On a Black Feminist Anarchism

Zoé Samudzi

March 25th, 2017

Note for readers: This is a transcript of Zimbabwean-American Zoé Samudzi's panel titled "On A Black Feminist Anarchism" given at the Orange County Anarchist Bookfair on March 25th, 2017, in Anaheim, California. Despite the rougher audio quality from the video recording of the original panel, the folks associated in the production of "A Black Autonomy Reader" (Seditionist Distribution, 2024), a compilation of Black autonomist and anarchist texts throughout history, were able to transcribe a large amount of Zoé's panel. While there was a Q&A section where Samudzi answered roughly 3-4 questions from the audience, much of the audience's questions are garbled compared to Zoé's clear answers picked up by their microphone. As such, this transcription is solely of what they said as part of her panel, not the answers they gave.

This updated transcription, done by myself, corrects nearly all omissions from the original, restores words that were left out, corrects misspelled names, and includes revisions to grammar and citations. Samudzi's multiple "and's" were omitted for readability. Public figures, book titles, and specific events mentioned have been footnoted, recognizing that readers may be unfamiliar with the histories and cultural contexts of what is being discussed. - AnarchoGuac

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Hi everyone. I'm really excited to be here. I don't like — I much prefer to have generative dialogue spaces than to talk at you. So I'm gonna try to keep it on the shorter side, and then we can have some more conversation on what I am trying to talk about.

In her 1983 literary work *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker described a womanist as "a woman who loves another woman, sexually and/or non-sexually. She appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility. She's committed to the survival and the wholeness of an entire people. She's not a separatist, except periodically for health. She loves the spirit, she loves struggle, she loves herself, regardless."[1]

So I have a really complicated relationship with political theory, particularly as someone that studied political science as an undergraduate. My relationship to political theory, especially to the kind of horribly white supremacist enlightenment values of "rationality" and "objectivity" is generally, like, a knee-jerk reaction to the whiteness and the eurocentricity of it and of the canon.

[1] In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983) by Alice Walker.

With regards to anarchism specifically, I often feel alienated from the theory because of the non-white and non-western globality of the politics of the ideology that have, all of a sudden, been turned into this white politic. Anarchistic values of horizontalism, of mutual aid, of voluntary participation, of non-extra or markably anti-state organization existed prior to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's self description of "anarchist" in the mid-1800s, or William Godwin's framework laying work in the 1790s. I say this, you know, what I'm about to say, in the same vein that Russell Means of the American Indian Movement sought to resist; being "Europeanized." He said that like capitalism, Marxism is right smack in the middle of European tradition, and the Hegelian dialectic is a secularizing theory that is even further despiritualized and despiritualizes humanity that we kinda end up also end up seeing in industrialization and Marx's materialism.[2]

So, I want to share a confession that's made me a bit unpopular in different anarchist communities that I've kind of tried to involve myself in. I don't read canonical anarchist theory, and I have no intention to. I've read some of and I deeply value Emma Goldman's development of anarcho-feminism, but I've never read Kropotkin, I've never read Bakunin, and I don't plan to anytime soon. My most important and foundational left-politics have been derived from observing organizations and political formations themselves. The Black Panther Party taught me what it looked like to apply Maoism in the development of a racialized resistance politic for community self-determination. The Zapatista's *Zapatismo* taught me about the synthesis of articulated Indigenous practices and sovereignty and socio-cultural organization with familiar principles and ideologies. African liberation leaders like Amílcar Cabral and Thomas Sankara taught me what a culturally relevant post-colonial formation and an agrarian revolution might look like on the continent, unfortunately before they were both assassinated. Brazil's Landless Workers Movement & South Africa's Abahlali baseMjondolo, which is a shack dwellers' movement, and they're about land reclamation and about widespread democratization processes beginning with the most poor and the most disenfranchised communities in the country— taught me what it meant to organize around reclaimed resources. Indigenous peoples and First Nations peoples of North America taught me what sovereignty meant. In addition to these global struggles, I'm deeply inspired by the myriad ways that Black people have resisted in the Americas and throughout the African diaspora. Boaventura de Sousa Santos— so I do read a ton of theory, I just don't read white dudes— he developed a concept of "societal fascism," which describes the mechanisms and logics of state formation wherein whole populations are excluded prior to or after the formation of a social contract.

