

What We Mean by “Roots-Grasping Science”

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During the summer of rebellions of 2020, I grew a watermelon plant out of a broken drum. Seeing the infrastructure collapse around the coronavirus pandemic, and the State as well as fascist responses to Black protests, I wanted to get into experiments around food growing. Me and the other Anarkatas coordinated a seed-share across the country and traded knowledge we had about growing plants.

I couldn't afford to buy a pot, but I went out looking for shit people might have discarded on the curbside, stuff like dressers, and bins, because I felt I should just recycle a broken item and use it to grow in. That's when I stumbled upon a red-and-black colored drum. I felt like it was perfect to add some green to it, and especially since drums are used to communicate messages and drums were used to channel the sacred throughout African history and culture, I chose to grow watermelons from the drum because of their significance for our ancestors. See, at some point, after the general strike of slave rebellions which caused the Civil War and then the emancipation laws which ended chattel slavery, Black folk in the US took up watermelons as a symbol of freedom. Unfortunately white people altered that legacy by using watermelon as a racist stereotype, and this was done alongside many different narratives and tropes under Jim Crow (fascist) segregation as the white power structure worked against our liberation efforts following Reconstruction. But watermelons still remain important to Black diets.

In the last two years, the United States has been witnessing the development of a new Jim-Crow response to the slave revolt of the George Floyd Uprising and the Black Lives Matter protests which preceded it for just under a decade. When the original segregation had ended, and the State tried to “integrate” our people, a history of resistance in the 60s and 70s had exploded, because our people realized that assimilation could not resolve colonialism. But these movements were repressed and decimated. Structural neglect around health issues (such as HIV/AIDS, addiction) alongside a drug war-fueled mass incarceration campaign, were used to regain a chokehold on our community. In response to that, anti-police and anti-prison organizing has been cropping up in the Black community more frequently in the last few decades, even as Amerikkka continues to claim that racism is over. More of such resistance is on the way, and once again structural neglect (this time around a pandemic) and a burgeoning police state is being developed to undermine it. Only difference now is we have a lot more Black faces in high places pulling the strings.

I am no longer growing watermelons from a drum. I had to move and my current space is much smaller. But, I am still planting seeds and trying to grow things. My comrades and I are as

well, in various ways. We talk bout plant life, about fungi too, about the underground, about being wild things: and we deal with this in a literal sense of ecogeny or the things of the environment as well as in various metaphorical senses that we apply to our political practice, perhaps even our spiritual practice for those so inclined. We are teaching ourselves and one another what it means to become Ungovernable, as Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin speaks of it, or to at least prepare ourselves for the coming need for ungovernability among the Black masses and underclasses.

When we Kickback about these things, when we “rap” about them in the way Marsha P Johnson was “rapping” about being a Street Trans* Action Revolutionary, I like to think about the old school phrase “droppin science.” It’s from before my time, expressed in songs like the one from Marley Marl, but it’s about when the emcee goes from just bravado and shit talking to educational mode. Not all Anarkatas are hip hop artists (a few are, though), but we come from the same marginal-class culture as does hip-hop. The “science” we be dropping is about “grasping things at the root,” aka radicalism as a set of ideological commitments.

Describing “radical” as something that “grasps things at the root” is a phrase that comes from Karl Marx, but it’s also been repeated by Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Davis, and others. In Marx’s day, European class societies began to shift from a feudal, monarchical, king-queen/aristocracy and Christian order to the bourgeois (capitalist), eventually liberal-humanist and Enlightenment, modern nation-State system. This process did not happen in one fell swoop, and as such it generated lots of internal crises, both economically and culturally, for Europe. It forced some of their members to try and “grasp” what the material root of all the issues were. They were able to give name to one major aspect, Labor, or rather its exploitation, and specifically its role in how a nation, society, and civilization develops from one phase to another. It was a necessary invention made by the Marxist attempt at root-grasping, because the authoritarian religious societies of Europe simply taught that all societal systems came from either God’s will; and if this wasn’t the narrative used, then things were simplistically blamed on “nature.” There were anarchists in Europe who began to try and “grasp things at the root” in their own way, and in the works of folk like Bookchin, we start to see an ecological paradigm get developed, as folks tried to explain how dominant human behaviors, and oppressive forces like the private property system, diverge from driving forces in evolution across species like mutual aid, symbiosis, and more. Anarchists took a different perspective than the Marxists on a number of things, which is a discussion for another time, but what both held in common was a neglect of the colonial roots of the crisis and its transformation in European class societies.

