

Accounts from the Fall of Silent Sam

Featuring Maya Little

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As the effects of the toppling of the Confederate statue at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill continue to ripple out, we've obtained two narratives of the night's events. The first statement is from Maya Little, the Black graduate student who helped catalyze the revolt against the statue by participating in a sit-in against it and then, when that did not succeed, dousing it in paint and her own blood. The second is from another anonymous anarchist, who connects the victory in Chapel Hill with the events of "All Out August," a month of resistance to fascism, prisons, police, and other manifestations of white supremacy and oppression.

Whose Streets? A Statement from Maya Little

On Monday night, August 20, 2018, students, workers, neighbors, and comrades reclaimed Chapel Hill in an ungovernable enactment of justice. We marched in our streets and the badged and unbadged racists moved out of the way. We looked out for each other and refused to yield when fascists and cops attacked our comrades. We memorialized and reawakened histories of resistance against the white supremacist institution and its followers and honored the martyred Black and Brown people in our area. People masked up in force rather than in isolation, limiting the power of fascists and police. Finally, the statue was pulled from its plinth and Silent Sam's smirking face was buried in the dirt. For the first time, we stood taller than Silent Sam.

This victory, cathartic and much more collective than previous efforts, challenged sanitized historical production, directed the conflict against the racist university, and aligned intersections of resistance against the institution to demand action alongside the most marginalized in our community.

In focusing on reclaiming and recovering histories of Black and Brown resistance, unlike objectified, depersonalized, and passive academic histories, the protest chose targets that rendered explicit the commitments to white supremacy that UNC and Chapel Hill maintain to this day. The focus on physical spaces brought UNC's shadowy behavior to light, challenging the university's abuse of Black students and workers. By directing attention to the protected existence of monuments, buildings, and plaques produced specifically to honor oppressors, organizers connected these physical racist symbols to years of racist policing, gentrification, and abuse of Black and Brown workers, students, and community members. In recontextualizing these racist monuments, Black students expressed solidarity with Charlottesville and memorialized Sandra Bland and the countless people of color murdered in our area. The fact that these were physical targets also enabled activists to reimagine spaces through the recovery of resistance histories—for example, in the Hurston Hall movement, the plaques put up to honor Pauli Murray, and the planting of placards last spring detailing many of the acts of police brutality and protest in Silent Sam's last 50 years.

At every step, the university opposed activists, confiscated materials, and used surveillance and harassment to stop the recovery and rejoicing in reclamation. It remains important for the university to portray resistance as an outlier, the unusual behavior of so-called "outside agitators." This is why Monday's 20-foot-tall banners memorializing the many murdered by white supremacy and honoring "Those who have fought against the white supremacy UNC upholds" were a critical element, helping to create an alternate campus that empowered and brought together anti-racist protestors without chancellors, police, or city officials.

The banners not only presented a different vision—they became our own plaques, our own memorials. Students, workers, and community members carried and protected the banners, using them to create a space that police and fascists could not take back. We carried them, fought for them, and worked together to put those banners up surrounding Silent Sam.

The violence that police demonstrated in response to our protecting the banners clarified their opposition to our freedom and united people in reclaiming the area. This demonstration did not involve marginalized people acting alone or demonstrators alienated from a sense of struggle. We were connected by our resistance to the united front of cops and Confederates.

Along with other Black students, I spoke about the pain and danger of being daily abused under Silent Sam's gaze by our university and racist visitors. This time, instead of behaving like hesitant and elevated allies, white students, workers, and comrades acted as "supportive accomplices." As people acted together, the banners were put up and the statue taken down. Backed into a corner and afraid of our power, the university has revealed that all it really knows how to do is to repress and seek revenge.

Their racist monument was taken down in an act of community power. Now UNC chancellor Carol Folt, the cops, and city and state officials in Raleigh are scared. Along with Harry Smith, Margaret Spellings, and Haywood Cochrane, Folt issued the boldest statement that I have ever seen from the Chancellor's Office. They promised retribution for the toppling of the statue through the use of extensive university and state funds supported by the SBI. Direct action and confrontation with the university and its police has been the only way to draw the administrators and cops out of their usual equivocating and shadowy operations to show their real colors. White demonstrators witnessed the force that the university regularly uses to crush Black dissent.

