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A CONVERSATION WITH VICKY OSTERWEIL

by ZOÉ SAMUDZI

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# Stealing Away in America

*Zoé Samudzi*



Since the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25th, the country has been seized by protests against police brutality. In addition to peaceful marches and demonstrations, there have also been dramatic scenes of looting and property damage: for example, the burning of Minneapolis's Third Precinct, which was preceded by looting of shops in the surrounding neighborhood, including a Target. These scenes—and similar ones in cities across the nation—have prompted the return of familiar arguments about looting that have periodically arisen for years—including, in recent memory, during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the 1992 LA riots that followed the police assault of Rodney King.

This debate was also reactivated six years ago at the beginning of the Ferguson uprisings, after the murder of Michael Brown, when many pundits and lay commentators praised the peaceful protests against police brutality while forcefully condemning looting as misguided or even counterproductive. In response, Vicky Osterweil published the essay “In Defense of Looting” in *The New Inquiry*. In the essay, Osterweil refuses the moralistic distinction between “non-violent protesters” and “looters,” writing that looting actually reveals “precisely how, in a space without cops, property relations can be destroyed and things can be had for free.” She also pushes back on common objections to these tactics, such as the claim that rioters are engaging in self-defeating behavior. She quotes a viral video in which one Ferguson rioter says, “People want to say we’re destroying our own neighborhoods. We don’t own nothing out here!” Osterweil writes, “This . . . could be said of most majority black neighborhoods in America, which have much higher concentrations of chain stores and fast food restaurants than non-black neighborhoods . . . How could the average Ferguson resident really say it’s ‘our QuikTrip?’” She goes on to argue that liberal critics of looting are often hypocritical. “The same white liberals who inveigh against corporations for destroying local communities are aghast when rioters take their critique to its actual material conclusion,” she writes.

Now, Osterweil has expanded her essay into a book, **In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action**, out this August. In the book, Osterweil has developed the original essay into a searching examination of the origins and evolution of policing, race, and property rights. Ultimately, Osterweil demands we not only overcome the respectability politics animating our desire for “peaceful protests,” but that we work to abolish the racial capitalist logics at the heart of American empire—logics that, she argues, are contested by the very act of property damage. In light of the resurgent conversation about whether to divide the “looters” from the “peaceful protesters,” I spoke to Osterweil about her book and its view of property damage as essential to the erosion of the racist property relations that uphold white supremacy—and the often fatal police violence that enforces it.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

**Zoé Samudzi:** Can you describe the etymology of the word “looting” and how that informs its present racialized usage?

**Vicky Osterweil:** The word “loot” was taken from Hindi by [British] colonial officers. It first appears in English in an 1845 colonial officer’s handbook. From the very beginning it’s this really racializing word that contains the idea that black and brown people were obsessed with plunder—that they had a deviant relationship to property, as opposed to the proper ownership embodied by the colonizers. This connotation persists today, which is why people are so reactive and defensive against the word. It really is a classic dog whistle. When Trump says, “When the looting starts the shooting starts,” we know he’s not talking about the white protesters who might be helping and participating. He’s talking about murdering black people.

**ZS:** In your book, you explain the relationship between property rights and the evolution of white supremacy and racial structures. You write, “Many historians have shown that strong, explicit racist ideology does not appear in the historical record in America until the revolutionary period, when the rights of man (and it is indeed man) became the defining philosophy of US politics. If the rights to liberty and property are inalienable, then what to do about all these people who are very clearly not in possession of liberty, or the capacity of property ownership?” To solve this conundrum, the colonists enforced the structure and hierarchy of race in America by designating white people as owners and black people as things to be owned, therefore joining racial identity and citizenship to property relations. How can we think about looting in the context of what you are describing as the racial roots of property?

