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Guest Editorial

George Floyd, Minneapolis, and spaces of hope and liberation

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It scarcely needs to be said that the murder of George Floyd at the hands of former Minneapolis police officer (and convicted felon) Derek Chauvin in late May 2020, and the accompanying protests and resistance that followed both in Minneapolis and around the world, was momentous for many people, myself included. Out of all the events that could have happened in the home stretch of writing my doctoral dissertation, seeing my home city become the latest focal point of police violence, brutality, and resistance was perhaps the last thing that I expected.

For days after Floyd's killing, my attention was firmly planted on home—I will openly admit that not a lot of dissertation work got done during that period, but how could I focus on my dissertation at a time when the convergence of spatial affect informed by childhood memories and a healthy dose of homesickness was particularly potent for me?

After all, George Floyd lost his life in front of a neighborhood convenience store that I had passed by many times as a young child growing up in South Minneapolis—it's within a six-block radius of many of my childhood spaces, including my old elementary school and several apartment buildings that I lived in as a young child. The protests in front of the Fourth Precinct and its immediate vicinity occurred in the same spaces that my parents and I would visit for grocery shopping, or a trip to the nearby Target. Young Deondre likely looked at the police precinct building on one of these trips and then probably looked away, not giving it a second thought—the next time I happen to go past that space, I will know better.

The events made me feel concern and worry for the many members of my family that still call Minneapolis home. All of this was amplified by the fact that due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I simply could not return home to be with the friends and family whose emotional and physical well-being were at stake.

In Ohio and online, friends and colleagues expressed solidarity and support when I expressed my distress—'We are surprised that something like this would happen in Minneapolis of all places', they would say to me. Of course, others, particularly social media-savvy suburban Minnesotans, would attribute the protests to the inherent 'dangerousness' of Minneapolis, and another example of why it should be avoided. As a geographer and a Minneapolitan of color, it is clear to me that this is indicative of the ways in which we inscribe certain spaces as 'safe' or 'dangerous' based on conditions such as police violence, and the ways in which, in the case of Minneapolis, such violence makes itself felt upon

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space in both spectacular and quotidian ways (Smiles, 2018).

Of course, Floyd's death is not the first time that Minnesota or the Twin Cities have gotten in the news for the death of a Black man at the hands of the police. The death of Philando Castile in 2016, as well as the very recent death of Daunte Wright in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center (another familiar space from my childhood), are other moments that have grabbed the nation's and the world's attention—particularly since Wright's death occurred during the trial of Derek Chauvin. However, people from outside of Minnesota are often surprised when I and other Black, Indigenous, and other Minnesotans of color mention that these supposedly 'spectacular' moments of police violence are simply footnotes in a larger history of segregation and state violence that extends back to the early histories of the settler colony known as Minnesota.

The Twin Cities have always been fraught spaces for people of color. For example, rising Indigenous populations in the Twin Cities due to processes of relocation from rural Minnesota and other places in the Midwest after World War II led to increased friction between Indigenous peoples and police, with Native community members forming the American Indian Movement in 1968 in response to police brutality (D'Arcus, 2010). In regard to Black Minnesotans, Minneapolis and St. Paul were among the most segregated cities in the United States, on par with cities in the Jim Crow South, but with the protection of the historical veneer of Minnesota as a Northern state without statewide *de jure* segregation (University of Minnesota, 2020). Racial covenants and redlining ensured that White Minnesotans were the only ones allowed to live in desired neighborhoods (Miller, 2020; University of Minnesota, 2020). The historical Black neighborhood of Rondo in St Paul went under the bulldozer in the 1960s, as Interstate 94 carved a concrete and asphalt cavern right through the middle of the city. Riots such as the one that occurred along Plymouth Avenue in 1967 led to increased disinvestment in parts of Minneapolis itself and white flight toward increasingly segregated suburbs (Einhorn and Chiwaya, 2016; Eligon, 2016).

Even in the parlance of everyday Twin Cities denizens, racialized spaces take on coded meanings about their safety or non-safety. Let's take Minneapolis as an example: areas of the city and place names such as southwest Minneapolis, Prospect Park, Uptown, 'Nordeast' Minneapolis, and '50th and France' suggest safety, vibrancy—these are also very white spaces, both historically and contemporaneously through processes of gentrification. Places such as North Minneapolis, parts of South Minneapolis, West Broadway, Little Earth, Lake Street, and Cedar-Riverside often have subtle connections with danger, crime—these are the places you don't want to be after night, as so many suburbanites and well-to-do Minneapolitans will likely tell you. They also happen to be spaces that have large proportions of Black and Indigenous residents. They grapple with fraught relationships with the police and continued disinvestment and neglect by city leaders (Chapman, 2021). To take a different analysis of Achille Mbembe's (2003) idea of *necropolitics*, these are the spaces where death is acceptable in the eyes of the state, both through political and economic disinvestment as well as shootings (police-related and otherwise) and other forms of violence. The Minneapolis Police Department figures heavily in this maelstrom of state violence and necropolitics—for example, Black Minneapolitans are far more likely to be stopped, arrested, or subject to force than White Minneapolitans, despite only making up about 20% of the city's population (Beer, 2020; Furber et al., 2020).

