

**Re-collective Revolution:  
A Reclamation of Black Self-Subsistent Economic Tradition**

by

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B.A. Public Policy  
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SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF URBAN STUDIES AND PLANNING IN  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The envisioning and deliverance of a collectively liberated future for all marginalized peoples is rooted in a rectified understanding of the redacted history of marginalized peoples. This paper uncovers a history of collective, collaborative, and communal economic traditions of pre-colonial societies in West Africa, with an anti-revisionist lens, in active repudiation of a capitalist, imperialist, and westernized erasure of Black self-subsistent, or self-reliant, economic tradition.

Through the excavation and utilization of anthropologic, archaeologic, and historic research as well as case studies, this paper highlights the Yorubaland (pre-colonial Nigeria) Guild System of trade and labor organization, the Ghanaian Nnobo cooperative farming system, and the Rotating Credit and Savings Associations (roscas) of pre-colonial Nigeria. The paper proceeds with an examination of the Boston Ujima Project, the Boston Food Solidarity Economy, and the Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity – Boston-based organizations and movements today that are actively intentioned on utilizing tools and approaches akin, and/or in intentional alignment with pre-colonial Black and indigenous collective principles and practice. Inspired and instructed by *afrofuturism*, *emergent strategy* and *pleasure activism*, this paper crescendos by engaging with these Black feminist-provided frameworks through a communally-minded collectively self-reflexive dialogue addressing the plausibility of, reticence towards, and uncertainty accompanying this particular path towards collective liberation.

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## preface

The impetus and necessary foregrounding for this thesis, as well as the foundation of my own personal theory of change and transitively influenced praxis, is the reality of my own lived experience and contextual grounding. My personal, professional, and academic journeys have convergently positioned me to be hyper aware of and diametrically opposed to society's dominant order. As a young Black male, growing up in urban communities, living in section 8 housing, being educated in inner city schools, *existing* in overpoliced neighborhoods, my experiences made clear that poverty is a death sentence in America, and those of us who are able to escape it, in tangible actuality, have in essence, and statistical reality, escaped death. I say this as the youngest male sibling, raised in a single father household (and intentionally emphasized *African* household), and as one of five first-generation siblings – despite being in a household headed by a highly educated Sierra Leonean immigrant and who was able to amass five advanced agriculture and engineering degrees in the States, I was the only one of all my siblings to ultimately obtain a bachelor's degree as of the writing of this thesis, and the only one of the three male siblings to not have been nor currently be incarcerated.

This foregrounding is critical to understanding my own positionality in this research and work, and also necessary for myself and for readers to understand the framing from which my own critique of “anti-capitalist” theory and practice within the realm of academia is engendered. As a self-identified anti-capitalist, my views and approach may not directly align with that of similarly identified academics, based in a personal reality that I cannot believe in a path to liberation for myself, my family, or my communities that isn't rooted and centered on acknowledging, discussing and centering economic empowerment, resource generation, and wealth distribution as a foundational component to any collectively liberative path forward.

It has been my lived experience that has primarily informed and shaped my views on and relationship to capitalism, and thus anti-capitalism, beginning with my observation of my family's navigation of our West African cuisine restaurant in Roxbury's former Dudley Square, now paradoxically named “Nubian Square.”<sup>1</sup> This “hole in the wall,” mom and pop's restaurant,

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<sup>1</sup> Steph Solis | [ssolis@masslive.com](mailto:ssolis@masslive.com), “Reckoning with Racism: Changing Dudley Square to Nubian Square Won't Be the Last Name Change in Boston, Activists Say,” *massive*, November 22, 2019,

*Bintimani*, owned and operated by my dad and step-mom, served as my parent's sole means of income for 15 years.<sup>2</sup> Despite being depended on by a substantive number of patrons within the community without access to a variety of ethnic food options, as well as being acknowledged by notable *foodie* publications, this "hidden gem" was evicted amidst a global pandemic by real estate developers solely seeking to accumulate, commodify, and displace, if need be, in continuous pursuit of profit.<sup>3</sup>

Witnessing, and doing my best to no ultimate avail, my family's restaurant unpreventable eviction helped elucidate the tension of my relationship to the concept of capitalism and the real-life navigation of it, outside of academic discourse. I came to see quite clearly that my parents, who have operated their small business as their sole means of survival, besides support from me, are de facto tied into, supported by, and in various instances beneficiaries of neoliberal programs and initiatives operating within the capitalistic agenda. For them, being "anti-capital," or against programs, opportunities, or resources at least in the most immediate sense, was an implausible solution to their current condition, despite the strings with which these resources came attached. From their perspective, their freedom from systemic oppression does not begin with the destruction or eradication of the only means they have (or know of, or have access to) for survival. Much of my experience engaging with academia-based "anti-capitalists" neglected to not just consider, but *actually center* the perspective of individuals like my parents, who make up a dominant majority of the urban communities discussed and targeted for these deemed "radical" agendas. Agendas that come without a rational handling of those most deeply entrenched, or plugged into the Matrix that is capitalism.

These realizations were further inspired, informed and *transformed* by Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*. I resonated with his catalyzing realization to articulate a dually functioning critique of capitalism and Marxism through an assertion that in Karl Marx's critique, he "consigned race, gender, culture, and history to the dustbin."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, according to Robinson, Marx and others' parochially lensed critique of capitalism lacked the multicultural, and multilayered, kaleidoscopic

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<https://www.masslive.com/boston/2019/11/reckoning-with-racism-changing-dudley-square-to-nubian-square-wont-be-the-last-name-change-in-boston-activists-say.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Terrence Doyle, "The Small Kitchen Doing Big Things in Lower Roxbury," Eater Boston (Eater Boston, October 30, 2017), <https://boston.eater.com/2017/10/30/16564238/west-african-food-bintimani-roxbury>.

<sup>3</sup> Terrence Doyle, "Bintimani, a Pillar of Boston's West African Dining Scene, Has Been Evicted," Eater Boston (Eater Boston, March 1, 2021), <https://boston.eater.com/2021/3/1/22307040/bintimani-roxbury-west-african-food-evicted-moving-to-providence>.

<sup>4</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (S.I.: Penguin Books, 2021), xxix.

view necessary to identify, critique and thus ultimately build liberative paths forward in ways for non-Europeans that simultaneously engaged with the critically necessary intersections of race, class, gender, etc. Similarly, for me, while encountering anti-capitalist discourse particularly prevalent in urban planning theory, again it seemed that matters of race and true and deep understanding of, and/or input directly from, the urban context were missing or off-center. Utilizing Robinson's exemplified re-interpretation, and re-revisionist historicizing, I sought to understand, and re-craft a narrative and approach to an anti-capitalism praxis, that is grounded in the articulated, observed, experienced, and researched history and perspective of those most marginalized by both capitalistic, and academic anti-capitalistic thought – as evidently, these exclusionary lenses also work to further marginalize already vulnerable populations from both participation within and liberation beyond the capitalistic mechanism.