**VO:** [The Jamaican writer and cultural theorist] Sylvia Wynter talks about this in her essay “No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” about the way LA police were referring to a black criminal underclass using the phrase “No Humans Involved,” or “NHI.” She uses that as a jumping-off point for her project about the construction of the human: how the idea of humanity itself is built on the denial of [human] status to black people. This project of rights and legal bourgeois subjecthood is being built on a definition of humanity that necessarily has an outside: That outside is always African and Indigenous populations.

The enslaved—who were not only excluded from property ownership, but were themselves defined as property—understood innately that the concept of property made no sense. They would call just having a meeting “stealing” the meeting, and they would call escaping “stealing away.” Once you have been made into property by a society, then you recognize that any freedom you’re going to have has to be stolen.

**ZS:** You write, “This specter of slaves freeing themselves is American history’s first image of black looters.” I really love the way you play with time, retroactively

applying the word “looters” and connecting it to contemporary usage. It really allows us to connect the sheer magnitude of the state’s theft, trafficking, and enslavement of African people to its present fear of the black looter destroying and stealing in return.

**VO:** For centuries, black thinkers have been arguing that slavery didn’t actually end [after abolition and emancipation]. Frederick Douglass was making that claim in the 1880s. Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe talks about how we have to understand the entire capitalist world as living in the wake of the techniques and modes of living that were produced in colonization and the slave trade. I think understanding that is really vital to breaking out of the progressive narrative that things have been getting better. In 1892, fewer people were getting lynched than are being killed every year by the police in America, which means there are more police lynchings now than there ever were at the height of lynching as a white fascist movement. None of these problems have gone away. There have been moments of uprising and resistance when they have been pushed back: Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, even LA in 1992. But the fundamental structures never shift.

**ZS:** I often find that the *real* objection to property damage is about the fact that there’s always a caveat for the preservation and maintenance of black life, a set of specific conditions under which most white people feel comfortable about allowing black people to exist. You write that the “specter of slaves freeing themselves,” the fear of black looting, is really the white fear of and objection to black people choosing terms of existence *beyond* white law and order. It’s a kind of deep-seated existential objection—one that we just don’t see, for instance, in responses, even condemnatory ones, to white people rioting and setting things on fire after a big sports victory.

**VO:** I think there is a desire on white people’s behalf to deny the existence of the anti-Black, white supremacist state that we live in. They don’t want to believe in it! They live their lives organized around not believing in it even as they benefit from it.

Legal scholar Cheryl L. Harris, in her very important text “Whiteness as Property,” argues that the ultimate property in society is whiteness. And for many white folks, especially in this country in 2020, [whiteness] may be the only property they own. Part of why so many have come out to the street this time is because they realize that the wages of whiteness have gotten really low. It’s important to understand that whiteness and property are inextricable from each other: Without one there cannot be the other. We tend to think of property as tangible things or commodities, but it also includes rights, protections, and customs of possession passed down and ratified through law. Whiteness emerges as the race of people who are neither Indigenous nor enslavable—national identities are increasingly collapsed around the distinctions of slave/free and black/white.

So when black folks rise up and attack property, they're also attacking whiteness. That is an understanding that goes back to the plantation: When you attack your status as property, you attack whiteness as domination over you.

**ZS:** It's so interesting to think about the slogan we often see: Being pro-Black isn't anti-white. But if you're supporting black people in the street protesting the police, if you're supporting white people protesting against the violence of the police, you are necessarily opposing whiteness.

**VO:** Yes. Whiteness only exists as the condition under which you can oppress black and Indigenous people. That's the identity of whiteness. There is nothing [else] there. The peace of whiteness is a peace of the grave. It needs to be abolished—and if we're talking about abolishing whiteness, we're also talking about abolishing the police. Police evolved from slave patrols, slave catchers, colonial overseers (in the Caribbean as well as Ireland), and as anti-riot forces designed to control new urban non-white populations. The earliest modern police force *in the world* was in Charleston, South Carolina: the City Guard. It existed mostly to control and terrorize the quarters where “hired out” enslaved people lived at some remove from their plantations and enslavers, and thus represented some small amount of autonomy, and the possibility of rebellion or organization—which was a threat to the white establishment. Further, one of the main [original] tasks of the NYPD, the earliest police force in the North, included enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act—kidnapping free black people and sending them back into slavery—and putting down the anti-slave catcher riots that were a major part of the abolition movement in antebellum New York.

