

Message From The Grassroots: Exploring Black liberation in grassroots economic practice and planning in the Americas

By

Austin K. Cole

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Authored by: Austin K. Cole

Department of Urban Studies and Planning, May 15, 2024

Certified by: Karilyn Crockett

Assistant Professor of Urban History, Public Policy & Planning

Approved by: J. Phillip Thompson

Professor of Political Science and Urban Planning, MCP Committee Chair

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Abstract

Building from theories of underdevelopment and economic warfare on Black peoples (Africans and Afrodescendants) globally, this study brings into the fields of urban planning and local community & economic development the analytic and urgency of the Black Radical Peace Tradition. This involves an exploration of alternatives to traditional paradigms of economic development and planning that might help reclaim and reconstitute “the economy” towards practices and efforts that serve human life and dignity, popular sovereignty, connection to the Earth, and self-determinative capacities of African peoples throughout the Americas. Intent on contributing toward an anti-colonial praxis in this field, the following study is in part an application of the lens of Black political economy to geographic and urban challenges. It is also an exploration of grassroots people-centered efforts, both operating within the spatial-political confines of empire and those revolutionary programs outside of its physical bounds. And finally, it is a reflection on the possible purposes and roles of the “intellectual” and “planner” in supporting the liberation of Black peoples in the Americas, as part of the program of the liberation of all peoples globally.

Thesis supervisor: Karilyn Crockett

Title: Assistant Professor of Urban History, Public Policy & Planning

Thesis Reader: J. Phillip Thompson

Title: Professor of Political Science and Urban Planning, MCP Committee Chair

Thesis Reader: Darien A. Williams

Title: Assistant Professor of Macro Practice Department, Boston University School of Social Work

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Dedication

*"We must act as if we answer to, and only answer to, our Ancestors, our children, and the unborn."
– Amilcar Cabral*

This humble project is dedicated to my people, y'all who continue to teach me the many faces and forms of love and struggle. I have been searching for you my entire life – I probably always will be.

To my late mom and maternal grandma, Kerry Yolanda Patterson Cole and Leola Melvin Patterson-Borrum, I never would have made it without you. And to all the Mississippi Black women who have fought to protect and care for their families the best they knew how;

To the late Anani Dzidzienyo, whose actions and generosity taught me and so many others that humanity is the first and most essential trait of any "intellectual", "scholar", or friend;

To all the ancestors who have left this world but whose spirit still walks with me.

To my dad, my sisters, my nieces and nephew, and all of my family, blood or chosen;

To Aasha Jackson and our life together.

To the revolutionary people of Mississippi and Alabama, Ayiti and Cuba, Vietnam and Angola, the Congo and Colombia, Puerto Rico and Palestine, and all those between and beyond who have found their love and humanity in revolution.

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“Now, who are your people?” – Ms. Ella Baker

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I owe so much to the many people who opened up their homes, offices, cultural centers, and virtual spaces to me to have conversations about their work and perspectives. Any richness and insight that appears in these pages is because of their openness and love. Their names appear throughout, and I thank them all dearly. In particular, the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente – especially Maritza and Idelsi – and the East Brooklyn Call to Action – especially Gretchen, who helped me to talk with people in their coalitions – I am deeply grateful. I hope this is just the beginning of our work and learning journey together.

My thesis committee was obviously fundamental to this work coming to fruition. Prof. Karilyn Crockett’s guidance as an advisor and confidant helped me to even envision what I could study and how I could study it. I don’t think I would have had the confidence to take this on without her constant support. Prof. Phil Thompson has offered immeasurable support in this effort, in research, and in understanding the intersections of politics and life. Prof. Darien A. Williams has been a friend and mentor since I stepped on to MIT’s campus and has never wavered in his support and insights. Thank y’all! In addition, I have to thank the DUSP faculty and staff as a whole. So many folks have supported my learning and livelihood. I must acknowledge Balakrishnan Rajagopal, Cesar McDowell, Erica Caple James, Holly Harriel, Janelle Knox-Hayes, Jason Jackson, Jean-Luc Pierite, Sophia Hasenfus, and many others. My DUSP classmates have also inspired and motivated me for the last two years. I can’t say how thankful I am to have shared space with the class of 2024 and made many lifelong friends. I have to give a special thanks to Nishan, Tiandra, and Trace, for supporting me, working with me, and letting me drag them along to build various trips and festivals. And to my 2024 dualies Eduardo, Mariama, Nwakaego, Raul, and Trace. The first, and to this point only, iteration of the class Black Planning, taught by Erica, Darien and Enjoli Hall, saved me mentally and spiritually in my second semester of grad school and gave me a beloved community.

Several organizations and coalitions at MIT have also been essential to my ability to persevere in this institution and have helped me understand what community looks like in the academic world, in particular the Black Graduate Student Association – especially the Political Action Committee and the 2023 Exec Board, the DUSP Students of Color Committee, Black DUSP Magic, the MIT Graduate Student Union-UE Local 256, the 2023 MIT Civil Rights Immersion Trip, the Coalition for Palestine and all the organizations within it, and the Final Five and the entire Scientists Against Genocide Encampment. There are many others who also supported me in a time of great need, and while I cannot name them all, this thesis would not have come together without the labor and support of some friends, comrades and supporters at MIT: Alula, Ana, Asya, BreAnne, Fedaa, Maggie, Mani, Nadine, Sandy, Sophie, Stewart, Tagoe, Zenon, all of those already named, and many others who worked behind the scenes.

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And lastly, this project would almost certainly not look the way that it does without the advancement and invigoration of my politics due to the bravery of the Palestinian Resistance and the people of Gaza and Palestine, who are fighting against genocide for their liberation.

Preface

“One day I know the struggle will change. There’s got to be a change—not only for Mississippi, not only for the people in the United States, but people all over the world.” – Fannie Lou Hamer

Who am I? Where are my people? What is my role? Why am I here?

In the last three years, I have asked myself these questions innumerable times. What you see here is in some ways trying to reconcile these to the best of my ability while finishing my degrees in City Planning and Business Administration. The questioning is not over, but this is a temporary destination along my journey. There is an academic orientation to this work, but it is not a search for answers or solutions, it is mostly an exploration of what lies between or within the gaps and intersections of Black liberation, urban planning, and community and economic development. More than anything, this work is a response.

This work is responding to **people**: those who uttered or wrote the words in italics you will find at the beginning and end of each section, whose legacies challenge me to resist, build, study, and act. More specifically, this is responding to what I have seen and experienced as a lack of focus on people within the fields of ‘urban planning’ and ‘community and economic development’ – at least the global majority of people. And it is *the people* who must be at the center of our work.

It is responding to **place**: those places I’ve called home – Springfield, Ohio; Chattanooga, TN; Washington, DC; Medellin, Colombia; Somerville, MA; London; New York; and others. And the future prospect of resting my head in a liberated place – a home where all of us are free.

It is responding to **space**: the space between African (Black) peoples throughout the world, that may be full of longing, pain, and confusion – but also joy, spirit, culture, love, and beauty.

And it is responding to **time**: the moment in which we find ourselves demands that we act, that we take serious and disciplined collective action against the war on *the people* of this Earth. We cannot allow ourselves to accept the genocides, imperialist interventions, dehumanizing media and political narratives, destructions and desecrations of communities as normal. It is time to move beyond individualism, to struggle collectively for justice and liberation. The time is now.

Finally, this is an invitation to anyone reading. An invitation to heed the challenge of Dr. Walter Rodney, who dared all of us in these spaces to become guerilla intellectuals, to strive toward the theory of Amilcar Cabral and commit class suicide so that we might join the peoples of this Earth, the working classes, the poor, the colonized and marginalized, in the struggle for liberation. It is an invitation to take a hard look at the challenges of this world and your role, get organized with others, and struggle for all of our liberation.

Rootedness in personal & political, ancestry & people

In this study, I aspire to honor Toni Morrison’s understanding of ‘Rootedness’ in art and writing, an ongoing search for a Black forms of writing and art that makes “conscious historical connection” to

ancestors and blends an “acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time.”¹ In this, Morrison calls back to the way that Black people, African people’s see and have long seen the world. In aspiring to this tradition, I also take Morrison’s challenge to find ways for you, reader, to participate in this piece – if accomplished, this should not be a lecture but a process of relationship-building through your screen or paper, in a manner that is “affective and participatory.”²

This is important even in a discussion about economic development and planning. If we are seeking a people-centered development and planning, we must make space for *the people*, and more importantly, people must see and take space for themselves. This is a choice to take steps toward contributing to what Carol Boyce Davies calls a “rooted exchange of knowledge between the academy and the community” so that the knowledge generated in this relationship might “serve the liberation of our communities from the oppressive European histories and epistemologies,” while permitting us “re-territorialise” our understandings of the world.³ Because, while I currently sit firmly with academy, in this endeavor, we are answering the late Walter Rodney’s demand that “the black intellectual, the black academic, must attach himself to the activity of the black masses” in order to break from the captivity of an academy in service of white power and white cultural imperialism.⁴ For us, this rootedness can serve this purpose and sets us up for a process of ‘grounding’ so that we might have a frame of reference to understand the usefulness of economic development and planning for the liberation of Black peoples. This rootedness and exchange are fundamental prerequisites to engage in the forms of what Campbell et al. call “Sankofa urbanism”, taken from the Ghanaian proverb that compels us to ‘reach back for that which we have forgotten’.⁵ This is a challenge to explore and utilize ancestral knowledge (of our peoples, environments, and more) in order to deploy those toward urban and sustainability goals of our contemporary world. In summation, this calls us to ask: “what does the past tell us as we look to our future on the planet?”⁶ At the end, you and I can return to this question and the framing laid out above to see if we are any closer to exploring dimensions of the question, “how do we get free?” There is economic development in that, but there is much more, and I hope we can take this journey to some places that are new, and some that are old.



¹ Morrison (1984)

² *ibid*

³ Boyce Davies (2021) in *The Groundings with My Brothers* pp. xi

⁴ Rodney (1969) “The Groundings with My Brothers” in *The Groundings with My Brothers*

⁵ Campbell et al. (2023) “Sankofa Urbanism: retrieval, resilience, and cultural heritage in cities through time”

⁶ *ibid* pp. 5

*“...How many of my brothers and my sisters
will they kill
before I teach myself
retaliation?
Shall we pick a number?
South Africa for instance:
do we agree that more than ten thousand
in less than a year but that less than
five thousand slaughtered in more than six
months will—
WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH ME?
I must become a menace to my enemies.*

*And if I
if I ever let you slide
who should be extirpated from my universe
who should be cauterized from earth
completely
(lawandorder jerkoffs of the first the
terrorist degree)
then let my body fail my soul
in its bedeviled lecheries*

*And if I
if I ever let love go
because the hatred and the whisperings
become a phantom dictate I o-
bey in lieu of impulse and realities
(the blossoming flamingos of my
wild mimosa trees)
then let love freeze me
out.
I must become*

I must become a menace to my enemies.”

June Jordan, “I Must Become a Menace to My Enemies” (excerpt)⁷

⁷ This poem was dedicated to the Poet Agostinho Neto, President of The People’s Republic of Angola: 1976

Introduction

“Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are already dying who could be saved, that generations more will live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution.” – George Jackson

The United States is on a per capita GDP basis, the wealthiest country in the world, yet underdevelopment is rampant, particularly in Black communities. This is evident in statistics, but it is clearer for anyone who has traveled across the country and seen the state of infrastructure not only in Black or racialized communities, but across the country. It is a long past time to recognize this economic underdevelopment as both a result of ongoing colonialism and a tool of imperialist domination through various forms and scales of warfare. As Rodney and Marable, and many others, so clearly show us, economic underdevelopment of Black/African peoples in the Americas exists not as a ‘market failure’ but as a system component of our society today.