Various African and Third World thinkers have developed an anti-colonial form of “roots-grasping” or radicalism. Relying on material analysis of societal development and human evolution, these contributed accounts of history that centered racism, imperialism, slavery, to look at how the bourgeois (capitalist) system did not just cause massive changes in Europe, but caused immense both change and devastation in Africa, in the Americas, in the Pacific, in Asia, all over the world. Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Samir Amin, these are some of the more common names that come to mind on this topic for the Pan-African struggle. They did not necessarily speak of their insights as “roots-grasping,” but turned to Marxism, to scientific socialism, to dialectical and historical materialism, and aimed at combining these models with the concerns of their local cultures/histories. Black women radicals did the same, and worked to reconcile the anti-colonial perspective on class with an analysis of patriarchy, gender, homophobia. The works of Claudia Jones, Frances Beal, Combahee River Collective, Audre Lorde: these are the most well known. All of these radicals and more found themselves in controversy with

the white Marxists (and anarchists) to some or varying degrees. Oftentimes their analysis of the roots of modern struggle under capitalism did not bode well for those who wanted to maintain the so-called original type of roots-grasping that was Eurocentric. And even in the Black/African struggle, for the women and other marginalized gender people who took roots-grasping to the question of not just class and colonialism but also cisheteropatriarchy, their ideas were or have been dismissed by some too. These contradictions have caused immense problems for revolutionary movements, collectives, organizations. Many of the Black Marxists had to break away from official Marxist organizations; and Black women radicals had to do the same with both the Marxist factions and some Black nationalist/anti-colonial ones as well.

There is an ingrained chauvinism behind many ideas of what constitutes a proper or real way to “grasp the root” of class struggle. A lot of it comes from presumption about who is the universal or more exemplary victim of the crises that capitalism has caused. Is it the so-called white, the European human, or the so-called male, the cisgender heterosexual man? Even in the case of Black women radicals, including queer ones, a history of transphobia, especially transmisogynoir has been present, because of a reliance on the “female body” as archetypal subject of the revolution. In each case, folks have been replicating the same issues, forcing the same organizational breakaways, the same controversies, because their frame of reference for what the roots of how capitalism changed the world are—it is a limited frame. But fascism abrews in this day, and the ruling class continues to ravage the planet and clamp down its hold on our people, while chauvinistic infighting continues on and on and divides and weakens our movements. And this has been the case for so long that there has become not just a need to “grasp the root” of class struggle but to “grasp the root” of these divided interests within the class struggle! These questions are as abstract as they are immediate and practical, spanning a range, from philosophy, social and natural sciences, to political economy, history, spirituality, and more; and deeply relevant to on the ground conflicts and antagonisms that spring up at protests, meetings, accountability sessions, mutual aid distros, strikes, unions, cooperatives, demos, and more.

It was Cedric Robinson who asserted that the Black approach to a radical tradition was neither firmly Marxist nor anti-Marxist. Cedric Robinson’s argument was that this came from the fact that not only did Black people start from a unique material relationship to capitalism via slavery and colonialism, but Black people started from a unique set of metaphysical orientations as well. We had cosmologies and notions of personhood/being, Robinson insisted, that played equally (if not more) important roles in the Labor struggle, and this was most punctuated in the form of a Revolt. Through Revolt, Black folks’ self-awareness as living human beings, informed by our unique “worldsense” (I borrow this term from Oyeronke Oyewumi), made a riotous expression. This is why the earliest forms of Black resistance to capitalism emphasized Self-Determination foremost, with the economic and political concern from a class struggle sense coming afterward. Additionally, this is why all Black Marxisms/socialisms find themselves having to be oriented toward or around Self-Determination, and are advanced by way of responding to the Black revolt/uprising/upheavals which operate in the same vein. This means that “Black Marxisms” tend to involve an underlying element that cannot necessarily be spoken of purely in material or ecological terms only, but that have an ontological dimension going back to as Cedric Robinson put it “a revolutionary consciousness that proceeded from the whole historical experience of Black people.” This has given the notion of Black Radical Tradition an elusive quality, because then when taken up, one starts to observe phenomena like maroon/anti-slavery resistance, or transgendered anti-cop/anti-prison resistance, in which sometimes there is no stable or singular vision of

