

To the People of the Streets

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The recent announcement about involuntary hospitalization in New York City has me wanting to reflect on a few things.

In the 1800s, a Southern Black trans woman, Mary Jones, was arrested in NYC. Put through trial for theft, she was laughed and scorned. The media presented her as a “man monster” and claimed that she had put pieces of steak between her thighs to trick men into paying for sex with her. They insisted that Mary Jones’ gender variance was a fictional thing that she simply used to gain access to wealthy (white) men in the area, to rob them.

I mention this because racial capitalism and State power in the United States overlap (“imbricate”) at a Patriarchal nexus. This Nexus is used to uphold some deeply despicable carceral violences and fascistic tendencies against the People of the Streets. I see Mary Jones as one of these Street People, as was Marsha P Johnson a century later, another Black trans woman, also arrested, also scorned, a revolutionary. And I see myself as one of the people of the streets. A born and raised NYer, all I have known is the shelter system and the projects. My current living situation is a lot better, thankfully, but keeping myself together when jobless and disabled is a constant war. But all I’ve known my whole life is class war.

Class war and racism and Patriarchy stole my health. And when my health began to deteriorate, I found myself in a situation where police and security were on me. I thought I would become a hashtag. My visible signs of distress that day were taken as “aggression.” The fascist who came for me was presumed innocent. His peers in uniform got between him and I and began to grab me... I won’t recount the details. But that day still haunts me. My lifelong battles with mental health deteriorated from then on into the current situation where even my physical health fails me. I get flashbacks; I have PTSD. And I avoid the outdoors on some days precisely because I never again want signs of my failing health taken as an excuse to call the police on me.

Mayor Adams’ “new” policy isn’t new. Whether it was Walking While Trans laws, Stop and Frisk, Gang Injunctions, or Broken Windows, NYC has long had a history of racial profiling and gender based harassment that targets all the exploited but especially the people of the streets. The fear mongering about homeless, mentally ill folks in the subway is just the latest development in that brutal history. It frames itself as a question of “care” for the people of the street, but it is anything but. New York City loves to put a liberal sheen over its cruelty. Rikers has an almost Guantanamo Bay-like reputation even though majority of those there are technically pre-trial. The drinking water system here lauds itself as one of the safest and cleanest in the world, even as

dirty and contaminated water continues to pour out of the pipes of those in the barrio and the ghetto. A so-called “sanctuary” sit, immigrants in this city find themselves going through the run around and structural neglect that oftentimes means folks slip through the cracks and are still at risk of deportation. As many historically Black neighborhoods and Black businesses we have in this city, furthermore, the overpolicing of Black neighborhoods, the crumbling infrastructure in our schools and places of living, the rampant disproportionate affects of air pollution and food apartheid still weigh upon us. And, as “progressive” as NYC may seem around gender, being a metropolitan center on the coasts, a hub for capital, and providing some programs for LGBT communities, those parts of the city considered the “outskirts” or periphery of what makes the city “great” are as unsafe for non-white TLBG people as anywhere else in the country or the world, precisely because “safety” is calibrated by racial capitalism and imperialism both here and in those other regions.

This last point is extremely relevant to the new anti-homeless “involuntary hospitalization” question because concerns about safety have percolated over the last two years to give a measure like this some weight. Soon as the Close Rikers campaign made some successes, a “New Jails” plan was announced. Around them, more police were put into the subways. NYC’s gentrification was beginning to swell, processes that had been kickstarted years beforehand were hitting new levels just before the pandemic. 2020 became a time when these developments congealed. By that point two anti-cop protests had overtaken the NYC subways and streets long before Minneapolis was on fire over George Floyd. But the Floyd-Taylor and #ENDSARS rebellions around the globe certainly spoke to what was occurring here as cop cars were set ablaze in summer 2020. When the heat began to die down that summer, the nonprofits and businesses of this nation stole the energy, put everything towards reform and DEI and “buy black.” And eventually, plans to “defund” and “reimagine” policing became a ploy for further funding the police.

