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Clout Culture: Queer Liberation and Social Capitalism

An Interview with Jewel the Gem and Prof.Ound

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The following article is based on a “Community Conversation” hosted by Jewel the Gem on IG live, July 17th, 2020 at 9pm. In it, Jewel and Prof.Ound (the author of this piece) share a conversation titled “They Do Anything for Clout...,” a conversation about “clout” as a concept, its positives and negatives, its larger political/economic context, its implications on Black Trans and Queer liberatory spaces, and ways we can use Black August to move beyond weaknesses in our movements that allow clout to ruin the work we are doing.

Jewel: Introduce yourself – name, pronouns, who you are and what you do in this world?

KD Wilson: My name is Prof.Ound. My pronouns are they/them, or “thaddy” if you nasty, lol. I am friendly, fabulous, fierce, and frenetic. I’m a Bronx-born nigga and I write poetry, I pray without ceasing, and I fight for Black liberation as a Street Queer Anarkata Defender.

Jewel: How do you think the larger society defines clout?

KD Wilson: Clout to me is a hood-nigga concept. It's about the pull you have. But I do think it's very specific to the social media era, so it's slightly different from regular degular street cred or respect. Somebody might have relevance and/or influence in their circles, and use that influence and relevance positively or negatively — but may never broach the potential of capitalistic success (or proximity to it, or the perception of it). It's that potential, proximity, perception of capitalist ideas of success that really ground "clout," if I'm thinking of Cardi as a clout theorist, lol.

Jewel: I agree clout comes from Hood culture. I think it goes back to the way you might be known for how you hold others down especially if they are on hard times. If you blow up, people drawn to you because they know about what you done for them. But how do you personally define clout? Clout culture...

KD Wilson: I would say that Black people do relate to clout from the perspective of that bottom-up, working-class hood understanding where we respect the way niggas ride for us. That's why I started out with saying that regular degular street cred is related to clout, but I do think it's different. Clout is an offline and online set of practices and thought patterns. It has a lot to do with the way an image/persona develops around you, especially because of social media, that can bring some degree of mainstream or institutional success to your "Grind," (i.e., the way you move to survive and meet your needs under capitalism is further enabled by it).

With clout, the dream or hope of some degree of economic success is made more possible because of a proximity to certain institutions and resources that the persona/image allows you to gain. Clout culture — I mean the song said it, niggas will do anything for clout, because it can help folk get sponsorships, speaking gigs, jobs at a nonprofit, a record deal, gig opportunities and more. And even if all that is precarious and doesn't help them get rich or even get by, they can accrue a persona/image, mostly just a string of associ-

ations that either allows them to navigate this meritocracy better than those who lack it, or that helps them seem like the folk who do have that privilege and access. It's that real or projected closeness to either capital or status markers or both, which makes clout so tempting.

Jewel: Social capital vs. Clout... are they the same?

KD Wilson: I think everyone should read the article "Social Capitalism" by MerriCatherine on Medium.com. MerriCatherine is a circle of Black trans women anarchists who have taught me a lot. They talk about the relationship between social capital, symbolic capital, and cultural capital. They specify the social media age in this article, and that's how I understand clout and "clout chasing." Even offline we make choices based on persona that we can project or concoct on these platforms, and that persona aligns with certain popular or relevant social norms and trends. These trends are defined by the mainstream, by the things academic/nonprofit activists and companies and television shows or movies and monied folk and celebrities are pandering to or talking about to service their career path or resume or consumer base.

We witness these practices and then we start mimicking them without realizing the economics behind how these folks enact their digital social relations. We start clout chasing: nurturing our personas, so that what we do looks good, or it looks radical, or it can be branded or marketed through association with a certain niche or idea or movement that's currently popular or relevant. And it's especially gon give that, if you are noticeably good at milking that yourself — you're taking fire pics, coming up with logos. If your visualities look tight, look legit, look like you was trained, like you got the skills to mobilize ppl, and looks like it came out the brilliance of your own mind — chile, people gon be drawn to it. Even if thas not your intention. And thas cuz of how celebrities and capitalists curate our view of them.