The demonstration last year, the marking of the statue with blood, and the memorialization and toppling on Monday have forced the admins and cops into a corner and now they bare their teeth. That's good. They fear the commitment to justice that we demonstrate; thereby, they make clear what they actually care about: money and maintaining white supremacy.

Fear was also present in the announcement of the expected results of the historical commission planned for Wednesday, August 22, a microcosm of every institution in this country and the obsessive need to compromise at the expense of Black lives. In this fear and in the aftermath of seeing what ungovernability can look like, in Raleigh we saw a show of force by the state in direct opposition to justice. Valerie Johnson, the sole Black commission member, quoted MLK in the minority vote in favor of monument removal: "American history is replete with compromise. The Missouri compromise that spread of slavery, Plessy v. Ferguson. Let's not continue compromising."

And yet they did—the reformists acted as they always do, choosing comforts over equality. They further insult the North Carolinian Black and Brown heroes by deciding to place their statues next to the massive, suffocating monuments dedicated to the racists who murdered them. Yet only two days after Silent Sam's toppling, the institution again met resistance. One woman stood up to read a statement against the racist statues and was immediately mobbed by police and dragged to a vehicle outside. The mere hint of dissent is beginning to frighten them more and more.

In every instance of action, whether it be the clever renaming of UNC buildings after Hitler and David Duke by students supporting Hurston Hall in 1999, the guerrilla history connecting resistances, or a crowd coming together to run off UNC police and topple a 105-year-old statue celebrating the Confederacy, we have seen clearly which side the university stands on. The

university, its leadership, and its institutions do not stand with us. We want liberation, they want to push their brand. We topple white supremacy, they uphold it.

Moving forward, looking to the courageous rebellions taking place against white supremacy on a broader basis such as the national prison strike and the unrelenting demonstrations for Black lives in Chicago and Toledo, we can draw inspiration from the actions in Chapel Hill on Monday night. In recovering the histories of resistance, in taking direct action against racism, surveillance, neoliberalism, greed, and institutional power, we brought about a new togetherness and a demonstration of our own power.

All Out August: A Statement from an Anonymous Anarchist

The actions of August 20 in Chapel Hill took place against the backdrop of a tumultuous month many have taken to calling All Out August. Starting as a joint social media and poster campaign among several informal autonomous anti-fascist networks across the so-called US and Canada, the hashtag rapidly came to stand for more than just countering far-right rallies.

This campaign became a nationwide effort encompassing several different issues—a modest attempt to present a common narrative tying together many different demonstrations, including some supporting the prison strike that began on August 21. This seems to have succeeded in addressing people beyond established anarchist and antifascist networks, strengthening popular mobilizations against various forms of fascism from Portland and Austin to DC and Chapel Hill and blurring the lines between ordinary demonstrators and those sometimes called “militants.”

The following personal reflection on a few moments of joy and determination on the streets of a sleepy Southern university town aims to highlight how this happened.

By only a few minutes after 7 pm, the entire plaza was overflowing with protestors. The energy was already palpable—the tone serious, hundreds of people silently giving the speakers their full attention. Students of color spoke of how the statue functioned as a reminder that they were not welcome on this campus, that they were not safe. Two Black students vowed to wear nooses around their necks from that day until the statue’s removal as their own reminder of what Silent Sam represents to them. Thanks to a combination of luck, determination, and uncompromising direct action, they only had to follow through on their vow for a few hours.

After a rowdy and inspiring round of speeches below the backdrop of the twenty-foot-tall gray banners that would soon shroud Silent Sam forever, the crowd was invited to march across the street to the statue. As speakers finished, they openly expressed their support and solidarity for the people who would be masking up—in defiance of North Carolina’s mask law—to help protect their identities from far-right doxxing and state surveillance. Over the microphone, we were reminded that those who dedicate their lives to fighting racism and fascism must sometimes cover their faces to protect themselves.

We pulled the freshly printed Carolina blue bandanas across our faces: three arrows pointing down alongside the words “SAM MUST FALL.” Solidarity was written across our faces. More banners appeared out of nowhere. The electricity in the crowd grew.

As soon as we crossed the street, the 10 or so cops that had been hanging around the statue attempted a show of force by targeting those who were wearing masks. They walked into the

crowd, taking their authority for granted, yelling at each demonstrator clad in Carolina blue, “Remove your mask! Take your mask off!” Some pulled their masks down temporarily; the police unsuccessfully attempted to rip masks off other comrades. The police thought they had an opportunity to separate the troublemakers from well-meaning non-confrontational student protestors and went in to arrest several masked individuals. They thought this show of power could weaken us, giving them the upper hand. Not this time. This time, we wouldn’t be stopped, we wouldn’t be scared. We were more powerful than them and we knew it.

