, it is life, it is the thing we do that ignites joy, and love,
and not just those—it ignites all emotions. And I know, for me, being creative, especially musically, singing, is something that means everything to me. It’s that thing that I try to keep sacred, that I don’t want to taint with the ways of capitalism and the man, you know? I just want it to be something that I do because I love it, because it makes me feel good, because it makes me feel joy…I’m all for finding joy in these times, it’s so important, especially as a Black woman, and a mother. Finding joy is important.

There are two ideas I wish to draw from what Laina told me here: first is the notion of art as sacred, and second is the necessity of searching for joy in tumultuous and uncertain times.

Laina was not the only artist I spoke to who framed art in this way, as something profoundly personal and sacred, yet made troubled, even disingenuous, by the imposition of capitalistic logics of production. The compulsion to turn art into a business, to shift creativity into profit becomes a necessary evil for these creatives, as they must balance artistic integrity and conveying a certain message with trying to appeal to buyers and grant panelists. Instead of one’s existence providing the space for art, art must become the means through which that existence continues. For Black artists, the challenge of producing art for consumption when survival is not guaranteed is further compounded. As my interlocutors attest, hypervigilance in protecting oneself against racist aggression and the traumatizing hypervisibility of violence committed against Black people in the news and across social media makes not just creating art, but even continuing with the minutiae of daily life into an exhausting experience. In this way, the making-profane of art as practice maps onto the devaluation of liberated Black life and livelihood in favor of the constant practice of survival under white supremacy.
And yet, over the blank canvas of a city boarded up as businesses closed during the pandemic, art began making itself known. The creation of the occupied protest as a place aspiring to freedom from the logics of racial capitalism simultaneously produced the conditions for artistic possibility outside of its use as a means of survival. In my conversation with Takiyah Ward, a member of the Vivid Matter Collective responsible for the Black Lives Matter mural, she described this freedom to me as

the freedom to be who you are, regardless of societal factors. If you were a chef, who only cooked to make money, now you’re in a space where there’s zero money in exchange. Are you still a chef? Would you do that for free? A lot of people did, day in and day out, a whole month, rotating, working with each other. Passing off shifts. I saw that. Therapists, you know. You get paid to hear people’s problems. Would you do that for free? People were doing that. Artists—I get paid to make art. I was here, I paid my own money to make that art. I paid thousands of dollars for that art to exist. And to that point, I think, I would think that those people in those positions got more than what they gave. (emphasis mine)

As Ward describes, within the occupied protest, people were forced to reckon with how to live in the absence of the template for survival imposed by racial capitalism. Without the structure of a money-based economy, without the individualist, Darwinist ethos rewarded by such an economy, all that remained was the people. The people, and what they could provide for each other.

The participants of Capitol Hill’s protest space contributed their time, money, energy, and skills into fashioning a space separate from everyday structures of domination that reduce craft to the level of commodity and human to the level of laborer. And, most importantly, they got more than they gave. I argue that part of what they got was the opportunity to redefine humanity within the space, and to redefine life in a way that does not revolve around subsistence
through the accumulation of capital but rather in community care and free expression. For the people who were there, crossing over into the protest space became a crossing over into a different ontological world. Here, I take inspiration from Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.” As Wynter writes, white supremacy inserts itself at an ontological level—its logics circumscribe not just material structures, but also metaphysical questions of being. She describes Man, an essentially white and European category constructed to be superior to and separate from Blackness (Wynter 2003). Just as Wynter describes the category of the rational-turned-biological Man as excluding Blackness, thus necessitating the theorizing of a more inclusive kind of humanity, I argue that the exclusion of Black people from an unimpeded, unassailed mode of living has necessitated the experimentation seen within the protests at Capitol Hill.

This is clear in Ward’s pairing of the questions, “Are you still a chef? Would you do that for free?” In this construction, the occupation of chef stands in for other markers of humanity, yet this identity is predicated on earning a wage. In the absence of such payment in the autonomous protest, the chef remains a chef, not by being paid for art, but by investing in the creation they do for a space, for a community. In Capitol Hill’s occupied protest, its contributors, its artists, thus worked to refashion a way of living predicated on service to the space itself, and this directing of creativity into the autonomous zone reforms the sacredness of such creativity.
In describing making creative contributions to the assembled community of the occupied protest, I in no way mean to imply that such service represented an affectively negative burden or obligation to the individual/artist. As previously mentioned, the people who gifted their efforts to holding space in Seattle during the 2020 protests frequently described to me the profoundly transformative impacts of what they worked to build for themselves and for others during that summer. Part of rejecting the logics of racial capitalism is not just recognizing a responsibility to each other, but also in realizing that such communities make us what and who we are. As Takiyah Ward would say, they got more than what they put in. It is at this point that I’d like to return to my conversation with Laina, and her emphasis on joy.

For Laina, the active seeking out of joy is a necessary countermeasure and mode of resistance to existing in a world that is actively hostile to Black life and livelihood. Holding art sacred, finding ways to approach her music that does not degrade the art to the level of commodity, is one way in which Laina, among many others, emphasizes joy and pleasure as constitutive elements to what I, borrowing from Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, will call “the art of living” (Aarhus University 2014). I take this to mean the ways in which people creatively experiment in composing a way of life for themselves when the ways in which people live already become unsustainable. This idea can be used to describe the imagination employed by my interlocutors in creating new ways of living not founded upon or subject to the logics of white supremacy. Thus, the protest in Capitol Hill held space for art as a literal aesthetic endeavor, as well as for this art
of living. Importantly, the ideals and demands of the protest centered not just a
defunding and dismantling of policing, but also—perhaps even more so—an
investment in Black lives, communities, and futures. In these calls, and in the
ways that the protest in Capitol Hill as a protest space tried to realize them,
participants in the protests attempted to radically reimagine the way that people in
this country live their lives. It is this radical reimagining, the creative spark
pushing to create something new, that distinguishes the art of living within the
protest from the survival that must otherwise be endured within a panoptic and
quotidian white supremacist world.

Laina foregrounded this kind of imagination in our discussions of the 2020
protests. During our interview, she told me

The community-building that I was doing, was in hopes that we would get
enough support and structure in place so that the people who were
choosing to hold space day and night as their means of protest had the
support to make it go as long as they wanted to. And when I think about
what I wanted it to look like, if this was going to last, if this was going to
go on forever, I wanted it to look like artists on every other block, or every
block, and in between. I wanted three or four stages going, like a music
festival. But you’re also learning about what resources you can access,
teach-ins, like Woodstock-esque, but I think they only had one stage. That
was the vision I had as an artist and educator and cultural curator, that was
what I was hoping it would get to.

Importantly, Laina led our discussion with her hopes for how the protests in
Capitol Hill would take shape. Her memories of the work she did on the ground
are purposefully linked with the possibilities for the protest that she envisioned. In
bringing up her own community-building work, as well as her work as an
educator and artist in Seattle, Laina again emphasizes how the participants in
these protests worked to build both the space and a new way of being for
themselves. In a sympoetic sense (Haraway 2016), the protest space and the
people protesting create each other. And this creation is entirely predicated, as Laina demonstrates, on prioritizing imagining a more joyful and fulfilling existence within, and as prompted by, uncertain times.

Capitol Hill’s occupied protest thus encompasses an indeterminate temporality. In all of my interviews, I began my questions by asking how long my interlocutors expected the occupation to last. Upon asking this question, I was frequently met with a half-joking, half-incredulous stare and the response that nobody had an answer to that question when the protests first started. Nobody knew how long the protests would last, except, as Laina put it, that the people holding space in Capitol Hill would try to do so as long as they could. Within this indeterminacy lies the promise and possibility of the protest as a space not just of protest, but of creativity and imagination. The potentiality of this protest space is evident in Laina’s choice of the conditional. When describing her own interwoven memories and hopes for the occupation, she describes how she wanted it to structure itself “if this was going to last, if this was going to go on forever”. Laina’s words here may initially seem like hyperbole, gesturing to an idea of permanence that is incongruous with the construction of a temporarily occupied space. However, the treatment of this idea of permanence as a legitimate possibility allows for Laina’s envisioning of a space which prioritizes her own happiness. In building on the idea of forever, Laina calls on us to take the work of the occupied protest seriously, not just an ultimately ephemeral moment but as a legitimate aspirational project and paradigm for life. And Laina’s dreams of the space as having musicians and artists on every corner, with stages for speaking
and performance, may seem hyperbolic but were in many ways realized by herself and other protestors.

In embracing the affective quality of indeterminacy, in not stopping to fear impermanence, the protestors that took to the streets of Capitol Hill were therefore able to harness the idea of possibility to imagine new ways, not only of living as individuals but of organizing society more broadly. The demands of the Collective Black Voices at Free Capitol Hill that the city, state, and federal government move towards police abolition, and the imaginings of my interlocutors who dream of true art on every street corner of the protest cannot be disentangled. They are both representations of the art of living, of how the streets of Capitol Hill became a ground for creative experimentation with what life should look like when not predefined by the limitations of anti-Black racism and the carceral system. In both imaginings, white supremacist structures of policing must fall in favor of music, art, teaching, and joy.

As many of my interlocutors attested, the physical time and space of the occupied protest provided a reprieve from everyday modes of survival that both diverted creative energy to remaining vigilant against the threat of anti-Black violence and forced the logics of capitalist production and profitability onto artistic creation. In this way, the liberation of Capitol Hill’s Occupied Protest from both the quotidian structures of policing and the more extreme retaliatory efforts of the early days of the protests opened the space into something that allowed for the creation of art, be that painting, music, graffiti, or the more abstract notion of creative experimentation with ways of living. The coproduction of art and protest
allowed for creative attempts at redefining humanity as community-oriented against the logics of racial capitalism. This creative spark, used to imagine life outside of regimented structures of white supremacy, is a spark that remains visible even after the official end of the 2020 protests. Even two years out from the official lifetime of the Capitol Hill occupied protest, art still reminds the people of this neighborhood, and of Seattle more broadly, that possibilities of living outside of everyday structures of violence still exist. And these structures of violence are thus still being disrupted and unsettled.