Pre-contractual exclusion refers to populations that have never been part of and can never be a part of the social contract. So in the United States, think of Indigenous people or think of Black people. Post-contractual exclusion, or ejection from the contract, means that a given population could enjoy conditional access to the contract. Think of immigrants who had to appeal to a proximity to whiteness in order to become American citizens. Think of poor white people, who are part of the contract through the merit of their whiteness, but are excluded because of their working classes. Black people, obviously as I said, exist within the former realm of exclusion, because Black people are residents within a settler colony predicated upon both the genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of African peoples. Despite formal emancipation in 1865,

[2] https://www.filmsforaction.org/news/revolution-and-american-indians-marxism-is-as-alien-to-my-culture-as-capitalism/

Blackness can only be perpetually relegated to the afterlife of slavery as long as the settler project continues to exist.

Though we're formally born [bound?] to the laws of the land, Black America can be understood as an extra-state entity because they are not a part of the social contract. Because of this location, I understand Blackness in so many ways to be anarchistic. African Americans, that is, the ethno-social identity of descendants of enslaved African people, have innovated new cultures and social organizations, much like anarchism would require us to do outside of the state structure in the event that the revolution happens tomorrow. Black radical formations are fundamentally anti-fascist despite often and generally functioning outside of conventional "antifa" spaces, and Black people have engaged in anarchistic resistances since our arrival in the Americas. From slave ship and plantation rebellions during enslavement, to post-emancipation labor and prison camp uprisings, to Harriet Tubman's literal removal of enslaved people from the custody of their owners, to the creation of maroon societies in the South, to combatting the historic and present collusion between state law enforcement and white supremacist groups, assertions of Black personhood, humanity, and liberation have always called into question both the foundation and the legitimacy of the American state.

So given this particular positionality, and the historical and contemporary relationship that Black people do have to the state — I'm developing an analysis *from* this particular position as opposed to simply analysis *of* the position. That is, I'm kind of trying to develop a decolonized dialectic because I'm in midst of reading *Decolonizing Dialectics*, which I actually recommend reading.[3] Marx and Engels have provided us admittedly useful dialectical tools for understanding history, state formation, class, and these are tools that have been adopted and adapted by countless resistances to colonialism all around the world. But I find Cedric Robinson's critique of Marxian shortcomings to be incredibly useful, particularly when he writes around the non-universal applicability of an orthodox western political thought, these processes of industrialization and proletarianization, and the failure to account for the inherently racial character of capitalism.[4]

In his 1997 article "Identity Politics and Class Struggle," Robin D.G. Kelley writes that "class is lived through race and gender,"[5] highlighting both the inextricability of race and gender with class, and the necessity for an anti-capitalist identity politic— yes I said it, I'm a firm believer in identity politics— that instrumentalizes unique experiences and understandings from a particular social positionality in racial capitalist regimes. It's not simply enough to center Blackness, right, to toss it into your analysis once you've created this grand theory of how oppression functions and how the state functions. But I specifically want to center Black womanhood because of the ways in which race is inextricably linked and co-constituted through gender. If anarchism is to be of any use to me, I must have an anarchism that speaks directly to my needs and vulnerabilities as a Black woman and to Black women of all stripes and all identities. If you're unaware, there have been a spate of kidnappings of Black girls and disappearances of Black women across the country. There are ongoing bold murders of Black trans women. Why is this? Because Black women's safety is a non-priority of the state and every predator knows this. We are being hunted, but this hunting season is grossly un-and-under addressed because of the degendering of anti-

[3] Decolonizing Dialectics (2017) by George Ciccariello-Maher.

[4] Possibly a reference to Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition (1983) by Cedric Robinson.

[5] Kelley, Robin D. G. "Identity Politics and Class Struggle." 1997, p. 5. Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/identitypoliticsandclassstr/page/n5/mode/2up

racist politics. Because of the way that Black womanhood is made invisible through diversity language around "women" and "people of color" that overlooks the intersections of race and gender. Because of the erasure of Black womanhood though "women of color," and because of the understandings of the ways that state violence against Black bodies tends to focus on the humiliation and emasculation and almost sole targeting of cisgendered Black Men — and so I hope to speak to a Black feminist anarchism, an identity politic, a dialectic, and an analytical framework that specifically addresses these urgent material needs.