The moment the cops went in to snatch several of our comrades, dozens more came to their aid. Banners appeared between the grabbing hands of the police and the fast-moving protestors; people held tight to those who were targeted. Smoke erupted, and a human tug of war ensued. A crowd surrounded the few visibly confused officers, chanting fiercely. Of the several people the officers tried to apprehend for covering their faces, they only successfully captured one. One very large officer covered the arrestee with his entire body, and the determined crowd was unable to remove his massive weight. (The arrestee didn’t report any injuries, and only was charged with two misdemeanors). Later, we learned that a police officer only a few feet away from the confrontation had reached for his gun.

The police were thoroughly distracted by the melee. The four gray banners were already almost entirely installed around the statue by the time they regained their bearings. Once the rowdy crowd realized it could do no more for this one comrade, people retreated to the statue, surrounded it with a ring of additional banners. During these chaotic initial moments, a lone white supremacist tried to intervene and succeeded in pulling down one of the gray banners encircling Silent Sam, but it was quickly reclaimed and the aggressor was ejected from the crowd. We were everywhere at once—unarresting our friends, removing fascists from our midst, putting up banners, chanting, moving, taking care of each other.

This moment defined the evening. The police had assumed that this crowd could be tamed. Yet as soon as we arrived at the plaza, we were a single defiant force with one goal clear before us, although none of us expected to accomplish it that very night. The students, teachers, alumni, anarchists, and community members of all kinds were together in this moment, tired of waiting for politicians to give us concessions. The crowd was diverse in age, race, and background, but that night there were none of the disagreements that have become so commonplace in demonstrations. There were no apologists demanding that we stop trying to rescue our comrades from the hands of the police. Confused by our unity and determination, the police stood back. They knew that any moves against any of us would be difficult and potentially dangerous.

Elated by our initial victory, we lost track of time surrounding the statue; it could have been moments or hours. No longer visible, Silent Sam was shrouded on all sides by a wall of gray. The words “For a world without white supremacy” waved valiantly over where Sam had stood as a threat to students of color for one hundred and five years. The other banners formed a line, creating a visual display of resistance. A few police and random fascists stood around the edges of the quad.

A distance opened, and those of us holding banners began to feel exposed to police and other attackers. At that moment, the crowd of joyous, uncompromising marchers encircled the monument, singing, dancing, chanting, and keeping our energy alive. This seemed to indicate that at least some of the demonstrators were aware that the police would target the people holding banners first in order to take out a line of defense. It would be harder to justify this if a crowd of “normal-looking” students surrounded this line with locked arms, chanting. It was becoming

ever clearer that this time, no one was interested in the usual divisions around tactics that often hinder our activity.

We all stood around, unsure of our next move. We had made it to our goal quickly, surprising ourselves. We thought it was over and it seemed the crowd was about to thin out. As the night fell, the summer heat did not lift, and we were all hot and tired, yet ready for more. Some rowdy folks got on the microphone and led some new chants:

“How do you spell Nazi? “C-O-P”!”

“Say no no to the po po!”

“Nat Turner, John Brown, anti-racists run this town!”

Someone finally got a sound system working, playing loud political hip-hop. A small dance party ensued. Once we began to lift up our spirits again, the crowd began to move. We spilled out into the street; linking arms in a classic form of resistance and solidarity, we moved together down to the next intersection. Pink smoke rose from the crowd and we formed a ring around the intersection, still arm in arm. We all faced each other, joined together with our new friends. We stood a moment in rest, listening to the voices of students of color on the megaphone, calling out the names of the revolutionaries who came before us. There was a solidarity in the air that words can hardly describe—hundreds of strangers who had come together, done what we needed to, and now held each other up. The line between street action that is categorized as confrontational and action that is described as “non-violent” became blurred. We linked arms to hold space, to breathe and celebrate together.

As we marched, we refused to let the fascists who wanted to bait us into argument distract us; however, we did not compromise in pushing them from our ranks. This occurred over and over that night. While we would never shed tears for a bigot who got himself bloodied, the crowd was wise to use just enough force to expel these people from our ranks and no more. The straggling right-wingers didn’t pose much of an immediate physical threat; outnumbering them, screaming in their faces, and shoving them beyond an established perimeter held by banners did the trick without causing a brawl that could have distracted us from our goals. Even when it came to people deploying smoke bombs, those only seemed to appear at the right moments, to serve as a distraction or conceal activities. These tactical decisions were made in the moment, between friends and strangers alike. For a few rare hours, we knew our power.