Figure 2: A sign commemorating the Black Lives Matter mural on East Pine Street in Capitol Hill, created by the Vivid Matter Collective. The sign has been tagged and has handwritten stickers with antifascist slogans along its margins. One sticker, which obscures some of the text on the sign, reads, “Support prisoners of the George Floyd uprising.” The mural itself is faintly visible in the background, centered in the road with yellow traffic markers surrounding it.
The Lifetime of Art

On July 1, 2020, after an executive order by former mayor Jenny Durkan, the Seattle Police Department stormed the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest. In retaking the East Precinct and the surrounding city blocks, spaces which protestors had refashioned into centers for mutual aid distribution, stages for public speaking and organizing, and galleries for impromptu art, police moved to dismantle the space entirely and arrested over twenty people in the process.³ As one of my interlocutors described, this dismantling of the protest extended beyond overturning tables and discarding the tents of people holding space in Capitol Hill, into a “sand-blasting” of the streets and sidewalks to remove evidence of protest art and graffiti. The Seattle PD, and the city more generally, engaged in an act of erasure at multiple levels—of people, of materials, of art, of ideas—in an attempt to regain control and return to an appearance of normalcy predating the death of George Floyd.

One of the largest pieces of art to remain, however, was the Black Lives Matter mural. Although preceded by the murals proclaiming the same message in Washington, DC and Charlotte, North Carolina, this was the first example in which all of the letters contained unique artwork. Each letter became a “mural within a mural,” as the sign commemorating it states. And the photos of this mural immediately after it was painted quickly spread across the internet. It was one of

³ My recounting of these events is taken primarily from the recollections of my interlocutors, though other accounts can be found from the contemporary news reporting on the occupied protest (see Martha Bellisle and Lisa Baumann’s “Seattle police forcibly clear ‘lawless’ protest zone,” for example: https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-arrests-wa-state-wire-id-state-wire-aac9a186e851763d60123ad1a4a20471).
the first things I remember seeing coming out of the Seattle protests in 2020, and it was one of the first things I went to visit when I read of the efforts to repaint and restore it happening over the summer of 2022. I was hardly the only person to do so; over my days walking through Capitol Hill or working in Cal Anderson Park, I would frequently see red double-decker tour buses passing down East Pine Street, their open upper level allowing tourists in the city to peer over and get a superior angle on the mural where it sprawls across the median of the road. Walking tours would traverse the neighborhood, with guides eagerly directing people’s eyes to the mural as a notable landmark in Capitol Hill, on the same level as the iconic rainbow crosswalks. In spite of how a push back towards normalcy attempts to destimate the significance of the mural to the level of landmark, the Black Lives Matter mural is inseparable from its origins within the occupied protest. It acts as a reminder to all who see it of the protests that produced it, as well as of the ongoing aspirations of Black safety and liberation made visible by those protests.

The place of this mural in the modern-day landscape of Seattle is unmistakable. So, when I sat down with Takiyah Ward to talk about the work she and other members of the Vivid Matter Collective have done both within and beyond the protests, I was surprised when she told me that it was not originally meant to last. As she told me,

We did it to last, but we didn’t do it to last forever. We didn’t have the necessary tools to make sure the murals stayed on a street that was being used. People were walking over it, gum, trash, coffee, all types of shit. So it was trashed by day three, and that was okay with us. We did the thing and people saw it, and in the end it traveled all over the world.
Subconsciously, I had envisioned the mural as something made solid and permanent by virtue of its placement in the ground. The fixity of the original images taken after it was first painted in 2020, as well as my own experiences walking past it almost every day, made the mural feel as though its tenure on Seattle’s streets stretched far backwards, and forwards, in time. Ward reminded me that this mural and its legacy, as well as the legacy of 2020’s antiracist protests, are still in flux, still being reshaped and renegotiated today.

In a photo essay on how power struggles play out across the wall surfaces of Oaxaca de Juarez, Livia Stone and Alison Stone write, “The overlapping layers that constitute the surface of any city’s walls are the result of hundreds of individual actions but can be read as a physical manifestation, both reflecting and creating our collective imagination about a space” (Stone and Stone 2014). This is no less true on the streets of Seattle, where a collection of fifteen people created and now tend to a mural that reshapes the way the city must engage with anti-Blackness and police violence. Again, we must consider the work of creativity and imagination in the art of living in opposition to white supremacy. In this case, the Black Lives Matter mural serves as a visual reminder that continuing to uphold the logics of white supremacy, logics which pervade all aspects of American society, is not only unsustainable but something that should not be further sustained. It makes an intervention at an ontological level, proposing an alternative model of being wherein Black lives do not occupy the lowest rung of humanity as Wynter describes in her theorization of Man but rather possess intrinsic value. In its messaging, the mural as an artistic form also asserts, and in
doing so creates the possibility of, a way of living which places Black life as a priority. And although the artists did not create it with the intention of it lasting forever, it now stands as a reminder of when such ideas were at their most visible during the 2020 protests.

The mural reiterates and extends the temporal indeterminacy of the Capitol Hill’s occupied protest and the protests of 2020. Although the Black Lives Matter mural was meant to last, it was never expected to—and, in fact, did not—last forever. The durability of the project was not assured beyond the moment inspiring its creation; its projected lifetime was indeterminate. This uncertainty, however, is possibility in disguise. The latent potentiality of the protests in Capitol Hill inspired the creation of the Black Lives Matter mural, and allowed for its completion in a way unique to those preceding it—without asking for permission at the level of government. Two years later, the mural still takes up space in Capitol Hill, and traffic parts around it. Although the Capitol Hill Organized Protest as a site of protest was officially dismantled, the affective resonance of that moment in time still persists, in part through landmarks like the mural which carry its message forward in time.

That the mural has persisted past the moment of the protests also speaks to the ongoing negotiation of these protests’ ideals and their legacy in public discourse. This is exemplified by the 2022 efforts to repaint and restore. In part due to the mural’s virality after being painted, the city of Seattle, namely the Department of Transportation and the Office of Arts and Culture, has worked with the Vivid Matter Collective to remove the original rendition of the mural, repaint
it, and seal it for a longer-term tenure on the surface of East Pine. As Takiyah Ward told me in our conversation, the Vivid Matter Collective’s contract with the city began in 2020, with a duration of five years. So, the mural’s future is secured for three more years as of writing this, at which point it becomes once again uncertain. And in the meantime,

We’re already getting huffing and puffing from Metro, we’re getting huffing and puffing from SDOT, we’re getting huffing and puffing from the Office of Arts and Culture, because they don’t want to do the work. So, the protection isn’t forever. It’s up to us [the VMC]… We continue. We’re still working together, we’re still doing collective work, we’re still making murals all over the country.

Beyond the spatiotemporal bounds of the autonomous zone, art is once again made profane as it, its creators, and its message toward the fair treatment of Black people once again fall under the scrutiny of a white supremacist state. And yet, as Ward says, the art, the artists, and the message continue, even if one piece of art reaches the end of its life.

For the graffiti artists of Capitol Hill, this prioritization of message over the longevity of work is even more apparent. During my time in Seattle, I observed the rapid life cycle of these statements: a new message proclaiming antifascist or anti-police sentiments would appear overnight on the side of the “fountain mountain” or across the brick patio of Cal Anderson Park, these messages would remain in place of a few days, often being joined by others, and after a period of eight or so days, city contractors would come in white coveralls to paint over or scrub the park surfaces of any sign of interference. Both within the context of Capitol Hill and beyond it, graffiti as a medium of expression finds its political meaning in the ways it rejects the state as a site of authority and
persists in public spaces in spite of state repression (e.g. Stone and Stone 2014; Austin 1998). The cycle of graffiti removal and renewal on the walls, sidewalks, and streets of Capitol Hill makes visible state repression of abolitionist and Black liberatory politics, while also demonstrating that these frameworks of living continue to exist in spite of such erasure.

Graffiti does not have the staying power of a mural, in large part because of stigma against the genre which demeans it to the level of vandalism and petty crime. Current Mayor of Seattle Bruce Harrell’s One Seattle plan, which will invest almost $1 million into cleaning the city of graffiti is evidence of that. And yet, as I witnessed, every time the city took a power washer to the streets of Capitol Hill, the graffiti returned. The lifetime of a single work of graffiti art in Seattle is not only uncertain, but eminently short. The lifetime of graffiti as a collection of art, and as a community of people, will not be finished any time soon. As Livia and Alison Stone argue, the actions of these individuals both reflect and reimagine the collective understanding of Capitol Hill. In demonstrating and reiterating opposition to violent entrenched structures, even through examples as small as contained within tagging “BLM” on the back of a parking meter, graffiti creatively outlines part of the roadmap to a life outside of violent structures.

4 In announcing his plan, Harrell stated that graffiti “detract[s] from the vibrancy of our city.” The money allocated to this plan will also include increased funding to the SPD for enforcing graffiti offenses. See Tobias Coughlin-Bogue’s coverage for Real Change News: https://www.real changenews.org/news/2022/12/28/ graffiti-isnt-going-anywhere-say-seattle-insiders
The political art of Capitol Hill exists within timelines of varying lengths and certainties. They all, however, work within and employ this uncertainty to re-emphasize and continue to imagine ways of living not inhibited by the structures of white supremacy. These visual cues, as small as the residue of spray-paint not quite cleaned off of a brick wall or as large as a painting project spanning the width of a city block, maintain within the collective imagination of Capitol Hill the promise of Black liberation from white supremacist systems made normal in this country. Likewise, although the occupied protest in Capitol Hill officially ended two years ago, its message far outlasts its duration as a physical space. Seattle’s protests and its art possessing the same ideals serve to produce and reproduce each other, leaving open and visible, even impossible to ignore, the understanding that a more just way of life is possible.
Aesthetics of Visibility

It was Laina who pushed me in the direction of James Baldwin, and from my additional readings of his work after our conversation, I came across this quote attributed to him: “artists are here to disturb the peace.” It is with this idea of disturbance, the political ramifications and possibilities of disruption to an assumed peace, that I will conclude this chapter.

