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Abolition, Ecology, and Afrofuturism

Some Thoughts

Nsambu Za Suekama

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“Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?”

— Isaiah 58:6

For several decades, many Black activists and others have advanced an intensified focus during August on the struggle of our incarcerated family. It was especially in recognition of the spirit in which many Black revolutionaries have operated, and for which they were/are persecuted by the State. Says Shaka At-Thinnin, Black August Organizing Committee in “THE ROOTS OF BLACK AUGUST”:

“Each year officially since 1979 [when it was launched] we have **used the month of August to focus on the oppressive treatment of our brothers and sisters disappeared inside the state**

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run gulags and concentration camps America calls prisons.

It is during this time that we **concentrate our efforts to free our** mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, and all other **captive family and friends** who have been held in isolation for decade after decade beyond their original sentence. Many of these individuals are held in the sensory deprivation and mind control units called Security Housing Units (S.H.U. Program), without even the most basic of human rights.”

Of particular interest to me this year is the August 21st National Prison Strike, the first of which was coordinated in 2016 as the largest organized prison strike, and which commemorated the Attica Prison Rebellion of 1971. Called for and being led by those inside the system and their allies on the outside, an intro to the press release for the strike reads as follows:

“Men and women incarcerated in prisons across the nation declare a nationwide strike in response to the riot in Lee Correctional Institution, a maximum security prison in South Carolina. Seven **comrades lost their lives during a senseless uprising that could have been avoided had the prison not been so overcrowded from the greed wrought by mass incarceration, and a lack of respect for human life that is embedded in our nation’s penal ideology.** These men and women are demanding humane living conditions, access to rehabilitation, sentencing reform and the end of modern day slavery.”

There are other significant dates for Black August, such as the death of Michael Brown which sparked the Ferguson Uprising, or the dragging of captive Afrikans to Jamestown in 1619. They cause us to focus on the politics of abolition, which is essential when talking about Black radicalism. Blackness (and other codes for ‘non-white’ people) is also psychically associated with the idea of ‘criminal’ no matter what. It is now well established that prisons and policing target Black communities for politico-economic gain, their roots traceable on one account to forces established to protect settler rights/claims to ‘property,’ (including Black humans kept as

chattel), and the trinity of convict leasing, debt peonage, and the black codes after Reconstruction aimed at preserving the slaveocracy despite on paper claims of emancipation. Addressing mass incarceration and the prison system in general, and by extension the police state and the entire legal system of the United States is essential to Black liberation. Black August is our time to meditate on, fast for, and develop our praxis around that fact.

As Mumia Abu Jamal once said: “[Black] August [is] a month of injustice and divine justice; of repression and righteous rebellion; of individual and collective efforts to free the slaves, and break the chains that bind us.”

“The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,
the heavens languish with the earth.
The earth is defiled by its people ...
Therefore, a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt.
Therefore earth’s inhabitants are burned up
and very few are left.”

— Isaiah 24:4–6

While fasting, shouting about, and studying more intensely the question of Abolition this month, I have felt moved to point out an aspect of the struggles our incarcerated family faces that doesn’t get as much attention. There is a significant, disproportionate battle with pollution and other environmental hazards that incarcerated people suffer. This is overlooked probably due to a general lack of regard for the safety and well being of prisoners given a punitive culture that sees them (and all poor, mentally ill, and Black people really) as deserving such deathliness — the wages of our s(k)in. Add to this the overwhelming bias in the environmental movement against addressing any ecological realities that affect all marginalized groups, especially because of the integration of anti-capitalist/

anti-colonial and even anti-state politics into one's ecology that these realities often call for — and suddenly no one can even imagine that incarcerated folks are on the front lines of environmental justice struggles.

In this vein, I point us to Nik Heynan's conversation about the need for an 'abolition ecology.'

"[A]bolition ecology... push[es] forward... **well-informed and deliberate organizing and continued theorizing against and about the continued existence of...uneven racial development within land and property relations.**"

Heynan grounds this kind of ecology, which is attuned to environmental racism, capitalist relations of property, and settler colonial theft of land, in the work of Black radical luminary W.E.B du Bois.

"“In *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) **DuBois illustrates how** the freedom dreams underlying African-American's fighting against the Confederacy were dashed through the collective recognition that **the self-determination they sought would be implausible if the very democratic fabric of the U.S. was not also simultaneously abolished** along with slavery given its inherently white supremacist logics and traditions. **DuBois calls this political vision 'abolition democracy.'"**

For Heynan, an abolition ecology extends ecology to du Bois' political vision, **a vision that aims to abolish the very fabric of the US in order to advance Black liberation.** Thus, connecting Black struggle, especially the liberation of those incarcerated, to environmental concerns like air quality, soil quality, water pollution, inadequate shelter, food insecurity and hunger, etc. (which disproportionately affect us as Black people), can only do one thing: **call into question the entire American project.** Nothing illustrates the importance of this to me like that the United States has the world's largest prison system, and its military pollutes the world more than any other force on this planet.

cosmos? I want to keep in line with Octavia Butler and really begin to try representing the possibilities both within and beyond an oppressive futures that bear resemblance to the processes unfolding our present . This is the way that we can start developing an abolitionist posture toward ecological devastation and the ‘space race’ response to it capitalists are having.

