

Dispatches from Among the Damned

On the History and Present of Trans* Survival

Nsambu Za Svekama

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My name is Nsambu Za Svekama, which means “a blessing in disguise.” I was the cofounder of a now defunct rapid response and mutual aid organization called SQuAD. We were modeled off the Street Trans Action Revolutionaries that Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera co-founded. But our ideology was that of Black autonomism or Black anarchism, in the spirit of the New Afrikan militant, BLA soldier, and bisexual revolutionary Kuwasi Balagoon. We were active in New York City between 2019 and 2021. Our membership was exclusively Black and trans/non-binary. Currently SQuAD is no more and my comrades and I are all resting and recalibrating in the wake of the red hot summer of 2020. We’ve each evolved away from SQuAD since that time in our own ways. I myself have shifted towards more focus on trying to theorize transfeminism, especially as it relates to anti-authoritarianism and Third Worldism.

When it comes to the present state of Trans* survival in the US of this year 2022, I am concerned but certainly not surprised. I have no faith in this country, based off its history and what I have witnessed in the short time I have lived on this planet. When Michael Brown was murdered in 2014, and the Ferguson Uprising spread outward from Missouri, I remembered the seeds of a lifelong hesitation about this settler colony, about capitalism, and about political authority. The seeds began to grow. Soon, I was drawn out of the fires of anti-cop/anti-prison struggle into Black nationalist organizing. I believe that the time that passed between those world-changing days and what came upon us in the uprisings of 2020 is important for understanding the contemporary transantagonistic legislation and culture wars. 2020 was a fiery rebellion in which Black working class and underclass/marginalized communities set precincts ablaze, looted business, destroyed property, redistributed goods among the masses, and helped popularize mutual aid as an organizing methodology. But that fiery rebellion would not have been possible if not for so-called riots that preceded it in the wake of police brutality here in the US, especially those associated with the 2010s, the Black Lives Matter decade.

The ruling class, the fascists, and the cisheterosexists are afraid of Black revolt: it threatens their property interests. The transantagonism we are seeing is a way of saying “enough is enough” when it comes to any kind of progressive change in this country, however liberal, because of fear of Black rebellion. It is very reminiscent of the way Reconstruction was undermined, or the way Black Power was undermined, in my view. Those members of the Black community who want to join the ruling class are, as during those time periods, perfectly eager to defend property interests

in collaboration with the State and the colonizers. What's unique about this moment is everyone throwing their full support behind both the police and the maintenance of the Family as a core economic unit of this bourgeois society. I mean, for how long under emancipation had both police brutality and so-called "broken families" been the textbook issues associated with Blackness in this country? It seems that what transantagonism is helping to overcome is the divide between a subjugated Black internal colony and the dominating settler colonial civil society. Neocolonial misleadership in the former, and fascistic members of the latter are both reacting to decades of subversive activity from Black people that *became crystallized in queer/trans abolition struggles during the 2010s*. Perhaps if that vanguard can be undermined, then the overall anti-colonial implications it could have would be turned back; in my view, this seems to be the underlying mechanism at work right now. Therefore, we need to pay attention to class struggle, to trans liberation, and to the Black Radical Tradition (as identified by Cedric Robinson).

It can be disconcerting to consider such a high level of urgency and exigency around what it means to be Black and Trans*. One would rather not be told they are somehow a threat to the economic and political order and any cultural webs and social nexuses that thread and calibrate it. There are days I want to be left alone. There are days when I am completely over the whole gay panic, trans panic stuff being blasted in every conversation. But, there are other days when Pride for me is a matter of "fuck the system." There are days when I am enthused about the fact that Pride, in its contemporary formulations, has roots in explosions like the Stonewall rebellion and the Compton Cafeteria riots. There are days when I am proud of my ancestral traditions in Africa, furthermore, which made room for those of us currently being marked as "trans" or "queer" but within the general system of indigenous relations, whether as shamans or royal servants, priests, and more. It's a complicated mix, here, I find. But, being both a threat and being non-threatening is about the social implications of a complexity that emerges from the historical-material evolution of geographically specific human-ecological conditions. Even the diversity that characterizes our varied gender-expansive rainbows and umbrellas and spectrums and continuums of queerness and transness are a consequence of these structural developments; they are neither adaptive nor maladaptive (my interest in critical human geography/ecology/biology is showing here).