My own aforementioned personal theory of practice has thus been influenced to treat radical change and collective liberation from white patriarchal, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and xenophobic global capitalism, as a process and journey that is inclusively focused on the eradication of the socioeconomic order we know today as capitalism, and also holds simultaneously important, the immediacy of now, and the necessity of capital and resources obtained through collective, nonattractive and uncommodified means to sustain and uplift urban communities throughout socioeconomic transition. This re-focus on the process of change, rather than just the goal, draws from adrienne maree brown's science-fiction based, and *afrofuturistic* concept of *emergent strategy*, which is concerned with building adaptive movements for justice and liberation, that are nonlinear, iterative, and thus create more possibilities for innovative, nuanced, and *fractal* (as in simplified individual pieces that eventually fit into a complex system, like LEGO bricks – not to be confused with *incremental* progress) movements towards system change.<sup>5</sup> My experience in academia led me to the realization that many of those within it, have had the luxury and privilege of being institutionally shielded from the *on-the-ground* perspective and reality of the urban condition, and thus an ability to or interest in grappling with communally-responsive, real-time, interventions for the marginalized. This specific lens, and approach became my *raison d'etre*, which I anecdotally posit within the question of, “If the fall of capitalism occurs tomorrow at noon, what is done for the folks who work third shift tonight, for folks without a plan for feeding their families for dinner, and the parents who

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<sup>5</sup>brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. United States: AK Press, 2021.

have to figure out day care whilst revolutionary work is being done?” This concern of practical urgency is not destined to uphold or sustain the status quo, but rather acknowledges its reality, and its inescapability for those most stagnantly enveloped within the cycle of systemic poverty – this is the catalyzing inquiry upon which this thesis is based.

## introduction

This thesis seeks to challenge the dominantly academia-influenced, community-(un)centered approach to system change, by researching, analyzing and proposing a model of praxis for a liberative path forward that is centered on the practical urgency of our most vulnerable urban communities. This adaptive framework further ventures to remove inapplicable versions of “anti-capitalist” theory, particularly those insufficiently concerned with the urgency of the urban economic condition – an oversight commonly found, and most effectively perpetuated within the realm of academia. In its stead, I articulate a proposed approach grounded in Black collective tradition of past, present, and future, that is intentionally centered on urban communities entrenched in economic struggle. This re-compassing purposes to proactively navigate and address the communal need for tools and strategies utilizable in the obtainment of collective economic resources, and a process and/or movement that allows for a focus on imagining and envisioning a system and/or approach that we are “pro-” rather than one that’s de facto inseparable from the order it is in opposition to, or “anti-”, namely capitalism.

Centering Black feminist, writer, activist, and personal icon, Audre Lorde, and her astute declamation to an audience of predominantly white academic feminists; “the master’s tools will not dismantle the master’s house,” in this paper, I have sought to respond to, and propose a collective praxis towards an individual, communal, and super structural “dismantling,” that adheres to Lorde’s cautionary guidance in the realm of socioeconomic liberation for marginalized peoples<sup>6</sup>. To do so, I begin with the inquisitorial retort of “which tools belong to the master, and which tools have long since belonged to black and indigenous communities that have been co-opted and commodified to further the master’s agenda? What is the process of dismantling? Where does it begin? Where does it end? And how will we determine what in this “house” that we’ve been held captive within, has always belonged to us, and thus should come with us when we leave it, and what should stay? Lastly,

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<sup>6</sup>Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Essay. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1996.

I ask what is this house? How much of our lives, individually and collectively are within and on the master's property? How far does it extend? What do we build upon its ruins once we have identified all that will be included in the demolition? The scope of this master's thesis does not allow me to do the excavation necessary to arrive at the possible root of the complex, mycelial (covered extensively later), and boundless root answers, but I have strived to at least offer a framework and approach critical in beginning the socioscientific process of constructing a/the liberatory apparatus.

The purpose of this thesis, and manifesto, is to provide a foregrounding, forewarning, and forward envisioning for a collective strategy towards community-based economic practice that draws from pre-existing indigenous tradition, practiced by communities of color *prior* to the establishment and proliferation of global capitalism. By uncovering, unpacking, and retrofitting these communal tools and collective strategies, the goal of this approach is to dismantle the existing ideological, and factual misconceptions and practices associated with capitalism, and begin to actively disassociate and discover collective, non-extractive economic practices of the past and present, in hopes of (re)creating the model of tomorrow that (re)centers resource generation as a collective activity, and as a critical step (of many) towards collective socioeconomic liberation.

The foundational premise of the case for this “new way” is; 1) that it is not new, and I will spend the first portion of this manifesto historicizing the existence of collective market practices amongst non-dominant cultures evidencing this factual and historical reality; 2) that these practices, ideologies and tools are present and working effectively today, which the second portion of the paper will expound on, and; 3) the last portion of the paper will focus on applying these tools and frameworks in a creative exercise to (re)imagine and propose a viable path forward.

A necessary acknowledgment vital to hold in tandem with the hegemonically codependent history and practice of academia, is the recognition that this work's production, sponsorship, and foundational application has existed within and been made possible through (although in ways, despite) the academic industrial complex. From my perspective, much like Audre Lorde's profound truth spoken at an event curated within academia, this fact does not diminish its value or merit, as much of the foundational premise of this manifesto similarly seeks to disentangle the tools and products utilized to establish and perpetuate the capitalist order – an agenda tethered to and bastioned by academia. Contrarily, I contend that this liberatory reclamation rather serves to further

prove that while ideas, tools, and methods have been commodified, claimed, and made inaccessible, *we* still have the means and ability to reclaim, and repurpose these tools and products to further goals that oppose and subvert the dominant agenda.

## **part i: past forms of economic organization and practice**

“Every continent independently participated in the early epochs of the extension of man’s control over his environment – which means in effect that every continent can point to a period of economic development. Africa, being the original home of man, was a major participant in the processes in which human groups displayed an ever-increasing capacity to extract a living from the natural environment. - Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*<sup>7</sup>

The focus of this section, and a basic tenet of the overall (re)framework, is that markets, economic tools, even problematic extraction, existed in indigenous cultures prior to the introduction of capitalism through European led and spread imperialism. Using the proof case of the West African experience, this section identifies these communal systems and tools, that were both established, and in-process of development, growth and adaptation, but were ultimately interrupted, co-opted, and de-communalized by European imperialists. As history is written by the so-called “victors”, colonists did encounter these established economic practices, but in order to fit narratives deserving of “uncivilized savages,” much of these practices were misreported and actively erased in their representations of African culture. western education, a reoccurring, formidable and vital accomplice, augmented this erasure, and co-conspired in this assimilative cultural re-engineering, by missionaristically ensuring that West African “learned brothers before independence were trained outside the country and brought with them the theory and philosophy of capitalism which they were taught,” thus enshrining the capitalistic way as the tabula rasa from which civilized societies must be built upon.<sup>8</sup> Here we begin uncovering this mythologized history through the excavation of West African practices known to have pre-dated the entrance of imperialist occupation.

### **the guild system**

Pre-colonial 19th Century South-Western Nigeria, was referred to as Yorubaland, and consisted of a collective of Yoruba Tribe states within the region, governed by Yoruba tradition and practice. Dr.’s Raji and Abejide of the University of Ilorin, Nigeria explain, “each of these states or kingdoms had

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Verso Books, 2018), 4.

<sup>8</sup> A O Afriyie, “Communal Non-Formal Financial Market System Development: A Model for Nnoboia Market System,” *European Journal of Accounting Auditing and Finance Research* 3, no. 3 (2015): pp. 48-60, 49.



centralized political and social organization with wide geographical limits. At the center of such elaborate socio-political structure in pre-colonial Yorubaland was a strong economic base.”<sup>9</sup> These Yoruba kingdoms encouraged, incentivized and supported communal economic activity and thus “gave the privilege of production and exchange to individuals and groups in the society” rather than as a governmental responsibility or a privilege only afforded to the elite.<sup>10</sup> This highly sophisticated and intentionally organized society, elected to charge the coordination of the varied economic processes and practices in pre-colonial Yorubaland under the responsibility of *the guild system* -- a legitimate regulatory body authorized to preside over labor, that guaranteed efficiency, quality service delivery and collectively-sourced best practices vitally needed to optimize collective production relations.