Cooption in NYC looked like selling this idea that houselessness and mental illness had gotten so bad that crime was on the rise. And not just any crime, but crime at the hands of homeless men. This, on top of media images from conservatives outside the city about the false predation of children by TLBG+ people, and discourses about the mass shooters becoming more frequent around the country have all become prominent themes in the overall story of how the State and capitalism must make sure that there is never again a chance that its precincts can be set ablaze or that businesses can be looted en mass. Additionally, it’s about allowing the ruling class to recover from the pandemic and move forward with material interests that they had already been trying to act upon.

And this is why I say that the Patriarchal nexus sits as an organized pattern for the (social) reproduction of dominant material and power relations. Because of this, it also is used by the exploited and subjugated as the way to contest, even reclaim those relations among ourselves. Mayor Adams is Black, after all. But his condemnation of Bronx drill music whilst overseeing a Hip Hop museum in the same borough have to be viewed from the lens of Patriarchy, class struggle, and imperialism.

Sexual oppression may thread the lives of those on the “light side” of coloniality in one way, as a “Grand Patriarchy” that maintains imperialism and those on the “dark side” of coloniality find our lives threaded in different way, as a “Minor Patriarchy” that maintains neocolonialism.

Patriarchy entrenches the Nuclear Family as the core economic unit of bourgeois society. Here, we are made to idealize the Homemaker and Breadwinner. Religious and scientific dis-

courses give it an idealistic allure. The State and its media rationalize it as the pinnacle of how you reproduce a healthy “citizen.”

What the Afropessimists speak of as “natal alienation,” and “social/legal nonpersonhood” has had to be constantly reproduced and contested at the nexus of Patriarchy – in both official and unofficial ways.

In the modern times, this has for many decades looked like pointing to “broken families” and “absent fathers” and “matriarchy” and “welfare queens” as explanations for why Black people can’t meet the Pull Yourself By Your Bootstraps narrative. Or why there is a criminal “pathology” in our community. Or why we struggle in schools and with health issues and any manner of problems.

When we read slave narratives like “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” by Harriet Jacobs, we learn in places like chapter 10 that the so-called “failures” of Black men to “protect” their wives and children from the violences of the slavers could be used to justify a racial-classist pathologization of our men. Part of the appeal of Christian education (which often was about access to literacy) and both abolitionist and feminist struggle for Jacobs was so as to respond to that pathologization and the violences of misogynoir simultaneously. The project of Christianization, then, and of emancipation and of women’s suffrage, did involve a pursuit of “proper” familial/kinship structures and the gender relations they may connote, even as such an ideal continued to escape our communities once “freedom” was procured. Throughout Reconstruction and the ensuing years, all through Jim Crow and Black Power and into today, Black people knew all too well that our kinship structures continued to be torn apart by various forces, and we have interpreted this in a range of progressive and conservative perspectives.

On the progressive side, the issue is identified for what it is: as white supremacy and Patriarchy and capitalism at work. Sometimes this meant trying to hold onto or revive an “it takes a village” mindset inherited from our ancestors. Other times it meant developing alternative or even blended/extended family structures. Not all of the time these approaches are taken up as conscious forms of resistance or rebellion. And even when they are, this is not always framed as part of a revolutionary struggle.

The typical response, however, is a conservative response. Certain men, usually the ones more aligned with the Breadwinner or Husband ideal will chastise our women for “promiscuity,” especially young girls. These men may have women at their sides, agreeing and pushing the same line, especially in the Church and in Government. They may also denigrate our men, especially young boys for things like “sagging pants.” Hip hop is blamed by these figures as the source of moral decline in the community, as is a so-called “Gay Agenda.” The more Integrated Negroes push this the most; it is known as Respectability politics. But it is not just a facet of how an “older generation” thinks. The rise in discussion of what it means to be an “alpha”/“sigma” male or “alpha”/ “sigma” female, and how that’s used to push this vision of “chasing a bag” or being “on your grind” are all manifestations of how the exploited must use the Patriarchal nexus to contest the imbrication of dominant material/power relations. And we queers/trans folk are no less guilty when popular understandings of our culture as such revolve around emulating celebrities and media personalities, the fashion world, and bourgeois institutions.