Let's suppose, for example, that colonial class society and the political order were like a dome set atop rounded arches. There are liberal attempts to include queerness/transness as though it were "adaptive" alongside conservative attempts to exclude queerness/transness as though it were "maladaptive." These would be tools for constructing the needed triangular "spandrels" that connect the dome and the arches to one another (this is an image I am repurposing from Stephen Jay Gould and RC Lewontin style sciences). This is to say: Capitalism and colonialism need gender rigidity or situational gender expansivity not because of some fundamental or mysterious reason. They need to *reduce* us in consequence of a long history of "development" for a certain civilization. When it comes to Black Trans* people in particular, I like to use the metaphor of the fox and the wolf from Malcolm X: the former will grin at you, but it still wants to devour you, while the latter will snarl at you and make its bloodthirst known from the outset. They both want to consume us, to keep the dominant society intact. What we are watching right now then is the pendulum swinging rightward where it had once supposedly swung to the left as far as providing us "representation." The representation was always about incorporation as much as today's upswing in transantagonism is about elimination. It's patriarchal expansionism leading right back to patriarchal restriction and vice versa.

Sanyika Shakur been said we would get here, in 2012 with his *The Pathology of Patriarchy*. He called it the “problem of action-reaction-solution,” and framed it in terms of neocolonialism and statecraft. You have the Grand Patriarchy, in his theory, which passed the colonial era anti-sodomy and buggery laws, broke up communalistic kinship groups and other less atomized formations, alienated men from their collectives, set up women with a double burden or Triple Jeopardy (a la Third World Women’s Alliance), and has waged a war on transgressive gender/sex categories with participation from various populations. These same forces now want to *pretend* to care about human rights. But their progressive reason is possible only because they *externalize* the cisheterosexist violence of colonial class society from the imperial core to the peripheries, including domestic colonies. This helps to produce a Minor Patriarchy among the exploited. This is why legislation and representation can reap so many rewards within capitalism for *white cultural expressions of queerness/transness*, meanwhile for those on the other side of the color line, we *les damnés de la Terre*, progressive reason has done nothing but incite more violence against us. The forces of Minor Patriarchy look upon it and pretend that being pro-trans/queer or even feminist is to be pro-Empire; and progressives within Grand Patriarchy absolutely will point to these manifestations in order to pinkwash genocide and apartheid and to advance homonationalism and military intervention. Meanwhile, reactionary forces in the Grand Patriarchy are going to work with political and religious leaders in the Minor Patriarchy against a so-called “gay agenda” or against a “trans agenda” and unfortunately, you have supposedly progressive forces within the Minor Patriarchy that will adopt these ideas, particularly through notions of “sex-based oppression.” In this way a transantagonistic feminism can further divide the colonized struggle.

It is a mess to watch feminism and even socialism take regressive lines on trans liberation. To see these movements fueling anti-transness, especially transmisogyny, can make one wonder if there is any hope for emancipation in this century, if at all. But then I try to look at history. Within the Christian church, a doctrine of “complementarism” was adopted for some denominations, which asserts the ontological equality of both so-called sexes, while insisting on an innate and inherent distinction or difference in both form and function at a social and spiritual level. This is a way of sorting humanity into fundamentally patriarchal roles through appeal to nature or tradition regarding sex, all while claiming to not be sexist. It seems that radical and proletarian feminisms are not too far off from this complementarist thinking, even if they don’t frame it in religious terms. What was once a helpful application of mid-20th century insights about the use of so-called sex characteristics to maintain a *particular* gendered system of class relations has been thoroughly transformed by contemporary feminists and leftists. Now, the thesis is either that “sex is real, gender is metaphysical,” or it is the idea that the human organism is the passive recipient of external historical material forces with regards to how sexual oppression is organized. Neither of these interpretations is actually scientific or dialectical, especially because they take dimorphism/dualism and the Western gender binary at face value. Certainly it is clear that not only were decolonization and rights struggles coopted: we have to remember that feminist and Leftist struggles have been too. Movements with ties to or aspirations for State power and legislative agendas are going to draw transantagonistic lines in the sand; this is most commensurate with maintaining political power under the auspices of managing changes in the material conditions of the exploited. And for the more well-intended attempts at socialist transition, they will find themselves having to contest transantagonism and queerphobia in terms of those *economic institutions* that are marriage and the family.