Defined as a “coordinated effort by which an organization is authorized to have the responsibility for the monitoring of economic activities of its members to ensure that production relation is smooth, consistent, and unhampered by discreet actions of members and non-members of the organization,” the guild system regulated and guaranteed professional conduct of ideal commercial practices in pre-colonial Yorubaland.<sup>11</sup> Debatably these may have been some of the first organizations that became modern day unions, as they also engaged in “contributory schemes” which provided financial and other support and empowerment for its members.<sup>12</sup> Similar to unions, and the union movement at its height, the purview and authority of guilds extended beyond economic or commercial lines as “the political class ... soon began to see the need to enhance the status of their leaders by way of political empowerment which made such guild leaders to become gradually integrated into the administration of the state.”<sup>13</sup>

These guilds were critical to local governance and decision-making, as each town or state organized its own guild system, each structured within three main categories; 1) a guild of general traders of inanimate goods; medicinal herbs, fruits, etc.; 2) guild of live goods traders; fowls, goats, etc., and 3) the skill/craft focused specialized guilds of traders, tradesmen or professionals, cloth dealers, soap

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<sup>9</sup> A. O. Raji and T. S. Abejide, “The Guild System and Its Role in the Economy of Precolonial Yorubaland,” *Oman Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review* 3, no. 3 (2013): pp. 14-22, <https://doi.org/10.12816/0016425>, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> Raji and Abejide. *The Guild System*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

makers, etc.<sup>14</sup> Given the economic and production-focused goal of guilds, they served to be inherently inclusive, premised in the power in numbers, and thus had no incentive to be exclusive of any and all willing members of the community. They sought to accept “all who engaged in the task of entrepreneurship and who had the resources or means of production,” and “all persons involved in the production and/or sale of the same objects engaged in the same profession would be expected to organize themselves into or belong to a guild whether on a local or regional basis.”<sup>15</sup> This strong community-centric, and identity-agnostic model yielded certain outcomes that even challenged deeply etched social norms, particularly those concerning gender. Dr.’s Raji and Abejide explain that “[s]ince trading was a major task of women, most of the guilds were actually dominated by the women folk especially in commercial activities.”<sup>16</sup> They were inclusive, locally focused, but also had regional influence within the interconnected guild systems across Yorubaland. Their clear leadership structure, with a head of each respective guild, allowed for efficient and quasi-democratic economic and political engagement, and ultimately developed into structural cooperation with political leadership, making them often equally responsible for decisions made by town councils.

### **critiques and shortcomings of guild system**

A social and structural flaw of the guild system was the susceptibility of guild leaders to political co-optation. It is known that “leaders were often co-opted by the town council when some decisions relating to war and criminal offenses were to be taken.”<sup>17</sup> The council often sought to involve guild leadership in order to abdicate blame and dilute responsibility in various circumstances for decisions ultimately in their control. Beyond town council leadership, the guild system often fell victim to the corrupt self-enrichment of chiefs and other members of the traditional ruling elite, whom often “took returns from the gatekeepers and then market officials in the form of daily market tolls, and large quantities of foodstuffs and other items which were delivered to them on regular basis.”<sup>18</sup> The proclivity towards corruption, then and today, is a direct byproduct of the socioeconomic and structural conditions yielded by an era and continued history of political instability and civil wars that displaced individuals and groups. This manipulation of the system which appears before colonial presence serves to indicate that not only was the guild system imperfect, it even yielded certain

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>17</sup> Raji and Abejide. *The Guild System*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 19.

outcomes prevalent within capitalistic systems, namely the prevalence of corruption, disadvantageous power dynamics between the laboring and ruling class, and a fragile socioeconomic foundation subject to ebbs and flows of the sociopolitical superstructure.

### **west african roscas**

Revisiting pre-colonial West Africa, Dr. Akanmu Adebayo notes that the region, in particular the Yoruba people, “have been the subject of interest for many Africanists partly because of the level of their civilizations which they had produced outside [Afro-Asiatic] and Arab-Islamic influence.”<sup>19</sup> Evidence of this societal sophistication, especially in regards to financial management practices, have been largely lost sight of, neglected, and/or actively erased. The resulting general perception is that these systems never existed, especially not at their level of complexity, prior to western influence. However, Africanist scholars retort, “the clear conclusion is that many indigenous African financial management practices pre-dated and foreshadowed their western counterparts.”<sup>20</sup> One of, if not, the most notable and critical of these systems, are the West African rotating savings and credit associations (roscas), which are still practiced today across ethnic cultures globally and thus referred to by many names, including the *esusu* amongst West Africans.<sup>21</sup>

Anthropological researcher Shirley Ardener offers the simple definition of roscas as “[a]n association formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is in whole or in part, to each contributor in rotation.”<sup>22</sup> Procedurally, anthropologist William R. Bascom further explains that in a rosca arrangement, “a fixed sum agreed upon is given by each at a fixed time (usually every week) and placed, under a president; the total amount is paid over to each member in rotation.”<sup>23</sup> These entities allowed individuals to utilize collective resources to receive lump sums at greater proportions and with greater efficiency than they otherwise would be able to do on their own. This net-zero approach, where there are no gains or losses, has value parallels to indigenous subsistence principles with regards to optimum resource utilization, and the value of

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<sup>19</sup> A. G. Adebayo, “Money, Credit, and Banking in Precolonial Africa the Yoruba Experience,” *Anthropos* Bd. 89, no. H. 4/6 (1994): pp. 379-400, <https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/40463014>, 379.

<sup>20</sup> Patrick Ojera, “Indigenous Financial Management Practices in Africa: A Guide for Educators and Practitioners,” *Advanced Series in Management*, 2018, pp. 71-96, <https://doi.org/10.1108/s1877-636120180000020005>, 71.

<sup>21</sup> Adebayo, *Money, Credit, and Banking*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> Shirley Ardener, “The Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 94, no. 2 (1964): pp. 201-229, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2844382>, 201.

<sup>23</sup> William R. Bascom, “The Esusu: A Credit Institution of the Yoruba,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 82, no. 1 (1952): pp. 63-69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2844040>, 63.

tight collective systems. West African esusus can be founded by anyone who wishes to do so, usually by those deemed trustworthy within a friend, familial or communal group, and depending on the size of the group, collection processes, etc., members of the group take on additional leadership roles deemed “heads of the roads” who may be made responsible for collecting the contributions and making disbursements.<sup>24</sup> In the rare occasion that a member defaults, it is said that “he dies on the road” and jeopardizes their rapport within these communal groups, although esusu heads make every effort to collect, and avoid the matter being brought to court or becoming a bad debt.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, the reputation of the esusu head is an important consideration in joining an esusu, in addition to the consideration of the amount of contributions and the intervals at which they are due. In this sense, esusu management was a vital opportunity and privilege for leadership development and community stewardship regarding one of the most essential of a community’s economic foundation; it’s collective capacity and ability to pool together financial resources. Of critical note, is the importance of the underpinning values of these systems; “trust, synergy, flexibility, and empathy, commitment, tolerance and punctuality and promptness.”<sup>26</sup> These values worked, and continue to work to strengthen community ties beyond a monetarily transactional system, through a trust-dependent collective system of financial relief for severely under-resourced communities with no alternatives.

