

# Seeing Seattle

An Interview with Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore

Cara Hoffman

2020

Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore is an author and queer anti-assimilationist activist living in the Capitol Hill district of Seattle. She spoke with Fifth Estate on July 2, the day CHOP, the district's autonomous zone, was demolished by police. Sycamore's latest novel *The Freezer Door* is in part about the stranglehold the suburban imagination has on city life; a meditation on the trauma and possibility of searching for connection in a world that enforces bland norms of gender, sexual, and social conformity.

What was the scene like when the cops attacked the Capitol Hill Organized Protest (CHOP)?

MBS: This was a very organized planned operation involving the mayor, police, transportation, parks services; it was all coordinated. The police came from two different directions, arrested thirty-five people, confiscated everyone's possessions and threw them away, pepper sprayed people, and within minutes of taking people away, there were city employees painting over the graffiti.

These agencies were there at once at 4:30 in the morning, and it was all over within half an hour. City officials showed up saying they're "taking the art to keep it safe." By art they mean all the protest signs, a few of which are elaborate painted pieces. The city brutalized everyone there, cleared out a space that had international attention, and what they want everyone to know is that they're taking the art, cataloging it, and keeping it safe for access later.

Was there a sense that things had reached a turning point in the days before?

MBS: Last night it felt like you had walked onto the end of something. I felt like this before it happened—felt like everything is going to go back to how it was before except that there will be all this trauma. The structural trauma of police violence, the murder of black people, the trauma of neo-liberalism. All this trauma is unaddressed, the way all the priorities are stacked against people who need resources. Then, there's the trauma of the people being tear gassed, pepper sprayed, stun grenades, rubber bullets, intense police brutality.

Do you think the protests and the autonomous zone had a galvanizing affect?

MBS: There were protests 24 hours a day with the protesters facing off against the cops. It was an idealized version of what people think or want Capitol Hill to be. It was mostly not people from the neighborhood but it felt like a neighborhood thing. After the police left the precinct and it became more or less an occupation then it became more heavily populated by people coming from outside Seattle—it became a destination. And I was fine with it—might as well bring new people in—and everything became covered with beautiful anarchist graffiti and that was an idealized space too.

Some of the media describe the autonomous zone as having a carnival atmosphere, or being like Burning Man.

MBS: When you would go there, it would feel depoliticized. People selling BLM t-shirts and hot dogs. Throngs of tourists, but it wasn't a carnival. Tourists were gawking, but what were they gawking at? They're looking at a precinct that's been boarded up and a memorial for George Floyd. They're looking at the names of black people killed by the cops in Seattle and across the country. Even if they're there with a tourist mentality, they're still taking this in. In the evening it turned into people partying, but those people still knew what the place was about.

Even at its most touristy moments, it allowed for people to imagine or experience something outside the middle-class imagination. Four years ago, people would not even use the name gentrification in Seattle. Now, we have graffiti that says gentrification is anti-black.

What was a typical day like in the zone?

MBS: The first protest was very scary because you knew the cops were going to teargas people. I have chronic health problems, so, I didn't go because I couldn't risk it.

After it became a protest site, I was going every day. I went to the center of the park where there was a sound system and music and tables set up. Two guys with an enormous sound system were doing cross fit. I decided, I'm just going to dance. I took my shoes off and four people came running up and asked can we dance with you? They were a small group of queer kids of color.

For many people, these were unprecedented experiences. There must be shift in consciousness.

MBS: The middle-class orientation changed. There was nothing middle-class about this occupation. White hip-pies, people who didn't come from cities, travellers, some drug activity, little anarchist cells, BLM, but none of that is middle class. This doesn't mean the people didn't come from middle class backgrounds, but the orientation was not middle class.

A bigger shift is that the techies who live in Capitol Hill are against the cops because they were teargassed every night. Within one week there were twelve thousand complaints against the police department. There's an ACAB banner on a luxury condo. Something happened. We have brutal police violence in every city in this country. Police brutality is to protect middle class white people. The thing that was fascinating is how the mobilization of resistance, the possibility of it was not limited by the middle-class imagination. By this I mean a suburbanized environment in the urban environment. Some of the resistance was gestural—planting a community garden.

A lot of people think when this is over, its broken. But the thing that's interesting is the puncturing of the middle-class mindset.

Cara Hoffman is the author of three novels, including *So Much Pretty*, and, most recently, *Running*, a *New York Times* Editor's Choice. She lives in Athens, Greece.

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