

From the George Floyd rebellion to Stop Cop City: Ungovernable abolition geographies as an ecosystem of tactics

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Abstract

In this author reply to four commentaries on our article, ‘Rioting as legitimate abolitionist practice: Counterinsurgency versus radical place-making in the George Floyd rebellion’, we reflect on the extension of the George Floyd rebellion (GFR) into the Stop Cop City (SCC) struggle, and state repression against them. SCC (temporarily) succeeded in its stoppage of carceral infrastructure expansion by forming an ecosystem of tactics – a collaboration between the procedural, autonomous, and insurrectionary abolitionisms we analyzed in our article. We stress that, even when procedural tactics are helpful or necessary, state repression against the GFR and SCC further reveals an adverse relationship between abolition and the state.

Keywords

Abolition, abolition geographies, protest, repression, riot

In ‘Rioting as legitimate abolitionist practice: Counterinsurgency versus radical place-making in the George Floyd rebellion’, we draw upon on-the-ground accounts from the George Floyd rebellion (GFR) to show that abolition geographers must consider how ‘procedural abolition might better work in tandem with insurrectionary and autonomous tactics and strategies, and support rather than pacify them’ (Kass and Dunlap, 2025: 15). Responding to four commentaries to the article, we consider the rebellion’s ‘afterlives’ in the Stop Cop City (SCC) movement in Atlanta (Ince, 2025); how the different abolitionisms explored in our article collaborated or blurred together within SCC; and how repression against the GFR and SCC reveals the state’s plainly adversarial position

to abolition. While centering an anti-state politics, we stress a cohesive relationship between procedural, autonomous, and insurrectionary abolition to (1) acknowledge riotous struggle in abolition geography and (2) despite engaging state institutions, recognize the importance of anti-statist tension/

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visions. We turn to the SCC struggle to clarify and reflect on the four commentaries.

Stop Cop City and an ecosystem of tactics

The SCC movement has been recognized by the state and abolitionists alike as a struggle carrying the legacy of the GFR (Anonymous, 2022; State of Georgia, 2023). The SCC movement is a perfect example of what Ince's (2025) commentary describes as the 'afterlives' of riots and new 'terrains of struggle'. The GFR led then-mayor of Atlanta, Keisha Lance Bottoms, to announce the City Council's 2021 approval of the private, corporate-sponsored Atlanta Police Foundation's 'Cop City' project. Cop City is an urban warfare police training facility, replicating the 'Riotsville' mock city model designed to militarize and train police in the post-Civil Rights era (Pettengill, 2022). 'Riotsville', today known as a 'Cop City', trains police in the use of military-grade weaponry in urban rioting simulations. Atlanta's Cop City would be constructed on 300 acres of the Weelaunee forest and an abandoned plantation and prison farm. The Cop City announcement sparked a diverse, heterogeneous social movement opposing the project that included a wide range of tactics and actors working to stop Cop City – from clandestine arsons, to litigation brought by environmental advocacy organizations, to dance parties tucked deeply in the woods (Kass, 2025; IGD, 2022). Due to the effectiveness of this ecosystem of tactics, the state murdered a forest defender, randomly arrested protesters on bogus Domestic Terrorism charges, and indicted 61 SCC and GFR participants on RICO charges – including the lead co-author – in an attempt to criminalize the struggle for abolition as a whole.

Between 2021 and 2025, the SCC movement used a mutually-supportive ecosystem of tactics (IGD, 2022; Dunlap, 2024). Bulldozers were burned alongside mushroom foraging walks and neighborhood marches. During the May 2022 and July 2022 Weeks of Action, call-in campaigns invoked Stop Work Orders, which supported forest defenders' tree sits, blockades, and encampments with mutual aid infrastructure (Kass, 2025). Members

of the movement engaged in a referendum campaign and was active in providing public comments in Atlanta City Council (ACC) meetings, meanwhile affirming the insurrectionary character of the struggle. Many public commenters, for example, were urging council members to halt Cop City's construction and insisted that 'if you build it, we will burn it' (ACC, 2023). When asked if she condemned the tactic of arson at a press conference, referendum organizer Mary Hooks said:

Not at all ... we need every, every means necessary to deal with the police state... We are not gonna condemn nobody for doing righteously what they need to do when our city has silenced every 'proper democratic process.' ... If we can't get this in the courts, if we can't get this in the council, then we are going to take it to the streets! (Anonymous, 2025: 11)

This ecosystem of tactics is 'solidarity in worldmaking', operating across tactical, as well as 'ideological', differences (Ybarra, 2025). This is the kind of affirmative co-existence between tactics that our article advocated. The SCC struggle reveals the challenges and lessons that abolitionists must continue to navigate.