### **critiques and shortcomings of roscas**

The most challenging aspect of the successful practice of roscas is navigating the inevitability of default – as Ardener indicates, they “cannot function unless all members continue to keep up their obligations.”<sup>27</sup> While the pressure of public opinion can be an effective deterrent, this ultimately has different effects on individuals based on their circumstances, such as those with less deeply etched ties within their rosca community. Even if members do not fully default, University of Cape Coast Ghana’s Dr.Amoah-Mensah explains that trust is at the heart of these systems, and without it, “group members are not willing to give their best since each individual has his/her own personal

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>26</sup> Aborampah Amoah-Mensah, “Nnoboia and Rotated SUSU as Agents of Savings Mobilization: Developing a Theoretical Model Using Grounded Theory,” *The Qualitative Report* 26, no. 1 (2021): pp. 140-175, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4318>, 140.

<sup>27</sup> Ardener, *The Comparative Study of Rotating Credit Associations*, 216.

values and beliefs.”<sup>28</sup> This can lead to discord across various aspects of a rosca group’s commitments and expectations individually and collectively.

The also problematically contrasting side of this experience is the pressure to repair one's reputation to be accepted back into their community’s graces, or to be admitted into another rosca, as they “ha[d] become so rooted in the economic and social system that exclusion would be a serious deprivation.”<sup>29</sup> It’s been cited that in certain dire circumstances of default, members have gone to great lengths, such as stealing, or other even more desperate acts in order to fulfill their obligations to their association, in the extreme, defaulted individuals have even been driven to suicide.

### **ghanaian nnoboa**

Dr. Aborampah Amoah-Mensah contends “the Nnoboa system, according to oral tradition, evolved out of the communal way of living in Africa, particularly Ghana.”<sup>30</sup> Community work and collective labor has been an integral aspect of Ghanaian culture throughout its history, this collaborative culture extended beyond the physical work of “constructing latrines, schools and roads” in cooperative ways, but also included “festivals, funerals, marriages, etc.” that were all done with communal spirit and collective effort -- “this spirit of self-help is voluntary but compulsory.”<sup>31</sup>

The Nnoboa is a “voluntary and informal cooperative society and practice whereby people help each other or themselves in all forms of farming work from clearing of land to harvesting and processing and ultimately any activity agreed upon by the group.”<sup>32</sup> This arrangement, likened to roscas, utilizes a rotational system of responsibility on its members, expecting each member both gives and receives support from the collective to provide labor and capacity to each other in ways that they otherwise wouldn’t have been able to accomplish on their own. Similar to Yoruba esusus they are formed based on “social, ethnic, and family ties” and often are empowered by “cultural, kinship, and neighborhood group” ties.<sup>33</sup>

While formal cooperatives began to appear and become established within the colonial period, these pre-colonial nnoboa’s began transforming into “business ventures akin to cooperatives” where

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<sup>28</sup> Amoah-Mensah, *Nnoboa and Rotated Susu*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>31</sup> Amoah-Mensah, *Nnoboa and Rotated Susu*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

individuals worked on other people's farm on a continuous basis, essentially as free/non-waged labor, as a form of savings by the person contributing the labor as it also constitutes as a loan given to the individual benefitting from the labor.<sup>34</sup> These arrangements, although managed informally, were guided by unwritten principles held up in their time and continue to today, as communal trust, social capital, and these community based systems of accountability worked to ensure fairness and justice were not disregarded without communal checks and balances.

### **critiques and shortcomings of the nnoboa**

One of the major issues with the Nnobia farming practice has been the way inequitable gender norms and outcomes were reproduced and in certain circumstances, exacerbated, within the cooperative system. Given that during the pre-colonial period (and now), "the vast majority of the early cocoa farmers were male. Though female cocoa farm ownership rose gradually throughout the period, by the end of it women were still very much a minority among cocoa farmers."<sup>35</sup> With ownership and management being intertwined, as a required role for owners to assume was that of the cooperative's managers, scheduler, human resources department, etc., many issues arose and permeated the entire system due to this gender imbalance. The dominant presence of male owner/managers also engendered a consistent and significant inherent conflict with regard to women's involvement, as women's contributions "in addition to their food-growing and child-rearing responsibilities" were neither addressed nor supported collectively as their voices and influence were further marginalized in this system germinated from within a patriarchal culture, and grew unfettered, without an intentional praxis or intentionally practiced anti-sexist redistribution of power and influence.<sup>36</sup>

### **conclusion**

Through this historical and cultural excavation of pre-colonial West African indigenous practice, we are able to extrapolate learnings and tools vitally applicable to liberative strategies of today and future. The guild system displayed a high-level usage of *cooperative group production*, that worked to pool together collective capacity, allowing the sum of the whole to be greater, i.e., more productive, than its parts, and thus simultaneously allowing individuals more flexibility and autonomy via this form of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 142.

<sup>35</sup> Gareth Austin, "Free Labour: Family Workers, The Spread of Wage Contracts and the Rise of Sharecropping," in *Labour, Land and Capital in Ghana: From Slavery to Free Labour in Asante, 1807-1956* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2012), pp. 304-321, 304.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.,305.

collective organization. While often subject to nearly inevitable allure of corruption, as evidenced in the guild leaders' susceptibility to bribery, systems that anticipate, and thus account and prepare for structurally sabotaging encroachment, have greater potential to be better prepared to respond to and overcome perceivably instinctual inclinations toward self-preservation and/or greed.

Through roscas, the value of *group synergy* is underscored as a vital, and sustainable tool that functions to both build and require trust to work successfully. Within this practice, individuals place high levels of trust in members, and its leadership with which they may have minimal, if any, familiarity, yet are willing to take a high level of monetary risk with, out of necessity, co-dependence, and/or fear of social reprimand. While the concern for the inevitability of default, or general *social loafing* with regards to maintaining one's commitment, are valid, the continuance of the practice serves to prove that with time, and collective practice, communities can work to mitigate these cases and/or have generated enough collective benefit from the model to outweigh its deficits – a positive byproduct attributed to economies of scale.

With the Nnobia farming system, *communal labor* and *self-help* are displayed as essential tools for a self-subsistent community and economy. Utilizing highly organized, and well-managed, collective effort these communal enterprises were able to provide value to all contributors and generate enough collective surplus to provide needed support to those involved. Not unlike these other pre-colonial systems, this tool and practice was not infallible to hegemonic norms, like sexism.

Critical to an analysis of these tools, and consideration for their replicative usage, is an understanding, acceptance, and need for reflexive adaptation/amelioration of their tragic and systemically reinforced shortcomings. Human nature, deeply ingrained hegemonic normalization, and internalized distrust, are all active centrifugal forces deterring collective and communal organization. These generation-old recurring disincentives offer no sign of dissipation, thus tasking those with collectively-oriented liberative aspirations to seek communal buy-in with practices and tools that offer great personal risk in the historically demonstrated propensity towards fallibility. The following section engages with organizations and movements active today, navigating these challenges in present-time, and seeks to offer insight into modern adaptive practices with the potential to address and demonstrate historically retrofitted liberatory models.

## part ii: modern forms of economic organization and practice

“[E]mergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.” - adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change Changing Worlds*<sup>37</sup>

Writer, activist, and Black feminist adrienne maree brown, notes the critically vital role adaptation plays in the emergence of radical change within any system or community seeking to organize for and/or ideate towards change. In this section, we explore models local to the Boston-area, that have collectively, whether intentionally or subconsciously, adapted from these pre-colonial communally-oriented liberative models. In this exploration, we continue to identify the vital *tools* helpful in (re)imagining and (re)implementing adaptive/adapted strategies for collective economic development, as well as offer critiques of the models, as we have done for models of past, in order to further the dialogue within, and experimentation towards, more collectively adept solutions for system change.