When these more “official” threads of (Minor) Patriarchy become thin, however, we see the expansion of “unofficial” threads along the margins. Sexist norms and labor divisions spill out of the pews and past the threshold and beyond the entrepreneurial milieu into the underground and semi-underground. They stop looking like or trying to emulate the gender patterns idealized in

media and in government and in the workplace and start to look more like criminal activities, the stuff of the streets and the lumpenproletariat. Or maybe there comes a strange combination of patterns from a more respectable registers with those that are met with scorn or suspicion in the mainstream (cults, gangs, etc). This strange mixture of the above ground and semi-aboveground forms of sexual oppression with more illicit or non-normative ones is because despite the ideals we hold, as yet Black people are not fully integrated. The Breadwinner and Homemaker image still escapes us. The two-parent home image still escapes us. And those Christian norms about sexuality still escape us, as the pioneers of free sexual expression continue to be Black people of the margins, including and especially Black women and queer/trans gender marginalized folks. And all these subversive gender/sexual patterns co-exist with the amalgamation of conservative tendencies inherited from official and illicit manifestations of Minor Patriarchy, overtaking the streets as more and more of us become jobless and houseless.

The true faces of Official forms of Minor Patriarchy will side with dominant business interests and the State (the Grand Patriarchy) in bringing the full weight of carceral violence to repress both subversive gender/sexual patterns and whatever illicit forms of Minor Patriarchy cannot be controlled. Those that can be controlled, are absorbed somehow into “guns down” or violence interruption programs and into nonprofit industries – something that women’s and queer organizing gets sucked into as well. Sometimes this collapse happens under the weight of revolutionary organizations who haven’t become fully conscious: radicals whose organizations become Patriarchal, whose members uphold abuse, whose internal cultures become cult of personality, and whose inner capacity to respond to infiltration is significantly weakened by sexually hostile norms and divisions of labor. These are all different ways to ensure that the threads of a hegemonic Nexus (Patriarchy) are in tact again, putting the exploited on track to try and reclaim the dominant material/power relations for ourselves.

The white Man’s “Grand Patriarchy” is still at work here. The Man has underground and semi-underground forms of sexual oppression and organization that occur alongside the “official” (above ground and semi-aboveground) ones. Churches, government, the workplace and other mainstream institutions may constitute the latter: while the former is typically criminalized or viewed as “backwater” and “hick” (“trailer trash”). The mafia and militias alike have had histories of collaborating with the police and politicians even if on other occasions these factions are at each other’s throats. Sex trafficking and drug trafficking very often has a ladder or hierarchy of actors that runs up to those holding dominant positions on down to “foot soldiers” in the margins, typically but not always men. When the scales of power or stability might teeter towards the unofficial Grand Patriarchy, or when subversive forces within the white world begin to challenge capitalism, colonial relations, and gender oppression, the dominant system has to reassert itself. Pendulums begin to swing. So, for example, in the height of the Gay Rights movement of the 70s, Chicago Police looked the other way as John Wayne Gacy sexually coerced, assaulted, and brutally murdered over 30 young boys. And with many other stories of serial killers and rapists we find a similar pattern: someone white, typically but not always a man, given social and legal sanction even if by negligence or outright lack of concern, to prey upon and murder innocent people – most especially vulnerable folks, people of the street, or poor and working class folks, women, disabled folk. Or, like with Jeffrey Dahmer: Black gay folks.

Whiteness is a standing garrison in the US. When the slave patrols (police) cannot perform their historical duty of maintaining the settler property system, the average “citizen,” must take up arms or get the police to do it for them. Karen may lie and say a Black boy whistled at her

to get him dragged out his house and killed by her white male compatriots (RIP Emmet Till); or Chad and his brethren may set a Black town on fire and demand that all the women therein, cis and trans, give their bodies over (RIP Frances Thompson). Or, they will simply stand idly by as someone else takes up the racial-sexual violence that comes of that responsibility. They'll complain about "sex starved incels" or about "gun control" and tell all these flavorful stories about "mental health crises" among white vigilantes or insult their intelligence as "Southerners" meanwhile doing nothing about the machinations of racial capitalism and Imperial Patriarchy because it benefits them as much as it benefits those who commit the atrocities. And it's entertaining too! To create all these podcasts and Netflix shows and documentaries that give you a window into the mind of white vigilante violence, school shooters, serial killers/abusers, cult leaders. To make the population feel like there's a random and inexplicable germ of depravity that they must together study through a shared vocabulary about narcissism, multiple personalities, sociopathy, psychopathy, is the perfect way to get them feeling like they are on the side of the cops in catching these "criminals" even as the main proponents of these violences avoid jail time, get help from the cops, or get minimal jail time. But that's because what is really at work is the opportunity for Grand Patriarchy to use this fear mongering and say "hey, those feminists and drag queens are here to endanger your kids. They've got Jewish led communists and a horde of Haitian immigrants helping them." Violence then begets violence. And when it does, some factions in the Official manifestations of Patriarchy can say, "we've got to catch these terrorists," but really just invest more into the State. Another atrocity happens. The media benefits. Patriarchy is still in place. Statecraft sharpens. Those who see themselves as part of the "social contract" anchored on reproduction of a "proper" citizenry feel more invested in maintaining the "order" of the system.