In other words, from the very beginning, police exist to prevent black people from unsettling their status as property and threatening property itself, as well as to repress other unruly proles who might riot, refuse work, and otherwise attack property and its systems.

**ZS:** In discussions about looting, people sometimes categorize survival theft—for example, stealing food or baby formula when you need it—differently from what's seen as opportunistic, joyriding theft. Do do you think that particular distinction really matters?

**VO:** No. I don't think so. Many people would, in moments of peace, encourage opportunism: They would tell you that you're just not working hard enough, you just need to get a better job, you need to better yourself. But when people who have been denied those legal “proper” routes toward wealth take an opportunistic moment to act, then suddenly opportunism becomes a crime. Then opportunism reveals a sort of villainous or lazy disposition. This distinction ignores the law of value. If you were really broke and you go into a department store and you grab as much food as you can carry, that's going to last you a lot less long in terms of survival than grabbing a handful of jewelry. You can carry a lot more value out of



a store in more valuable things.

This understanding also erases something essential about the act of looting, which is that it's actually really scary and tense and difficult. It's not just an easy solution to the problems you have. It also undermines the capitalist system by pointing to a way of relating to things and to each other that doesn't involve property. It's a way of immediately transforming your relation to the world around you. I think that's also part of what makes it so scary for onlookers, and why they want to divide between people stealing a bag of rice and people stealing a flat screen TV.

**ZS:** What about the distinction between looting from or damaging small businesses as opposed to chain stores or corporations?

**VO:** “Small business” has come to mean a “moral” business, a “good” thing. As anyone who has worked for small businesses can attest, small businesses often subject workers to just as much wage theft and workplace harm as large ones. Small businesses may occasionally uplift, but more often they prey on the poor as much as big businesses, just a little less profitably.

In the case of riots, as looting is usually done by people who live in the neighborhoods where it occurs, distinctions are often made between businesses that gentrify or oppress, and those that don't. Liquor stores, pawn shops, pharmacies, and gentro-cafes tend to be hit much more readily than the quaint “small business” the phrase is designed to evoke. I believe we should trust those who loot and riot to understand their targets and their actions: to have analyzed the social world they live in, and therefore to trust them when they select the targets of their rage and resistance—especially when that rage is applied to property. No amount of lost business is worth more than a single lost life.

**ZS:** You quote the black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman—whom I consider the queen of pleasure and anarchy—describing black people taking small moments of pleasure as “stealing away”—which, as you noted, is a phrase enslaved people used to talk about escaping. It's so interesting that the language used to talk about pleasure overlaps with the language of theft, the criminal and also self-emancipatory act of freeing oneself from bondage. This also makes me think about how the revolutionary Frantz Fanon talks about violence as an act of self-making. What you think is the function or role of pleasure in looting? I don't think that part is negligible or apolitical.

**VO:** One of the things that scares police and politicians the most when they enter a riot zone—and there are quotes from across the 20th century of police and politicians saying this—is that it was happy: Everyone was happy. In the book, I quote a piece by the playwright Charles Fuller, who happened to be a young man starting out his career during the Philadelphia riots of 1964. He talks about the incredible sense of safety and joy and carnival that happens in the streets.

I think riots and militant violent action in general get slandered as being macho and bro-y, and lots of our male comrades like to project that sort of image. That definitely happens, but I actually think riots are incredibly femme. Riots are really emotive, an emotional way of expressing yourself. It is about pleasure and social reproduction. You care for one another by getting rid of the thing that makes that impossible, which is the police and property. You attack the thing that makes caring impossible in order to have things for free, to share pleasure on the street. Obviously, riots are not the revolution in and of themselves. But they gesture toward the world to come, where the streets are spaces where we are free to be happy, and be with each other, and care for each other.