In this study, I take a specific interest in the forms of economic organization that emerge from local conditions but hold the core contradictions and manifestations of global systems of oppressions as key to their solutions. With an understanding that “the economy” is both an amorphous global force and a summation of the everyday activities, productions, and exchanges of people in societies, I emphasize that economic organization cannot be divorced from the broader social, political, and cultural forces that influence it and that it influences. This is critical, particularly to understand grassroots models of economic organization as responses to various racial capitalisms that are rooted in the same global systems of oppression but particular to their manifestation on the national or local scale (Hudson 2018). Nonetheless, we will not replace some set of theories of economic development with another, or lay out a playbook for a new society, instead we focus on highlighting grassroots economic practices at a local level. In particular, we will see how actors on the ground are conceptualizing and constructing processes of grassroots economic practices and planning as a response to a current system of economic and sociopolitical hierarchy and exploitation under which the vast majority of Africans in the Americas suffer, and against which local economic development and planning are positioned as tools.

e can take these concepts as useful guides as we attempt to identify a vision that might guide what the construction of grassroots economies can be, and the various conditions that they are struggling against.

They are conditions of **economic warfare** – in the form of financialization, corporate price hikes, housing shortages, attacks on organized labor, unilateral sanctions and coercive measures globally, punitive debt

measures⁸, and coercion against minimum wage raises⁹ – produces mass poverty and economic destabilization for the global majority. They are conditions of **militarism and capitalist-racist violence** – the attacks on our bodies and murders of black people that inspired the Black Lives Matter movement and mobilizations are tied to very real broader phenomena that don't always result in Black death, but do oppress communities.¹⁰ They are conditions of **ecological devastation and climate crisis** – both environmental and climate justice movements converge on the understanding that state and corporate interests align and conspire to not only deprive Black, racialize, working class, and poor people from having self-determinative control over their lands and resources, but also in the intentional obstruction. And they are conditions of **psychological warfare** – efforts to 'tame' communities that might rebel against the material conditions they face.

All of these forms of warfare detailed above are possible because those in power can utilize the structure of our social and economic system to systemically dominate masses of others. More tactically, such warfare is possible because these forms are disguised behind neocolonial masks, and oftentimes the purveyors of war look like the people they are oppressing. This Black misleadership¹¹ at home and Blackface imperialism¹² abroad, is an increasing smokescreen intended to obscure the reality of who and what needs to be struggled against.

Where we are going

In this project, I hope to understand how Black/African peoples in the Americas see economic practices, relationships, and planning as contributing to real liberation, not just monetary gains in wealth within an unjust system. In doing so, I focus on a central and expansive question: *How and why are organizers, activists, and practitioners conceptualizing and constructing grassroots economies – as alternative forms of economic development and/or planning – in response to the local manifestations of global systems of oppression that they face?*

⁸ “The Caribbean’s ‘Silent Debt’ Crisis” FT (2023)

⁹ “Factory workers in Haiti go on strike, demand higher wages” AP (2022)

¹⁰ This includes policing of Black and poor communities to extract fines/taxes that support city revenue extraction (Mike Brown, Ferguson, MO); raids and increased scrutiny in areas marked for or undergoing gentrification (Breonna Taylor, Louisville), criminalization of survival economies and the people participating in them (George Floyd, Minneapolis, MN and Erica Garner, New York City), and the assumption of Black people participating in life freely as threats (Tamir Rice, Cleveland, Ohio). Finally, these state-sanctioned murders clear the way for policing through white supremacist vigilantism (Trayvon Martin, Florida; Ahamd Arbeury, Georgia; Kaylin Gillis, New York) and a lack of questioning of deaths in police custody (Sandra Bland, Texas; mass graves in Jackson, MS).

¹¹ Ford (2020) “MLK and the Black Misleadership Class”

¹² Pierre (2024) “Kenya's Blackface Imperialism and the History of Intervention and Occupation in Haiti,”

First, we will briefly **review the methodology utilized in this study**. This includes a specific focus on connecting to social-political struggle rooted in the masses of Black people and taking seriously the concepts of refusing researching and guerrilla intellectualism.

Second, to answer the question posed above, we will then move toward a brief exploration of **conceptions of ‘economic development’ and ‘planning’ in a political and social context Black/African peoples in the United States, with an internationalist lens**. Here we will highlight why capitalist models of economic development do not serve Black/African people and diaspora globally, utilizing work of scholars and organizers within the Black Radical Peace Tradition we see that we cannot exceptionalize the United States, but must view the condition of Black people within it through the country’s global and regional position.

Third, we **analyze how various actors are organizing, theorizing, and practicing grassroots economies on the ground in their communities**. This involves engaging with various geographies of struggle, with a deeper focus on La Habana, Cuba, and Central and Eastern Brooklyn, New York City, while detailing grassroots efforts from other geographies as well, primarily in North America. With this effort, we will name and explore themes that might birth generative understandings of how ‘economies’ can be meaningfully redefined and reclaimed in a material, cultural, and spiritual sense, in service of a people(s)-centered project of remaking the world in a liberatory vision.

Fourth, we begin to interrogate more deeply **the ‘why’ of our question and examine the inextricable link between politics and planning by looking at the strategies and tactics that these actors are using in their engagement (or avoidance) of state power**. Specifically, from the perspective of these same grassroots actors, we seek lessons on grassroots responses to the impositions of local “economic development” and “planning” that might be continuations of global imperialism, national colonialist relationships, and localized racial and class violence – at various scales and in different contexts.

Finally, we close with reflections and a short search for methods of **more deeply connecting local grassroots economic efforts across borders and geographies, in order to face the global systems they challenge**. We see how actors on the ground understand these local to global and global to local connections, and briefly offer some trends, tendencies, and possible connections that would benefit from future praxis-oriented exploration.

Geographic context for this project

Before engaging moving forward, we must look quickly at the context around the geographies that we will explore here. First, several of the projects discussed are based in the borough of Brooklyn, New York City. This is a borough that is well known for its rich contributions to national and international culture,

the diversity of its people, and the deep communal ties in many of its historic neighborhoods. Brooklyn also faces many of the challenges that beset most of the US's dense metropolitan cities, including disinvestment in working class and poor communities, deepening economic inequalities and hierarchy, and rapid gentrification over the last few decades. In addition, Brooklyn faces some of the most urgent environmental, health, and climate resiliency challenges in the city – and in some cases in the nation. All of this in the largest city in the country.

Here, we will look mostly at Central and Eastern Brooklyn, and will engage with grassroots projects in the neighborhoods of Brownsville and East New York. These are two of the neighborhoods with the highest proportion of Black residents, in a city that has lost hundreds of thousands of Black people over the last couple of decades.¹³ These are also areas that have not yet been consumed by the pressures of gentrification and traditional economic development, though those forces loom consistently over the horizon.

Moving to a different part of the hemisphere, we will engage deeply with organizers from the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente [Afrodescendant Neighborhood Network], which operates in the cities of La Habana and Matanzas, Cuba. As is well-known, Cuba underwent a social, political, and economic revolution in 1959 and has been in the process of advancing and defending that socialist revolution ever since. Since nearly the beginning of the revolution, Cuba has also faced intense pressure and attacks from the US in the form of outright (para)military attacks and a six-decade-plus unilateral blockade on the country.

Outside of these attacks, Cuba has continued its processes of development, most notably around education and healthcare. In addition, the largest island in the Caribbean, and the nation that dared to build an anti-colonial, socialist revolution in the middle of the Cold War, has now also become a model for sustainable development, despite challenges with maintaining personal income levels and collective infrastructure maintenance, largely due to the blockade.

Finally, we will also see examples from organizers or practitioners in Boston, Baltimore, Chicagoland, and Oakland. All of these people and their organizations face different circumstances, but the challenges are connected to the broader political economy of this country. Across all these geographies and varying political-social-economic contexts, circumstances are vastly different, levels of financial wealth are vastly different, but Black people and communities continue to suffer.

¹³ Closson & Hong (2023) “Why Black Families Are Leaving New York, and What It Means for the City”

A note about positionality

I am a Black/African man born and raised in the US, the son of parents from the US South (Mississippi and Alabama) and descended from enslaved peoples kidnapped from the continent of Africa and brought to these shores. In this work and beyond, I look at the US as my primary site of struggle, with the knowledge that US and Western imperialism has made connecting to the rest of the world a critical necessity. I also hold several positions in connection with this project. I am a graduate student at MIT, a student researcher working with community organizations, a student organizer involved in several struggles on campus (past and present), an organizer and activist locally and internationally with various organizations and varying degrees of formality. I'm also a fiancée, a brother, a son, an uncle, a nephew, a friend, a comrade, and more. All these identities and responsibilities influence this work. I must call attention to the fact that all of the people interviewed for this project have some prior or potential future connection to either my organizing or professional work.

Towards a methodology of grounding with our people and embracing struggle as knowledge

“All white people are enemies until proved otherwise, and this applies to black intellectuals, all of us are enemies to the people until we prove otherwise.” – Walter Rodney

Research methodology

Perspectives and reflections

The methodological foundation for this study takes inspiration from Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s “R- Words: Refusing Research”, which details the relationship between ‘research’ and overstudied communities, particularly Native, Black, and ghettoized communities.¹⁴ In particular, the questions of “How do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over)hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze?” and “How do we develop an ethics of research that differentiates between power—which deserves a denuding, indeed petrifying scrutiny—and people?”¹⁵ These questions, these challenges, motivate me to move beyond the strictures of academic research and seek a methodology that while legible to the academic space, can serve a slightly different purpose that supports practitioners, organizers, and activist looking to build economic projects and processes that support liberation and help practice alternative ways of being free.

The foundation of this study’s methodology, then, lies in its relationship to struggle. It occupies an interesting intersection for me as a researcher, student, organizer, and Black/African person in the Americas. This work is personal to me, and it is deeply intertwined with several aspects not only of my identity, but of the social-political struggles that I am a part of and in solidarity with. I am deeply invested in the goal of Black liberation and the various movements that have emerged within that framing, particularly those tendencies that understand that Black liberation means and requires the collective liberation of all peoples. These movements far proceed me and go far beyond the scope of this work, but that is what this study primarily seeks to advance. In doing so in an academic context, there are a myriad of contradictions and challenges, but in general this aims to embody a “rooted exchange of knowledge between the academy and the community” to generate knowledge that can “serve the liberation of our communities from the oppressive European histories and epistemologies” and promote new territories of understanding our world.¹⁶

¹⁴ Tuck & Yang (2014)

¹⁵ *ibid* pp. 223

¹⁶ Boyce-Davies (2021) “Re-grounding the Intellectual-Activist Model of Walter Rodney” in *The Grounding with My Brothers*

This insight from Carol Boyce-Davies, was written in honor of the guerrilla intellectual Walter Rodney, and it is his concept of “grounding” that makes this study more than just a traditional effort in qualitative research. For Rodney, “grounding” was an element of building Black Power that simply involved Black people sitting down together, reasoning, talking, and connecting on a human, social, and political level. For Rodney, it was critical that this communing be done with the masses of Black people in a humble fashion, “The black intellectual, the black academic, must attach himself to the activity of the black masses” and learn about Black power from them, not aim to teach them.¹⁷ This drew from Rastafarian and general Caribbean activities, and had the simple argument that “the meeting of black people” is important in itself and in order to attack the distortions of white imperialism and cultural imperialism that appear in academia and scholarship.

Partners

As we’ve already discussed, this is fundamentally an exploratory work that aims to highlight how various actors and communities are building possibilities for Black/African liberation as a fundamental pillar of the liberation of all peoples globally. As such, it does not attempt to define a new model of economic development, but rather shed light on existing practices and framings of grassroots economic activities and provide some analysis on how the actors behind and within these models understand their objectives and possibilities.