class liberation detectable at all times, if at all. On some occasions, that makes these expressions of movement foldable into bourgeois/State relations.

Rather than being dismissed as incorrect, the proper response is to the variegated shape of Black Revolt take up an ongoing view of revolutionary transformation, an Insurrectionary view, where the transformation of society isn't just military (as the authors of the Black Armed Joy zine emphasize) but a continuous social process. Since it is social, and not just military, that requires us to keep watch for how the shape of it can morph from a rebellion to a civil rights struggle to a decolonization/socialist project and then backward again so long as the entire Bourgeois order and its various entangled oppressive matrixes are, at *both* a material *and* metaphysical level, unchallenged. There is an incredible humility that this observation forces upon us, one which asks us not to put faith in even our movements alone as ends unto themselves, but to believe instead that the "magic hands are the hands of the people," as Fanon said. This means acknowledging that some strong man or demiurge or mechanistic development in the material condition or a historical telos is not what will drive resistance toward true liberation. No, only us, us alone, each generation, must figure out what it means, based off lessons from the past and the conditions of the present, to keep the revolution and make the revolution, keep it alive, keep it developing, keep it fresh.

Cedric Robinson speaks of the Intelligentsia as some of the more well known interpreters or interlocutors of Black Radical Tradition. He does not say that these educated Black thinkers, scholars, etc. pioneer or created it, as Robin Kelley reminds us, but that they "discovered it" or were overcome by it. This legacy was something beyond them, therefore. But they used elements of Western knowledge especially in the form of Marxism to make sense of it, to grasp at not just the root of class struggle, but the root of why Black Revolt impacted said struggle in ways that didn't align with most interpretations. And yet, in many ways they fell short, in part because just as the original Marxism was "caught in between" a changing feudal to capitalist world in the European context, the Intelligentsia in the Black struggle were "caught in between" their indigenous societies and that of the colonizer, often from a position of their own class privilege. Many of the ongoing divisions and chauvinism that the Black Radical movements has reflected in ways analogous to the white radical traditions, can be explained by how deeply entrenched Western/bourgeois institutions and values have become in African lives and minds under neocolonialism, in part because of the Intelligentsia. When imperialism changed its relationship to the descendants of the enslaved and colonized after the mid-20th century wave of revolts and civil rights and class/decolonization struggles, it was not simply that Radical movements got suppressed. Many were also co-opted; and often times those speaking for the interests of the Uprising Black masses and marginal classes, via the more privileged sectors of these movements, especially in the Intelligentsia, found themselves in positions where they or their compatriots had positions of leadership. Regardless of intention, there was a development of State/bureaucratic management of Black struggle that eventually meant that the material arrangement of capitalism took on new guises, as the leadership apparatus created an infrastructure that could be divorced from those at the bottom, and used to incentivize class treachery as opposed to class suicide. Since then, more Black people have adopted the worldviews and ideas of personhood of the white Man simultaneously. Some of the Intelligentsia realized this would happen, and issued warnings about it; some, only too late after they parties were ousted, for example. Some, still have not learned, however, even as their movements find themselves incorporated into various bourgeois relations, including the academy, cisheterosexism, and the nonprofit industrial complex. As a result, with

the increased fascization of capitalist society, what we see is a right-wing turn within even the Black Radical Intelligentsia whose milieus are, again, wedded to both Western metaphysics and bourgeois material relations in the neocolonial age.