The creative work in Capitol Hill, taking place both during and after the events of the George Floyd uprising, all constitute a disruption to the institutionalization of white supremacist logic in the United States which
systemically devalues Black life and livelihood. On a material level, the mural stretching across East Pine Street presents a literal disruption to the flow of traffic. In the words of Takiyah Ward, “That used to be a lane that people could drive through. Now they can’t drive through it anymore.” Graffiti intentionally makes a spectacle of itself and leans into the implications of petty criminality which grant it attention in otherwise pristine spaces. The “art of living” practiced in the Capitol Hill occupied protest and later carried out of it intervene directly in racist logics, in asserting that other structures of life—a around community, centering joy, without the demands of capitalist productivity or the policing of Black bodies—are both possible and the best path forward. These literal and discursive disruptive acts work concurrently to sight the cracks in dominant violent systems that would otherwise present themselves as impenetrable. In making these cracks visible, they become wider, and alternatives to a world founded on the oppression of Black people becomes eminently more possible.

The everyday violence of white supremacy is inertial—it relies on people, especially white people, allowing it to happen as a fact of life, ignoring it as something maybe unfortunate but ultimately one of many instances in a single day and thus not worth the effort of commenting on. The inertial effects of white supremacy ask people less affected by it to keep their blinders on, to focus on oneself rather than do anything to make a scene or cause a spectacle. To prioritize nothing over making it home in one piece at the end of the day, and repeating that for every day after. White supremacy thrives when it can compel people to forget its own cruelty. To disrupt this momentum, radical thought and action must be
made unforgettable, must look and feel relentlessly different from our everyday lives and surroundings. While systemic violence breeds passivity and hopelessness in the way that normal life doesn’t stop even in the wake of collective outpourings of grief, the art of Capitol Hill makes more visible both the circumstances necessitating such grief and the action being taken to find justice for it. It becomes a call to action, and a call to imagining and building lives where such justice can be taken for granted.
There are flower boxes beneath the windows of the East Precinct.

Walking past the building, trying to be inconspicuous about my attempts to peer through the police station’s tinted windows, I noticed them for the first time: clumps of pink, red, blue, and yellow spilling out of boxes at the base of each window. I turned the corner of the block, tracing the edge of the building, and there they were still, tracing the lower edge of windows revealing nothing but my own reflection. I had been in Seattle for weeks at this point, and despite my keeping a wary eye on the precinct building for all that time, the flowers were the closest I had come to seeing a sign of life anywhere in that building. With Google still informing me at the time that the building was “temporarily closed,” even two years after the occupation of the blocks surrounding the building by antiracist protesters had been invaded and dismantled by Seattle police, I slowly began to expect that this would remain true for the remainder of my stay.

Except, this was not entirely the case. With a close eye, it was possible to notice how little things shifted day to day, even if I could not see who did it. On one day during a walk around the building, I stopped in my tracks when I spotted a wet floor sign propped up in the center of the lobby. There was no person visible who may have put it there. On another occasion, I witnessed half of a custodial cart sticking out of a doorway, seemingly stalled with no one around to push it through in either direction. Outside of the building, police cars took up staggered shifts parking on the corner, across the street, sometimes in the median of an
adjacent road. Some of these cars sat silently, as if trying not to be noticed, while others, left to idle with keys still in the ignition, sent a more noticeable reminder that somebody had driven them there, and would at some point return.

These squad cars did end up delivering my first sighting of police officers entering the precinct building. One morning almost a month into my stay, one particular police car pulled into a curb cutout on the side of the building, cutting off my path to the nearest crosswalk. From my vantage point, I could see two white male officers in the front seat. The one closest to me, the driver, wore a pair of wraparound sunglasses on that day, obscuring his eyes. Our standoff on the sidewalk stretched for a few brief moments, until a metal garage door that I had not previously given much notice began to inch its way open. The police car pulled through the door once it had opened fully, and was quickly swallowed by darkness.

The East Precinct, and the structures of policing it both enforces and represents, haunt the neighborhood of Capitol Hill. For all that signs of activity in the precinct building were fleeting, ambiguous, and seemingly without actors, these residues were nonetheless noticeable as an active warning of the power police and policing could exert over the neighborhood, and the city more broadly. Here, I use the word “haunting” in the sense of Anna Tsing, who constructs it as a counterpart to the kinds of freedom that matsutake mushroom pickers negotiate. About the town of Open Ticket, Tsing writes, “[it] is haunted by many ghosts…not only the haunting memories of war that will not seem to go away; but
also the ghostly appearance of forms of power—held in abeyance” (Tsing 2015, 76).

I theorize with the idea of forms of power as a kind of haunting within a landscape. Within this notion of haunting, overarching structures of power appear to have no place or presence. For Open Ticket, this manifested as the freedom of mushroom pickers to create their own livelihoods outside of global food systems and the restrictions of capitalism; in the case of Capitol Hill, the presence of policing melts into the landscape, creating the image of a free and safe neighborhood. Although such structures of power may not make themselves overtly visible, they are still tangibly perceived and felt. In the case of Capitol Hill in the wake of the George Floyd uprisings, the residual and haunting presence of police violence is an intentional one, as the state engages in efforts to both obscure and, when that is not possible, to legitimize and justify systemic violence against Black people and communities. Nevertheless, police and policing are still present in Capitol Hill, and Black people must continue to navigate their safety and livelihoods despite this presence.

In this chapter, I argue that the Seattle police department employs an aesthetics of abandonment to mask the ongoing reality of police violence. White supremacy, and policing as the arm of white supremacy, inhabits all aspects of everyday life in the US, and in this imbrication into the everyday this institution actively works to render itself invisible. When police brutality against Black people becomes hypervisible, this brutality as a spectacle is rendered exactly that—spectacular, irregular, and thus sheltered from attempts to critique policing
as a system. Community members engaged in efforts for Black liberation must actively refute the apparent non-presence of police violence in everyday life, as they both carry the felt experience of violence and continuously plan to counteract or mitigate its resurgence. In other words, they must contend with being haunted by a history and present of anti-Black violence actively obfuscated by the state, and by a precinct building whose current occupation remains ambiguous.

This chapter begins with a discussion of police violence, framed through the concept of war. Echoed to me through many conversations was the thought that the streets were a “war zone” in the initial days of protesting, before the establishment of the occupied protest in Capitol Hill. Working from the scholarship of William C. Anderson and his theorization of Black statelessness, the concept of “war” as felt within the imperial core troubles notions of police violence as an extraordinary act. Far from being unprecedented, police violence against Black people and communities is indicative of the ways in which white supremacy, both historically and into the present, imposes itself onto everyday life for Black people and communities.

The ongoing experience of war as felt by Black people is contrasted with the efforts of the state to mask and justify white supremacist violence through categorizing it as a spectacle. The hypervisibility of Black death through platforms such as social media produces such violent acts as extreme and thus separate from the experience of “the normal” in the United States. Through representing such spectacularized moments of police cruelty as irregular and abnormal, policing is then reified as part of the greater good. Here, the state
endeavors to make the exception prove the rule. Moving to a moment of rupture, the abandonment of the East Precinct building by police, protesters then needed to account for their lived experience of violence, even as the SPD worked to erase their perpetuation of violence via their physical departure from the space.

The actions of protesters within the protest were haunted by violence: by the lingering injuries from rubber bullets and tear gas canisters, by continuing and heightening threat of invasion by the police or alt-right agents, and by its characterization as a lawless and othered place in conservative media. The negotiation of these hauntings reveals frictions in concepts of security, safety, and healing. In the ambiguous present, with signs of police presence continuing to haunt Capitol Hill, community members continue working to recognize and exorcise these ghosts, even as they mask or soften their presence. The protesters of Capitol Hill, both then and now, refuse to allow police and state violence to render itself invisible or justified. The protesters held (and hold) an understanding of anti-Black violence which they render visible, critique, and envision beyond, interrupting efforts to establish carceral systems as normal or opaque.

**Logics of Invisibility, Logics of Exclusion**

Jacques Rancière interprets the interplay and coexistence of aesthetics and politics through what he terms “the distribution of the sensible”, or the system of sense perception which tacitly defines commonality and exclusion within a position or space (2013, 7). He describes this aesthetics of politics as, “a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and
noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience” (Rancière 2013, 8). The ways in which the “sensible”, what can be sensed and experienced, constitute social hierarchies is my primary interest and point of departure.

Rancière’s understanding of the sensible resonates, as well, with the idea of haunting which pervades this chapter. The state attempts to erase and thus normalize/naturalize police violence. In contrast, Black people and antiracist protesters must exert incredible effort to unmask this violence as something tangible and ongoing as a way to stop it. In this case, the violence of white supremacy as it encompasses the US legal system works to render itself invisible; however, it is still sensible, in that it is still perceived and experienced by those most impacted by it. This haunting, residual nature of police violence thus reveals spaces of opportunity for political work that opposes—and imagines outside of—everyday violent structures. The distribution of the sensible, as Rancière constructs it, is not left wholly in the hands of the state; rather, people committed to anti-racist and Black liberatory work actively engage in efforts to shift this balance in their favor.

This structuring of visibility and invisibility, however, manifests itself in other ways. One of the ways in which state violence against Black people and communities is justified comes through the exclusion of Black people and Blackness from a conceptualization of the state itself. In The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition, William C. Anderson describes the experience of statelessness that Black people, particularly diasporic Black people living in the
West, must experience. As he writes, Blackness is systemically excluded from notions of state citizenship, producing the tense experience of the perpetual outsider or foreigner. Regardless of capitulation to the demands of a white supremacist society or social advancement, “if you’re Black, none of it is yours…We are Black outsiders, and we are seen as enemy combatants or enemies of the state by a security apparatus that views us as a perpetual threat” (Anderson 2021, 125).

In excluding Black people and Blackness from the state, in portraying young Black men as criminals and Black communities attempting to protect themselves as terrorists, the Black body is made both invisible within the idealized image of the United States, and at the same time hypervisible when existing within the bounds of the state. By constructing an image of the US as exclusively including and protecting white settlers, the state justifies police violence against Black communities through their imposed separation and thus presumed danger.