Social capital isn't always a problem, by the way, because like MerriCat writes, if *"I know a guy who knows a guy who can open*

your locked car door... you can get the keys inside, so you can get to work to make money [to survive].” People talk about “networking,” right — community connections. That can be so helpful, you know. And we need community. But community doesn’t exist in a vacuum, devoid of class and other oppressions — race, gender, sexual, ability, religious, linguistic. So then what happens, as MerriCat also touches on, is that folk “*with power or influence of favouring relatives or friends... [give] them jobs. This harms not only the working class, but also those who can not find work through hire, and may become lumpenproletariat.*”

I experienced this directly cuz once I dropped out of school because of ableism and racism and queerphobia. Folks I knew in the arts world stopped tryna put me on to job and performance opportunities. Gatekeeping, and now I’m lumpenproletarianized. I need survival economics. I’m not a formal worker. I don’t fit the Grind now cuz I’m not somehow on that bag-chasing track our people have grown to love so much now due to the celebrities and the entrepreneurs. Mind you, folk don’t do it intentionally, but it’s their class orientation or class aspirations at work. And inherited values around success.

That’s why, somehow, whenever I have managed to get to some opportunity — which is really difficult as a disabled, nonbinary, dark-skinned, working class nigga — suddenly here they come talk about “Black Excellence” and I have mad likes like never before on social media. That’s the clout kicking in, that persona that resonates with what it means to succeed. Gets you recognition, legitimacy, and folk might be more drawn to send resources your way because of it, and listen to what you have to say. So-called “radicals” replicate this in the online and offline communities they create. We start seeing cliques, and all the invites and information is dictated and circulated within them.

Jewel: Do you think that clout culture is linked to capitalism — any other -ism, really?

tering cis men, but I want to retain its practical and concrete features: the focus on study, on spirit, and on solidarity and struggle. I think if Black queer and trans people get serious about not forming “community” in the way we have — around trauma bonds, around escapism, around elitist social clubs — we can make ourselves less susceptible to the ways capitalism and clout chasing and the violences they shield co-opt the work. Collective study helps us all continue to grow so that nothing about radicalism becomes associated with one person and their image; spirit helps us nurture a cultural and ancestral kinship and find forms of wellness among each other; solidarity means we actively commit to mutual aid and other ways to concretely support one another’s needs; and struggle means we train one another and ourselves for when it’s time to start throwing bricks at the pigs again... Marsha P. Johnson’s birthday is during Black August, by the way, and so her spirit and power is a perfect touchstone for what I’m thinking about.

Suggested Resources:

1. “Clout,” Offset ft. Cardi B
2. “Social Capitalism,” MerriCatherine
3. “The Anarchism of Blackness,” Zoé Samudzi and William C Anderson
4. “How We Roll: Suggestions for Organizing as Anarkatas,” Afro-futurist Abolitionists of the Americas
5. *African Anarchism: A History of a Movement*, Sam Mbah and IE Igariwey
6. “Celebrate Black August,” Critical Resistance

KD Wilson: Clout culture is definitely tied to capitalism. I mean, social media is a capitalist enterprise; it’s all about advertising and consumerism, not really about communication. The aesthetics and microcommunities that are built into and built around these platforms all go back to that; and we fall into a pattern of repurposing that infrastructure in order to spread radical ideas and even to help ourselves survive by somewhat monetizing our discussion of these ideas. Social media is not evil by the way. Everything has positives and negatives. We are raising revolutionary consciousness in a unique way because of it. At the same time, because it’s a capitalistic technology, problems of individualism, white supremacy and antiblackness, transmisogynoir and disablism will infect how the spread of ideas unfolds on these platforms. And that means some people get overlooked, while others with more access and power and privilege get clout! They are either ascribed a brand or persona, or they construct one actively, and they can capitalize off it and they can weaponize it to service folk who align with them — because they now have actual or perceived proximity to capital. This is how so many “movement leaders” with no actual or serious politics can just swoop in as experts.

Jewel: Is gatekeeping always an issue? How do we make sure we vet our spaces and keep our people space?

KD Wilson: Something I remember hearing from Zoé Samudzi, a Black feminist anarchist, is that “boundary is not a border.” I’m Anarkata, so eventually we gon have to address borders, because borders are a State process, and the State is an instrument of the ruling class and colonizer. I’m not against boundaries, tho. Indigenous people, our ancestors prior to colonialism, had boundaries. Boundaries are about health. So in the same way that regular degular pull on the streets, influence, etc. — the stuff you said are based on respect for how someone hold you down in the hood — thas different from clout. The same way that there is a difference here because of class — protecting our spaces through boundaries is also different from gatekeeping. Two different class orientations. What

we doing is trying to protect the most marginal. We tryna make sure we keep transphobia, homophobia, racism, fat phobia out of our communities. We shouldn't call that gatekeeping. According to *How We Roll*, which is like an Anarkata mini-manual, "*Gatekeeping is when knowledge [and skills and resources] and their use or implementation is locked in the bourgeois class [or people with proximity to them, or the image thereof], often through their universities, with political representatives and academics and unjust religious leaders allowed to then dictate our destinies for us through what they (profess to) know better than the rest of us...*"