So first, womanism. Womanism is the social theory based on the race and gender oppression of Black women that is rooted in materiality, lived experience, and embodied knowledge. Womanist theologian Dolores Williams describes this embodied activism as being associated with traditions and resistances that are formed from different conditions, events, socio-cultural, and contextual meaning and all of the different values that these things have within Blackness. Womanism offers two things for me in particular. It offers the opportunity to break from traditional definitions of womanhood, where cis Black womanhood is othered and Black trans womanhood is doubly othered in the way that it presents a threat to gender hegemony and to the gendered anxiety of us as cis women. The second thing that it presents to me is the emphasis of kinship and community over individuality. Womanism seeks to reconcile Black women's relationships with one another and with nature, most notably our deeply commodified and violated bodies, over which we have historically had very little agency, our physical environment, and our spirituality.

Now, Black feminism says that sexism and misogyny, gender identity, class depression [oppression?], and racism are inextricably linked in a mutually constitutive web of, to quote Patricia Hill Collins, and I'm sure as you've all heard, "interlocking systems of oppression," and within this tradition, of course, is Kimberlé Crenshaw's "intersectionality," which builds off of the Combahee River Collective's "simultaneity," and even 19th century Black feminist works like that of Anna Julia Cooper. Black Feminism too seeks to ground political understandings and anti-capitalist critiques in embodied knowledges and in lived experiences and also present a non-essentialized and non-biologized critique of Black womanhood's identity and position within history; a useful historical revisionism that highlights racial capitalism's critical subjugation and Black nationalism's exclusion of Black women. It presents a response to the racist exclusion of Black women from women's issues, issues around safety, deservingness, agency, autonomy, and class oppression. In understanding Black women's unique subjugation by the state means understanding race and gendered labor extraction within capitalism, most incisively, the ways Black feminism is a modality for understanding how the anti-Black settler state is a fundamentally illegitimate construction. Unlike what Jacobin and their class fetishizing ilk of all sectarian stripes might tell you, intersectionality does not undermine Marxism, or anything. It doesn't.

What does it mean to properly understand Black women's subjugation? It means to understand the ways in which Black women's labor was central to the development of the capitalist state and to the American slaveocracy. Sarah Haley's book *No Mercy Here* outlines the myriad ways in which gendered anti-Blackness forms the construction of the Jim Crow system.[6] [This] paves the way for the contemporary systems of mass incarceration and school to prison pipelining that we see today. Haley's book makes direct comparison between the hyper-imprisonability of Black women's gender deviance and the redeemability of white femininity, and the ways in

[6] No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity (2016) by Sarah Haley.

which these constructs were made oppositional and reified through judicial sentencing that enforced Black women's objection.

Black women were thought to be "as strong as men" and were frequently used for all kinds of labor, whereas white women were only employed in fields as punishment for particularly bad behavior. Where Black men were 1.4 times more likely than white men to be arrested, Black women were 6.4 times more likely than white women to get arrested. It becomes evident that white women's normativity is made more and more concrete through the tripled labor: the domestic, industrial, and sexual (euphemistically called "social reproductive") labor, as Black women became playthings for prison guards and male approximate punishment. White women ultimately became exempted from chain gang labor— there was literally legislation saying that white women were not allowed to work on chain gangs. They were the only demographic to be protected from carceral punishment in this way, and this codifies the race/gender normativity and highlights the ways in which carcerality and punishment operate in service of white womanhood and how carceral gendering enforced both white women's superiority and Black women's distance from innocence.