The War Zone

I met “Imani” for the only time in-person in my last week in Seattle, even though we had been emailing back and forth for some time beforehand. I found her for the first time quoted in a Capitol Hill Seattle blog postdated back to during the protests, and following her name across the internet I was first exposed to the mutual aid and community organizing work she has been doing for over three years, now.
We chose to meet outdoors so we could both be unmasked. Sitting at a table outside of Molly Moon’s Homemade Ice Cream, my phone resting on a cream-stained napkin and myself precariously balancing on a small pastel-painted metal chair, I reintroduced myself. Over the low hum of cars passing by on East Pine, the laughter of pedestrians walking through the area, and the thump of music from the street fashion stand that always popped up on the corner of Cal Anderson Park, I told her that I felt an affinity and connection to what had happened in Seattle. I told her that it had partially inspired the occupied protest I witnessed in my hometown of Richmond, Virginia, hundreds of miles and most of a country away. And as part of my project, I wanted to find out the different ways people were working to imagine better worlds for themselves and their communities, during the summer of 2020 and extending beyond it.

Imani told me that she was glad to have the opportunity to share her experiences of that time, as tumultuous as they were. With a wry smile, she said that in the aftermath of the protests, there has been an effort to rewrite history and rewrite memory. It was important, she said, to make sure that the truth remains, that things are remembered as they happened, by the people they happened to.

It was during this conversation that Imani theorized protest as war, putting together pieces of a puzzle I had been holding throughout my fieldwork without quite seeing how they fit. When I asked her how long she initially thought the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest would last, her answer moved up backwards in time to before the occupation began. As she reminded me, the generative nature of the
autonomous zone could not be remembered without the week of violent stand-offs with police preceding it. As she told me,

Where I lived, I was in the thick of all that when it first popped off. I was hearing helicopters and flash bombs and grenades for days. It was literally like a war zone, so I stayed inside, because as a Black queer woman I do not feel safe in those spaces. So, protesting in that way was never for me.

In that moment, I realized that I had an idea of what she meant. I remembered one night back home during the protests, when we had been boxed in by one of the Richmond precinct buildings. I remembered standing in a row with a group of other people clad in black, holding up trash can lids and plywood boards and umbrellas as shields against the pop of rubber bullets coming down from the precinct roof. In that moment, I saw a parallel battlefield of the war Imani was talking about, and it’s something I have not been able to forget.

From the perspective situated within the white supremacist, colonial, imperial state, war exists as an abstract concept, rather than a lived reality, and it only exists outside. War has a defined beginning, and a defined ending—it is a state of exception to an otherwise normal flow of time. It is something waged by choice and for if not moral, then at least justified reasons. The United States, projected as a land of opportunity, the “land of the free”, may engage in war, but does not allow it to touch its shores and breach its borders. So what does it mean if such a state creates a war zone within its own territory for its own people to navigate? What does it mean if this war is intimately tied to the history and legacy of white supremacy, and will not end until that system is dismantled?

The answer to part of this question, according to Black anarchist theorist William C. Anderson, lies in how the border of the state is defined. From its very
inception, Black people and Blackness have been excluded from the notion of
citizenship. Relegated to the status of “resident within” rather than “citizen of” the
United States, this hierarchy of being maps onto a schema of violence (Anderson
2021). If the United States does not experience the brunt of war, and instead only
wages it, then the Black people residing on this land must necessarily be excluded
from the United States as justification of the institutionalization of white
supremacy and anti-Black violence.

As my interlocutors attested, anti-Black violence is endemic to life,
particularly their lives, in the United States. It colors every action and every
decision a Black person must make in this country. The regular threat to safety
that Black people experience simply by living in the United States premised the
ways in which they were expected to navigate the world, in times of so-called
normalcy as well as the apparent extreme that was the occupied protest in Capitol
Hill. For Imani, this meant that, when I asked her how long she expected the
protests to last, she began her answer by describing the fear for her own safety
that prevented her from initially entering Free Capitol Hill. Her experience as a
queer Black woman contextualized that particular moment of protest, and served
as a reminder that she was far more likely to face the brunt of an arrest or
counterattack than any white protesters at the same event.

For others, when I asked them their thoughts on the significance of the
protests in 2020, their responses would move towards the topic of history. In more
than one conversation I had with participants in the occupied protest, I learned
how the work of my interlocutors and the protesters in Capitol Hill responded to
more than just the murder of George Floyd by police. The protest, and the people within it, were in fact responding to over four hundred years of white supremacy and anti-Black violence which had produced the death of George Floyd and countless others at the hands of police. Tracing a lineage through slavery, through Jim Crow, through the deaths of people like Rodney King and Emmett Till, my interlocutors contextualized their lives and experiences as Black people in the United States. This legacy of violence as it was—and is—inflicted against Black people permeates the ways they must navigate the world.

These examples always returned to the matter of time. The story of the lastingness of Capitol Hill’s occupied protest began with Imani’s experience of the initial days of protest as a war zone, and her unwillingness to risk her safety because of it. The goals and significance of the occupation afterwards could not be separated from a legacy of white supremacist violence inflicted against Black people, in which the murder of George Floyd was only a recent and highly publicized example. These shared moments reveal how state-enforced and state-permitted violence perpetrated against Black people saturates their experiences, across different spaces as well as different times. This is a war that has been waged since before the first ships docked in Virginia in 1619, and it is a war that is still ongoing.

And yet, acts of police brutality, when they are publicized, are relegated by police narratives to being moments of exception. This exceptionality is used to evade any critique of systemic faults within the structure of policing. People
committed to antiracist futures, then, must point to these faults as a means of disrupting them.

Figure 4: A photo of the shelterhouse in the meadow of Cal Anderson Park, one of the main hubs of protest in 2020 and part of what was later absorbed into the Capitol Hill occupation. The most prominent message painted onto the building reads, “COPS KILL; KILL COPS.” Although the shelterhouse was regularly cleaned and repainted by employees of the Seattle Parks department, this message would reappear more than once on this particular wall during the summer of 2022. It reminds its viewer that policing is fundamentally adversarial and murderous, and encourages those embattled by policing to respond in kind.

Engaging and Opposing the Spectacle

The spectacle exists as an event which is removed from historical continuity for the way in which it draws attention. Guy Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle*, formulates the concept as that which degrades authentic human
relationally to the level of representation and images (2014). This formulation of
the spectacle builds on the reification of the commodity and the notion of
alienation. It describes how a modern consumer society, through the mediation of
mass media and state intervention, becomes displaced from or stagnated in an
understood progression of history (Debord 2014). Building from this analysis, I
use the idea of the spectacle as that which derives its meaning and significance
from its appearance, its visibility, within a given discourse. The spectacle
produces moments outside of the narrative of linear progress, outside of the
normal, as it exceeds the affective charge of its moment in time.

Much has been said about both the Black Lives Matter movement, and the
efforts of protesters in Capitol Hill during 2020 in particular, to render such
efforts as nothing more than spectacle. The emphasis on depicting a “night life”
attitude within the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest, and conversely the intense
commitment to describing the lawlessness and confusion of the space, abounded
in print media covering the 2020 protests. These efforts worked to discredit the
real political and social work being done in Capitol Hill during that summer. By
remarking on the spectacle of the occupation, in describing the heightened sense
of thrill that reporters or random passers-by experienced when entering the protest
space for the first time, sources external to the committed participants in the
occupation marked it as “other” to a normal understanding and experience of
Capitol Hill as a place where people lived. Rather than consider that aspirational
goals of the occupied protest as an experiment in creating new and more caring
ways of living, much of the reactionary news surrounding the protests painted it to
be an anomaly, and one that threatened the stability and progress of the state at large.

On June 10, 2020, former president Donald Trump took to Twitter, raging against the “far-left” and “antifa” incursion into Seattle. Threatening the then-mayor of Seattle, Jenny Durkan, as well as the governor of Washington, he stated that if they did not “take back” the city of Seattle from its protesters, that he would call in forces to do it himself. Again, we see how the efforts of Black people and communities in the United States to protest for their own lives becomes construed as a threat demanding military intervention. The protests in support of Black Lives are only a spectacle in that any efforts by Black people to assert their own humanity within a white supremacist country will be deemed antithetical to a state of normalcy or peace.

In the magazine *Christian Century*, Martin Luther King, Jr. said the following on the nature of peace: “But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to submit to insult, injustice and exploitation. It was a negative peace. True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force—justice, good will and brotherhood” (1957). In the calls to retake the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, there was no peace to be had. The United States can continue its covert war against Black people living in this country, continue to exclude them from the rights and protection afforded to white people, continue to over-police and subject them to regular and ongoing systemic violence, and still proclaim a time of peace. This systemic effort at committing violence against Black communities remains
covert in that the United States chooses to disavow it and discredit any attempts at acknowledging it. And yet, the efforts of those committed to Black liberation, to a positive kind of peace, will always be interpreted as a threat to the white supremacist state, justifying a military intervention.

And yet, this is not the only spectacle at play, working to mask the reality of white supremacist violence. The state does endeavor to depict antiracist protest as spectacular and divorced from the represented normal of life in the United States, so as to justify the waging of war against Black people and communities. Beyond this, however, the state also renders spectacular the very acts of violence it commits. Particularly in recent years, with the acceleration of the speed at which information can be shared, incidences of police brutality have become more visible than ever. As has already been shown, these acts of violence are symptomatic of a long legacy and ongoing project of violence being committed against Black people. Just as the lynchings of the past became public spectacles, events made fit for the consumption of white audiences, now too do bystander videos spread across social media platforms at prolific rates.

The production and distribution of Black trauma in this way, as a spectacle, is not new. Despite this, its construction as a spectacle relegates it to the level of the spectacular—that which does not fit into, and thus should be excluded from, our understanding of the progression of history. The dissemination and consumption of brutal acts of white supremacist violence in this way suggests a level of artifice or irregularity. Even as the racism and violence of the state, emblematized by police brutality, make increasingly regular appearances in
publicly consumed media and collective discourse, these events are represented so as to appear inconsistent with a normalized assumption of policing as a collective good.