Our celebratory moment in the street ended when shouts rang out that some people had stayed behind at the statue and were now facing harassment. There was no hesitation among the crowd to return to the site for our comrades. We came marching back, much to the surprise of the small line of police trying in vain to protect Silent Sam. They were soon surrounded by an angry crowd; some tossed empty water bottles at them. These served as warning shots, letting them know that we meant business. This was our moment, our place. Their laws and their violence meant nothing to us. They stood fast at first with fear and confusion visible on their faces. But as soon as the bottles flew, the police immediately tapped each other on the shoulder to back off in retreat.

A few lone right-wingers remained, insisting that they were “just bystanders.” In the moment, this was obvious code, as they refused to join in the protest or get out of the way. The crowd opened, offering them a path out. When they refused, they were pushed through this opening; they turned around, fists cocked, only to find a crowd of masked people confronting them, and banners quickly shutting behind to block their view of those who had just removed them. Like tattletales in elementary school, they ran to the police: “Mr. Officer! They shoved me!” Once

again, we let the police know that they did not rule over us. The march down the block had renewed us and we were ready for anything.

The night was built of moments like this. Fascists repeatedly tried to stand among us to gather intelligence but were immediately identified and neutralized. We always began by telling them to leave; then people around them would begin to chant in hopes of driving them out with voices. If this was not enough, one quick push could get them out of the crowd. A banner would move into place between the fascists and the crowd, and we could shift our attention to other things. Everyone seemed to have a similar understanding that we would set our boundaries very clearly with both the police and the fascists but never let them distract us from our goal.

It must also be said that there were many other bystanders who came to watch; these people were more than welcome and some joined in. Those who had brought banners often passed them on to enthusiastic newcomers who had been observing how to use them as defensive tools against state surveillance and attacks. The media will always describe us as “an angry mob,” attempting to foment fear about the threat we supposedly pose to the community, but that’s just propaganda. The only people who were unsafe in this situation were the thinly-veiled fascists who support monuments to white supremacy and advocate for the genocide of Black people and other people of color. They *should* be afraid. On the night of August 20, even the police had nothing to fear as long as they didn’t try to arrest any of us. All genuine bystanders, community members, and future troublemakers are welcome to join us.

Once police and fascists were cleared from the statue, word spread that it was going to come down. A rope had materialized around Silent Sam’s neck. We all moved out of the way; despite the chancellor’s fear-mongering statement later that night, there was never any risk that the statue would fall onto any of us. We all stepped back together to see if it would fall. To be honest, for a moment, we didn’t believe it was possible. The chants that had filled the air fell silent as we all waited in anticipation.

After a few seconds of pulling to no avail, a deep metal grating noise rang out and we knew that Silent Sam would stand no more. We erupted in uninhibited joy and shrieks of delight as the statue lurched through the gray banners and fell into the dirt. All at once we were jumping, hugging, crying in disbelief. Immediately, multiple clouds of pink and orange smoke rose up; people began throwing dirt on the statue as it lay face down in the mud. Banners were unfurled once again as people danced together and embraced.

As our cheers died down and we pulled our masks from our smiling faces, the rain that had been forecast all evening finally began to fall. This perfect timing completed a night that already felt magical and surreal. It was as if the natural forces were working with us, aligned with us, and now we could cool off from the heat and begin to wash away all the pain that Silent Sam’s legacy has inflicted upon all our communities. Those struggles are far from over, but that moment was ours. The rain grew heavy; jubilant and still alight with adrenaline, we disappeared into the night.

For those of us who have dedicated ourselves to a life of struggle towards liberation from capitalism, the state, white supremacy, and oppression in all the other forms it assumes, it’s easy to become accustomed to losing. Over the centuries of our struggle and the years of our own lives, we have experienced so many losses that we dare not count them. The powers that be rip through our communities and try to break us, yet we keep going. We lick our wounds and continue forward because that is the only direction we know how to go.