In pursuit of this goal, we will come across several different partner organizations that I engaged with through this qualitative research process. The first partner organization is La Red Barrial Afrodescendiente [Afrodescendant Neighborhood Network], or the RBA, an anti-racist community-based organization in La Habana, Cuba that has been operating since 2014. My connection with the RBA comes from a community organizing delegation to Cuba that I went on as a member of the Black Alliance for Peace in April 2023. In that trip, I and a few others learned from and exchanged with members of the RBA, and they supported us in launching a regional campaign from Havana. I have remained in community and communication with them since, primarily as a leader within the Black Alliance for Peace. I returned to La Habana for this specific project in January 2024. While in Havana for this study, I spoke with several members of the coordinating body of the RBA, as well as individual leaders of organizations who participate in the network. I chose the RBA as a partner because of the deeply grassroots nature of all of their work, and the emerging economic projects and initiatives that they have either incorporated or helped to construct. They are the largest and most successful Afrodescendant grassroots formation in Cuba and have reached national prominence while still maintaining a completely

¹⁷ Rodney (1969) pp. 66-67

grounded and neighborhood-focused character, making them an ideal partner for this work because of their activities at many scales.

My second partner in this work is a coalition called the East Brooklyn Call to Action. This grassroots coalition is supported by the Brooklyn Communities Collaborative (BCC), a nonprofit focused on building community health, wealth, and leadership. I have been connected to BCC since June of 2023, when I worked with them as part of a summer fellowship. This connection has continued as I have supported emerging efforts that they are either leading or connected to as part of my Research Assistantships as a master's student at MIT. While I did not interview BCC staff for this effort, I did engage with member organizations of the East Brooklyn Call to Action. This coalition is at the forefront of grassroots, community-driven social and economic justice work that also interfaces with large public institutions to drive change at a borough level. Similar to RBA, they have a deep grassroots focus, but are also working at many scales to achieve positive change for their local neighborhoods and the people within them.

Finally, I interviewed multiple leaders within grassroots organizations or coalitions whose work touches on many different forms of grassroots economic activity. My relationships with these organizers varied. Two I was meeting for the first time, one I had been in contact with but never spoken to face-to-face, and two are close comrades who I work with closely. All these organizers live within the United States and do work that spans local, regional, national, and international levels.

Methods

Through this process, I have aimed to take the spirit of this scholar-organizer and guerrilla intellectual and apply the concept of “groundings” and apply it to this research study that is connected to local economic development and planning. I tried as much as possible to meet with people in person and to not conduct these interviews solely as interviews, but as opportunities to learn from one another, build together, and contribute to Black liberation through this collective effort.

This is fundamentally a qualitative study and exploration that utilized various methods. The primary mode of data collection was semi-structured interviews. These included in-person interviews with RBA organizers and entrepreneurs, individual in-person interviews with two organizational leaders within the East Brooklyn Call to Action, and five virtual interviews with grassroots organizers across the US¹⁸. These interviews were crucial to understand both the ‘how’ and ‘why’ behind the grassroots economic practices of various organizations. Secondly, while in La Habana, I engaged in participant observation of the RBA’s programming, including participating in a neighborhood mutual aid effort geared around food

¹⁸ Includes organizers working in Baltimore, Boston, Chicagoland, New York City, and Oakland.

distribution by one member organization, as well as a site visit to a potential new member organization by members of the coordinating body. This provided a rich perspective on how the group builds its economic and social programs and how these programs are being received publicly and gave me firsthand exposure to this programming and organizing methodology. I also utilized historical and contemporary analysis of economic organizing models, which attempted to put the grassroots economic activities explored into context, which provided essential context to what I was hearing and seeing. Finally, I periodically drew from personal reflections from my research journal and field notes. Given the relational nature of all this work, I feel it is essential to highlight that as a method of analysis as well since my own positionality and role in this work is essential.

Embodying decolonization as more than metaphor

Self-actualization

As Tuck & Yang write, “decolonization is not a metaphor”.¹⁹ This is something that struck me at multiple points during my fieldwork in La Habana. Initially it came to me as I was explaining my research ahead of a meeting with several members of the RBA and I used the phrase ‘decolonizing economic development’. I later reflected on the academic nature of what I had said, and the limited applicability it might have in the context of Afrodescendant organizers in the revolutionary context of Cuba. This pushed me to think more deeply about how I frame this entire effort and the objectives of presenting my research within the academy. Then, after a personal exploration of my own spirituality in relation to some of the practices related to traditional African religions in Cuba, I had a strong physical and emotional reaction to facing my own challenges with ‘decolonizing’ myself. That experience knocked me out for an entire afternoon and evening, and almost derailed my “research” because of the frustration and questions that it raised within me. Specifically, I began to ask myself, ‘Should I even be doing this work and research in Cuba, or even in Brooklyn?’, ‘How can I reasonably talk about decolonization and liberation when I have so far to go in my own personal exploration?’, and ‘Is it ethical for me to be mixing this academic work with a personal spiritual journey and collective organizing efforts?’. Suffice to say that this study would not be what it was without that experience, and I attempt to bring that learning into this work as well.

A note on terminology

African, Black, Afrodescendant, peoples, communities – here we will see various forms of descriptions utilized to describe varying groups of people of African descent in the Americas. These descriptions are political and contested, and I certainly do not claim authority over them. In my own writing I tend to use the somewhat cumbersome ‘Black/African’ description, particularly when referring to people of African

¹⁹ Tuck (2012)

descent in the Americas. This a political decision that recognizes that there is a political weight to recognizing ourselves as Black and embracing expansive versions of Blackness that have oftentimes incorporate people who were not strictly of African descent, while also making the tie to Africa and Africans globally, from which we come and to who we are linked whether we like it or not.

This understanding of a global African peoples is emphasized in Carol Boyce Davies and Babacar M'Bow's writing on an 'African Diaspora Citizenship', which sees African peoples as those of us who have "historical origins in Africa irrespective of time period and geographical location."²⁰ Leaders such as Malcolm X and Kwame Ture also spoke about this often, and in using the term 'Africans', I draw significantly from my own organizing with the Black Alliance for Peace. When referring to specific organizations or individuals, I have attempted to consistently use the terminology that they themselves employ. Many of the folks who I interviewed in this study who are in the United States would describe themselves as Black, some describe themselves as African as well. In Cuba, the term Afrodescendant has much more currency, and people often shortened it to 'Afro'. This term, while occasionally used in the U.S., is much more common in Latin America and the Caribbean, where more porous historical racial boundaries have led to much lengthier histories of racial intermixing and a complex set of politics around skin color, social class, and cultural heritage. 'Afrodescendant' resonates strongly because it not only connects politically to 'Blackness', but also because it creates a direct throughline to the continent of Africa and the cultural and political lineage of African peoples.

For me, all these concepts have validity, I will often use the clunky terminology of 'Black/African' because I believe that highlighting the direct ties to the continent of Africa are important, and like the leader and scholars referenced, I see 'Afrodescendants' as African peoples. I also see 'Black' or Blackness as a political category that understands our shared position in society under empire requires Black peoples to be united in fighting for our liberation. While this may cause some confusion, it is in service of both processes of building collective self-determination and fostering solidarity across peoples.

²⁰ Boyce-Davis & M'Bow (2007) "Towards African Diaspora Citizenship" pp. 16



“But then again, perhaps as you observe the debacle in which I now exist, the utter ruin that I say is my life, perhaps you are remembering that you had always felt people like me cannot run things, people like me will never grasp the idea of Gross National Product, people like me will never be able to take command of the thing the most simpleminded among you can master, people like me cannot really think in abstractions, people like me cannot be objective, we make everything so personal. You will forget your part in the whole setup, that bureaucracy is one of your inventions, that Gross National Product is one of your inventions, and all the laws that you know mysteriously favour you. Do you know why people like me are shy about being capitalists. Well it’s because we, for as long as we have known you, were capital, live bales of cotton and sacks of sugar and you were the commanding, cruel capitalists, and the memory of this is so strong, the experience so recent, that we can’t quite bring ourselves to embrace this idea that you think so much of. As for what we were like before we met you, I know longer care. No periods of time over which my ancestors held sway, no documentation of complex civilisations, is any comfort to me. Even if I really came from people who were living like monkeys in trees, it was better to be that than what happened to me, what I became after I met you.”

- Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*

Conceptual framework & Literature Review

“Never allow your enemies to educate your children..” — *el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz (Malcolm X)*

The following literature review and conceptual framing set up our understanding of the theoretical and practical context within which we can explore grassroots economic practices. This is important because the practices that we look at are not themselves complete solutions for either their local communities or other communities across the Americas, but they do help to break the hegemony of what planners and policymakers typically call economic development. This involves interrogating the concept of economic development, while also exploring the conditions of racism, exploitation and oppression, and how various scholars have theorized those conditions nationally in the US and internationally. In this interrogation, we will see concepts that can help guide our interpretation of the grassroots practices we will see.

Concerning “development” and “planning”

I see planning as a middle ground between state power; market relationships; and people, space, and resources²¹. This is an understanding and a profession that emerges from the Global North and on the local level has been materialized primarily through municipal agencies, private sector developers and consultants, and nonprofit organizations. While these roles are fluid, planners as professionals typically implement policies and practices aimed at creating good cities. These practices have often focused on “how cities ought to work and what ought to be good for people and businesses in them.”²²

Economic development is entrenched in these practices and is a tool of both localized urban planning and the fields of global development and international aid. At its most simple and expansive, economy might be defined as the “processes that provide for human life,” which typically connects with social relations through some form of economic exchange, whether that exchange is commodity-based, command-driven, or communal.²³ In the modern world, the process of shaping and wielding “the economy” is inextricably tied up with industrialization, technological advancements, and organization into various forms of productive forces – or development. For me, these processes are critical to understanding economic development, but they are given too much weight. In this study, to understand the contradictions inherent in promoting local economic development, we draw heavily from Walter Rodney’s seminal work *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. In *HEUA* Rodney laid out the web of historical phenomena that lead to endemic underdevelopment on the continent, such as: slavery and colonialism, imperialism and

²¹ I love a good ‘what is planning?’ debate as much as the next person, but seriously we have a lot to cover here.