### ujima boston

The Boston Ujima Project came into being in 2015 under the founding and stewardship of the Center for Economic Democracy, a Boston-based, nationally focused nonprofit missioned on educating and providing capacity to communities on understanding and utilizing tools of popular economics and economic democracy. Ujima, which is the Swahili term and principle representing “Collective Work & Responsibility,” was created to address escalating socioeconomic inequalities by advancing “equitable cooperation through innovative ways to invest, work, buy, own and advocate for fighting against socioeconomic inequalities in Boston on the one hand, and shape economic democracy at the community level on the other.”<sup>38</sup> By integrating community-controlled business and diversified financing strategies with community organizing strategies, Ujima aims to help low-

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<sup>37</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> C. Bevilacqua and Y. Ou, “Place, Relationships, and Community-Controlled Capital: On Ecosystem-Based Innovation towards an Equitable Competitive Advantages Distribution, the Boston Ujima Project Case,” *International Journal of Sustainable Development and Planning* 13, no. 08 (December 2018): pp. 1072-1089, <https://doi.org/10.2495/sdp-v13-n8-1072-1089>, 1076..



income communities of color gain control over capital, grow cooperatives and land trusts, and protect locally owned businesses from the capitalist corporate economy. Ujima works collaboratively to achieve this by leveraging the power of investing and organizes neighbors, workers, business owners and investors to create a community-controlled economy, or a *solidarity economy*. Most vitally, Ujima funds microbusinesses, start-ups and small businesses, which plays an extremely important role in shaping local economies and their economic landscapes. Given the existing capital gap in mainstream finance, Ujima is able to provide small loans to microbusinesses at a lower, even zero interest rate, as well as offer community-rooted businesses applicants free office space and business coaching to supplement capital investments and provide holistic support.

Particularly unique and critical with regard to Ujima's approach, is its emphasis on *place* and *people*, which work to contextualize Ujima's interventions, and allow the organization to harness the embedded community assets such as collective political power, investment power and consumption power. These outputs become reciprocally enhancing inputs, deepening the sense of place, and value of membership within a community, vital to creating and retaining the means for collective wealth generation within local communities.<sup>39</sup> This self-subsistent ecosystem building approach nearly directly parallels the Ghanaian communal model that preempted and sustained the Nnoboa farming systems. Both models evidence the value of geographically proximate communities, and further display how self-subsistent systems, such as complex capital flows can democratically be irrigated efficiently and effectively within a closed community system.

### **critiques and shortcomings of ujima**

In their graduate thesis case study of Ujima, Tufts University Master of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning candidate Sarah Jimenez diagnoses a challenge Ujima faces in its multi-stakeholder collaboration process – that being the perpetual struggle of ensuring participatory stakeholder engagement throughout its processes.<sup>40</sup> Established in Ujima's mission and praxis is an understanding that “participation is vital to achieving [their] objective of economic democracy ... nonetheless, a tension exists between the need to ground decision-making in core constituent groups of low-income communities and the necessity to allow external ones to participate meaningfully.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Bevilacqua, C, and Y Ou. “Place, Relationships, and Community-Controlled Capital: On Ecosystem-Based Innovation Towards an Equitable Competitive Advantages Distribution, the Boston Ujima Project Case.” *International journal of sustainable development and planning* 13.8 (2018): 1072–1089. Web.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Jimenez (ProQuest LLC, 0AD), pp. 1-144.

<sup>41</sup> Bevilacqua and Ou, *Place, Relationships, and Community-Controlled Capital*, 1084.

Jimenez reports an inconsistency in participation, and general trends of decreased participatory engagement across stakeholder groups, for both more core constituents and external, that presented a considerable barrier to consensus building, and made it difficult to discern “how much to prioritize cultivated participation and democratic engagement over other project objectives.”<sup>42</sup>

### **boston’s food solidarity economy movement**

Around 2018, a network of long established and newly emerging initiatives began burgeoning to establish the Boston food solidarity economy movement. Made up of a community land trust, farming and gardening collectives, a kitchen incubator and catering firm, a social enterprise cafe, a food cooperative, a worker-owned recycling cooperative, and a growing multitude of partners, this ecosystem has been initiated and led by majority Black and brown local residents. The movement is anchored in solidarity economy praxis, which seeks to co-generate “a socio-economic order and new way of life that deliberately chooses serving the needs of people and ecological sustainability as the goal of economic activity rather than maximization of profits under the unfettered rule of the market.”<sup>43</sup> With this foundational aspiration, Boston’s food solidarity ecosystem has been centered in the need to have complete community autonomy and control over its food production, quite literally from the ground up. To this end, Boston’s movement starts with shared ownership of land through a community land trust in the Dudley Street neighborhood, which is betwixt Dorchester and Roxbury – Boston’s most disinvested and neglected majority Black, brown, and poor neighborhoods. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, created by a group of residents and organizations with the mission of revitalizing the Dudley Street, and resisting city development plans that would spawn gentrification, are the stewards of the 60-acre community land trust that has served the community and the food solidarity movement ecosystem as a vehicle for decommodifying land and provides the much-needed resource of a collectively governed and collectively shared common.

The land trust hosts a variety of urban agricultural activities, including a 10,000 square foot community greenhouse, and two farm sites, as well as dozens of home and community gardens. Penn Loh articulates, “this control of land, made possible by building political power, has enabled DSNI and its community partners to guide development that goes beyond the constraints of the

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<sup>42</sup> Jimenez, *The Emergence of the Boston Ujima Project*, 80.

<sup>43</sup> Paul Lachapelle and Michael X. Rios, *Community Development and Democratic Practice* (London: Routledge, 2019).

private real estate market.”<sup>44</sup> The aspiration for long-term land control, a vision modeled by DSNI, has served to intention the Boston’s food solidarity movement on an interconnected, multi-pronged strategy for collective impact that is grounded in taking back more public and private vacant land into the hands of the community, while establishing new and enveloping existing organizations, partners and initiatives throughout every step of the food production, distribution, consumption, and disposal/regeneration processes.

Within this model centered on delivering food justice within a severely under-resourced community is capacity building that has the ability to be utilized beyond food. Organizing and power building have been critical to the ecosystem’s development and functionality – for example, Dorchester Food Co-op and CERO, ecosystem partners, are democratically governed by their members, and DSNI itself is a multi-thousand-member nonprofit whom elect a board or directors that represent the various racial/ethnic groups and other stakeholders in the neighborhood. Solidarity economy practice believes and expects that “this power base can be then mobilized to gain supportive policies and other resources from the state.”<sup>45</sup>

### **critiques and shortcomings of boston’s food solidarity economy movement**

Boston’s Food Solidarity Economy, along with the solidarity economy movement in general. are in a constant struggle against the neoliberal capitalist agenda to envelope these efforts into its own ideological framework. This Sisyphean effort of “trying to sustain and build new solidarity practices and institutions, while simultaneously resist[ing] and reform[ing] neoliberalization processes,” as Loh denotes, requires a collective praxeology dually focused on disrupting “dominant narratives that limit our consciousness of possibilities [and allow for the creation of] counter narratives for broad transformation” as well as holding concern over co-optation seeking to mainstream, sanitize, and/or depoliticize the movement in order to survive.<sup>46</sup> These pressures manifested by neoliberal regime are at work to uphold the idea that “there is no alternative” to capitalism and its accompanying predilection towards “individualism, market efficiency, privatization and small government.”<sup>47</sup> This “deeply infused” ideological hegemony in turn engenders a prevalence of “skepticism and belief” in

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<sup>44</sup>Penn Loh and Julian Agyeman, “Urban Food Sharing and the Emerging Boston Food Solidarity Economy,” *Geoforum* 99 (2019): pp. 213-222, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.08.017>, 217.