Indeed, radical place-making is a verb, highlighting how people construct their own 'worlds' by various means within and beyond the state. Ybarra (2025) transposes our critique from abolitionist geographies in an academic journal to abolitionist struggle more broadly – stating 'I am not sure why rioters would be concerned with legitimacy'. Our article is based on self-published material from rioters, abolitionists and their friends, and bringing that material into conversation with abolition geographers. We emphasize insurrectionary and autonomous abolition, but certainly value tactics which turn the state's own rules on their head toward abolitionist ends, as Honeywell (2025) describes with Sisters Uncut and the withdrawal of consent for policing within various state institutions. The struggle for abolition only benefits from this type of tactical creativity – with the caveat of, as Honeywell (2025) warns, 'careful balancing' and 'active discernment'. Our article critically engages statism within abolition geography and the

importance of riots and/or militant struggle even while, as Ince (2025) reminds us, ‘we must attend to their content and intent’.

Counterinsurgency and the limits of a solely procedural abolition

State repression of the SCC/GFR struggles, and the fight against it, also highlights our article’s original wariness of the state as a liberatory vehicle and how it deploys various counterinsurgency strategies and tactics. As the RICO prosecution has dragged on for years of litigation, the struggle to SCC has withered and waned as energy and resources are funneled into the 61’s defense. The SCC 61, their supporters, and the movement are now largely *confined* to procedural forms of abolition which, while critically important tactics, remain no more than immediate decarceration strategies considered by necessity to fight to free the defendants – for example, opportunities for defendant collective action, participatory defense, or political and media strategies. The abolitionist movement, if possible, should avoid self-confining their strategies and tactics.

This necessity of considering procedural strategies alone is hardly rooted in liberatory ambitions; rather, they are survival-based, *forcibly* ‘an insufficient but necessary horizon that must be seized and refashioned into a tool of struggle’ to free the 61 (Chua, 2025). As Ybarra (2025) mentions, procedural abolition is certainly taken up by incarcerated (and prosecuted/formerly incarcerated) organizers. This fact does not take away from the pitfalls and limitations of procedural abolition as a *dominant* abolitionist tactic, including but not limited to circumscribing the battle and its battlefield within the courts, jails and prisons of the state.

Yet while incarcerated, the 61 engaged in the ‘solidarity as world-making’ that Ybarra (2025) advocates, showing how the three abolitionist tendencies may dissolve into one another – simultaneously providing one another with basic needs, disrupting jail operations, and evoking civil rights to privacy after turning themselves into the Fulton County jail collectively (see Kass, 2025). And the

61 are far from the only example of incarcerated people enacting abolition beyond the solely procedural (see Davidson et al., 2023). While we emphasize combative and riotous struggle for an academic context, we also acknowledge the importance of place-making and mutual aid.

Non-reformist reforms, we contend, should not be the only focus or tactic for abolition. ‘Law should be used as just another weapon in the government’s arsenal’, explains Brigadier General Kitson (1970: 69), while solidifying counterinsurgency strategies from their experiences in Malaysia, Kenya and Northern Ireland. Georgia and the City of Atlanta have taken Kitson’s advice by ignoring conflicts of interest, appeasing large corporations and the police themselves. The state has ‘silenced every “proper democratic process”’ regarding the dismantling of carceral state infrastructure, Mary Hooks reminds us. The Georgia Senate’s recently passed SB63 law effectively criminalizes bail funds and bailing out protesters, exemplifying Kitson’s (1970: 69) strategy to ‘introduce new legislation to deal with the subversion’ (ASF, 2024). Engaging protest, like bailing protesters out of jail or distributing flyers, has been alleged to be an ‘overt act in furtherance of [a terrorist RICO] conspiracy’ (State of Georgia, 2023). Abolitionists of all persuasions, state-sanctioned or not, are being prosecuted as terrorists – the ultimate enemies of the state – when these rights are supposed to be protected under law.

For four years, Cop City was successfully stopped by ‘powerful demands made within movements [which] thread the needle back and forth between these [insurrectionary/autonomous/procedural] forms’ (Chua, 2025). Yet Cop City was ultimately built, and opened in April 2025, with the very same source of ‘the state’s capacity to provision social needs’ – tax dollars and political power. The state used these capacities to simply bypass the central non-reformist reform demand of 2020 – defunding police. In the extension of the GFR into SCC, the state has not proven itself a trustworthy or reliable avenue for abolitionist struggle. It has proven itself, instead, to remain a consistent enemy of and obstacle to it, even in the face of tactical diversity and state, non-state, and anti-state collaboration.

Conclusion

We recognize the state as a central mechanism of political, economic and social conquest. We acknowledge the necessity of dealing with, engaging and creating non-reformist reforms, but only in providing space to augment and break down this political system of exploitation, extractivism, confinement and murder. We see the state as ‘insufficient’ (Chua, 2025), and affirm the necessity to dismantle and fundamentally alter it. We can certainly understand the allure of ‘seizing and refashioning the state as a tool of struggle’ (Chua, 2025), which we view as an imposed necessity to survive. We never want to allow the state to define what’s ‘realistic’ for us – even if this itself is a struggle. Imaginations, capabilities, ideas, theorization, and praxis should not be constrained. We must refuse the ‘practicalities’ or ‘realism’ that attempts to constrain our analysis, assessment, and actions.

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