²² Jacobs (1961) pp. 97

²³ Center for Economic Democracy “Economics for Emancipation: Module 1”

neocolonial rule, European capture of indigenous lands, degradation of natural resources, and disruption of social and cultural systems, and defines economic development in this manner:

What then is economic development? A society develops economically as its members increase jointly their capacity for dealing with the environment. This capacity for dealing with the environment is dependent on the extent to which they understand the laws of nature (science), on the extent to which they put that understanding into practice by devising tools (technology), and on the manner in which work is organized. Taking a long-term view, it can be said that there has been constant economic development within human society since the origins of man, because man has multiplied enormously his capacity to win a living from nature.²⁴

To this productivity-focused definition, Rodney adds the context that economic development is intimately tied to social processes, leading to interactions between the “economic base” and the “superstructure” of society, which is to say the totality of the material environment, social relations, forms of government, patterns of behavior, and systems of belief.²⁵

In bolstering this view of underdevelopment, Rodney makes several historical claims: that the economic and social standing of African states vis-a-vis Europe was product of consequences of European colonialism; that the trade of enslaved persons was a European one, where Europe held blame; that pre-colonial cultures of Africa should be understood independently, not in relation to Europe, and development is relative in all senses; that arguments of the benefits of colonialism are false; that enslavement and colonialism had a net benefit for Europe, built and sustained Europe, and fueled capitalist development.²⁶ In making these claims, Rodney identifies not capitalist development as the goal for Africa, but rather Black self-determination through the building of political power, mobilizing of self-defense, (re)definition of ideology and culture, and the taking of control over their destinies.²⁷

Much like Rodney, Beckford understands (under)development’s material basis, as well as its ties to spiritual and emotional well-being.²⁸ A core aspect of the plantation system, he argues, was its promotion of cultural underdevelopment, through rigid social structures, undemocratic politics, weak social responsibilities and cohesion, forced conformity, and demoralizing impact on individual’s motivation to change or strive for self-actualization and community’s cooperative impulses.²⁹ Similarly, Marable took Rodney’s analysis and found that underdevelopment was also a function of US society and collective racial discrimination was foundational so-called US democracy. In the US, Marable notes that this

²⁴ Rodney (1972) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* pp. 3

²⁵ *ibid* pp. 3

²⁶ Hudson (2023) “History, Method, and Myth: Walter Rodney and the Geographies of Black Radicalism” pp. 112

²⁷ Rodney (1973) pp. 132

²⁸ Beckford (1971)

²⁹ Beckford (1971), Nicholls (1960)

underdevelopment was particularly pernicious as it created a sense of fear in Black ghettos, engendering crime, despair, lack of social trust, apathy and nihilism, urban decay and economic exploitation, and barriers to the development of class consciousness. These factors create a self-perpetuating downward spiral and demobilizing effect, like that seen in plantation economies. This is important because these plantation economies and sub-economies are self-perpetuating entities that are themselves major economic and social barriers to transformation, and which cause persistent underdevelopment for their societies by denying the majority a stake in the country's governance and means of production, creating legacies of dependency, and instilling a lack of motivation for socioeconomic mobility because of the previous two phenomenon.³⁰

Another contribution to our understanding of development is Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom, where Sen outlines 'freedom' as the central input and outcome of development, a process which emerges through the expansion of an individual's *capabilities*.³¹ The capability approach focuses on what people are able to do and who they are able to be, and takes precedence over any specific assets or resources that might appear in measurements such as GDP or tax returns. Despite a somewhat more abstract definition, Sen is clear that issues such as poverty and material deprivation, patriarchy and gender inequities, and a lack of democracy and accountability are major barriers to fulfillment of development as freedom.

For me, these conceptions of economic development show that while agricultural, industrial, and technological production are key to maintaining the necessities of a society, other aspects of human well-being and society must consistently factor into even basic understandings of development and economy. Further, for places and peoples that have been subjected to underdevelopment, economic development toward liberation requires an epistemological and material break from the systems and structures that cause underdevelopment in the first place.

Urban planning and development

For planning scholars and practitioners, definitions of economic development typically focus on the concrete realities and assets of a local environment. Malpezzi (2013) avoids a simple definition, but focuses development as a multidimensional combination of 'measurable' goals – jobs, income, wages, wealth, improvements in income distribution, educational and health outcomes – as well as more abstract notions – quality of life, structural changes, better environments.³² On a local level, Marshall argues that economic development can be seen as all-encompassing because cities are primarily economic entities, therefore economic development is everything that involves the management of cities sustainability,

³⁰ Beckford (1971), Best (1968)

³¹ Sen (1999) *Development as Freedom*

³² Malpezzi (2013) Local Economic Development and its Finance, pp. 3-5

productivity, and growth.³³ However, in practice, most economic development focus on a local level in the U.S. is concerned with job creation and income growth on one side, and housing and real estate concerns on the other, largely through incentivizing private developers or businesses.³⁴ A critical issue here is that local economic development is not disconnected from the dynamics of development and social change at a world system level. The tendency to separate social change from more ‘pragmatic’ urban issues, planning, and economic development maintains status quo hierarchies and stunts transformative efforts.³⁵ Economic development must consistently tie together the local and the global.

Even those theories that aim to connect planning to social justice, typically stop short of addressing the structures of discrimination and harm. Fainstein’s Just City approach emphasizes diversity, and has been summarily critiqued for the lack of understanding of power, histories of racial-economic exploitation, and structures of inequality beyond the symptoms that manifest in urban space.³⁶ This is true even in the case of ‘anti-subordination’ planning, which builds off of Krumholz’s equity planning and recognizes social inequalities impacts on life chances, focuses on institutional structures of bias, and attempts to build policies that directly reduce inequality.³⁷ However, reduction of inequalities is not enough as the system produces inequality by design and the city’s function as a growth machine expressed through elite interests is the status quo.³⁸ This need to question the assumptions of perpetual growth and economic concentration is something that de-growth theorists have noted, as they call attention to land-use policies and the need for re-evaluation at a local level.³⁹ However, these too tend to emphasize the importance of top-down state action, at a national or local level.

Other planning scholars have pushed back against the acceptance of state processes of planning. In countering state injustices of action and inaction, both Mifratat and Roy outline how insurgent planning has the potential to confront planning’s role in “advanc[ing] a certain paradigm of development and capital accumulation” and offer alternatives from the bottom-up through social movements using self-determinative tools.⁴⁰ But insurgency has limits and primarily responds to a certain context of state neglect and ineptitude and less so to the constant cooptation and state-sanctioned violence of a regime like the modern U.S. Beyond planning through ‘insurgency’, equity planning describes a role for planners to use the state apparatus that exists to redistribute resources and opportunities toward the most marginalized to heal and repair within the context of the U.S., but equity planning relies deeply on using the state’s

³³ Marshall (2012). *The Surprising Design of Market Economies*

³⁴ Zheng & Warner (2010); Greenbaum & Landers (2009)

³⁵ Harvey (1989) “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The transformation in urban governance in late capitalism” pp. 3

³⁶ Fainstein (2010), Steil & Delgado (2019)

³⁷ Steil & Delgado (2019); Steil (2022); Krumholz (1997)

³⁸ Molotch (1976) “The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place”

³⁹ Lehtinen (2018) “Degrowth in city planning”

⁴⁰ Mifratat (2009) pp. 23; Roy (2005)

tools and can replicate or even reinforce racial planning, through action or inaction, by espousing reparative planning in any place where the state is concerned.⁴¹ Even understandings of ‘planning from below’, ‘abolitionist planning’, and ‘ethical accountability in planning’, while they challenge imperialism, still put the primacy on the Planner, not on communities themselves.⁴² Thus are susceptible to holding back liberation by reproducing injustices and hierarchies inherent in this professionalized space.⁴³

Often marginalized in economic development in Western planning, is the primary of land, ‘natural resources’, and a peoples’ connection to them. The understanding of the inherent relationality between human beings, our non-human relatives, and the Earth systems we interact with, is a critical foundation of many indigenous cosmologies and planning efforts.⁴⁴ This question of land extends to such battles as the ‘right of return’ of Palestinians to homelands stolen since 1917⁴⁵, the struggle against imperialist ‘fortress conservation’ and for local control of biodiverse areas on the African continent⁴⁶, the mobilization of peasant groups and rural workers around the globe through La Via Campesina and other groups, and the burgeoning ‘the right to the city’ movement in urban areas in the Americas, focused on anti-displacement and livable cities. Importantly for our purposes, indigenous forms of planning and understanding of the world challenge also concepts of development rooted in unfettered extraction and expansion; private property relations, in capitalistic terms; and irreverence with regards to traditional ceremonial, religions, or ancestral places and practice.⁴⁷ This is in line with Escobar’s ‘autonomous design’ argument that rejects the market-orientation and universality in favor of a focus of a pluralistic philosophy, based in environment, experience, and politics which pulls from Indigenous and Afro Latin Americans.⁴⁸

Intersecting and transcending these worlds through the context of Black/African peoples in the US, is Clyde Woods’ theory of Blues Epistemology. Named for the Black US American music genre and rooted in the cultural and social experiences and geographies of ‘African-Americans’, primarily in the South of the US, Woods names Blues Epistemology as a materiality “operating in its own expression”.⁴⁹ This form explicitly embodies resilience and resistance and emerges as a counter-narrative to dominant forms of knowledge production, in order to focus on the embodied and cultural perspectives of marginalized Black people and communities. The most ephemeral of the forms we touch on here, Blue Epistemology is real effort at establishing an ethic and materiality of a Black peoples, in their spatial-cultural context, that is

⁴¹ Williams (2020) pp. 4-5

⁴² Abbott, Aslan, O’Brien & Serafin (2018) “Embrace Abolitionist Planning to Fight Trumpism”; Rankin (2010); Roy (2006)

⁴³ Dozier (2018) “Response to abolitionist planning”

⁴⁴ Jojola (2008); Pasternak & King. (2019); Chandler & Reid (2020)

⁴⁵ Kanafani (1972) “The 1936-1939 Revolt in Palestine”

⁴⁶ Sene-Harper, A. & Seye, M. (2019); Sène (2022); Montgomery, Borona, Kasozi, Mudumba & Ogada (2020)

⁴⁷ Krawec (2022) *Becoming Kin*; Estes (2019) “Water Is Life: Nick Estes on Indigenous Technologies”

⁴⁸ Escobar (2018) *Design for the Pluriverse*

⁴⁹ Woods (1998) *Development Arrested*

not explicitly premised within or diametrically opposed to Eurocentric models. A particularly important aspect that Woods offers here is the resonance of Blues Epistemology in the context of local forms of neoliberal exploitation and oppression, seen in New Orleans, Louisiana.⁵⁰

For me, it is Woods' Blues Epistemology that can help fill that gap in understanding of how to move beyond development-underdevelopment and toward Liberation for Black/African peoples. The simultaneous recognition of material deprivations and unique cultural-social experiences and places emerging from those conditions creates an underlying basis from which to build a new understanding of 'economy' that can serve our peoples.

A world apart from these scholars of development, is the Afrofuturist novelist Octavia Butler, who developed her theory of change and development through fiction, but in a way that is not less materialist. In Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, her protagonist writes, "All that you touch, you Change. All that you Change, Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change."⁵¹ While written in a post-apocalyptic novel, Butler's words should be heeded by those of us focused on planning and economic development – not only because many of Butler's predictions about the future seem to be eerily accurate, but also because this field has long been guilty of projecting a universalist and utopian vision of the future of cities as aiming towards some static perfect future.

Race, space, and empire

As mentioned already, regions, cities, and towns are not just inheritors and manifestations of broader national economic systems but serve as economic engines in their own right. There then exists a relationship between localities and the national and international systems that they exist within, and the challenges within our world system at this juncture in history are always manifested spatially. As scholar and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore points out, "a geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice; if justice is embodied, it is then therefore always spatial, which is to say, part of a process of making a place."⁵² The spatial imperative is critical as we look at some of the core challenges facing Black/African peoples in the United States, and to a large extent all of the Americas, today. Chief among these are poverty and dispossession; unemployment, underemployment, and lack of fulfilling work; massive inequalities in income and wealth, at a time of skyrocketing gaps between prices and wages, and which have deep racial and gender intersections; destruction of community and social infrastructures; poor and costly healthcare; displacement, lack of affordable housing, and homelessness; lack of accountable political representation at all levels; and finally, ever-expanding climate crisis and

⁵⁰ Woods (2017) *Development Drowned and Reborn*

⁵¹ Butler (1993) *Parable of the Sower*

⁵² Gilmore (2002) *Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography*, pp. 16

environmental degradation. Theories of ‘Black Geographies’ also help us to see that there are more ways of conceptualizing and making space, than those determined by Western metrics and concerns.⁵³

With these crises in mind, Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”⁵⁴ Political philosopher Olufemi Taiwo adds to this definition in seeing racism as the accumulation of disadvantages in the global system to certain groups, in a way that is reflected at every scale.⁵⁵ According to this understanding, for racial justice and reparations, the entire world needs remaking because in order to have safer neighborhoods, better schools, and healthy communities, we must move to a social system that overcomes the dominance of ‘global racial empire’, Taiwo’s term for the system that is defines these advantages-disadvantages and is backed by imperialist military and white supremacist violence.⁵⁶ Taiwo and climate scholar Max Ajl also directly connect racism and climate crisis with the historic and ongoing processes of white supremacy and capitalist development: super-exploitation of individual workers and colonized populations, eradication and destruction of societies, primitive accumulation, and a large-scale appropriation of natural resources.⁵⁷ They and other scholars see an urgency in connecting how people are existing in relation to nature, climate, and land, with how environmental racism and underdevelopment are in reality different faces of the same phenomenon.⁵⁸ For Taiwo, looking at the current climate crisis is fundamental to overcoming global racial empire, not only because capitalism has been the mechanism that has so massively accelerated extraction and emissions, but also because this crisis heightens existing discrimination, inequality, social divisions, and suffering at every scale of human society.