This logic manifests itself most clearly in the interpretation of police brutality as the work of a few “bad apples.” This phrase, in itself, represents an interesting linguistic shift—initially, it meant to warn against the corrupting influence of an ill-intentioned minority group on the actions of the whole. In recent years, and particularly when defending the actions of police who inflict extreme violence and death on Black victims, the phrase is used to insist that the work of a small number of bad actors should not be used to represent the intentions of the whole. Here, the violence of police involved in acts of brutality against Black people is rendered spectacular, beyond the normal, and thus should not alter the image of policing as a system.

Thus, the unequal application of the spectacle to actions deemed violent ultimately lends itself to defending the legitimacy of policing and the carceral system. Black people, deemed always outside of the bounds of the state, cannot protest for the recognition of their own lives and agency without such actions being interpreted as a threat to the nation, worth responding to in kind. As Blackness is structured to be forever outside of the state and its beneficiaries (Anderson 2021), policing, as the sword arm acting within the state, is then justified in responding to these “outside threats”⁵. In contrast, the extreme...

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⁵ For similar reasoning, much reactionary media surrounding the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone/Occupied Protest worked to depict it as a “rogue nation,” a space threatening succession from the United States proper and thus worthy of responding to as an enemy state. News reports
violence that police use to respond to such apparent threats can be divorced from the imagined overall good of policing as a system. Through this, as well, the everyday violence of policing—its heightened presence in Black and brown neighborhoods, its siphoning of material funds from community efforts, its enforcement of laws that are already in themselves products of white supremacy—disappears from the public discourse.

This is the distribution of the sensible in action. Policing acts to mask its own violence through a representation of the spectacular that renders such violence unseen. Even as extraordinary acts of violence committed by police officers in the line of duty are caught on camera and disseminated worldwide, their representation and interpretation as extraordinary—as beyond the ordinary—in mainstream and social media legitimizes the banal, everyday work of policing. This banal work of policing is nonetheless built on and enforcing the ideals of white supremacy.

This work to disappear the everyday violence of policing took a literal turn in Capitol Hill on June 8, 2020, when the neighborhood’s East Precinct was abandoned after over a week of violent confrontations between police and protesters. This action, the physical removal of police from the neighborhood, came in the wake of many nights of community members bearing the brunt of rubber bullets and tear gas. At first a battleground between a militarized police

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emphasized the building of barricades as the creation of a literal border, separating one (legitimate) nation from another (illegitimate) one. These logics can be seen, as well, in the Tweet previously referenced. By representing the occupied protests as an enemy in this manner, rather than as a coalition of people within this country endeavoring to build more caring and safe ways of being in this country, calls to raze the space became justified.
force and regular people on the ground, the abandonment of the East Precinct building would at first appear to be a moment of rupture.

And yet, in the following days of the establishment of Free Capitol Hill, the threat of policing had not vanished, and people responded in kind. Barricades were reinforced and frequently guarded by armed members of the community who worked together to establish a makeshift patrol. Inside of the occupation, locations that had been used by medics in the previous days now came to house free food and water alongside medical supplies. Healing circles and teach-ins began to populate the streets within the occupied protest, educating participants on theories of abolition and antiracism while separately holding space for Black people to be in community with each other, to grieve their own experiences of racist violence and creatively imagine a way of living beyond such atrocities. And all of this happened within six blocks of the East Precinct building, a place bearing the visible reminder of recent and historical police violence. A building that was, early in the days of the occupation, spray-painted over so that its exterior would read “Seattle People’s Department,” rather than “Seattle Police Department.”

These are memories of the occupation in Capitol Hill, as they were recounted to me. In this space, the preparation for police incursion necessarily existed alongside efforts to cope with and heal from such violence. And these two impulses, working in tandem, both acknowledged the truth—that the danger of policing had not truly disappeared.
The police may have vacated the East Precinct, but this did not erase the reality of policing as an ever-present threat to the Black community in Capitol Hill, Seattle, and beyond. For protesters engaged in antiracist work, revealing how white supremacist violence not only happens, but how it happens as part of “the normal” of policing, became a significant step in building opposition to policing as a structure. This manifested, in part, through vigilance, and the ways in which participants in the protest continued to engage in measures of security to prevent infiltration of the space by undercover cops. The ongoing vigilance against police incursion continued alongside efforts to care for people carrying the physical reminders of recent police violence. The everyday violence of policing could not truly disappear when the lived experience of such violence continued to exist in people’s bodies and minds. The efforts to provide care in the wake of such violence, rather than minimizing the reality of policing as a violent system, served to make visible that there are better ways of living.
Figure 5: A sticker on a lamp post in Cal Anderson Park in Capitol Hill. A few short days before the taking of this picture, the sticker read, “Community Watch Area, Police Not Welcome.” Someone went to great lengths to remove this message from public viewing. And yet, the imaginings of community care outside of carceral structures is not entirely absent from this image—the Black Star Farmers community garden, started as a guerilla gardening project within the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, is just visible in the background.

The Specter of Violence

In the ramp-up to Capitol Hill’s block party in mid-August of 2022, I remember noting with increasing concern the heightened police presence surrounding the East Precinct building. After so many weeks of traversing the neighborhood and seeing so few signs of people working in the precinct, I then began to witness groups of uniformed officers walking in and out of the front doors, congregating on the corner in a tight huddle as one gave instructions,
blocking off roadways that would become ticket-only entries into the event. At first, I had no idea of the block party itself, and saw the increased police presence as an open act of intimidation. Only a day before the party itself, when I finally saw city contractors in neon yellow vests placing metal barriers and ticket booths on the side streets that would enter into the festivities, did I finally realize what was going on. Even after I found out about the block party and connected the officers now roaming the streets at all hours to the city’s desire to maintain order for an otherwise “unruly” event, the sight of cops in and around the East Precinct, a place where I had only ever seen and felt a residue of their existence there, filled me with a sense of disquiet.

On the day of the block party, I remember walking down East Pine, approaching the precinct building. There I saw two cars stop and park in the median of a bisecting roadway. Four officers emerged from the vehicles and huddled on the other side of the crosswalk from me. An officer who had emerged from the building joined them and began giving orders, at a volume loud enough to be heard but not quite loud enough for the words themselves to be parsed. As I slowed down in my movements towards the crosswalk, hoping to keep an eye on what they could be doing, I realized I was not the only one. A woman catty-corner to me, her dark curls pulled back into a ponytail and the lower half of her face covered by a blue surgical mask, had her phone pulled out and pointed at the officers puddled on the sidewalk. I saw, then, that the people of Capitol Hill would not allow policing to settle itself into the background of daily life. Through
the small act of pulling out her phone and pressing record, she made sure that policing remained visible, as a reminder that it should not be here at all.

During my time in Seattle, the violent nature of policing manifested itself as a kind of haunting. The East Precinct maintained a ghostly liminality of livelihood, neither fully committing to admitting police presence nor fully committed to disavowing their power within the neighborhood. The spectacular aspect of policing had now manifested into something spectral—not fully seen, and yet still tangibly felt.

The carceral system in the United States endeavors to construct itself as necessary, ordinary, and thus not worth noticing. Through a finessing of the spectacle, hypervisible moments of police violence are removed from their place within a history of violence waged against Black people. Meanwhile, the banality of policing as it enacts itself in everyday circumstances becomes reified as something legitimate and normal within the United States. Through this process, the logics of white supremacy which are inculcated into all aspects of policing are made to disappear, and policing as an institution is able to fade into the background of American life. White supremacy as it is enacted through the carceral system thus comes to haunt places like Capitol Hill, as it attempts to make itself invisible and yet is nonetheless felt and perceived.

In spite of this, people committed to other possible of living work to make policing, and white supremacy, visible. This work comes in many forms. The vigilance of the occupied protest remains, as community members continue to capture police on camera, an effort to tangibly mark the ghostly work of police
onto a real historical record. The ongoing work of care in the aftermath of police violence continues, as well. Through community gardens, through artistic projects, through mutual aid networks, the people of Capitol Hill are still building ways of living and connecting to each other. They are doing so, as well, in ways designed to alleviate, and eventually to supplant, more punitive modes of structuring a community. This work of making police violence visible, of revealing the ghost haunting the streets of Capitol Hill, is one of the first steps to disrupting and dismantling policing as a system, and leaving something better in its place.
3. Tracing the Future Through Memorial Practice

I arrived in Seattle having already heard stories of the memorial spaces built up in the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone, commemorating the lives lost to police brutality. I arrived in Seattle in the summer of 2022 and quickly realized that, although the autonomous zone and the things within it had been dismantled and destroyed two years ago, the will to honor and remember the lives of people killed still remains.

Cal Anderson Park, a central point for the start of marches and demonstrations in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd’s death, and later a hub of green space in the center of the growing occupied protest in Capitol Hill, was a canvas for the expression of people’s grief and remembrance. A few weeks into my stay, I took in the sight of a burgeoning memorial spreading across the sidewalk behind the playfield. Colorful chalk, expanding in vibrant hues of greens and blues and pinks, proclaimed the names of people killed by local police departments. Iterated along the back of the batting cages I saw names spelled out in flickering flames, half-lit, red and white tea candles marking the importance of Jayland Walker, and Summer Taylor, and Willem von Spronsen. Some of the names I recognized, and others I did not.

Over the next few days, I returned to this small site of memorial, and every day it appeared to change. The chalk on the pavement, after a few days of misty mornings and the heavy foot traffic of the park, began to fade and smudge across the ground. The tea lights arranged so lovingly became displaced—some seemingly dispersed by the wind, rolling away on their sides; others burned low to
the bottom of their wicks, so that all that remained were puddles of hardened wax carrying the vaguest indentations of words. As the days passed, flowers left to surround the names began to wilt and discolor and dry in the dappled patches of sun left by overhead trees. And yet, even as the fundamental pieces of this space aged over the course of hours and days and weeks, their intention was not lost.

Even now as I recall this place, this altar dedicated to the victims of white supremacy, of police or state violence, it comes to me in fragments. I cannot remember the color of the flowers encircling Summer Taylor’s name in the shape of a heart. I cannot remember all of the slogans and demands written out onto the sidewalk in chalk, although I can remember how the messages persisted through days of gloomy, overcast skies before the rain finally washed them away. What remains with me most strikingly is the intent of the space, for all that it would never last forever. These people were loved, and remembered, and mourned. Even after the flowers dies and the names first written so carefully became obscured, that remained apparent.