What, then, must the Trans *movement, especially Black Trans Radicalism, do* in response to all of this? Well, for me, it would have to be first realizing that the national self-determination struggles are the context for what's happening with gender self-determination struggles. If we are not prioritizing anti-colonialism, especially the struggle against anti-Blackness, then we will fail. Once we establish a consciousness which locates gender self-determination in the horizon of national self-determination, then we have to consider that all the bourgeois roadblocks in the latter, which everyone from Fanon to Rodney to Cabral and even anarchists were warning about, will undoubtedly be present in the former. This is why I'm always encouraging people to read chapter three of *The Wretched of the Earth*, called "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness." There are strata among the oppressed who want to *occupy positions they once could not occupy* before independence. They are unsurprisingly going to try and set themselves up as *representatives* of the interests of the working and underclasses, and then strive to *compete with each other* through stirring up of hatred and backwardness against the so-called "Other." The West and other forces hostile to Black and Third World liberation are certainly invested in these developments, because it keeps capitalism intact, especially (but not solely) if it presents an opportunity for them to swoop in as "saviors." Imperialism is primary here; but that by no means is an indication that the colonized lack forces internal (endogenous) to our communities who aid and abet the collective misery and subjugation. The task is to figure out how and why and whom and for what ends.

I used the word "nexus" earlier and I think that what's happening is that the family, Grand Patriarchy, marriage, and cisheteronormativity together constitute one such nexus. But there are non-hegemonic nexuses that the Grand Patriarchy has decimated, with detrimental consequences for the internal relations of the colonized, which incentivizes the growth of a Minor Patriarchy to fill the vacuum. The things we understand as "gender expansivity" or transness/queerness among the colonized are tied up with these non-hegemonic, subordinated nexuses. So if gender self-determination steps in as the horizon of a currently inert national self-determination struggle, I believe that we as queer/trans Black and Third World people will inevitably become more conscious of ourselves with the *materiality* and metaphysics of these *nexuses* in mind. Nationalism was pushed to evolve from mere religious and race based and liberal forms towards a Black Power-style communist/socialist and scientific understanding of the world-historical importance of that fight. It appears to me gender self-determination will have to mature through its phase of human rights concerns and spiritual revivalism and reductionisms as it rediscovers and confronts the contradictions of internal relations (nexuses) and eventually gains a communist/socialist and *material* understanding of its own world historical importance. This will then have an impact on the advance of a class struggle, and ultimately (in my view) a struggle against hierarchy and the state.

As for white/First World trans people, if they are not fighting to curb and ultimately put to death the asymmetrical power that the Global North wields first and foremost, prioritizing concrete and militant support for Black Liberation and Land Back movements, this would only maintain the stranglehold and ideological inertia of this moment that fuels global transantagonism and incentivizes reactionary anti-transness in the Global South. Getting colonial powers off indigenous and especially African lands is going to be essential from any so-called allies outside our communities. This is an immense task ahead on each of our parts, requiring more than I could ever list here or even articulate as an individual. We are in the 21st century, not the 20th century. We can never "return" to a perceived heyday of anti-colonial fervor. We are also in the midst of a mass disabling event, not to mention a mass extinction event too. There's something existential

and ontological we have to grapple with. Old models, old theory isn't enough; mere skepticism of new models, new theory will get us nowhere.

We can only push ourselves to discover the mission of *this* generation. To me, that's about realizing that if the problem of last century was the problem of the color line, the problem of this century is how the *color line is being more tightly wound (though occasionally relaxed) by a gendered thread*. Black Trans* people will need to become ungovernable and prepare for a long century of struggle with this in mind. I can foresee us turning these tides the closer we get to the 22nd century. I can feel it. I dream of it. 2020 gave us a taste of what's possible. So I hold out hope: though the moment may feel like an apocalypse, an apocalypse is just an unveiling. May we unravel the veil even further and not just study the conditions of today's world that have been mystified because of it, but struggle to change the world whilst we change and define ourselves, our names, our pronouns, our presentation, our bodies, our identities, our spirits.

from a sister-in-flight,

Nsambu Za Suekama ("a blessing in disguise")

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In early September, *Pinko* Magazine hosted a conversation between generations of trans organizers at the Bureau of General Services—Queer Division. The topic was the recent uptick of attacks on trans life and how to think about it historically. The following is an edited version of comments delivered by one of the participants.

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