The political economy of U.S. capitalist racism

Scholars describe the U.S. as an outlier compared to other countries in key ways that are critical for economic development: it is a fragmented and ‘territorialized’ political system with frictions between places and people, jurisdictions and organizations; its economic organization is fragmented as well, with labor institutions and organizations being weak – particularly at a local level; and there exist “deep racial cleavages” that cause division in political society and derail support for public goods and mass organization.⁵⁹ The cleavages, however, are no coincidence. DuBois clarifies that capitalism and racism are fundamental to the historical formation of the U.S., and both represent barriers to true democracy and

⁵³ McKittrick & Woods (2007) “No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean” pp. 5-8

⁵⁴ Gilmore (2007) *Golden Gulag*, pp. 141

⁵⁵ Taiwo (2022) *Reconsidering Reparations*, pp. 10-11

⁵⁶ *ibid* 10-28

⁵⁷ Ajl (2021) pp. 163-4

⁵⁸ Pulido (1996), Gilmore (2002), NCEJN (2016)

⁵⁹ Hacker, Hertel-Fernandez, Pierson, & Thelen (2021) pp. 12-13

peace in the country.⁶⁰ Throughout most of U.S. history, capitalism and racism have manifested in a way so that Black dispossession in the U.S. South mirrored many causes of poverty in the Global South.⁶¹

In this Dubosian internationalist tradition, Charisse Burden-Stelly demonstrates the core international and domestic forces that constitute what she terms *U.S. Capitalist Racism*, and which is a racially hierarchical political economy and social order constituting labor superexploitation, expropriation by domination, and ongoing racial/colonial primitive accumulation.⁶² This connects to *Wall Street Imperialism*, a phenomenon based in the consolidation of monopoly financial capital through business and government partnerships; born of the U.S. North-South unequal relationship; and maintained through war, militarism, expropriation, and racial domination abroad.⁶³ For Burden-Stelly, these two phenomena combine to form the *Structural Location of Blackness* in the United States, which is an economic relationship of exploitation, a disempowered political status, and placement at the bottom of the social order of the country. The Structural Location of Blackness, which calls back to our earlier definitions of racism as accumulated disadvantage and premature death, is born of U.S. Capitalist Racism and maintained by Wall Street Imperialism, and therefore a fundamental feature of the U.S. political economy and critical to its survival as a system of massive accumulation and power. Beyond naming *racism* then, the Structural Location of Blackness helps us to locate Western imperialism as the primary source of , through an international division of labor that slates Black/African peoples for constant exploitation and racial domination, in order to maintain this economic relationship.⁶⁴

These understandings are critical for my understanding of what conditions grassroots economies are responding to, and how they are responding. The social-economic-political interconnections of empire and material exploitation that Black/African peoples face globally and specifically in the Americas cannot be boiled down to simply ‘racism’, what Burden-Stelly offers is a thorough understanding of how U.S. Capitalist Racism operates across scales in a way that is both local and deeply connected to the operations of the global capitalist economy and imperialist political-economic order.

The connection of racism and structural exploitation has led to an understanding by many that Black peoples and communities within the United States constitute an internal (neo)colony.⁶⁵ As Robert Allen wrote amidst urban revolts of the late 1960s, Black communities in the US face a similar form of imperialist rule as foreign colonies and countries, though he also noted this was quickly shifting from the

⁶⁰ DuBois (1935)

⁶¹ Dubois (1935), Beckford (1971), Wallerstein (1974)

⁶² Burden-Stelly (2022), Burden Stelly (2023)

⁶³ Burden-Stelly (2023), pp. 6-17

⁶⁴ Lenin (1916) “Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism”; Rodney (1973)

⁶⁵ This include: Harry Haywood (1948), Claudia Jones (1954), Malcolm X (1963), Kwame Ture & Charles Hamilton (1967), Robert Allen (1969), Manning Marable (1983), Jalil Muntaqim (2010), and many others.

condition of a colonial nation to one of a neocolonial nation, where Black faces and “leaders” would take the formal reins of power but still do the bidding of white elites, a fact that Allen confirmed had indeed occurred in a 2005 revisiting of this thesis.⁶⁶ Economist William Tabb through a study of Black political economy arrived at the same conclusion based on the conditions faced by Black people in urban ghettos: lack of labor freedom, suppressed wages, position as a buffer pool of labor in the economy, dependency on external aid (welfare) and political power (patronage) at the price of comprising collective needs.⁶⁷ This understanding helps us to make the intimate connections between neighborhoods in our cities in the US, and countries that face colonial exploitation. Therefore, connecting the local and the global is not a stretch, but an imperative.

Beyond ‘development’ toward grassroots economies

Economic development has tended to emphasize relatively-universalist solutions based in a belief in either the market or the state to best distribute and coordinate resources, led to a focus on scaled policies or projects that can have a large “impact” on many people, or created an obsession either growing GDP or with lifting people out of poverty – both defined by somewhat arbitrary global measures that do a poor job of reflecting the true conditions of people’s daily lives. In the way that the owners and operators of finance capital and political power understand and practice economic development, it cannot liberate Black/African peoples in the Americas or anywhere else on the globe. In fact, it is antithetical to our liberation, our survival, and our well-being as a collective. Nonetheless, we cannot only creatively destroy economic development as it is, we must also socially construct something else. Where can we turn then – as planners, practitioners, policymakers, organizers, activists, and community members – to attempt this social reconstruction? To the grassroots, to the people, to the Black Radical Peace Tradition.

⁶⁶ *ibid* pp. 14, Allen (2005)

⁶⁷ Tabb (1970) *The Political Economy of the Black Ghetto*, pp. 26-31



“Friends, brothers, and sisters in the struggle for human dignity and freedom. I am here to represent the struggle that has gone on for three-hundred or more years — a struggle to be recognized as citizens in a country in which we were born.

I have had about forty or fifty years of struggle, ever since a little boy on the streets of Norfolk called me a nigger. I struck him back.

And then I had to learn that hitting back with my fists one individual was not enough. It takes organization. It takes dedication. It takes the willingness to stand by and do what has to be done, when it has to be done. A nice gathering like today is not enough. You have to go back and reach out to your neighbors who don’t speak to you. And you have to reach out to your friends who think they are making it good.

And get them to understand that they—as well as you and I—cannot be free in America or anywhere else where there is capitalism and imperialism. Until we can get people to recognize that they themselves have to make the struggle and have to make the fight for freedom every day in the year, every year until they win it.”

Ella Baker, addressing a 1974 Puerto Rico solidarity rally.

Practicing of grassroots economies across the Americas

“But with black brothers you learn humility because they are teaching you. And you get confidence, too; you get a confidence that comes from an awareness that our people are beautiful. Beauty is in the very existence of black people” - Walter Rodney

Abolition geographies at the grassroots

The power of organized grassroots mobilization to both improve people’s lives and foster an embodied understanding of the possibilities of collective self-determination is further illuminated by Ms. Ella Baker’s philosophy of radical democracy encapsulated in her phrase “Give Light and People Will Find the Way”. This may be familiar to those of us who are students of community organizing efforts more broadly, and the words of Baker, a freedom fighter and a behind-the-scenes architect of the Black Freedom Struggle, resonate still, even now exactly 50 years later.

It is from this same tradition of collective self-determination and liberation from the ground up that visions of revolutionary abolition emerge as well. In expanding on a narrower understanding of ‘abolition’ as only focused on the direct networks of the prison industrial complex, Ruth Wilson Gilmore encourages a deeper engagement with the idea of abolition geographies through building forms of ‘grassroots planning’. Importantly, these abolition geographies are not ethereal, but material and spatial constructs that can create “openings” for ordinary people to “grasp some of the social wage” in their neighborhood, city, and/or other political-economic surrounding” – in other words, creating spaces and places of freedom that give the masses of people the capacity to take control and power of their collective destinies and resources.⁶⁸

Gilmore encourages us to look at a grassroots form of planning that is driven not by the technocratic imperative of “*what-is-the-solution?*” to various social crises, which limits imaginations and focuses on ‘wins’ that are all too often co-opted into reforms that don’t shift the status quo⁶⁹. Instead, Gilmore asks us to aim towards a view of how we construct grassroots-driven alternatives that foster “real engagement of people’s creative thinking mixed with locally or externally available understandings of political and economic possibilities and constraints may be a way of getting at the question “*If not this, then what?*”.⁷⁰ This more open-ended question opens up the possibilities for building collective self-determination on a

⁶⁸ Gilmore (2022) pp. 339-342

⁶⁹ *ibid* pp. 338

⁷⁰ *ibid* pp. 342

local level and creating consciousness among ordinary people about their capacity to affect transformative change through building alternatives.

Within this context, we understand – as do the grassroots organizers, practitioners, and activists engaged in struggle everyday – that economic development and planning as practiced in the capitalist-imperialist West cannot support the liberation of Black/African peoples and communities. This is clear. In sweeping traditional economic development into history's dustbin, we heed Gilmore's warning and are careful not to replace this hegemonic idea with the hegemonic question of '*what-is-the-solution?*'. Instead, in the face of various forms of global-local systems of oppression and exploitation, we ask these grassroots actors '*If not this, then what?*', and seek their practices, reflections, and desires.

In this pursuit there are innumerable possibilities and iterations that can answer '*If not this, then what?*'. Here we will explore four emerging principles that speak to meeting the needs and desires of grassroots efforts: **Culture of Liberation** through mass-based popular struggle and self-actualization; **Social (Re)Construction** through collective self-determination and Black autonomy; **Ethos of Community Care** through internal healing and external solidarity; and **Life Systems Justice** through community asset-building and relationship transformation. We will explore each of these in the context of practices witnessed or discussed in La Habana, Brooklyn, and select examples beyond. These are principles that are either explicitly referenced by the organizers and practitioners I interviewed or that I have synthesized based on what they described to me.

In looking at these guiding principles we remember Woods' Blues Epistemology and Butler's 'God is Change' as framings that encourage us to see Black/African grassroots economic forms as territorialized expressions of material and spiritual that are ever shifting, expanding, and contracting based on the desires, needs, and relationships of the people who shape and are shaped by them. I argue that these principles are enacted in line with this material-spiritual form of 'development'. These principles are also responding to the material realities that Rodney's and Beckford's perspectives on *development-underdevelopment* in the *imperialist-plantation society* provide us with, as well as Burden-Stelly's analysis of the *Structural Location of Blackness* inside and outside US borders – all which frame both the how and why of these grassroots responses to systemic challenges in their local and global contexts. This perspective is essentially to understand why the principles that follow are critical to grassroots economic construction – because they respond not only to individual or community-level circumstances, but also to complex social-economic-political systems at a global level. We now take a deeper look at each of these principles across geographies, as well as social-political borders and context.