Thankfully, these types were never the only intellectual voices in the legacy of Black Revolt and Black spiritual resistance. In the prisons and on the streets, particularly as capitalist amelioration has extended the carceral and lumpenized experience into more and more lives, pushing more of us to the fringe, there was a different type of revolutionary. This revolutionary did turn to Marxism, yes, but who also turned to anarchic ideas too, who blended them in an Autonomous (and very often feminist) fashion. These, too, wanted to grasp class struggle at the root, and to understand colonialism, and patriarchy, but they also found themselves wrestling against major presuppositions in the Black Radical Intelligentsia too, especially around the question of hierarchy, but also around the question of Western notions of being, like cissexism, ableism, even humanism. They wanted to harness their anterior African cosmology (and self-consciousness) with knowledge from the natural and social sciences, to understand the ways Black revolt evolved and metamorphosed, from the slave uprisings to the prison struggle, from civil rights movements to decolonization struggles. And many of them began to question the use of a State in socialist and independence movements, to put more emphasis on anti-authoritarianism, on a “self governing” process, and if not direct democracy, then more democratic processes as compared to those currently being used in the established Black revolutionary organizations. This is the type of roots-grasping that the Anarkata Turn emerges from.

When I say that we “droppin roots-grasping science” I am talking about the radical theory and radical ideology as it developed because of these prison/street revolutionary tendencies. These are inspired off the letters from political prisoners, the autobiographies too, and the zines and pamphlets passed out in the streets, things that aren’t kept in well known libraries, that don’t have entire academic disciplines devoted to their study or their application, that are sometimes as elusive as the Black Radical Tradition itself, but are also as enduring and impactful. I consider them the way I consider the original slave narrative: rooted in lived and direct experience, they are also keen and attentive to explaining objective conditions, at merging understandings of both. This is so much the case that it can easily be woven into oral culture/orature, storytelling, poetry, music, the sacred (many of its pioneers being practitioners of ATRs or adherent to Islam) and often is. For example, Assata’s autobiography, taken as both a theoretical document for many, and also the basis of protest chants and songs. And her work travels in this way on the ground and via the underground; among those engaged in direct action and conflict with the State and ruling class, who are getting activated militantly in the face of rebellions in real time. That’s how it was for me, at least. Me, fresh out of high school, and wrestling with questions of religion and race and gender. Having spent a few years involved in environmental restoration and then community/legislative advocacy through the arts, the crisis of my young adulthood required me to start roots-grasping. I got involved in the Black nationalist organizing scene. I tried to go to school and get involved in campus/student organizing as well. I dropped out of school, however; and I left Black nationalism. Yet, there were lessons conveyed to me, through the protests and direct actions I went to, and I discovered not just Assata but also the Panthers and BLA more generally, and, eventually, Black Anarchism.

Seeing Black anarchists in the street, learning with them online, I also began studying their works: the roots-grasping of Martin Sostre, the roots-grasping of Ojore Lutalo, the roots-grasping of Kuwasi Balagoon, the roots-grasping of Ashanti Alston, the roots-grasping of Sam Mbah, the

roots-grasping of Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin. I began to grow into a fuller understanding of myself as a Black transfeminine person, as a disabled person, as someone from the Hood, someone who reveres my ancestors. I started to build with other so-called "BARs," so named now because we understand that we related to "anarchism" in our own way as Black people. We were coming up during Ferguson, or we remembered Watts, Attica, Haiti, etc: Black Revolts. We had heard Malcolm and Martin growing up, listened to Wu-Tang Clan and Alice Coltrane and Fela Kuti and Bob Marley; we went to churches that had had preachers who marched on Washington, or attended mosques with deep connections to Black militant struggles going back decades, or we had ceremonies that stretched back to those used at Bwa Kayiman or well before. And we either did time or almost did time; we either lived in or ran the streets or almost did. Or we know folks in these situations. Or we are currently dodging and working through them. It's this working and underclass and marginal class orientation, different from the Intelligentsia who keeps asking one another to "commit class suicide" yet never effects such a form of solidarity, that is the real lifeblood of how one discovers the Black Radical Tradition, in its practice, its cosmology, and its science/study. Our theorizing and practice flows in this continuum, because the conditions we face push us to extreme lengths, where we eventually have to turn to whatever is out there that can help us better "grasp things at the root" about our suffering and our resistance. I can remember sleeping out the back of a car while rapping about "the African roots of war" by du Bois with some comrades over the phone. Or, I can remember sitting on my front stoop with a copy of Pedagogy of the Oppressed and some brotha walked by, saluted me, told me that book was important. I can remember sparking with my homie many times, listening to music, chilling and drinking, whatever, and then going over distinctions between the Counterhumanism of Sylvia Wynter and the antihumanism of Frank Wilderson. And then, it's back to our regular lives: taking care of our kids, grinding to survive, struggling with our health issues, organizing mutual aid and zine distros when we can (in 2020 we were out on the street corner and in the parks almost every week that summer), studying or just vibin virtually with the other Kats, growing shit yes, and shit that only those who truly move like mycorrhizae know. All the while: we will dissect and analyze, and identify strengths and weaknesses across schools of thought, and struggle together to figure out what will get us to Self-Determination, class liberation, and autonomy.