What we are doing when we are trying to protect vulnerable and marginal people — from abuse, harm, oppression — should be called "laneguarding." According to the *How We Roll* mini-manual, "laneguarding" is not about liberal/boujie "gatekeeping" practice, because its function is to make sure that those who are not aligned with a particular community's material interests/struggles do not dominate or ruin the process of resistance and radicalism such community members are involved in. And in the name of laneguarding to protect the marginalized, we should take a stand against clout culture. Clout culture replicates gatekeeping, which is class violence, since both are tied to the same bourgeois class milieus.

Jewel: What have you seen in celebrity clout culture that you've also seen replicated in the Black Queer and Trans Community?

KD Wilson: Well for one I have literally witnessed Black queer radicals actively studying the social media tactics of people like Kanye West, or the tactics of the Shade Room, in order to develop their community initiatives as organizers. So that's an explicit example of celebrity culture being replicated on the grassroots. But there's less explicit ways too that are best identified when we follow Tiffany "New York" Pollard's advice and "look at the material." Clout culture is a class problem. Even if it ain't boujie folk replicating it, it's that "on yo Grind/get to the bag" ethic among working-class Black folk showing up in subtle ways. This is just

Spreading leadership capacity also means widening our vision of what radical activity looks like, because oftentimes particular models are what people have in mind, models that don't work for everyone. So we need organizing and community models that are not just in the mainstream activist-organizer-artist-college-nonprofit-scene universe. People in these milieus, even ones who genuinely fight for liberation, are often ones who have clout. And even if they just have regular degular influence, especially if they are cis, it is on you to shift resources and skills and power and access to the most vulnerable and marginalized — by prioritizing alternative spaces. Look to the underground, the margins, the undercommons, the stuff that ain't been legitimized or paid attention to by the mainstream and the powerful or folk with access and privilege.

Jewel: What do you think is important to make really clear if people get anything from this live?

KD Wilson: I think it's high time Black queer and trans people actively commit to forming community in new ways. Ways that are more militant but also more caring. The balance of both is super essential. I said before our community is uniquely politicized, in ways the straights are not, and I think our enemies know that, which is why they are working harder to stamp us out. We have to step up the level of care work we are doing and the level of militancy or vigilance we bring into our connections and relationships. And it all has to be informed by the revolutionary traditions our ancestors have passed down: the methods, understandings, principles they have fought for.

One way we can seriously take steps toward this is by reclaiming what is called "Black August" — but for our movements. Historically, Black radicals have used August to honor George Jackson and other mostly cis male political prisoners in the ongoing Black liberation struggle. What Black August has involved is political education, fasting or ritual, and training for struggle and/or prisoner support. I want to move Black August away from cen-

image meant we should either self-doubt about our concern or others would doubt us. Their clout protected them and it is protecting plenty other abusers in our movements.

Clout culture literally prevents us from creating a consent culture; clout culture literally prevents us from addressing rape culture and gender violence. Clout culture literally causes us to let niggas groom folk into quietly accepting their abuse and violation. I have watched several accountability processes fail because clout meant people put the focus on the “healing” of the abusers rather than survivors, and the abusers could use their clout built on “success” as organizers to inoculate or groom people’s perception of their actions. Even when betraying their politics, they can lean on the persona by which it is all associated with them to feign or evade accountability. I’m currently in confrontation with a man who can use his connections in the nonprofit world to shield his abuse because he is understood as well-versed in transformative justice, knowing all the lingo. His clout, coupled with his cisness — chile, he keeps getting away with violence year after year. Clout is dangerous to me.

Jewel: How can we come together as a community to decentralize leaders who have a certain level of clout?

KD Wilson: I believe in spreading leadership capacity, which is an Anarkata principle. If you read Anarkata: A Statement, it references Ella Baker in saying that “strong people don’t need leaders.” It speaks about us needing to bring all people to the material source of our power. If community and movements is how we sustain ourselves and protect ourselves and fight and advocate for ourselves then we have to cultivate leadership in every level that. We have to be intentional about nurturing and sharing the skills and resources people need to take free initiative in their liberation. Free initiative, the capacity to actively lead oneself toward liberation in this way — Anarkatas prioritize growing it for us all. It’s hard work, concrete work that requires the more powerful folk shifting whatever power and access they have to those who lack it.

“pull yourself by your bootstraps” but rebranded as Hood. Clout culture means people’s worth and the value of their word or their work is formulated around how well they can move or have moved through the system.