Emerging principles of Black liberation x Grassroots economies

Culture of Liberation

In the Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba (Yoruba Cultural Association of Cuba) in La Habana, I sat around a table with leaders of the coordination of the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente, or RBA, as well as various *emprendedores* (entrepreneurs, roughly) whose projects or organizations were members of the network. It was my second time in the Association building that serves as a regular meeting place for the RBA and is adorned with religious and cultural symbols and representations. As the coordinators and *emprendedores* went around the table speaking, several phrases were repeated began to call my attention because of their frequent usage by many of the eight or so folks participating: *valores humanos* (human values), *dignidad afro* (Afro[descendant] dignity), *solidaridad y apoyo mutuo* (solidarity and mutual support), *reivindicación y rescate de tradiciones* (restitution and rescue of traditions), *fraternidad religiosa* (religious fraternity). All of these various observations and explanations come back to a core concept: culture. The organizers and practitioners with whom I spoke highlighted the production of a culture of liberation that involved popular struggle to advance collective humanity and solidarity across their neighborhoods and networks, as well as processes of self-actualization that are tied to dignity, material freedom, and expression.

Here, I turn to Woods' Blues Epistemology to understand a notion of culture that is both grounded and boundless, material and ephemeral. According to Woods, culture occupies a plane of existence that crosses the bounds of economic, social, political, spiritual, and even celestial. This framework is essential because it shows us that cultural development at a grassroots level is in fact an essential economic response to an imperialist and colonial system that devalues and commodifies Black/African peoples. Rodney describes precolonial African society as having a primary focus on cultural development, as well as the priorities of African social behavior: hospitality, role and treatment of the elderly, law and public order, social tolerance, non-imperialistic traditional religions, art and ceremony.⁷¹ I contend that there is something explicitly African about the primacy of cultural developments in the economic sphere, particularly those. As Maritza L. mentioned during this assembly of RBA members and me, "*uno solo entiende ser negro por ser negro*" (one only understands being Black by being Black). Various articulations of this sentiment were voiced by Maritza in many settings throughout my time in La Habana.

Here, I see Maritza describe a way of being that relates to the political nature of existing as a person or a people who are deemed Black in their society – informed by the Structural Location of Blackness; the social reality of growing up identifying as Black, African, and Afrodescendant in a white supremacist

⁷¹ Rodney (1969) "African History in the Service of Black Revolution"

world system – global racial empire – nuanced by local manifestations of this as well; the cultural and spiritual practices, traditions, and histories inherited by all African peoples and communities globally, and informed by the social-political context; the dignity of effortful contribution to the collective and accountability to an ethic of self-help that encompasses care and responsibility to community and family (given or chosen); and the economic forms of marginalization and discrimination that African peoples and communities endure, as well as the innovation and resilience that we bring to life. All of this is simultaneous individual and collective, conceptual and embodied. That is all quite cumbersome, so for simplicity, I will refer to this form of being that the RBA implicitly operates within as *la manera afro* (literally, “the Afro[descendant] way”).

Art, Health, Community

During my 2023 trip where I first met the organizers of the RBA, we had an ‘*encuentro*’ or meeting with a member organization called Afrodiverso, which organizes from the perspective of LGBTQIA+ community in the neighborhoods and spaces where they operate in order to support art, health, and community-building. Unlike many similar organizations, they are particularly focused on building with Black trans people and engaging in cultural expression through *transformismo* or drag. The drag show and subsequent *encuentro* over a fully home-cooked meal that Afrodiverso provided to me and my comrades was legitimately paradigm-shifting for me. It spoke to the power of art and creative expression, as well as community-based mutual aid and support, in shifting neighborhood cultures and individual mindsets, while asserting the human dignity of LGBTQIA+ AfroCubans.

That sentiment that I came into this project with was reinforced by the co-leaders' comments and reflections during the meeting at the Asociacion Yoruba and a presentation I received from them a few days prior. They highlighted the intersection of building a social and solidarity economy based in community support with consciousness-raising that contributes to cultural change and gradual acceptance. Tangibly this is perhaps best exemplified by their program La Caldoza Afrodiversa, a weekly mutual aid food distribution and delivery that they operate in their 10 de Octubre neighborhood, and which I had the good fortune to participate in. Though this is far from their only program, it shows how solidarity and consciousness-raising is not done theoretically or through pilot programs, but through human relationship building, sweat equity, and dedication to community. In discussing the theory behind their mutual aid and consciousness-raising work, Argelia, one of the co-directors of Afrodiverso stated, “I am an anti-academic, everything has to do with the community and comes from the community.”⁷²

⁷² Interview w/ Argelia

For Afrodiverso, this grassroots culture of economic solidarity is also about creating accountability with community members and the RBA, who share funds and resources. They meticulously track the meals they prepare for the mutual aid and the demographics of who they deliver to. Since starting this program in October 2023, the meal distributions had expanded rapidly⁷³ and they began to see small donations of food or money from neighbors who had been receiving meals or seeing them being delivered – a sign that this may be a catalyst for the emergence of deeper solidarity culture and participation among many neighbors. This organizing discipline and human-level economic and social operation has also had follow-on effects in terms of consciousness raising, as they note that the “professionalism of services has helped us change culture and gain acceptance in some of the most patriarchal zones of the city.”⁷⁴ All of this success feeds back into the art and community programming, which has been at the forefront of expanding visibility and support for Black LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups. We will revisit Afrodiverso in the discussion of an ethos of community care. For now, we note how culture is a critical component in and result of the grassroots effort to fill a dire economic and nutritional need for their neighbors who are struggling the most.

In possibly a more traditional example of ‘arts & culture’, Naturarte is an independent urban arts festival, done in *la manera afro*, that began running annually from 2018-2020 and recently re-started in 2024 for its fourth edition after pandemic lockdowns. Sahily, the founder of the festival created this based on previous asks for community art workshops and connections she has from the initial wave of *hip hop cubano* in the 90s and early 2000s. The core goals of the festival are to provide a space for cultural and artistic expression that is accessible to the regular people of the neighborhood, to combine arts with non-hierarchical forums based on communal exchange and shared learnings, and to showcase and empower hip hop and Black art in a country where official channels have more or less left the genre and culture behind. This includes rap performances, open mics, breakdancing, tattooing, photography exhibits, workshops on DJing and on connecting with the natural world, local vendor booths, and more.

For Sahily, one of the most important aspects of the festival is that it creates an environment where “people can find new ways of living that aren’t based on living from the street” or doing demeaning or dehumanizing things to survive. She extends this to talk about the necessity of building people up through shared culture that they are contributing to, “we want to help people self-actualize, to build people up so that they see that they can do things...this is more than art, it is a space for many things...already this has opened doors for many people.”⁷⁵ This vision is done within the framework of a desire to rescue a culture that is being forgotten in the mainstream – a culture that is connected to largely Afrodescendant and poor

⁷³ They delivered 400 meals on foot to their neighbors over 3 months of weekly distributions.

⁷⁴ Interview w/ Olantay

⁷⁵ Interview w/ Sahily

people trying to survive. It is the vision of a high-quality cultural festival for and of the people, that is itself an intervention in advancing cultural norms, supporting social community, and providing a space for economic exchange. The festival programming also centers Black women and makes spaces where all participants can experience moments of self-actualization, self-determination, and creative autonomy.

This cultural production and showcase have allowed for the continued survival of an underground culture that is the bedrock for many of these participants, and while these are annual events that happen over the course of a few days, Sahily and her partner are already looking for ways to expand the work throughout the year and build programming and community based in these goals as well. Though with a different political and social context, Naturarte has some of the same conceptual roots as the Caribbean Carnival that Claudia Jones co-founded in London in 1959, and which has now become Notting Hill Carnival.⁷⁶ It is perhaps poetic that Jones, a Trinidadian Black Communist and Feminist, has as one of her most notable legacies the founding of a festival that is deeply linked to Black British identity. Linking culture and politics, this Carnival responded to political and racial oppression of Black British communities in the UK and aimed to create community to resist racist attacks, but also celebrate the creativity and artistry of West Indian people living in the UK – becoming a representation, both physical and spiritual, of Black resistance in the UK.⁷⁷ While Naturarte is not positioned in resistance to broader Cuban society, it certainly seeks to advance culture and take space for the people.

Spirituality, religion, and connection to Africa

Three other projects highlight the various ways that spirituality and religion play into grassroots economic construction within the RBA. The first is *Taller Yoruba* (Yoruba Workshop), a more-recently founded project that is teaching youth to work with material arts toward spiritual usages. Its founder is a relatively young man who has both recently become a *santero* in the Cuban Yoruba religious tradition and is a relatively new member of the RBA. This workshop was “started in an effort to raise consciousness” around traditional religious and cultural practices, but it has shifted to incorporate efforts and artistic mastery, creation of streams of income, and opportunities for the growth both personally and professionally of its participants. Culture for them is a way to encourage the “social reinsertion of youth” who might be susceptible to more delinquent behaviors, and to support them in “changing their cycles by giving them technical learning”.⁷⁸

Another materially based religious and economic project is *Sorpresas de Ocha* (Surprise of Ocha), which makes sweets for religious offerings and ceremonies. Melvys, the founder and operator of the projects,

⁷⁶ Roach-McFarlane (2021) “The Forgotten Legacy of Claudia Jones: a Black Communist Radical Feminist”

⁷⁷ *ibid*

⁷⁸ Agustin, during meeting with RBA coordinators and emprendedores

makes these sweets at home and sells them to members within and outside of their direct religious community, so that her customers can fully participate in providing offerings for Orishas (Yoruba deities) and treats for children. These religious sweets are often quite costly to purchase in Cuba, so the project not only allows for more community members to partake in their individual and collective practices, but also supports a growing solidarity-oriented economy. In addition, there is an educational aspect, particularly in teaching youth not only what the sweets are utilized for in religious and cultural practices, but how to make them. Unfortunately, the blockade against Cuba has forced Melvys to shift what she makes and transition to other foodstuffs because of the exorbitant costs of sugar and other ingredients. According to her, the tightening of the blockade has had “a large impact on the system of religious practices” for their local community, particularly because many items come from the US and are hard to source elsewhere.

Finally, perhaps the most expansive and free form of these projects is called *Mas que Ile, Mas que Omo, Mas que Oko* (“More than home, more than children, more than spouse” in a mix of Spanish and Yoruba languages). This is a loose group of primarily, but not exclusively, women who come together to resolve everyday problems and support one another in their various religious and spiritual practices. This includes a mix of economic support, religious discussions, connecting around material cultural practices (e.g., weaving), and more. According to the founder, the group started based on “discussions with people who came together with various problems, but also to talk about how to allow adaptability in religious ceremonies without violating the principles of [the] Yoruba [religion]...[the group] has a liturgical basis but it is open and does not discriminate. The aim is to help people practice what they want and need”.⁷⁹ This framing and purpose perfectly encapsulates the balance between rescuing traditions and advancing a liberatory culture of self-actualization through mutual support and camaraderie, and the vision for the future of this group which is “continued empowerment of Black women”; “economic, social, and religious capacity-building”; and “working with youth and leaving them a legacy”.⁸⁰

Each of these socio-religious projects takes different approaches but form an essential part of the cultural development that is indicative of the RBA’s work. These forms of cultural restitution, maintenance and advancement also resonate with Rodney’s assertion that products of “the spirit” have always been part of human production as well, and that these are valuable and were valued deeply in African societies, which tended to be highly advanced in cultural development and its material expressions.⁸¹ In particular, the RBA and various members within it are thinking of ways to connect these cultural practices to the development of an economic culture that is based in “capacity-building of people and away from a culture

⁷⁹ Interview w/ Idelsi

⁸⁰ *ibid*

⁸¹ Rodney (1969) “African History and Culture” in *The Groundings With My Brothers*

of personal gain” that is starting to dominate forms of ‘entrepreneurship’ on the island.⁸² It is no surprise that this blend of spirituality, human relationship, and material production, connect deeply to *la manera afro* in Cuba, a nation that has been undertaking a revolutionary socialist project and is continuing to struggle to fully embody its anti-racist, anti-colonial values.