As we are mid-way through this year’s Black August, let us continue learning, theorizing, organizing. But also, let us expand the boundaries and scope of our analysis from the soil to the stars.

We owe it to our people, our planet, and maybe other planets (and their potential inhabitants).

Free all (political) prisoners. Free mama earth. And let’s do it before we have to start saying free planet mars as well.

“...The vision awaits its appointed time;
it hastens to the end — it will not lie.
If it seems slow, wait for it;
it will surely come; it will not delay.”

— Habakkuk 2:3

What could a world without prisons, cages, the state, and the environmental perils caused by unwanted growth and greed look like? Is a planetary belonging like this even possible? Can we truly ever imagine or even create a world like this?

Whenever Abolitionists call for the eradication of prisons, policing, surveillance, punitivity, captivity, etc., we are hit with this above question about *possibilities*.

In fact, the thinking behind that question is why for a while, although I held a lot of abolitionist concerns, I wasn’t on board as a self-identified Abolitionist as I am now.

For me, I saw the material world as impermanent and always in flux; this meant (potential) dangers exist in such an unpredictable reality. I was (and still am) of the opinion that at times (though not all) we need mechanisms in place to secure or ensure or guarantee valid concerns for our safety, differing levels of social cohesion and permanence, and access to resources for our needs.

In the US, however, we are raised incorrectly to think of such mechanisms as:

Capitalism, an economic structure which is put in place as the supposed only way, or the most viable way, toward our basic material needs (water, food, clothing, shelter, education, healthcare, etc.)

The (Westphalian) State, a political structure which is put in place as the supposed only way, or the most viable way, toward our basic needs for social cohesion.

And prisons/policing (and the military), centralized organs of literal violence and force put in place as the supposed only way, or

the most viable way, toward our basic psychic/physical needs for safety and protection.

Growing up then, even as I was critical of (even hostile toward) these systems because of their ongoing colonial, classist, and racist formations, *imagining* possibilities beyond them felt (and sometimes still feels) difficult.

And yet, as I study the Black/Afrikan Anarchist tradition, and other non-European ways of being, I am beginning to understand that alternatives *have* existed in human history, and *are* being enacted on-the-ground by radicals around the world.

I think now about what well known abolitionists at Critical Resistance say: “An abolitionist vision means that we must build models today that can represent how we want to live in the future. It means developing practical strategies for taking small steps that move us toward making our dreams real and that lead us all to believe that things really could be different. It means living this vision in our daily lives.”

How do we begin to practice representing these abolitionist future-visions? In other words, how can we manifest our dreams of abolition in real time?

In *Straight From the Underground: On Ecology in (my) Black Speculative Practice*, I share my budding **use of Afrofuturism** as a way to **forge a Black radical** environmental study, and Black radical **environmental movement**.

I live in the South Bronx, **poverty, pollution, prisons and police, and punitive culture interact**, thus worsening the racialized colonial/capitalist violence that we poor Black, Brown, and Indigenous (and otherwise marginal) inhabitants face. This convergence of battles means a coalescence of struggles, theory, and practices are necessary; Afrofuturism holds the power in helping us develop that.

Exciting and entertaining, with its transposition of Black people into space, digital worlds, alternate pasts, new futures, Afrofuturism also has “real-world” application. As Reynaldo Anderson

argues in *Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Art Movement: Notes on a Manifesto*: “Black speculative art integrates African diasporic or African metaphysics with science or technology and seeks to interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and as a catalyst for the future.” In this way, all Afrofuturism has an underlying drive: the **constant, critical and creative re-assessment of boundaries**, with an emphasis on **synthesizing tradition and science to re-create possibilities** for the future.

I think it possible to re-assess boundaries, and synthesise African and Afrikan diasporic sciences and traditions in a range of areas, including ecology. This is the way I see us creating an environmentalism that is abolitionist. In other words, through Afrofuturism, we can develop an environmentalism which articulates itself ‘straight from the underground’, as N.W.A did years ago — in open defiance to the colonialism and capitalism that has taken captive the earth and those of us reduced to ‘unhuman’ or ‘superhuman’ categories thereof.

For example: Afrofuturists, who often re-imagine Black realities through the theme of interstellar travel (as the great jazz musician Sun Ra did), could begin to reflect on what it would mean for the US military — which we’ve established is (one of) the world’s largest polluter(s) — prepares to expand its operations into space. This shouldn’t be regarded as mere speculation or abstract imagination; if Trump announced it, it’s probably that the amerikkkan military has long been preparing to impose its fundamentally colonial-capitalist dominion onto the ‘final frontier’ of space. I mean, rich folk and scientists have been talking about escaping climate destruction in space for a while now. Whose to say, then, that — analogous to the exploitative use of prisoners to fight wildfires caused by climate change (which is itself a result of the same system benefiting from mass incarceration!) — incarcerated folk already seen as disposable won’t be placed on the front lines of whatever unknown dangers could come as a result of Massa’s quest to commodify the