There is a vicious direction this country is going. Fascism is here and Comrade George was right about two things: that fascism has many forms/definitions, but also that if you boiled it all down "reform" is where you see it. Emancipation gave to Jim Crow; Civil Rights gave to Mass incarceration. Multiculturalism and post-racialism are giving to whatever this is we are seeing today. The technologies for ever more regressive and repressive technologies of social and labor discipline borne whenever Black Upheaval gets tamed (for it was our Upheaval that required Lincoln to pursue peace, not his love for us, as it was with the Voting Rights act). But, more specifically, I find, it is the expansion of Patriarchy, in its Grand and Minor forms, in both their official and unofficial manifestations — this expansion coming with recombination and new contestations and hybridized conservative yet quasi-progressive tendencies — this is where the problem is most prescient. As Patriarchy continues to invest citizen and non-citizen alike, slave and non-slave alike, in the patterns of social imbrication idealized by the liberals humanist-enlightenment tradition, the oppressed misapprehends the context of our (natal) alienation and turns instead to a body-reasoning that is a tool of the State and bourgeoisie. Even if that body-reasoning simply blames a "mass shooting" on "mental illness," or paints queerness/transness as sexually predatory, or: more specific to New York City, if it assigns to those who exist outside of the home, the nuclear family, some "pathology" concerning their/our health and financial conditions. The solution it yields: shuttle these street people away, protect infrastructure from their presence, and curate the culture such that (gendered) propriety and property alike are secured. The people who beat on Black people at Dyckman in 2020; the people who called for more policing in the Bronx after a certain innocent boy was killed by a gang a few years ago; the people who voted in Mayor Adams and voted in all the racist-classist mayors before him; the people who work with the cops even while pretending to be grassroots organizers and violence interruptors: and the

average person who is convinced that he, she, they, xe must have a share in the Amerikkkan pie will all have a vested stake in the violences against the People of the Streets.

What the people of the Streets must do is strengthen our networks of care and militancy. And we will need a roots-grasping “science,” Black Radical Tradition, Materialist Transfeminism, and Disability Justice, to help us clarify how Class War is being waged against us and the ways Patriarchy reproduces our subjection.

I say we look to the intertwined histories of the Panthers, the Young Lords, and STAR in this city. Learn from their mistakes but apply their critiques of the medical industry and the way they each took health into their own hands, whether it was through occupying a hospital, developing acupuncture and sickle cell treatment, or implementing spiritual life and housing for those who didn’t have it.

The ruling class is well aware that on this occupied land of Lenapehoking, even as they displace and dehouse countless, the properties they hoard sit vacant. Their ultimate fear is that the people of the streets will become conscious enough to take that vacant property and stolen land and establish something of their/our communities by way of i. They don’t want to see any more riots, looting; they are afraid of squats and alternative homeplaces. This is why they are ripping up homeless encampment and trying to turn the “normal” citizen against your street-based kin. They recognize a potential subversive population whose struggles would reveal something about the dispossession the undergirds ALL our struggles. They want everyone to see us people of the streets as vermin, defects, to be got rid of, to keep the smokescreen over the whole system from being cleared away.

But we of the streets, we the damned and wretched, we the poor and unhoused and underhoused, we the jobless and underemployed and exploited, we the underclasses and the margins, we the colonized and the mad, we of the trenches and the hood and the barrio, we of the outskirts — we will prevail. We must prevail. We can prevail. And if we must not, then let us pass like a wind that blows of the dead leaves from off the earth’s skin.

from a sister-in-flight,
NZ Suékama

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