Memories, for all that we may envision them as perfect snapshots of a given moment, do not remain fixed in time. The tools of remembering (like flowers, like candles, like written messages) have a material lifetime that augments how we commemorate people who have been lost. Equally important, though, is that the remembrance of those people does not end when that material lifetime is finished. In some cases, it is reinvigorated, repurposed, recreated.

Some things are made to be more durable than others, and thus serve different purposes. Spray-painted slogans and symbols, new or weathering weeks
and months of rain and storm. “FTP”, “1312”, the ubiquitous circle-A, “COPS KILL/KILL COPS”. Chalk, recent and ephemeral, drawings of daisies next to a half-faded “PRIDE WAS A RIOT”. Stickers on power line posts and lamp posts, begging for ongoing support, printed by the dozens and ready to be placed anywhere. Paper flyers that might not last the next rain, making a papier mâché on every traffic light post on every street corner you see. Be prepared for urgent action. Time, place. Be ready. Medium reflects urgency, preparation, lastingness. It makes us remember, realize, and acknowledge what is going on around us on varying scales of time.

The graffiti and the stickers and slogans are not scars or remains of an all-important event two years ago. These events are still happening, and people are still here being affected by them. Attempts at returning to a white-supremacist normal may paint the protests of 2020 as exceptional, as a flashpoint not to be repeated. And yet, people haven’t stopped in the wake of those protests ending, nor did they only begin at their inception.

This chapter examines the practice of memory at the level of the material. The physical words and messages imparted onto the surfaces of Seattle reveal the ways that people engaged in liberatory politics enact the process of remembrance as a means of envisioning and sparking action towards more just futures. Here, memory made tangible—through the construction of memorials and altars, through the naming of victims of police violence in chalk and paint—makes visible and unavoidable the cruelties inherent to normalized systems like policing. This act of memorialization weaves together moments in time, producing a
nonlinear understanding that connects the injustices of white supremacy and anti-
Blackness to the past and present, while always provoking and pulling into the
present the possibility of futures freed from these notions of violence.

Beginning with the work of an artist who covered the Capitol Hill
neighborhood with chalk during the summer of 2022, this chapter analyzes how
medium alters and amplifies memory as a practice provoking political change.
Chalk, with its bright colors and its pointed positionality in a space, unsettles its
viewer when used to highlight histories of police brutality, while also calling on
the inspiration of whimsy and nostalgia to push for worlds where such violence
no longer takes place. These messages have lifetimes of indeterminate but
nonetheless finite length, as the state and individual actors affiliated with it work
to erase visible opposition to everyday structures of violence. While those aligned
with such structures of violence engage in a process of editing to realign the space
of Capitol Hill with the naturalization of state and police violence, the evidence of
opposition remains. Even after the lifetime of the tangible memorial ends, its
memory exists as a trace in the minds of those who witnessed it, ready to be
mobilized in further efforts at memory and activism.

This chapter ends with a reflection on names, and the significance of
naming the people lost to state-imposed or state-normalized violence. At the heart
of all memorial practices, there are names, which contain within them the
understanding of a life cut short. In centering these names in the memorial
process, those engaging in memorial practices bear witness to the injustice of their
loss. At the same time, the act of naming keeps alive both the profundity of that
name’s life beyond its final moment of violence, as well as the inspiration and hope of futures where such people can live full lives, free of violence, in more than name only.

**The Trace as Disruptive and Generative Force**

Throughout this chapter, I think with the idea of the trace, as theorized by Édouard Glissant. Building from his construction of the migrant and African diasporic thinking, Glissant describes the trace as the memory of a lost past that lives on in the mind of the diasporic African, inspiring his creation of new culture, customs, and community. In this work, I take inspiration from Glissant’s treatment of memory as something which lives beyond the tangible, and which produces seeds from which grow new and generative ways of being.

In *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, Glissant writes,

> The trace is to the route as the revolt to the injunction and jubilation to the garrotte. It is not a rough sketch of the land, a babbling of the forest, but the organic inclination towards a different way of being and knowing; and it is the moving form of that knowledge. One does not follow the trace to rejoin comfortable paths, it is dedicated to its truth, which is to explode, to constantly chip away at the seductive norm. (2020, 44)

Here, we see the trace as a necessarily complex and untransparent kind of knowledge, which develops alternate ways of being and relating to the world. The trace does not easily map itself onto systematized forms of knowledge, but exists develops organically, fragmentarily, and uncomfortably as something inspiring the formulation and creation of the new. The trace, as the invocation of a remembered past and its impression on the creation of fundamentally new ways of being and relating, is something that Glissant explicitly constructs as oppositional to the
normal. The trace disrupts the seductive norm, in measured fragmentation and grand explosions. As the trace reveals itself in the memorial work of Capitol Hill, it similarly works to disrupt the everyday violence of policing and white supremacy. Whereas these violent systems strive to maintain an appearance of banality and invisibility, the trace works through efforts at remembering and revealing police and state violence, while opening the door for ways of living beyond those structures.

**Spatiality and Temporality of Chalk**

There is a person in Capitol Hill who regularly takes to the streets and sidewalks, covering them in messages in chalk. In the same distinct handwriting, in the same medium of technicolor and pastels, these messages are visible for all who look down to read them. Along the sidewalk across from a new housing development, “free housing for all.” On a square of concrete at the corner of an intersection, “this is stolen land—honor the Point Elliott Treaty.” And on the

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6 In 1855, the Treaty of Point Elliott was signed by representatives of the Indigenous tribes of the Puget Sound region, including chiefs and sub-chiefs of the Duwamish, Suquamish, Snoqualmie, and Lummi tribes, and the Governor of the Washington Territory. Among the signers of the document was Chief Si’ahl of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes, the namesake of the city of Seattle. This treaty promised hunting and fishing rights and reservation lands to all signatory tribes in exchange for 54,000 acres of land now considered part of Washington state. This treaty was broken within the same year of its signing by white settlers in the region. To this day, the Duwamish tribe, for whom the city of Seattle is ancestral territory, has not seen the promises of the Point Elliot Treaty kept by the US government. See [https://www.duwamishtribe.org/treaty-of-point-elliott](https://www.duwamishtribe.org/treaty-of-point-elliott).

The significance of the Capitol Hill occupied protests cannot be separated from the fact that the city of Seattle is on stolen land. There is tension in the idea that this occupation reclaimed space for the purposes of liberation when that space was only made available by the dispossession of Indigenous peoples by the state. This friction in the liberation of space was acknowledged by the Collective Black Voices of Free Capitol Hill in their list of demands, as they stated, “Although we have liberated Free Capitol Hill in the name of the people of Seattle, we must not forget that we stand on land already once stolen from the Duwamish People, the first people of Seattle, and
sidewalks surrounding the East Precinct, a never-ending cycle of dual accusations and remembrances. Through these messages, I first learned the names of Herbert Hightower, Jr., Charleena Lyles, Terry Caver, and Iosia Faletogo, all killed by the Seattle Police Department. As much as Capitol Hill’s chalk artist indicted the police for their murders, they also centered these names as worthy of remembering.

For many, chalk is introduced to us as a means of play. Manufacturers produce and sell it in bright and eye-catching colors. In the summer, children take to the streets and sidewalks around their homes to fill them with drawings and games. And yet, for a summer in Capitol Hill, chalk works as a medium through which structures of power which imbricate themselves in all public and private spaces become denaturalized.

The intense visibility of neon chalk is intentional. It draws the eye, compelling the viewer to stop, read, and ponder. In the shade of a tree lining the sidewalk, along the bottom of a fountain’s concrete wall, in the shadow of a building, these messages must stand out. Often, I found these messages working to stand out in a way that encourages its audience to stop and consider the place that they are in. In Cal Anderson Park in Capitol Hill, named for the first openly gay member of the Washington State Legislature, came the bright pink of “pride was a riot.” This phrase actively cited the spatial context of the park, already with

whose brother, John T. Williams of the Nuu-chah-nulth tribe up north was murdered by the Seattle Police Department 10 years ago.” While the occupation of already-occupied lands does produce tensions, it also opens the path to resonances and solidarities between Black and Indigenous peoples. These resonances are, however, beyond the scope of this project.
its art installations narrating a history of the AIDS epidemic and calling on viewers not to forget it. It called on the history of queer life and activism in the Capitol Hill neighborhood, and from this historical seating made a provocation that such histories of resistance must be continued, rather than allowing them to fall stagnant in an era of increasing legislation against queer and trans people.

Likewise, the choice to name victims of police brutality on the sidewalks in direct view of the East Precinct building is an intentional one. Here, place provides both context and target for the message being written. Already, the choice to place an open accusation of acute harm mere feet from a building invoking the haunting violence of policing is an act of defiance. This intentional placement begins with the assertion that white supremacist violence is inherent to policing, and thus must be marked visibly in close proximity to structures which house or exemplify the institution. This accusation becomes not only visible to the residents of Capitol Hill, as a stark reminder of the profoundly negative impact of police violence, but to cops themselves, as a reminder that the community of Capitol Hill will not allow for such harm to pass without incident.

Capitol Hill’s chalk artist followed the same format, the same script, for many of their messages left outside and around the East Precinct. Like a litany, repeated as a prayer, they read: “SPD killed this person—abolish SPD”. Over and over again, revealing dozens of names, often names I had not heard and did not recognize at that point. These messages reiterated themselves not only across names, as memorials to different people, but also in repetitions across time, as the activity of the city eventually wiped one away. The pairing of a medium like chalk
that weathers over the lifespan of a few days and weeks lends itself well to this work of iteration, and underscores that the remembrance of the victims of police brutality should continue even past the single bright and unclouded day. Through rain, through the gradual degradation of time passing and people moving, the work continues. This effort to remember those who lost their lives to the armed enforcement of white supremacy, and to ensure that such senseless losses are not repeated, reiterates itself just as these inscriptions make themselves known, again and again, newly refreshed and once again brightly colored.