<sup>45</sup> Loh and Agyeman, *Urban Food Sharing*, 219.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

an alternative, more collective economic practice sought to be established, promoted and scaled by the Boston Food Solidarity Economy and the larger movement.<sup>48</sup>

### **center for cooperative development and solidarity**

In November of 2015, Latinx residents of East Boston concerned about rapid gentrification organized to convene the Center for Cooperative Development and Solidarity, an organization missioned on providing technical, educational and organizational support to current and potential members of worker owned cooperatives in East Boston.<sup>49</sup> CCDS' theory of change is rooted in a belief and approach that worker owned cooperatives have the greatest capacity to deliver “decent work with decent pay,” particularly for Black and brown, immigrant, and low-income residents which will advance a sustainable and permanent social and economically just neighborhood. CCDS' approach is also based on solidarity economy principles and heavily relies on the use of popular education methods, a pedagogical approach promulgated by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who believed in education as a way of liberating poor oppressed peoples.<sup>50</sup>

Through popular education, which involves establishing “a praxis, a collective and participatory orientation, and action,” CCDS actively works to build a collective consciousness within East Boston's Latinx community around cooperative development that takes into account the particular context residents are situated within to ensure teachings trainings are centered on their experiences and needs.<sup>51</sup> This culturally responsive practice has impacted CCDS' with regards to its intentional emphasis on the importance of language and culture, exemplified in the in-Spanish trainings, and the intentional creation of spaces where issues and experiences like those of survivors of domestic violence can be seen and supported in equal balance, and when needed even given greater priority over the formal educational content. There is also a great level of intentionality involved in the dynamics of the collective instruction arena, in how individuals with different levels of education (formal and informal) and worlds of knowledge are treated in order to ensure both informal knowledge and lived experience are centered and not devalued.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>49</sup> Penn Loh and Sarah Jimenez, “Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts,” *Solidarity Rising in Massachusetts: How Solidarity Economy Movement Is Emerging in Lower-Income Communities of Color*, August 21, 2019, <https://pennloh-practical.vision/2017/03/14/solidarity-rising-in-massachusetts/>.

<sup>50</sup> Tom Steele, “Cultural Studies and Radical Popular Education: Resources of Hope,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 6 (July 2020): pp. 915-931, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420957333>.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 918.

A critical component of CCDS' theory of change, is its emphasis on ensuring the support for and value within co-ops, extend beyond job creation, and include holistic communal benefit. Board member, Indira Garmendia stresses “ it was really important through the training to clarify what is cooperativism, because it’s not just about creating businesses but about developing the community.”<sup>52</sup> This intentional praxis and messaging ensures the collective of members and stakeholders are aligned in principles, values, and overarching goals for the community, beyond an individual’s financial prosperity – CCDS aims to instill cooperativism as a “way for us to help change the world and neighborhood around us” and challenge the individualistic capitalistic model.<sup>53</sup>

### **critiques and shortcomings of ccds**

The most challenging barrier for CCDS is scale, as Board member Lilliana Avendaño notes, “that takes time, because we are not talking about not just ourselves,” understanding that “everyone who wants to do co-ops really needs to be aligned with the principles and values,” and this consensus building is very heavily time, resource and capacity consuming.<sup>54</sup> As a still relatively inchoate entity, CCDS itself is still growing and capacity building, “while at the same time supporting coops and other solidarity initiatives.”<sup>55</sup> Leadership understands that for their approach and teachings to become widespread within their community and beyond, communities have to see existing, and come to rely on, an interconnected, highly present network of coops where “everybody involved has the same values...” for CCDS that is when “we are going to see transformation in individuals, families and our neighborhood.”<sup>56</sup> Such transformation does not come expediently or without immense collective effort.

### **conclusion**

The modern usage of these tools is inextricably linked to the past history of their usage and applicability to pre-colonial communities. Many of the organizing principles of these organizations and movements are intentionally rooted in indigenous practice and history familiar to communities of color. With regard to the Boston Ujima Project, whose very name is derived from an East African language, their usage of *economic democracy*, which is described as, “the general idea that economic

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<sup>52</sup> Loh and Jimenez. *Massachusetts-Based Solidarity Economy Initiative*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

power should be accountable to those significantly affected by it,” speaks to the value of collective community input, not indifferent from the same values generally rooted in subsistent tradition.<sup>57</sup> Whilst we understand the political structure of a “democracy” to be a western structure, collective decision making has been historically evidenced in indigenous cultures, such as with Native Americans, where these groups primarily used consensus-based forms of organization. Understandably, then and now, the most anticipated threat to the success of an economic democracy is suboptimal participation in the engagement process. For this tool to be most effectively utilized, considerations of community buy-in, and stakeholder choice, play critical factors – as determining the collective “we,” requires intentionality, and the application of an equity-centered ergonomics, intentionally designed to curb apathetic engagement or nonparticipation from members of a collective.

*Solidarity economies* also quite legibly contain elements replicated from existing subsistent tradition – it’s very foundational principles are derived from a pre-industrial consciousness of the finitude of land and its limited natural resources. As this tool has proven vital in the development of Boston’s food solidarity economy, it’s historically provided a necessary collective philosophy that grounds a community and an ecosystem within itself beyond just market considerations, and engenders a culture of care – for one’s surroundings, and one’s community that not only allow for economic collaboration, but also co-investment in the lives and livelihoods of a collective. Unsurprisingly, as communities develop utilizing this practice, and as co-generated resources and collective production become community resources, the co-opting coax of capitalism continually encroaches, and if not actively anticipated and repeatedly resisted, will continue to be one of the most credible threats to a stable, solidarity-based ecosystem.

CCDS’ emphasis on *popular education*, which is a shared toolset and connected foundational element of praxis amongst each of the organizations and movements archived, elucidates the essential role of collective education, awareness and both an individual and collective consciousness play in the work of liberation. Freire’s critical pedagogy purports for an “education that serves the interests of the popular classes (exploited sectors of society), that involves them in critically analyzing their social

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<sup>57</sup> Tom Malleon, “Economic Democracy: The Left’s Big Idea for the Twenty-First Century?” *New Political Science* 35, no. 1 (2013): pp. 84-108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2012.754670>, 86.

situation and in organizing to act collectively to change the oppressive conditions of their lives.”<sup>58</sup> As we observe within East Boston’s Cooperative movement, education and awareness serve as an important prerequisite for potential participants to be able to engage beyond the most tangibly available resources and opportunities, extending into the larger vision towards liberative change. In tow with the capacity and complexity involved in effective popular education, are the concerns of scale, and the formidable task of seeking buy-in from a critical mass of necessary stakeholders within and eventually beyond a community.