A similar understanding of the important dialectical relationship between material development and culture was critical as well for Amílcar Cabral and the PAIGC in the process of the decolonization and fight for liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde from Portuguese colonization. Cabral pits national liberation in opposition to the underdevelopment of imperialist domination, through the means of cultural reinvigoration and unification.⁸³ Cabral saw culture building as a process that required defeating imperialist colonial domination, so that the people could “return to the upward paths of their own culture, which is nourished by the living reality of its environment, and which negates both harmful influences and any kind of subjection of foreign cultures,” and therefore “national liberation is necessarily an act of culture.” Through an anti-colonial form of praxis that almost melds Rodney’s and Sen’s formulations of “development”, Cabral highlights that the core objective of national liberation is economic and social progress of the nation and all its people and classes, informed by the grassroots realities and achieved through construction of a liberatory culture.

Cultural economy and ways of being in the U.S.

“My vision for the cultural economy is not different from the economy at large – I want everyone to be ok”. These are the words of Cierra, of the Boston Ujima Project, which is a nonprofit organization building solidarity economy within Black neighborhoods and communities in Boston, Massachusetts, and notably the first democratically governed investment fund in the U.S. Similar to members of the RBA, Cierra is not concerned with what wider mainstream white society considers as culture: “entering the mainstream is not as important as being a boulder in the underground.”⁸⁴ This is particularly relevant in Boston, where the dominant culture of the city has not typically made space for large-scale diffusion of Black cultures, and certainly not for expansive, mass-based forms of Black expression.

Within this context, Cierra talks about how two of Ujima’s print publications are core to constructing alternatives to this denial of the mainstream:

We are working from a lineage thinking about ‘how can we elevate what we see our people doing?’...*Ujima Press* and *Fortunately* are picking up those lineages – those strong histories of Black people writing shit down and spreading their message just so the ideas

⁸² Interview w/ Martiza

⁸³ Cabral (1970), “National Liberation and Culture”

⁸⁴ Interview w/ Cierra

can be diffuse. It's for us and not for *them*...*Fortunately* is a print and online publication, a lifestyle magazine dedicated to arts culture and solidarity economies...I was interested in lifestyle magazines and in stealing, or borrowing, the aesthetics, and using that as medicine.

Here Cierra describes an intersection of reaching back to lineages of past cultural work and encouraging a re-remembering of Black forms of cultural development that were not dependent on commodification but rather on the simple sharing of cultural and social expressions among a people. This is reminiscent of the use of the press and political cartoons in the 1960s and 70s by the Nation of Islam in the publication *Muhammad Speaks*, which helped to proliferate a shared Black political and social culture counter to the mainstream commercial narratives.⁸⁵ As scholar Walter Rodney described, there is value in simply pointing out that our people are beautiful – and I might add, alive.⁸⁶ Cierra connects this to what she calls ‘narrative excavation’, which is aimed at unlocking a “compelling invitation to think about your life differently, to reframing your life, and understanding that this work [that Black people are doing] is worthy of audience, direction and intention”. For her, this cultural development, is not only valuable then for spreading culture, but also for shifting how people see themselves in relation to others and contributes to a self-actualizing process of helping individuals engage with their “embodied forms of knowing” and insert themselves into participatory processes that Ujima has around collective governance and community investing. Culture, then, becomes material here as well.

In a different context, culture is also a building block of collective struggle and self-actualization in Brownsville, Brooklyn. LaShawn, recounts how culture has been a key asset for their work to build a homegrown and inclusive economy in the neighborhood, reintroduce the institution to the community, and build community trust to reduce violence:

My husband's joke is that he thinks there's one man responsible for all of us here, like Mr. Brownsville is everybody's father, like everybody's father, because we know. I can look at my preschool picture and pretty much know everybody first name and last name, and if I see them today: 'hey so-and-so'. That's the other part of Brownsville that doesn't get any shine, and people don't know about it. You have to be here to know about it. So that's part of what we are looking to create this process for people to meet us, the real Brownsville.

This recognition of culture as a community asset not only disrupts narratives that pit Brownsville as simply an underdeveloped part of New York City, but also play a strategic role in grassroots economic projects that can approach program and campaign design differently knowing that community culture can fill in gaps that seldom appear in traditional financial and business models. This culture certainly appears

⁸⁵ Williams (2023) “Let's Build Our Own House: Political Art and the Making of Black and Muslim Worlds”

⁸⁶ Rodney (1969) “The Groundings With My Brothers” in *The Groundings With My Brother*, pp. 72

in the many murals and t-shirts that state the famous local slogan, “Brownsville, never ran, never will”, but it is also materialized in the grassroots economy in a way that can promote dynamic applications through various institutions like the CBEDC. *la manera afro* may apply to and reach Brownsville as well.

Social (Re)Construction

Deeply connected to cultural development and perhaps most adjacent to what Tabb describes as Black economic development is the idea of social (re)construction from a grassroots Black perspective. As described by various interviews, social construction toward liberation is highly dependent upon the social-political contexts that Black/African peoples find themselves in; however, there are similar reverberations across geographies. This understanding of social (re)construction is one that is based in a fostering of collective self-determination and Black autonomy and bolstered by continuous consciousness raising efforts. The “(re)” in (re)construction is critical because many of these strategies, relationships, institutions have existed but were destroyed by capitalist-imperialist aggression or subterfuge. As we will see, this is a fundamental aspect of grass economies that aim to support liberation by not only divorcing from exploitative systems of development-underdevelopment but also building the alternative systems necessary for liberation.

People-Centered Institutions

Upon mentioning the connection between Black liberation and alternative forms of economic development, one of the first things LaShawn of CBEDC told me about was her discovery of the histories of the Reconstruction Era in the US and how it inspired her to create talk show over a decade ago, called Black Reconstruction, which was coincidentally, not intentionally named after DuBois’s seminal work:

I’m now a little older, finishing my education and I’m in this class, and I’m like ‘we have the blueprint’. The amount of progress that happened during the Reconstruction period was phenomenal, But of course everything that came behind it, it was destroyed, but I’m like ‘we have the blueprint’. It’s just unfortunately the policies, but also the [Black] people now with all the [white] people running around in their head have also become gatekeepers, and all of the things that don’t allow us to just keep producing, keep producing so it can’t be torn down. So that’s why I named it Black Reconstruction. So I said, now fast forward and we have a lot of scholars who put amazing information in books – not only are we not reading them, but we’re not applying it either, so that was the purpose of the show...to say things like how do we take your thesis and now apply it.⁸⁷

LaShawn’s intentions with the talk show and educational initiative exemplify the tenets of Sankofa planning and rootedness in the work of ancestors, while looking toward building what is needed in the here and now. Her acknowledgement of the need to not only (re)produce institutions that can serve the

⁸⁷ Interview w/ LaShawn

liberation of Black peoples, but also create the capacity to defend these institutions from the oppressive, exploitative, and violent nature of US capitalist racist society. In DuBois analysis, the U.S. had a chance to shift this structure after the emancipation of enslaved Africans, during Reconstruction (1869-76) but Southern elites, the ‘Bourbon plantocracy’, violently regained control and reasserted their social, political, and economic dominance and institute a regime of racial terror called Jim Crow.⁸⁸ It is this same Bourbon plantocracy that influences Woods’ conceptualization of Blues Epistemology – in this way, practices of social (re)construction are deeply informed by the forces that have caused underdevelopment, disinvestment, and destruction generally.

Such a philosophy applies to some of the work the CBEDC has been leading in Brownsville to revitalize economic activity in the neighborhood, which she says doesn’t really have its own local economy that isn’t solely about extracting value from its residents without returning much back to them. Specifically, a business incubator called the Brownsville Hub. One of the main projects of this hub is to bring a ‘restaurant row’ into the neighborhood, which currently has no sit-down restaurants outside of fast-food chains. Though this might seem like traditional economic development processes, the call for restaurants as community spaces has come from the community, and the stipulations around these new businesses are required to partner with local entrepreneurs from the neighborhood to create joint ventures with them or offer franchise opportunities to them. This is critical because as LaShawn says, “we must have local ownership because 99% of the businesses that are owned and operated here are owned by other people. We don’t have an economy in Brownsville, so this will be the start to building a real economy in Brownsville.”⁸⁹ In this, and in an acknowledgement that they would like to support cooperative business development, LaShawn acknowledges the need to engage in a process that is meeting the people and community of Brownsville where they are at, with regards to institutional and economic revitalization.

Other businesses working with the incubator as well, including a new movie theater and cafe focused on supporting the Black community in Brownsville and surrounding areas, which will be the first movie theater in the neighborhood in fifty years and serves as an anchor institution for economic revitalization efforts. Finally, one of the critical socially reconstructive aspects of the Brownsville Hub is in its workshop for entrepreneurs to prepare them for partnerships and developing their own businesses, which is focused not only on training and networking, but also in building up people in the neighborhood to contribute to a wider process of social (re)construction through revitalization⁹⁰:

It starts with healing. With the incubator, we have developed what I call a ‘pre-incubator’ for what some people might call a runway because everyone is starting at a different place,

⁸⁸ DuBois (1935)

⁸⁹ Interview with LaShawn

⁹⁰ Interview w/ LaShawn

but that doesn't mean that everyone shouldn't participate. I always look to remove any barriers, if you want to do a thing. So we have a brother that works with us, brother Shabazz, he has a human development workshop called human development for economic empowerment to eradicate plantation psychosis. So everyone must go through that course, cause here and here [points to head and heart] people have been hurt, and so we're talking about partnerships? The other thing I'm clear about is people need to choose each other. What I'm also looking to do is curate the space to look for them to do just that because we don't want to just celebrate the opening of the partnerships but that they are sustained...[and] we haven't done the cooperative piece yet. I really cannot wait to do that but I haven't come across a business big enough yet but it's definitely part of the model.

This pre-incubator and its focus on relationship- and capacity-building, as well voluntary partnership selection, show how critical the human aspects of social (re)construction are, particularly to any grassroots effort. The focus on healing and the connection between individual entrepreneur, possible partners, and the community illuminate why traditional economic development training programs often fail to do much in communities that have endured decades of underdevelopment and trauma. Specifically, the human development course that all entrepreneurs must participate in calls back to Beckford's understanding of (under)development that has a clear material basis yet is also deeply tied to spiritual and emotional well-being. For Beckford, a core aspect of the plantation system was its promotion of cultural underdevelopment, through rigid social structures, undemocratic politics, weak social responsibilities and cohesion, forced conformity, and demoralizing impact on individual's motivation to change or strive for self-actualization and community's cooperative impulses.⁹¹ Here, we see that the 'plantation mentality' can be understood as both a symptom and a contributor to economic, social, and human underdevelopment. The solution then, is a Black Power intervention: "There is no chicken-and-egg problem at all. We begin by changing the view that the people of plantation society have of themselves."⁹² This is an intuition and analysis from 1971 that sounds much like *human development for economic empowerment to eradicate plantation psychosis* in 2024. While the Brownsville Hub may still be building within the broader capitalist system, it is part of a process of economic revitalization constructing people-centered institutions and interventions aimed at fostering self-determination.