So then when we look at contemporary anti-racist politics, right, we look at the ways that Black humanity and personhood continues to be evaluated through the impossible-to-obtain lens of innocence within the white liberal imagination. In "Against Innocence: Race, Gender and the Politics of Safety," Jackie Wang makes a constructive framework for Black personhood and victimization that resonates really deeply with me and sits at the bedrock of all of what I'm talking about.[7] She writes on this phenomenon saying that "innocence becomes the precondition for launching antiracist campaigns," campaigns where empathy can only be established if and when Black people are able to pass rigorous tests of moral purity. So for example, we can agree for the most part, that Tamir Rice was egregiously victimized because he was a child, and also because we saw that video, but that's a different story.[8] Empathy was a product of his youthfulness, and that's the same with Aiyana Jones[9], but Mike Brown[10] was not enough of a victim because he may or may not have committed strongarm robbery, and Darren Wilson's testimony[11] added to the process of what Frank Wilderson refers to as "niggerization," we now know that Mike Brown did not commit strongarm robbery, but whether or not he did should not affect whether or not you believe that extrajudicial assassination is suddenly a reasonable punishment for robbing a convenience store.

We didn't however see this overwhelming outpouring of empathy and support for CeCe McDonald, a Black transwoman who was convicted of second-degree manslaughter after killing an attacker that violently confronted her with first racist and transmysoginistic language and then smashed a drink against her face. She accepted a plea bargain of 41 months in prison in

[7] "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety," by Jackie Wang, originally in LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jackie-wang-against-innocence-race-gender-and-the-politics-of-safety

[8] Tamir Rice was a 12-year-old boy fatally shot by a Cleveland police officer on November 22, 2014, while carrying a replica airsoft gun at a recreation center.

[9] Aiyana Stanley-Jones was a 7-year-old girl fatally shot during a Detroit police raid in May, 2010.

[10] Michael Brown, an 18-year-old Black teenager, was fatally shot by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, sparking the Ferguson uprising, which were days of protests and unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, that drew national attention to issues of police violence and racial injustice.

[11] Darren Wilson was the police officer who fatally shot 18-year-old Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri.

June, 2012, served 19 months in two different men's facilities (which is another story) prior to her release in 2014. Now, given the epidemic murders of Black trans women, is her defensive violence not warranted? Is she not *innocent* enough? What makes her less innocent, and we're not using these juridical measures of guilt and innocence that the state kinda arbitrarily lays out, but what makes her less innocent is than say Marissa Alexander who fired a warning shot in the air after her husband attacked and threatened to kill her? There was far more outcry about the gendered implications of women invoking stand-your-ground laws then there was about the perfectly reasonable use of any form of violence in response to the assault on Black trans women's personhood. Perhaps, because in the case of Alexander, white liberals, particularly white feminists, were able to apply their carceral logics of "protecting the world from scary Brown men" that sits at the root of so many anti-domestic and intimate partner violence interventions.

Where there were so many anti-racist logics, even ones that emerged from radical spaces appeal to innocence, we continue to rely on the logics of the white imaginary and draw upon exceptional cases to buttress our arguments. But ultimately in doing so, we affirm illegitimate modes of governance and social regulation in an illegitimate state. Reliance upon empathy fails to produce a politics that unequivocally affirms Black humanity. Enduring out our own judgements of who we perceive to be innocent and who we perceive to not be innocent *enough* fails to actually articulate the state's relationship to and production of Blackness. So to return to Frank Wilderson, if one were to ask the police why they shot a Black person, they would say "I shot you because you were Black, you are Black because I shot you." We are Blackened, we are made Black by the logics of violence that are born out chattel enslavement in the Americas [and] colonial subjugation in the continent. Innocence defenses can only ever be flawed because the disciplinary and extractive systems erected around us, the ghetto, the plantation, the prison, the colony, can only ever define us solely through our criminality, our deviance, our ongoing existence as both capital and a heavily subsidized labor force for the state. We can never be innocent, and the issue is not the brutalized and slain Black individuals we decide to immortalize through hashtags after death, but rather our fundamentally criminal subject position. The state does not produce anti-Black socialities, the state *is* anti-Black sociality.