Motivations for the protests that arose surrounding George Floyd's death (and recently with Daunte Wright's death) will likely vary depending on who you ask and the spaces they inhabit. As I mentioned earlier, many of my suburbanite associates, as well as the typical denizens of social media posts surrounding the protests, chalked up the protests to being merely 'riots', acts of violence carried out by 'thugs' who simply wanted to take advantage of the situation to steal, smash, and burn. *Of course*, protests took place where they did, people would say—those neighborhoods were already dangerous, and the protests simply reinforced that.

However, to many others, myself included, the protests were another example of the ways in which

Figure 1. Memorials at George Floyd Square, May 2021 (Photo Credit: Author).

spaces of state violence can be remade into spaces of hope, liberation, and the possibility of a better future. This work isn't new in Minneapolis. For example, Tia-Simone Gardner (2021) presents tiny homes as an example of the ways in which Black Minneapolitans may be able to achieve broader home ownership in a gentrified and de facto segregated city. Despite the inherent risk of being yet another example of Black fugitivity due to the access and mobilities that they might provide, tiny homes also represent the creation of what Gardner describes as 'workable' architectural geographies that present alternative futures to capitalism and gentrification (Gardner, 2021).

What has happened in Minneapolis surrounding George Floyd's death, and what has happened in places like Brooklyn Center, Ferguson, Washington, DC, and countless other places where collective anger has taken to the streets to protest police violence also represents a challenge to the continued marginalization of Black, Indigenous, and other spaces of color through disinvestment and neglect by the state. Minneapolitans of color, and to be quite frank, people of color in cities across the United States, are not content with the status quo. To me, they are building upon what scholars such as Beth Rose Middleton Manning (2019) have described as 'geographies of hope', and what other scholars such as Adam Bledsoe and Willie Jamaal Wright (2019) describe as the pluralities of Black geographies. Although they draw on different situated knowledges—Middleton writes about this in contexts of repatriation of Indigenous remains while

Figure 2. 'Where There's People There's Power' at George Floyd Square, May 2021 (Photo Credit: Author).

Bledsoe and Wright are writing about the various spatial articulations and re-articulations of Black expression and resistance—I feel that questions of hope, healing, the possibility of a brighter future, and the ways in which these concepts intertwine with space have just as much applicability to the living. In this case, through the 'spectacular' act of protest and collective resistance, people are pushing toward a future where the 'quotidian' is no longer tinged with necropolitical violence at the hands of the police. They refuse to allow spaces of violence and death to remain as such—they instead become spaces of hope and liberation.

At the time of writing this editorial, I did finally make it back home to Minneapolis to visit family, in early May 2021. As a part of my visit, my wife and I took some time to visit George Floyd Square, and the place where Floyd was killed. We parked our car a block away from the intersection of 38th and Chicago/George Floyd Square, as the intersection/square itself is blocked off to traffic. In the square was a series of memorials, including a sculpture of a raised fist, a large painting of George himself, and, of course, flowers and other mementos at the exact location where Derek Chauvin killed George Floyd in front of Cup Foods (Figure 1). A gas station across the street was covered in art, including a large slogan on a canopy: 'WHERE THERE'S PEOPLE THERE'S POWER' (Figure 2). On that Sunday morning, only a few people were there, and worship music filled the air from an outdoor service carried on at a church on another side of the intersection.

I am still grappling with the emotions of being back home and being in that space, but one feeling that did come to the fore and has stuck with me is a feeling of hope in the work that folks in Minneapolis and across the country are doing to reshape the spaces that surround them into spaces of life. I refuse to subscribe to the sentiment which some politicians have expressed that George Floyd's death is a form of noble sacrifice that has opened our eyes to the realities of police violence and racial inequality in the United States. For Americans of color, we've always had our eyes open to these things. I'd like to believe that the work that is being done through organizing, protesting, and building consciousness and awareness of these issues is not in response to some 'sacrifice', but it is instead building toward a potential future where killings such as what happened with Philando Castile, George Floyd, Daunte Wright, Breonna Taylor, Botham Jean, and many others do not need to occur at all. As a Black and Ojibwe geographer who studies the political possibilities that can come out of forms of resistance, especially everyday resistance, I am still confident that these things can help point the way forward toward a liberatory future.

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