So the folks with the most clout have privileges and access others don’t. The folks with the most clout often have degrees or did some college. The folks with the most clout have specific discursive patterns and language styles. The folks with the most clout have podcasts, talk shows or radio shows, they been interviewed, they go to conferences, they travel the country or the world. They might still be poor but still they have status markers attached to them. They can look or sound like celebrities do, or like professionals do. And the people around them probably are actually boujie, blavity black types, or full on nonblacks and white gays. They might plaster the word “hood” and on everything but the venues and events skew towards and invite folk who are familiar with or actually from a certain higher class/socioeconomic status. Then, we add politics to the equation, cuz the QmmuniTy is very politicized, in disproportionate ways than the straights, due to how pronounced our oppression is and how tireless Black trans organizers have been. If ‘radical’ is factored into a capitalistic social arena, such as those built around clout, then no longer are movements properly understood and built.

Revolutionary activity should be the conscientious expression of unconscious striving for liberation by the masses and the margins; but clout culture means we are simply involved because we are loyal to individual figures or formations. All power is not being brought to all the people. Ideas and spaces are linked to individuals. Our attachment is not to a mosaic of principles, methods, and understandings that are a collective project to participate in. Instead we are more centered on the assumed uniqueness or brilliance of one or a few persons’ mind — curated around their aesthetic or their resume. Spaces and the skills needed to organize are not diffused among us but concentrated in the hands of certain people —

the ones with clout, taken to be most qualified by virtue of their persona, and their access or perceived proximity to resources and power and institutions and experiences that others lack.

Some people don't want this clout stuff, by the way, but it happens anyway because folk start seeing their actions and words through a celebrity, fan or stan lens, especially on social media. Social media is all about branding and so eventually, if we aren't careful, it forces ideas and those who purvey them to be consumed as a product. Others do actually want clout, they want their persona and their projects at the center of the work of community. And they may mean well, by the way; it might be unintentional, but they are still going off colonial, bourgeois mentality. I have watched organizers help put together marches in the thousands, and the main focus went to who would be there to draw a big crowd, on taking good and engrossing pictures, and ultimately they took credit for the action's success — rather than the credit going to the masses — through social media posts. This was because they was tryna make their movements look a certain way and gain more followers or members. But I had to ask, why do we need branding and marketing to legitimate our movements? Is the growth and relevance of the work stifled when there is no flow of someone's clout? I have to ask, then, can we get nowhere unless we know so-and-so is taking videos or doing xyz for us? And why is it that my friends only get plugged into this stuff if they see me and so-and-so on Facebook live at the march? And what about our parties and chill spaces? Who is being ignored because they don't know the host? And who gets to be the host anyway? Why? What got them to the place where they are so loved and cherished, and why is that associated with their individual worth and brilliance and experience?

Part of it was the work they did, but part of it was clout and institutional/mainstream access or proximity too. And there's many who have rode in simply on clout and nothing else...

Jewel: What are the beauties and dangers of clout?

KD Wilson: For people of marginalized genders, like Black TGNC folk, clout can allow us to stake out a record of existence in a world which often erases us once we die. We get erased; clout can help us blip on the radar. But being remembered fondly can be achieved without clout. Ultimately, though, having renown in the community should not be our primary investment in radical involvement and easily slips into clout chasing and clout culture.

The biggest dangers I see of clout is that people become adamant about doing the most to keep it and influence others or society through it, even if their choices don't bring a material benefit to the movement or they make others unsafe in QmmuniTy. Our communities and movements have become plagued by unchecked abuse and manipulation, and this is older than clout. Individualism, and cisheteromasculinism, and hierarchy have bolstered abuse and manipulation in movements for a long time; but clout culture builds on these issues to shield abuse in a unique way. Folk who are invested in it are not willing to "throw away" certain figures or formations because of a capitalist vision of success — success as visibility or fame or relevance, all tied to the personas in question.

People will literally hold onto abusers because "they do good work," as if the work hinges on them as an individual person and is not simply a conscientious expression of a collective striving for freedom. People gain unquestionable, unchallenged images in their communities because of clout culture, even when they move in unprincipled and anti-revolutionary, abusive ways, because now the work and their persona is tied together. Their violence is ignored because their "success" as an organizer is prioritized. This is especially true if the abuser has not only clout but comes from a dominant social position (cishet men get away the most). We watched someone who got clout for being *thee* Black trans ally go for years unchecked in terms of problematic language and disregard for boundaries, and folk either failed to call it in or were to scared to call it in because of a keen awareness that her persona/