

Snapshots of Resistance and Solidarity in the East Bay

Roberto Mónico

California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt

The 2020 summer uprisings were the culmination of years of witnessing unchecked police abuses and incompetence from an inexperienced presidential administration. People poured out into the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd that year. But there was something else that was brewing underneath. The murder, along with the pandemic and a racist president, had pushed people to the brink of discontent. The Trump Administration had no real plan to curb the pandemic, nor to investigate the killing. Frustrated Americans across the country expressed their grievances on the streets that summer. The ineptitude they witnessed for the last four years had led to pent-up anger. Another policing killing caught on camera and lack of response to ensure public safety galvanized people, but it was not the first time this had happened.

In the winter of 2014, students, residents, and community activists met every night for a week, demanding the end of widespread police misconduct. Another senseless murder of an unarmed Black person caught on camera thrust people onto the streets. It was triggered by the decision not to indict NYPD Officer Daniel Pantaleo for slaying a father, storeowner, and neighbor Eric Gardner. The people of the East Bay community were rightfully enraged by this unconscionable decision and believed that Pantaleo needed to be held accountable for his actions. When the residents took to the streets, a militarized police force armed with batons, rifles, and drones met them. This image of a “warrior cop” sent a strong message to the community that they were unwilling to disarm, and would continue to support the proliferation of militarizing themselves.

I joined the marches that week. I took photographs of the fury that saturated the streets of the East Bay. Though the collaboration of multiple police departments confronted unarmed protestors, the images I captured left me feeling optimistic. An energy permeated the air. Together, we demanded justice and expressed our frustration while the police demanded obedience. They protected property,

while we protected each other. When they knocked us down, we picked each other up.

The possibility of transformative changes had imbued people from all different backgrounds. We had a community comprised of various races, genders, progressive ideologies, and ages that coalesced all over the county. It appeared on the surface that some white people would no longer stay silent or ignore the atrocities that had become routine for over-policed communities of color.

I noticed a shift of perception transpiring. Prior to this era, people who did not experience some form of police violence rarely spoke out against the violent tactics aimed at working-class, non-white communities. When residents of the East Bay converged on the streets, they began to understand how an authoritarian institution represses dissent. That is not to say, that these people are able to fully comprehend what it means to be under constant surveillance. But at the very least, they received a taste of the repressive measures that hyper-police communities of color endure all over the United States.

Each of these pictures represents two diverging communities: One where the police are willing to separate themselves from the people and criminalize them in the process; the other challenges a violent institution that operates on an inflated-budget with several military resources at their disposal. It was because of these confrontations that the notion of defunding the police entered the mainstream conversation. Indeed, defunding the police has been silenced by both mainstream political parties, but that does not mean that these so-called leaders can lecture the public on morality. We have seen unchecked power reign for decades. With leadership that supports law enforcement and not the populace, violent police officers will continue to exert control in our communities. But wherever injustice appears, there will always be people willing to oppose it and demand that police officers be held responsible for their actions.