The survival and further development of these tools and collective frameworks provide as much hope and instruction as they do concern and skepticism, particularly given the nearly perceivably inevitability of their pitfalls. Alone, these tools and practices, and these movements and organizations, can only confer a level of confidence in their ability to garner concrete steps towards collective revolution. Understandably making it difficult for individuals, potentially even for those currently engaging in this thesis, to commit themselves towards collective liberation, and most daunting; it’s potential associated risks. To this, Black feminist Francis Beal abdicates us from this magnitudinous collective burden, and both elucidates and complicates the task in articulating that, “to live for the revolution means taking on the more difficult commitment of changing our day-to-day life patterns.”<sup>59</sup> In this next and final section of this exploration, we seek to address the process of changing one's own thinking, actions, and eventual patterns, through ideas frameworks and tools, particularly guided by Black feminists oriented towards the future, and ways of finding oneself in the process of finding freedom of the collective.

### **part iii: engaging in liberatory dialogue**

This final chapter offers more questions than answers, but nonetheless seeks to present a liberatory exploration of the questions and concerns often, and personally, encountered on the path towards the development of a personal theory of praxis with regard to collective liberation. The navigation of this collectively internal dialogue is foregrounded with tools, strategies and/or frameworks that serve as necessary foundational lenses to ground and contextualize one's own praxis, in a creative,

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<sup>58</sup> Hal Beder, “Popular Education: An Appropriate Educational Strategy for Community-Based Organizations,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 1996, no. 70 (1996): pp. 73-83, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.36719967009>.

<sup>59</sup> Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

emergent, and pleasurable incubative process, critical to unshackling oneself from the deeply tethered psychosocial chokehold of patriarchal capitalism.

### **afrofuturism**

Ytasha Womack, who literally wrote the book on Afrofuturism, defines this philosophy and practice as, “an intersection of imagination, technology, and liberation.”<sup>60</sup> She and other afrofuturists see it as a way to reimagine possible futures through a black cultural lens, and a way to encourage experimentation, reimagine identities, and activate liberation. Afrofuturist practice is both art and critical theory and combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-western beliefs. “In some cases, it’s a total envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.”<sup>61</sup>

Afrofuturist works span the gamut in terms of mediums and the creatives that utilize them, examples include but are not limited to: Sun Ra, jazz composer, poet, and philosopher who appropriated technological artifacts and scientific symbols to fabricate a utopian posthuman, post-racial, and post-racist society; Jean-Michel Basquiat addressed elements of black strife, a consciousness raising, that was blended with the use of robots, a science fiction conscious razing; W.E.B Du Bois’ double-consciousness, which deals with the duality of blackness, is considered to be an evolutionary predecessor to afrofuturism, which is “remixed and complicated” in afrofuturism, birthing the idea of infinite orders of black consciousness.<sup>62</sup>

### **afrofuturism in dialogue:**

*Can racism really be stopped or eradicated?*

Womack posits, “Afrofuturism is concerned with both the impact of [technologies] on social conditions and with the power of such technologies to end the “isms” for good and safeguard humanity.”<sup>63</sup> While technology may have equal or greater both anticipated and proven capability to widen disparity, and serve as an anonymizing or culpable perpetuator of discrimination,

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<sup>60</sup> Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Michael Bennett, “Afrofuturism,” Arizona State University, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://asu.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/afrofuturism>.

<sup>63</sup> Womack, *Afrofuturism*.



Afrofuturism asks to *imagine* its potential capabilities and functionality if *fully* wielded within a liberative agenda, and outside of the existing constraints confining the resourcing, funding, and development of innovation in tech within a Silicon Valley-driven valuation of a prototype's determinable import.

Without being enveloped in concern for *how* society progresses to this point (we seek to address in later dialogue), we can *imagine* the potential for impact of the various innovations and/or impact of the collective presence within the social-engineered technology sector on the ability for racism and its suite of offerings on the marginalized condition.

*How and through whom do we illuminate a path forward?*

Simply put: creatives, and Black womxn, and especially Black womxn creatives. “Improvisation, adaptability, and imagination are the core components of this resistance and are evident in both the arts and black cultures at large,” says Womack.<sup>64</sup> Understanding this, and the historical hyper-prevalence of academics, elected officials, community leaders, and orators often envisioning and leading social change, a healthy, necessary and correlatedly evidenced missing contributing stakeholder are creatives. Also evidenced, is the inclination of many of those who have contributed the most towards liberatory thought, to have penchants for creativity – Du Bois was also a science fiction writer who wrote about race and presumably found sci-fi “both a great release and the ideal tool to ponder the what-ifs in climbing through a rigid race-based social structure.”<sup>65</sup>

With regard to Black womxn, it was Black feminist thought that articulated the experience of *intersectionality* that Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined, and allowed for an understanding of the way in which racism and sexism create an inescapably discriminatory floor and ceiling exerting oppressive forces from both directions, most detrimentally impacting Black womxn. Thus, afrofuturism seeks to liberate the imaginative potential of the divine feminine ideal, which values nature, creativity, and healing, and to be the first movement in which “Black women creators are credited for the power of their imaginations and are equally represented as the face of the future and shapers of the future.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Womack, *Afrofuturism*.

*How does this approach not stand to replicate existing oppressive norms (a repeated question)?*

A critically important understanding to carry is that no theory in existence short of total annihilation can guarantee the eradication of patriarchal capitalism or its psychosocial chokehold on all subjected to its regime. However, “Afrofuturism provides a prism for examining this issue through art and discourse,” which while may seem perceivably less tangibly useful than a manifesto, a multi-pointed plan, or a *dream*, this praxis contains and expands upon these outputs, and even further, seeks a reflective and responsive opportunity to co-ideate, co-imagine, and co-anticipate what happens when these products of liberation no longer work, or fall victim to co-optation.<sup>67</sup>

The basic premise of Afrofuturism is rooted in an infinitely imaginative future, which unlike the currently prevailing consensus established and systematically reinforced by capitalism, is not limited to the capitulatory rationale of “there are no alternatives.” Afrofuturism pushes for an undying movement committed to complete and total liberation of all peoples, and an incessantly imaginative and divinely feminine unwillingness to cease until it's unadulterated deliverance.

### **emergent strategy**

adrienne maree brown explains that the concept of emergent strategy was initially in reference to an adaptive and relational leadership model found in the work of science fiction writer, and afrofuturist icon, Octavia Butler. Eventually it was developed into “plans of action, personal practices and collective organizing tools that account for constant change and rely on the strength of relationships for adaptation.” Emergent strategy draws influence from biometrics, which is the imitation of the models, systems and elements of nature, used to solve complex human problems. It also draws from permaculture, which is a system of agricultural and social design principles, modeled after patterns and features observed in nature.

The application of Emergent Strategy is foundationed in deep authentic collaboration, metaphorically and literally rooted in mycelial structuring, which refers to the interconnected underground thread-like fungal root system that make up mycelium, the largest organism on earth.<sup>68</sup> Utilizing these structures, ways of organizing, and ways of movement-making modeled in nature,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

emergent strategy simply seeks to offer an intentional, familiar, and natural paradigm used to replicate the process of building and maintaining complex ecosystems as exhibited in nature. Its outcomes look like; iterative processes, that whether producing success or failure, provide valuable data that in turn increases the collective liberative intellect; reflective and projective thought that remembers the past, observes and acts in the present, and imagines the future; and the potential for a movement focused on critical connections instead of critical mass – a shift from “mile wide inch deep” movements to “inch wide mile deep” movements.<sup>69</sup>

### **emergent strategy in dialogue**

*How does the proposed approach differ from existing “radical” approaches?*

Emergent strategy is grounded in the understanding that “existence is fractal,” which is a never-ending pattern – “fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self- similar across different scales.”<sup>70</sup> In essence, a revolutionized and liberated city, country, or world, is the summation of a multitude of revolutionized communities connected in aligned ideologies and practices. A collective economic movement, built community by community, each one self-subsistent, but intentionally, authentically and deeply bonded with one another, has the ability beyond any previous existing movement, to form a mycelic collective – interconnected and in alignment with the overarching goal of collective liberation.