If it isn't yet obvious, my almost singleminded focus within a Black feminist anarchism is that of safety. We should be able to rely on mainstream feminism because we're women, but we're precluded from white supremacist notions of womanhood, an exclusion that's doubly compounded for trans women. White women are only virtuous and worth [protecting] because Black women are not. Protecting white women includes a regulation of public space and criminalization of personhood that still victimizes Black women. We're unable to rely upon popular criticism of police misconduct that fail to understand that violence and murder of Black people is not an indiscretion and bad behavior on the behalf of police officers. It's not something that can be trained away by diversity training. But it's rather the output of white supremacist settler colonial machinations. It can never not happen again as long as the state continues to exist. Nevermind that the African American Policy Forum, which Kimberlé Crenshaw is a member, had to coin the "SayHerName" hashtag in February, 2015 because of Black women's exclusion from these narratives and memorializations of victims of police violence.[12] Because how can you indict the state for violence

[12] #SayHerName is a campaign Kimberlé Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum launched in 2014 to bring attention to Black women and girls affected by police violence, working to counter their exclusion from wider conversations about racial justice.

against Black bodies when, in a post-Daniel Holtzclaw's conviction world, we're still failing to highlight the racialized gendered violence that has characterized it since its inception, and that the state has imposed, and the means by which the state has imposed it's violence against Black women's bodies?[13]

Furthermore, how do we have the audacity as anti-capitalists, or anarchists, or however we self-define it, to name anti-Blackness while failing to have Black people in organizing spaces? How do we entertain these lazy rejections of identity politics when our politicized way of knowing and resisting and understanding are a product of the embodied knowledges that come from our marginalized identities?

Wang discusses the ideas of these "zones of intelligibility," that is spaces of being, and habitation, and navigation that are understandable to white people.[14] She highlights the fact that perhaps there was so much support that was mobilized for Trayvon Martin[15] and for Oscar Grant[16] because both were murdered in places that were intelligible and understandable to white imaginations. Trayvon Martin was killed in a gated community and Oscar Grant was murdered in a public transportation station. Still, she writes, there are violences that occur and have occurred in alternative universes, like the slave ship, the hood, the prison, at the hands of the state. But what happens when you're unable to articulate the violence of and from your subject position because you possess an unintelligible identity, as is possessed by Black people, hence the need to constantly perform the dehumanizing mental gymnastics of appealing to an innocence that we can never attain? What happens when the violence is simply a logical extension of the politics you either knowingly or unknowingly enable and perpetuate?

When white liberals favor order over justice, they by extension support segregatory policy and ghetto policing because that's what order is. Perhaps part of our silence about the murders of Black trans women, both by Black and non-Black cis communities, is because the violence and abuse they experience is the logical extension of the cisnormativity that materializes our very identities as cisgendered people. Because as with cis Black people killed by the state, we name and exceptionalize and count and deadname the murdered transgendered women, but we fail to interrogate the way that cisnormativity and gender regulation are central to white supremacist state-making.

You need only look at the way that CeCe and Chelsea Manning[17] and nearly every other transwoman is placed into male facilities, or in administrative segregation, for their own protec-

[13] Daniel Holtzclaw, a former Oklahoma City police officer, was convicted in 2015 of eighteen sex-crime counts involving eight Black women and sentenced to 263 years in prison. Holtzclaw abused his position as an officer by running background checks to find information that could be used to coerce his victims into sex.

[14] "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety," by Jackie Wang, originally in LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/jackie-wang-against-innocence-race-gender-and-the-politics-of-safety

[15] Trayvon Martin was a 17-year-old from Miami Gardens, Florida, who was fatally shot by 28-year-old George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012. Zimmerman was acquitted. After the shooting, Zimmerman painted the Confederate flag, mockingly posting images of Trayvon Martin's body, and sold the gun he used to kill Martin for $250,000.

[16] Oscar Grant was a 22-year-old man from Hayward, California, who was shot and killed on January 1, 2009 at the Fruitvale BART Station in Oakland. The shooting was carried out by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle, and video of the incident helped spark widespread protests.

[17] Chelsea Manning is a transgender woman and former U.S. Army intelligence analyst and whistleblower who disclosed hundreds of thousands of military and diplomatic documents to WikiLeaks. Sentenced to 35 years in prison in 2013, she was released in 2017 after President Barack Obama commuted most of her sentence.

tion which is tantamount to torture. So we've got to reject this innocence in favor of a politic of Black women's deservingness of safety in a world where Black womanhood is unviolable and unrapeable. Even in childhood, we're still hypersexual-baby-jezebel-fast-tailed girls, and innocence is impossible for us to attain.

So that's all I have, because I want us to have a conversation.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F09BowIVEQo

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