The prison/street expression of Black Radical Tradition is a "roots grasping science" because it is not anti-intellectual. When you learn accordingly, you do not see a categorical and ontologically reductive dismissal of anything that isn't hood or isn't Black, but rather an attempt to synthesize Truth wherever its rational kernel appears. There is an "in between worlds" character to this particular kind of "roots-grasping" but only because of how Western information impacts those coming from the position of those who have to deal with COs and abuse on the inside, or those on the outside but who have to deal with bosses/employers as laborers, or case workers in the shelter system, or violence through underground struggles of various kinds, who are transient or migrating constantly because of poverty and safety needs. Plus, as social media and other technologies begin to transform the way everyone relates to each other and the world, and widen access to information, this also begins to interact with how working and underclass and marginal class people are confronting the issues we deal with under racial capitalism. I, for example, find it important to integrate the findings on critical theory and human ecology into my discussions on transgender liberation, in order to combat eugenic and bioessentialist views of human sexual reproductive capacities and anatomy that are often weaponized against our people. These are things that are relevant when I have to deal with hoops and fuckery while trying to get access to

gender affirming care, health care in general, navigating public assistance and legal name change processes, etc, and seeing how the notion of sexual dimorphism is used to position my gender expansive womanhood as transgressive. I have comrades who learn about geography, psychology; who adopt technical training around the use of coding/computers, mathematics; comrades learning about biotechnology; comrades digging into buried archives as best they can, even from outside the academy, to dissect how white supremacy reconstructed and erased precolonial, ancestral, indigenous gender expanses. They are working through these things while wrestling in their jobs, or in moments of job insecurity, the gig economy, or incessant crowdfunding campaigns as they get hit with mounting bills and debt, or are gatekept out of school and healthcare because of systemic ableism, have to deal with immigration law, surveillance, and more: all struggles within which certain narratives from the ruling class is used to rationalize their oppression or domination or exploitation. So we start the “root-grasping” shit, but it is not about ideas divorced from our engagement with the whole totality of a material struggle, including the question of our being, our Soul. We are still fully and firmly rooted in our experience and our culture and this is because that is foundational to who we are and why we fight. Yet, our roots-grasping science deals with the world and tries to change the world, as much as it deals with the self and tries to change the self too.

I find that the conditions which require us to move like this are becoming more weighty. In this climate change age, this fascizing age, as the revolts come and go, and as their direction shifts, and we see even the radicals tailing barbarism, carceral/surveillance technology is finding its tendrils in more parts of our life than ever before, and with it comes the diffusion of ruling class ideology into more parts of our world and culture. It is the prison and street revolutionaries who have developed the tools and legacy of study, that draw both our African myth and radical materialism together, in a struggle to catalyze Autonomy as a revolutionary tendency, and bring about an end to class society and all hierarchies, all forms of domination, all exploitation. So when you see the “wild things” are in our kick backs and our rituals and doing what we do where we do it, studying and building as we do, this what we about. This is what it means to drop a roots-grasping science.

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