*How does this approach not stand to replicate existing oppressive norms?*

adrienne maree brown accurately identifies the ways in which social-justice organizations currently are pitted against each other competing for a limited supply of majority philanthropically generated funding, and rather than collaborative attainment and investment of these funds, structural and ideological particularities create deep splits in this sector and disallow for a more collaborative culture.<sup>71</sup> An emergent approach necessitates deep and intentional engagement that eventually builds into a shared network. With these fundamental (and slowly developed) processes, a larger collective movement to fundamentally shift and/or dissolve any relationship with philanthropic dollars, has the potential to allow for the social impact-oriented sector to thrive collaboratively, instead of

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

struggling competitively. Transitively, this shift makes possible the potential of the sector to more effectively address inequitable outcomes, and the ability to grow into a system resistant to resurfacing oppressive norms, and resourced efficiently and sustainably enough to much more effectively address the systemic issues seemingly unaddressable today.

### **pleasure activism**

adrienne maree brown also introduces us to and offers an understanding of pleasure activism as the “work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy.”<sup>72</sup> She emphasizes the necessity of the collective acknowledgement of marginalized peoples that we all need and deserve pleasure, and thus should ensure our social structures and practices reflect this. This “pleasure” includes the erotic, as well as humor, passion, work, connections, expression, creativity and more. The foundational belief of pleasure activists is that by tapping into these sensory experiences, with a level of intentionality and consciousness, we can fully engage the goodness in each of us, allowing the co-generation of justice and liberation. “Ultimately, pleasure activism is us learning to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have on this planet” adrienne maree brown contends.<sup>73</sup>

Connecting to a recurring theme rooted in indigenous subsistent tradition, Pleasure Activism evokes care for oneself and others, as an act of political resistance/solidarity and as a means of cultivating resilience. This eros-centric approach to a collective liberatory tradition seeks “shift from individual transactions for self-care to collective transformation,” which makes the praxis of liberation require a high level of vulnerability, a comfort with the uncomfortable, and a deeply rooted and shared commitment to a rigorous collective practice of trust-building, radical honesty, and intrapersonal intimacy necessary to deconstruct the confines of our heteropatriarchal socialization.<sup>74</sup> Through this immeasurably deep and emotionally complex socio-spiritual practice, Pleasure Activism posits to provide a constant reminder, and rigorously developed praxis that centers the most vitally needed muscle to fortify a movement for liberation; the heart.

### **pleasure activism in dialogue**

*How do we build the trust needed to develop this level of shared community?*

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<sup>72</sup> brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. AK Press, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

I answer this with two parts, and the first is by acknowledging and centering the collective experience of oppressed peoples as one beleaguered by generational harm. Pleasure activism acknowledges the roots of harm to be systemic, and contributory to a collective distrust of one another and a society that has normalized and accounted for our collective suffering. If we believe in transformative justice, we are thus committed to identifying “the roots of the harm, together, and mak[ing] the harm impossible in the future.”<sup>75</sup> If and when successful in this mission, the very concern and treatment of a collective trust, has the potential to transform from the existing status quo where trust is earned, to one where in which trust is solidified into the foundation of a collective, like that of a sisterhood, members of a congregation, or soldiers in a battalion.

On battalions, my second retort mimics the retort utilized to dissuade radical thought, “what’s the alternative?” As a collective, we are in perpetual danger, and constantly under attack, while being pacified and placated by progressive politics, only to regress to socioeconomic conditions, mortality rates, and a collective despair comparable in disparity with the status quo of generations prior for communities of color. adrienne maree brown asserts her belief that in order to survive this collectively intact, “we need to learn to adapt and stay in relationship,” and that only through a foundation built in trust and a radical practice of love, can collective transformation be made possible.

*How does this approach not stand to replicate existing oppressive norms?*

Pleasure activism is rooted in *somatics*, which is a “path, a methodology, a change theory, by which we can embody transformation ... Somatics builds in us the ability to act from strategy and empathy.”<sup>76</sup> If radical change is something that is understood and practiced as a muscle, capacity and praxis that builds from within, and then emanates out to each individual and the collective entity co-enraptured within communal solidarity, we can use the rationalization for the personal as we use for the envisioned super structure. Therefore, if we believe our personal selves to be capable of change, of varying levels of magnitude. and can thus understand, accept, and *practice* sustained transformational change within an individual, somatics provides the foundational theory that

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<sup>75</sup> brown, *Pleasure Activism*.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

supports its translational and scalable application to the collective. While the permanency of this superstructural shift is no more guaranteed than the permanency of new habits we seek to develop, or old ones we seek to discard, unlike with personal change, collective accountability is simultaneously in play, course-correcting for individual or collective deviations from sustained transformational change.

## **conclusion**

In this final section, we have been able to explore through inquisitive dialogue the frameworks offered towards the envisioning of a liberated future. These frameworks and toolsets are understandably the least collectively and historically practiced, but like much of collective liberation tradition as we have explored, the tools and foundational ideologies are rooted in traditions and cultural practices with pre-existing degrees of familiarity within marginalized communities. Many even draw from nontraditional areas typically dissociated from the social justice arena. These potentially formerly perceivably disparate areas such as permaculture, science fiction literature, and or technological innovation, serve as models of how transformational resistance and a subsistence praxis operate to activate and make valuable the available tools, re-engineered towards liberative practice.

A collectively-reinforcing error, significantly attributable to academia, is a misread, or more cynically described, a misdirection based in Audre Lorde's caution against the master's tools. Many have come to interpret her conveyance to confer that "genuine measures of resistance and liberation must come from somewhere else, somewhere 'outside,' whether outside of 'the canon,' outside of mainstream Academia, outside of modern political institutions, structures, and social processes, or perhaps from outside of history altogether. "The intention is not to debate her words, but rather propose a praxical retort that heeds her caution, analyzes the context of her critique, and seeks to both challenge and correct the overarching "master"-induced historicized discrepancy and narrative erasure that has actively disoriented the collective understanding of the realms within radical tradition, and the possible realms outside of it.

Therefore, in this exploration we have been able to research and uncover pre-colonial collective traditions pertaining to West African, indigenous, subsistent economic tradition, developed continents away from Europe, and centuries prior – rooted in communal values, and collective self

and environmental preservation. These tools, we can ascertain, have unequivocal origins in indigenous practice, thus allowing its cultural descendants the same generationally transitive opportunity to resurface and repurpose these tools towards modern and future fractal progression towards liberation – as well as the usage of tools and frameworks engendered from these past traditions, that have endured to this day, or have been retrofitted for modern and future applicability.

A critically necessary caution of this approach, is a need to be consciously, constantly, and vigilantly mindful of the reactionarily adaptive nature of capitalism. Audre Lorde’s caution also makes mention of the illusion of the “temporary win” if/when capitalism’s grasp is evaded, and thus in order to ensure these momentary shifts do not recidivate, a sustainable movement must have a keen awareness of the masterfully resilient inclination of capitalism. However, like the resilient nature of an aggressively invasive weed, we must collectively be able to eradicate and rebuild at the roots of our oppression, and only through a process of conscious disentanglement and radical regeneration, can we properly and collectively sow the fruitful seeds of collective liberation.