These messages call on their audience to do two things: to consider and recognize a name and the circumstances meriting that name’s remembrance, and to act from that recognition and understanding to push for a different world. These two efforts, a push for recognition and a provocation to change, are necessarily linked. The practice of memory in Capitol Hill is not passive, nor is it accepting of the naturalization of structures of violence. For the people and communities invested in Black liberation and police abolition, the remembrance of police brutality victims does not stem from a cynicism or resignation at the systemic nature of white supremacy, but rather from a loving rage and drive to dismantle these systems and create something better. Likewise, the call to remember the names and lives of police brutality victims must come with a call to tear down the powers that premised their deaths.

These messages, as they are marked onto the surfaces of sidewalks and walls, are pointed acts of creation. It is not enough for these words to position themselves against a structure of power. More than this, they demonstrate and are
part of the generative force of imagining worlds outside of policing and white supremacy. Implicit and ever-present in the act of marking surfaces with chalk is the power that people have to not just alter, but contribute to their surroundings. This was the drive that created the occupied protest in 2020, the desire to deconstruct a place evocative of anti-Black violence and repurpose, refashion, and better it for the sake of promoting liberation and healing for Black people. The production of messages in chalk in Capitol Hill traces out the possibility of a better future, and reminds the viewers of these messages that such futures are possible if and when they organize to create them.

The medium, as well as the message itself, is important for this tracing out of possible futures. Chalk, the choice of children on summer days, at first does not seem suited to the gravity of a statement indicting the violence of policing as a system. Indeed, there is some dissonance in the affects of joy and nostalgia coloring the use of this medium when contrasted with the deep sense of mourning and injustice felt on behalf of the people named. This dissonance enhances the visibility and mental staying power of the message itself, as the viewer must then untangle these feelings in order to fully parse the message’s call to action. And yet, chalk’s vibrant reminder of happier moments does more than challenge its audience through dissonance. The nostalgic sense-memory of chalk resonates with the call of these messages to prioritize remembrance, and to use that remembrance as a force to change the world around us.
Figure 6: An example of some of the work created by Capitol Hill’s chalk artist. The sidewalk backing up to the baseball diamond in Cal Anderson Park is host to carefully penned messages in a variety of bright colors. Among the collected messages is “free the people,” “dismantle systems of oppression,” “no human is illegal, especially on stolen land,” and “justice is abolition.” The chalk messages are a few days old; the dust stretches outward in small haloes from each message, and lines intersect some of the messages where bike-goers have passed directly over them. Still, the messages saturate this small corner of the park, calling on a prospective audience to slow down and disentangle them.

**Editing Capitol Hill: The Afterlife of Memory**

Chalk is an easy medium to co-opt or neutralize. One cup of water and it’s erased. Even the palm of a hand can wipe away whatever was written, leaving a smear instead of a slogan. Over the summer, one Tweet documented this in a series of photographs, the slogan “housing is a human right” reduced to “housing is □□□”. The following picture showed the message rewritten in full, along with
the addition of a citation to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the year the US ratified it. This oppositional editing and redacting and rewriting can be seen everywhere. A “TRUMP 2024” graffiti is edited overnight to read “fuck TRUMP 2024”. Black X’s slash over posters protesting the overturning of Roe v. Wade, even later disappear as they are papered over by the original poster. And of course, the removal of chalk graffiti calling attention to victims of police violence, calling for abolition, only for such reminders to resurface in the span of a few days.

The streets of Capitol Hill are made, and unmade, by its people. And even as certain messages are erased from their positions in space, their significance remains.

I remember one day at the end of July, walking out of the Cap Hill link station onto Broadway. Past groups of people lining up for their breakfast at the Dick’s Drive-In, past the benches outside of the M2M Mart where two older men with salt-and-pepper hair always sat and told jokes, past the Seattle Central College campus, in a quiet lull at this highpoint of the summer. It was there that I first saw the posters: black images and text on a white background, glued to a Blue Light pole. “SOLIDARITY For All Anti-Fascist Prisoners,” it read, “#J25” repeating along the bottom edge.

Once I saw this first poster, I kept seeing it. All up and down Broadway, on both sides of the street, covering over faded graffiti on apartment walls and the backs of no-parking signs and the solid inch of older posters papier-mâché’d to every electric pole, I saw it. I saw it, snapped a few pictures as quickly and
surreptitiously as possible for fear of being deemed a tourist disrupting the flow of traffic, and made a note to myself to keep an eye out for any actions or protests coinciding with them.

And it looked like others were keeping an eye out, too. The next day, I re-emerged into Capitol Hill, ready to get a closer look at these new signs prominently displayed across the neighborhood’s most populated roadway. The first thing I noticed, however, was not a poster, but a man. A white man, graying hair receding at the temples from a peaked hairline, wearing a plain red tee shirt and jeans, and wielding what looked to be a paint scraper. He stood at the corner of Broadway and East John Street, right across from the entrance to the link station, his body bracketing the metal pole holding up the intersection’s traffic light. He pushed his paint scraper up the side of the pole, and I watched as curls of white paper landed at his feet. Working with a patient diligence afforded by an abundance of time, the man worked his way around the pole, shaving off the layer of paper covering it until only the dull sheen of metal remained. Satisfied, the man walked away from the pole and up the street, paint scraper in hand. I watched on as the curls of paper, the only evidence left of whatever the man had decided to remove, scattered in the wind, scraps dancing into the nearby storm drain like errant snowflakes.

Now walking with a purpose, I retraced my steps from yesterday, hoping to check on the posters I had found. On the Blue light pole, on an electrical access box built into the sidewalk, on a chain-link fence surrounding a boarded-up storefront—all of the posters I had seen the day before had been ripped from their
places, leaving at most some translucent and unreadable remnants, like a price
sticker not quite fully removed from a purchase. This evidence I had seen of
tangible, ongoing action in Capitol Hill, reduced to nothing more than my own
rushed photos and scraps of paper on the street.

This moment, of a man removing a poster glued onto a street corner pole,
speaks to the uneven and contentious distribution of visibility as it plays out
across the surfaces of Seattle. The man in question was not identifiable to me as
affiliated with any branch of the city government and lacked the standard uniform
of coveralls, high-visibility vest or hard had that would mark him as one of the
city’s contractors. Nevertheless, he could do the work of removing the #J25
solidarity posters in broad daylight, as one part of a larger effort to invisiblize
work that would otherwise bring to light the everyday violence of the state. While
graffiti artists must wait for the perfect moment to strike and imprint a message on
a wall in Cal Anderson Park, or else risk being arrested, those aligned with the
state’s efforts to justify and mask its own oppressive foundations can do so with
the assurance of an abundance of time to do so.

So, when examining the oppositional editing that writes and rewrites the
desires and demands of Capitol Hill, we must first recognize that the actors
involved in this debate already operate along uneven levels of power. Already,
actors aligned with the state have the ability, and often the resources, to alter the
appearance of the neighborhood and be visible themselves as doing so. Those
expressing messages opposing white supremacy, fascism, and other violent
structures adopted by the state must make such provocations without being seen.
This both mirrors the distribution of the sensible which allows for violence to occur invisibly, while also underscoring the urgency with which people act to alter this balance and make their opposition seen and felt.

Posters tacked up on a street corner, like temporary autonomous zones, are not made with the expectation that they must outlast the people who make them. Rather, they are intended to serve certain purposes, deliver specific messages or prompt certain kinds of action, with the knowledge that these sorts of things do not (and maybe should not) last forever. If somebody hadn’t torn them down, the posters would’ve gotten destroyed in the next rain. The act of taking down the J25 posters, rather than underscoring a cynical temporariness or ruination of the message being invoked, in fact shows how the ideas present in Capitol Hill’s occupied protest are still being actively proposed and contested in material ways by real people.

These ideas, the notion that the system we live in is fascistic and we need to show solidarity with people imprisoned for standing up to it, means things to people. It means enough for people in support of the idea to put up posters raising awareness of J25, and it means enough for the people against that idea to tear those posters down. Capitol Hill is a place made and unmade by the people in it, because those people have different and even contradictory images for how that place should be. Posters, graffiti, murals, community gardens, protests—they’re all made by people, trying to fashion and refashion a city into something more livable. Returning to Glissant’s notion of the trace, this making tangible of political messaging produces new ways for the people in Capitol Hill to relate to
their surroundings and to each other. The invocation of the J25 poster in which I focus here is explicitly about producing new communities, new connections among otherwise disconnected people, through the act of solidarity in the face of state violence and repression.

In that moment, I mourned what I felt to be a loss of evidence, an erasure of political action and provocation as it manifested itself on the surfaces of Seattle’s streets. And yet, this was not entirely the case, or at least, not the entire story. Because the truth of the matter is that those posters served their purpose. I saw them, and I saw enough to look for myself into what J25 signified. Any number of other people could have done the same, and likely did, in the few days the posters went up. The posters lived a life that was decidedly finite, and yet their intervention into the makeup of the Capitol Hill neighborhood made at least one person stop and think. In that moment, even as I mourned a—admittedly small—kind of loss, I nonetheless held the memory of that object, the physical manifestation of another person’s call to action, able to be acted upon at a future time. This is the work of the trace: not a marked and irretrievable absence, but the lingering presence that plants the seed of something new. Even as tangible messages fade, through the passage of time or through their intentional destruction by those who disagree, they continue to inspire new ways of understanding and moving through the world.

This is what I learned about J25: it marks the occasion of June 25, a day designated as the International Day of Solidarity with Anti-Fascist Prisoners. Beginning in 2015 to honor an Australian man arrested in Bulgaria for taking
action to protect two Romani people from fascist attack, the holiday spiraled outward and was taken up by anti-fascist networks across the globe. Online, you can find lists of people imprisoned for participating in anti-fascist work, often with links to financially support them or with addresses to which you may send messages of encouragement.