When Silent Sam made his nosedive into the dirt of the university, we remembered what it was like to win. These tiny moments are a breath of fresh air; they are the fuel that keeps the fires within us burning. It is like falling in love again after heartbreak—we know that it may not last forever, but it is worth it. It is worth everything they will try to do to destroy us, because we know what it is like to feel alive.

The joy that we felt when the statue fell is the joy we feel when we take control of our own lives. We are raised to believe that someone else will solve our problems for us, that we must rely on the police or the state to change the conditions of our existence. In North Carolina, the state has done us a favor by literally barring politicians from removing the statue, leaving direct action the only option. Once we learn what it is like to taste freedom, we never forget. Felling the statue with our own hands provided the kind of catharsis that could actually heal some of the wounds that 500 years of colonization, slavery, and oppression have left on our collective psyche.

Imagine the statue being removed by the city at a designated time by people paid to wear yellow safety vests! Would we have felt that sense of victory in that moment? Or would we have just felt a muted satisfaction, perhaps even a touch of resentment at the officials smiling smugly for the photo op, proud to benefit from the one concession they have given to the same communities that their police officers murder with impunity, harass daily, and kidnap to fill their jails and prisons? Our elation in this moment of healing is so powerful because we took it for ourselves, because we worked together as a community to establish our autonomy and self-determination. We were effective because for a few hours, we did not fight with each other. We allowed people to be confrontational, militant, and assertive without policing each other, and we eschewed any unnecessary escalation that would have distracted from our goals.

There is an argument that our success was only possible because of a police force that was not heavily invested in protecting the statue. There may be truth in this, though the police will surely deny it; but in any case, we know that our success was our own. There was a palpable affinity amongst the crowd: though strangers, we came together with a single goal, and we learned quickly how to work together. This also attests to the participants reading the situation correctly. If a police force is not able to muster the will to act, why not take advantage of their weakness to solve a longstanding problem? We struck a blow that will ring out for a long time.

At the same time, this brings up questions about how some of the authorities might try to use the outrage surrounding monuments to recuperate our struggles into more state-approved methods of so-called social change. How will “progressive” politicians latch on to the “people power” that took down statues in Durham and Chapel Hill to bolster electoral campaigns full of empty promises, that won’t actually shake the foundations of institutionalized white supremacy?

While *All Out August* still isn’t over, we can begin to see its success in a multitude of ways, as combative solidarity demonstrations have kicked off in multiple cities in support of the prison strike and there are rumors that another monument somewhere else in the South could be next. The so-called “Alt-Right” that attempted to regain its previous momentum has largely failed, with pitiful showings in every city this month besides Portland. Even there, their numbers were dwarfed by the anti-fascist opposition, and they were only able to march on account of extreme violence on the part of the Portland police, who nearly killed a protestor.

One lesson we might glean from all of this is that while it is absolutely necessary to oppose the far right when they attempt to build street power, we’ve been stuck in a reactive loop for the past year. Now we are regaining the initiative. If there is a monument to white supremacy in your town—and they aren’t all Confederate statues—why not take the offensive against it now?

In some cities, it has appeared that people are waiting for a far right group to make the first move, but we can see clearly from Chapel Hill that a crowd that takes the initiative can accomplish far more than just impeding a far-right group from organizing.

We must also be thinking about what comes next. *All Out August* has been a first step towards connecting the legacy of the Confederacy and the enslavement of human beings to contemporary struggles against prisons and police. This is a huge first step, on a national scale, but there is a long way to go. How can we make these connections with even more clarity? Not just through posters and hashtags, but with actions on the ground, with real people? How do we increase our capacity to block ICE operations and to defend those actions against fascist intervention, while connecting the fight against ICE with the fight against colonial exploitation of the land? We've seen glimpses of these moments in the streets—through the clouds of smoke following the fall of a statue that came down with the complicity of people who might have called masked demonstrators “troublemakers” just a year ago.

As we desire for these actions to spread, we know that our victory in the streets of Chapel Hill was the product of creativity, flexibility, and uncompromising solidarity. It does not stand alone in the fabric of history, but rests on a foundation of decades of effort. We won because we refused to fight each other, because we set the terms of how we would take the space. We won because we seized the moment and learned to work together. We won because we took the opportunity to turn our desires into action. That moment reminded us that when we build collectively, look out for each other, and take control of our lives, even a small group of people can topple giants.

We saw that even something that seems permanent and inevitable might actually be nothing more than a hunk of cheap bronze shoddily attached to a pile of concrete. It doesn't take that much to see it come crashing down.

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