

## On White Rioters & Black Liberals

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After Black Lives Matter protesters in Atlanta began destroying physical property and violently confronting police, the Mayor of Atlanta Keisha Lance Bottoms held a press conference with rappers T.I. and Killer Mike to address the citizens of Atlanta.<sup>1</sup> Mayor Bottoms admonished protesters for violent tactics that she argued destroyed their credibility, and T.I. explained to the viewers that Atlanta should be seen as a city that has been there for Black people when they have experienced discrimination elsewhere. Positioning Atlanta as a stronghold of Black creatives and entrepreneurs, T.I. went as far to claim that “we can’t do this here, this is Wakanda; It’s sacred, it must be protected.” Killer Mike subsequently appeared in the camera’s view wearing a black shirt that read in all white capital letters “KILL YOUR MASTERS.” He explained that he did not want to be there, but that he felt he had a responsibility to make clear to protesters that “it is your duty not to burn your own house down for anger with the enemy. It is your duty to fortify your own house so that you may be a house of refuge in times of organization.” Yet, the rhetoric of Killer Mike’s speech contradicted the message on his own shirt as he began to emphasize the importance of voting and putting pressure on politicians to pass specific reforms.



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<sup>1</sup> 11Alive, *T.I., Killer Mike Join Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms in Condemning Violence in Atlanta Protests*, Youtube, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vOvB29-1FK4>; Devyn Springer, “Killer Mike, T.I. and Atlanta’s Black Misleadership Class,” *Independent News*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/killer-mike-atlanta-speech-ti-video-george-floyd-a9543551.html?fbclid=IwAR2pdELfxrn41ZG4clgGMP8ZEvGttS0YMJals60nzfVpjt5pYe2H24ohg3g>.

## Screenshot of Atlanta Police Press Conference

Far from the desire to kill your masters and end the world as we know it, viewers were instead offered a narrative about what it means to be an authentic non-violent Black organizer who is interested in protecting the sacred Atlanta. This narrative worked in tandem with the stories offered by the mayor of Minneapolis Jacob Frey who framed the violence as a product of “outside agitators” and “white anarchists” who concealed their faces, brought shields, were trailed by medics, and were always on the frontlines.<sup>2</sup> I want to interrogate how the slippages in this language mobilize a certain kind of iconography – the white anarchist rioter versus the authentic Black organizer – that unwittingly authorizes the perspective of an anti-Black regime. Building on Frantz Fanon’s discussion of the internalization of a “white concept of self,” I want to consider how the rhetoric of T.I. and Killer Mike’s statements demonstrate the internalization of a white concept of Black radical organizing.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, I want to meditate on the tension between the message that Black people should kill their master’s and the message that it is Black people’s duty to avoid destroying physical property in Atlanta. Following Freud and Lacan, I consider how psychoanalysis might lend itself to highlighting how a subject’s unconscious investments might slip out alongside their conscious rhetorical gestures.<sup>4</sup> In this instance, this press conference highlighted each of the speakers’ unconscious investments in a white society and those investments came into tension with their identification with Blackness. This tension is then smoothed over through the forging of a rhetorical narrative in which authentic Black organizing and violence are placed in opposition to each other. T.I.’s claim that the authentic Black organizer has the duty to protect the sacred Wakanda cleverly drapes the status quo in Black aesthetics as a means to dissuade the masses of Black people from pursuing an abolitionist project that would completely overturn the status quo. On one hand, each speaker identifies themselves as part of the aggrieved communities who are sick and tired of the way Black people are positioned as abject in this country. Killer Mike even claimed that “[He] wanted to see the world burn this morning when [he] woke up.” On the other hand, this identification is strategically mobilized in order to gaslight Black people into feeling shameful or guilty for partaking in acts of violent resistance.

Rather than participating in the formation of a revolutionary movement, violent protesters are demonized as little Killmongers. In this narrative of white rioters and Black liberals, non-voters are discarded as inauthentic activists; police chiefs and prosecutors are offered up as symbols of progress because they are Black women and calls for abolition are

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<sup>2</sup> Trevor Hughes, “Protests in Minneapolis Turned Violent: Officials First Blamed Outsiders, but That’s Not What Arrests Show,” *USA Today*, May 30, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/30/george-floyd-protests-riots-violent-outsiders-minnesota/5291658002/>.

<sup>3</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008), footnote 25 on pages 139-141.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Ecrits Closely* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004), page 72.

ratcheted down into the “defunding of the police.”<sup>5</sup> All the while, the structural conditions of anti-Blackness remain. Thus, paying attention to the details of these rhetorical narratives might help us “peep the footwork” of an ever-shifting regime of anti-Blackness. We might instead consider the power of chaotically disassembling these iconic narratives of progress, and how those interruptions might contain the seeds of a Blackened world. By shattering the production of this mythic narrative in favor of Fanon’s “complete program of disorder” we might usher in the twilight of our idols.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Scottie Andrew, “There’s a Growing Call to Defund the Police. Here’s What It Means,” *CNN*, June 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/06/us/what-is-defund-police-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 2005), page 36; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols Or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Richard Polt (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997).