At this same time, nearing the end of June, I noticed something else happening: online, through Tweets and Instagram infographics, and more materially through the pasting of stickers and posters to walls, there was a resurgence in calls for legal support for protesters arrested during the George Floyd protests in 2020. With some protesters in the Seattle area still awaiting trial and others forced to plead guilty, the call went out for them, as well, to receive letters, commissary funds, and jail support. It took me heeding the instructions of the J25 posters to connect these events to anything other than the anniversary of the protests. It was that and more—a moment meant to commemorate and support people repressed by the state for antifascist work, and to recognize the push for the recognition, celebration, and liberation of Black people and communities as part of that same struggle.  

Resonating with this struggle over the visibility and invisibility of messages in the space of Seattle’s streets, is the work of the prison-industrial complex in disappearing people, displacing them from their own communities and rendering them invisible, rather than attempting to solve the systemic problems which contribute to crime. Imprisonment functionally kills worlds and communities, and people are left to learn to hold space for, remember, and support their incarcerated community members in the wake of a different kind of loss.
Figure 7: A collection of names and messages, painted onto spare pieces of wood and bricks and left on the steps at the edge of the reflecting pool in Cal Anderson Park. The names included are Atatiana Jefferson, Manuel Ellis, Sandra Bland, John T. Williams, Tony McDade, Philando [Castille], Reggie Coleman, and Daniel Prude. One plank of wood, on the bottom step to the left, reads “thousands of deaths at the ‘US-Mexico’ border—DESTROY the border.” Another, sitting above them all, reads, “we keep us safe.” Days after this picture was taken, the messages painted on bricks were removed, but the rest remained in the park as a continual reminder of the lives lost to police and state violence.

Say Their Names

Herbert Hightower, Jr. was killed by the Seattle Police Department in 2004 while experiencing a mental health crisis. He was 24 years old. His name is still being remembered and honored: in December of 2020, Russel Wilson of the
Seattle Seahawks walked onto the field during a national football game in a pair of custom cleats displaying the faces of him, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Charleena Lyles.  

Charleena Lyles was a pregnant mother of four, who was shot and killed in her home by Seattle police officers in 2017. In 2021, Lyles’ family was paid $3.5 million by the city of Seattle to settle the wrongful death suit level against the city. Her name is still remembered and honored: along with her inclusion in the cleats made for Russel Wilson, her family and community continues to seek justice for her wrongful death, in spite of a legal system that refuses to hold police officers accountable.  

Terry Caver was killed by the Seattle Police department on May 19, 2020, only six days before the death of George Floyd would push the city of Seattle and the country at large to protest. He was 57 years old. His name is still remembered and honored: his family speaks of him as a generous and caring man, who did not deserve to be killed while suffering from a mental health condition.  

Iosia Faletogo was killed by Seattle police on New Years Eve in 2018 during an unjustified traffic stop. In 2021, the city settled the civil suit surrounding his wrongful death for $515,000. His name is still remembered: a bill was introduced in February 2023 to the Washington State Legislature that would

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restrict traffic stops for minor offenses, inspired by the experiences of people like Faletogo and his family.¹⁰

These are names that I saw, again and again, during my time in Seattle. These names inspired the activists and community members that populated the protest spaces of 2020, and their work continues into the present. And these names are now being shared with you, to join in this process of remembrance and honoring that makes itself known in the neighborhood of Capitol Hill. All of these people are so much more than what I have told you here. Their lives encompass an infinity more powerful than anything I could contain in this text. And yet, it is important for you to know who they were. It is important for you to know that their deaths, but even more so their lives, continue to inspire people to action. This action does not simply seek to dismantle structures like policing, but in doing so also envisions more just and caring ways of living in community.

As they are memorialized in chalk on a sidewalk, in paintings and posters and flower-covered altars, these names continue to mean something. These names, like the people they belong to, live on beyond a physical lifetime in the ways that their community continues to remember them. And far from being a passive act, this intentional, formal practice of remembrance intervenes in the space of Capitol Hill. Where passers-by witness these names, be it on a footpath in Cal Anderson Park or within eyesight of the East Precinct, the viewer is then left to reckon with what they have come to signify. These names force the acknowledge of white supremacist violence as it is enacted by the state. From this

¹⁰ https://www.axios.com/local/seattle/2023/02/01/traffic-stops-limits-police-washington-state
acknowledgement, those brought into this practice of memory now hold a new way of seeing and relating to the world around them.

This is the space of possibility opened up by remembrance. Far from negating a consideration of futurity, the conscious centering of victims of police brutality both recontextualizes the present and provokes a call to transform the future. The names of police brutality victims call attention to the omnipresence of white supremacy in everyday structures of power, and in doing so denaturalize it. At the same time, however, these names challenge the power of white supremacy, as practices of remembrance aim to center victims’ lives over the violence to which they were subjected. From this, remembrance models a more just way of being. Remembrance of Black lives killed by police must take place, as it prompts the building of communities actively engaged in preventing future loss. In this way, the opposition to white supremacy’s violent involvement in everyday life is transformed into something which traces out the beginnings of a more generative way of being.
Conclusion

In a country where white supremacy invades all aspects of life, where structures of violence are omnipresent within daily life so as to become normal, how can people work to imagine ways of living beyond that? For the communities in Seattle devoted to the struggle for Black liberation, this question is more than rhetorical, and it is answered every day. The vibrant possibilities of life liberated from systemic racism and anti-Blackness are built and modeled as these people position their lives against such harmful systems. The only recourse to a life invaded by oppressive systems rendered to be normal is by living a life which regularly and continuously disrupts oppressive systems. Although the Capitol Hill occupied protest may stand as a key example of how this way of living could appear, it does not mean that such possibilities of living disappeared with protest itself.

The work of disrupting the normalcy of white supremacy continues through the profound and impactful work of artists in Seattle. Through painting, music, or the written word, Capitol Hill’s artists even now creatively experiment in new and better ways of living. Beyond simply making cracks in the foundation of white supremacist logics (Walsh 2018), these forms of creation also plant the seeds for something new to grow in that space. The work of disrupting the logic of racial capitalism is not simply oppositional, but also, even more so, generative. In opposing and unsettling the logics of racial capitalism which would reduce the
Black artist to laborer and Black art to profane commodity, a privileging of human joy and community become not only possible, but the best path forward.

The work of recognizing and confronting the ghostly hauntings of police violence continues through the vigilant care of Capitol Hill’s communities. Whereas the state employs the image of the spectacle to decontextualize and remove from history the extreme acts of warfare it wages against Black people, those committed to worlds not structured around white supremacist violence still work to perceive the violence of policing for what it truly is. In actions as simple as pulling out a phone to record a huddle of policemen on a sidewalk, people in Capitol Hill can use their own vigilance in tracking the danger of policing to unmask it for those around them. Even more than this, the act of vigilance comes paired with an attendance to community care outside of carceral structures.

Through the making tangible of memorial practices, the work of denaturalizing police presence and action continues onward, as well. The creation of memorials to the victims of police and state violence, be they as small as a name written in chalk or as grand as a collection of bouquets and candles, all point to a model of living which shifts priorities from violent carceral systems to something that centers and remembers peoples’ lives. These memorials intervene in the ways the very space of Capitol Hill is allocated, bringing into question the necessity of a designated space representing carceral violence. In the repetition of names, we are once again reminded that ways of living which center human life and community care are possible beyond the harsh imposition of everyday structures of violence.
Together, these efforts all come together to help us envision a world where a devotion to community, to recognizing the value of lives that have been historically devalued, is able to exceed attempts by white supremacy to render itself as the only way of being. During the month of the Capitol Hill occupied protest, this process of envisioning was incredibly potent. With the police at least nominally out of the neighborhood and the space reclaimed for the people of Seattle, the “reality effect” of government (Graeber 2009, 284), the ways in which state violence enforces and constrains ways of being so that other alternatives do not feel possible, had been stretched to its most thin. In this sense, the occupied protest was able to function as a profound ground for experimentation in how to live when not always already limited by the bounds of white supremacist institutions.

Perhaps, then, given the threat the occupied protest posed to the white supremacist state on an ontological level, it was always going to be overtaken and dismantled. The projected lifeline of the protest was always an indeterminate, amorphous thing, as many of my interlocutors attested. And yet, this finitude of life does not negate the impact the space had in showing that this kind of imagining otherwise is possible. Nor does it negate how, moving into the present moment, this work of imagining and modeling an antiracist otherwise is something people are still working to achieve, albeit in more fractal ways.

Even two years after the George Floyd protests, at the time of my research, this work was ongoing. Even now as of writing this, almost three years out from the protests, this work still continues. The work of people committed to abolition,
committed to investment into communities of color, committed to the valuing of Black lives in a way that this country has not historically valued them, acts as a reminder to all who witness it. Their actions remind us that other ways of living are possible. Other, better futures are possible. And this text, in honoring the work of these communities, hopes to remind you of the same.

What does a future beyond the imposition of white supremacy into all aspects of life look like? For many of the people I was lucky enough to speak with, this imagining of the future is already here to be seen and felt in the present, if one only looks for it hard enough. Mutual aid networks crisscross the city in a fabulous rhizomatic pattern, working to cover as much ground, and support as many people, as possible. Direct Outreach in Teams, or DOIT Seattle, holds regular table events on street corners in the University District, providing a low barrier to entry to people interesting in learning about abolition.

Black Star Farmers, which began as a guerilla gardening effort in the Capital Hill occupied protest, has now grown to dozens of volunteers working to grow food for Black and brown community members in Capitol Hill. Africatown Community Land Trust, an organization predating the occupied protests of 2020, has not faltered in its mission to provide community ownership of land to members of the African diaspora in Seattle. Initiative 135, a city ballot initiative proposing the development and maintenance of social housing, was approved in February of 2023 after months of grassroots campaigning.

Even beyond all of this, we can return to the aspirations Laina shared “if [the protest] was going to go on forever.” For her, this envisioning of a better kind
of future, a future in which the life of the occupied protest and its creative experimentation could be guaranteed, looked like artists and teachers and activists working together on the same block. To her, this future looked like a community invested in all people’s collective joy.

This vision of a future is still attainable. It only asks that we work to confront omnipresent and normalized structures of violence that would prevent it. It only asks that we believe a better future to be possible.

Figure 8: Even in the aftermath of the occupied protest, the call for a Free Capitol Hill remains within reach.
Bibliography