Just down the road from Brownsville, East New York Restoration (ENY Restoration) is another nonprofit organization whose work focuses on creating initiatives and workforce programming centered on people and building a level of self-determinative capacity in the neighborhood, not simply improving metrics of jobs created and or businesses built. The organization's Executive Director Colette Pean notes that East New York is unique among neighborhoods in Brooklyn (and in the City generally) in that it is actually becoming proportionally more Black and a maintenance of housing affordability has allowed many

⁹¹ Beckford (1971), Nicholls (1960)

⁹² Beckford (1971) pp. 234

longtime residents to remain in the neighborhood. For Pean, this is one of the foundational elements of collective self-determination – that people can remain in their homes and neighborhoods.

The other element is collective capacity-building and civic engagement that directly entertain with opportunities to improve people’s material well-being. “We have to tie [social issues] together, right? That’s why we’re doing this as job development, career development, as well as environmental justice. As we’re educating people around it, it has to lead to some real job opportunities and some career opportunities, and it’s very difficult.”⁹³ Winning real community benefits are a critical part of not only bettering individual and neighborhood circumstances, but also aiding neighborhood residents’ sense of empowerment in impacting the conditions of their community⁹⁴:

The goal behind all these different things that we must do to get to it is to mobilize my community to be involved in fighting racism, in which environmental racism is one aspect, be more involved in being part of the change because there is difference of this and that, be it state money, federal money, this or that...Part of what I see as my job and our organization's is engaging people to at least know what’s going on and then hopefully impact on it. And I think it comes from the community must be self-determining – self-aware and self-determining.

Colette and ENY Restoration’s goals here align with Gilmore’s understanding that self-determination can be seen as a process that “depends on people’s short and long-term engagement toward achieving an outcome.” The scholar also argues that within grassroots self-determinative processes, the “ability to organize any project is determined by a people’s ability to identify with their surrounding and themselves.”⁹⁵ For Colette, the first steps toward social (re)construction through self-determination is building up people’s capacity to impact their local environment and to rely on themselves and each other. Without this foundation, it would be foolish for ENY Restoration to try and operate autonomously from the city government institutions that fund them or provide capacity to their work. This is particularly important because much of the work involves long-term job development and environmental justice processes that necessitate engagement with the state.

Both examples provide a perspective of the opportunities (and challenges) inherent in undertaking processes of social (re)construction within US capitalist racist Society, particularly in the financial capital of New York City. These models are radical in that they are trying to give Black people more power to shape their lives and the institutions around them, but they are vulnerable and must also collaborate with the state that is structurally opposed to truly sharing that power and can destroy efforts that it sees as challenging its authority. This contradiction is a fundamental reason why grassroots economies must be

⁹³ Interview w/ Colette

⁹⁴ *ibid*

⁹⁵ Gilmore (2022) pp. 345

dynamic in their operations and goals with regards to social (re)construction – to try to change social relationships while protecting Black people, neighborhoods, and livelihoods. The reality is that full social (re)construction is incomplete without broader political and social revolution. Even then, building a just society and practicing the social relationships of liberation are a constant process – “God is Change” as Butler contends – and it is the values, principles, and material conditions that guide this process's achievements and limitations. To see how those processes can unfold in a revolutionary contextFor now we return to La Habana and the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente.

Black dignity, consciousness, and autonomy in a revolutionary process

One of the most successful and long-standing projects within the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente is Todo Turbante, a network of Black women who make and sell turbans designed for Black hair. They are one of the strongest projects within the RBA and their reach extends nationally through making and selling products, conducting workshops, bringing women together, and uplifting their heritage and dignity. The fundamental goals and context of this work, says Martiza D., the national coordinator, are:

the rescue and recognition of our Black ancestors who came to this land, and a recognition of the ethic and aesthetic,as well as the resilience and fortitude of the Black woman, and the support that [the turban] represents and the history of its support in maintaining roots and protecting nourishment of the hair, which is also part of our identity and elegance as Black women, principally – it is not against others, white or mestiza, but I think it is part of our spirituality as Black women with heritage from Africa that should be unified in the turban and our clothes, and our being in respect with the deities. This exists also within the context of the empowerment of women, and the discourse around force, recognition, and what women are able to at this moment in Cuba. All of these articulations and proposals of projects, we do community work, like AfroDiverso does, we support people with disabilities in the ways we can, we do workshops with children – who are the hope of the world – and we do workshops with young girls and share that the recognition of all of this is part of Cuban nationality and that this is a mix of Afro culture and Afro-Caribbean culture.

This is an expansive perspective on what a superficial observer might call an example of Cuban “entrepreneurship”. It is certainly that, or that is certainly an aspect of the work of Todo Turbante, for while the network does have an economic model that supports the women who make the turbans, the goal is to make and distribute products (through production) and capacity (through workshops) that empower Black women and strengthen conscious connections to African heritage. This is an economic project in line with Woods’ Blues Epistemology, that blends the material, cultural, and spiritual to contribute toward constructing a different way of livelihood in response to the conditions of this modern exploitative system.

Maritza D. sums up the ultimate purpose of this work and it is not building ‘wealth’ or , but ‘social construction and Black dignity’ with the context of Cuban society, culture, and politics, and in coordination with others: “All of [the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente] are my family. Each one of us has our own project but in the end the objective is the same for all of us, it is social construction, helping communities, and helping the next people to come. It is a network of Black women who are recognized, it is demonstrating and fighting in line with our values.” It is this spirit and focus on social (re)construction that motivates Todo Turbante and makes the organization such a strong part of the RBA.

The RBA exists to connect projects like Todo Turbante with dozens and, eventually hundreds, of projects to achieve a scale that comes not from centralized dictates, but from autonomous, voluntary organization at a grassroots level, supported by a strong, revolutionary state that can defend the gains of social progression. These dynamic grassroots practices serve not only to shift consciousness and build relationships among many different types of organizations, projects, and initiatives, but also to engage in social construction that enhances the well-being of grassroots Black communities and organizations. Some of the core institutions and practices of this Black autonomous and revolutionary network are: a WhatsApp group⁹⁶ that connects all members in Cuba, as well as those in other countries who have visited the RBA and been invited to participate; AfroFeria, a fair, marketplace, exhibition, and performance opportunity that serves to connect members of the RBA with one another and the wider community; regular meetings that allow for knowledge sharing and processes of decision making; participation; sharing of resources, donations, and forms of mutual aid; and coordination of international support and solidarity.

All of this is done to give organizations, members, and eventually entire neighborhoods the capacity to implement anti-racist practices and structures in their lives and the rest of society. This is also done in connection and dialogue with the municipal and national political apparatus. Unlike in the US examples, this establishment of autonomous institutions occurs in Cuba without direct challenge from the state because the Cuban state is one that is attempting to eliminate not only racism, but all the vestiges of the colonial-capitalist-white supremacist system that the Cuban Revolution rose up against over sixty years ago. As the RBA coordinator Martiza L. notes, though, building out this autonomy and coordination for Afrodescendants in La Habana and Matanzas goes against some of the historic tendencies of Cuban political culture, which has tended to be highly bureaucratized and centralized. However, with the work on a national plan against racism, economic crisis, and broader cultural shifts, there has been increased acceptance of the need for more flexibility and dynamism at the grassroots level.

⁹⁶ Author’s note: I am a member of this Whatsapp group and have been since May 2023.

Moreso than private service businesses and even some cooperatives, the economic projects that are part of the RBA represent a vision of grassroots social construction that is line with tendencies of African heritage and culture. Chief among these is possibly an organizing impulse around empowering and giving capacity to people so that they can in turn pass that on to others and expand new ways of being from the ground up. We see this in another project that is part of the RBA, La Muñeca Negra, which started as a family project to create dolls and art using recycled materials, and has now grown to include workshops throughout the neighborhood that they live in and others in La Habana and internationally, and now an emerging more sophisticated economic model that can help to sustain the work and distribute resources to the community.⁹⁷ This mirrors a strong push within organizations within the RBA to start building out an economic culture that is fundamentally based in autonomy and systems and cultures of solidarity. This autonomy is not just for the RBA relative to the state or other institutions, but also for all the members and organizations with it – these relationships are based on voluntary consent and a spirit of mutual support and camaraderie. In addition, this autonomy is utilized not to undermine the revolutionary state, but to make direct connections that can facilitate subversion of the economic blockade against Cuba by the United States, and support livelihoods of people on the ground even more directly.

Social (Re)Construction and the Black Commune

From Brownsville and East New York to La Habana, Cuba, these examples of social (re)construction have resonance with the conceptual underpinnings of George Jackson’s “Black Commune” George Jackson, the freedom fighter, political prisoner, and theorist on US fascism, conceptualized that prison was only the most intense form of an exploitative and perverse system of centralized economic power, corporatist political domination, and false democracy – a system that is mirrored across scales of imperialist plunder: the local, the national, and the global. Jackson also argued that revolt against this system of repression and warfare was not only justified but inevitable. The revolt that might bring about destruction of the current system and prison that was fundamental to its operation, though, would support the construction of a generative, grassroots alternative, the *Black Commune*.

Paraphrasing Jackson and connecting his theorizing to the short-lived autonomy created during the Attica Prison Revolt in 1971, Orisanmi Burton describes this Black Commune as “itself a demand for a new world” and “an autonomous site of self-organization capable of nurturing revolutionary culture and alternative modes of collective life.”⁹⁸ The Black Commune, then, is not about inclusion and recognition, but escape, resurgence, and autonomy for Black (African) people at a collective level. This autonomy

⁹⁷ Interview with leaders of La Muñeca Negra

⁹⁸ Burton (2023) pp. 84-85

and resurgence might contribute to a form of social (re)construction that can exist across many scales, and serve as “a space-time of ecstasy, joy, love, intimacy, pleasure, and collective Black radical becoming.”⁹⁹

In this way, the Black Commune connects to the reflections on culture that Sahily and participates in Naturarte mentioned about constructing new ways of being and experiencing a form of freedom and autonomy through cultural practices and spaces. We see in that example, as well as in Brownsville, how social (re)construction and culture are fundamentally different aspects contributing to the same vision of liberation, and that the process of building collective self-determination and autonomy are dynamic and adaptable, and must contend with the material, social-political realities of their societies. As Colette mentioned in the case of East New York, autonomy is a wonderful goal, but it requires capacity, and capacity requires that people are aware of and engaged in their community, have opportunities to participate in processes that return individual and community benefit, and are cared for and able to care for others. Without such basic foundations, processes of social (re)construction toward a freedom like that offered in the Black Commune have no hope of ever reaching exit velocity.

Next, we explore how these grassroots actors are keeping their communities and their people alive and protected, while continuing the struggle for a better present and future.

Ethos of Community Care

A critical aspect of grassroots economic formations revolves around how people Black people survive individually, how Black communities persevere collectively, and how both build mutual relationships of solidarity within and outside of their own geographies. We can summarize this as exemplifying an ethos of community care, a principle that was named explicitly throughout my interviews. This expansive definition of community care calls back to Cierra’s expression that “I want everyone to be ok”, and adds a focus on healing from trauma, harm, and exploitation; as well as an intentional building of generative relationships that provide support and safety. As we saw before with the Central Brooklyn EDC, healing processes and other initiatives that aim to care for the whole person, not just the economic producer, are a fundamental part of building effective grassroots economic practices. However, such healing is only the first step of true community care, which is not actually possible without the reduction and eventual destruction of the systems of harm that prevent everyone from being ok.

Erica, a local, national, and international organizer in Maryland near Baltimore remarks on this fundamental challenge of what it means to care for a community and focus on developing an economy under the conditions of capitalism and imperialist domination. When asked to discuss economic

⁹⁹ *ibid*

development, Erica jumped into a description of the inability for traditional economic development to care for people¹⁰⁰:

I think of what's happening with Jackson in the efforts to to build out cooperatives there and then there's smaller cooperatives that exist here. Like farmers, cooperatives that exist here in Baltimore City, and then in some of the counties outside of the city. But again, real and true economic development, the way that I understand it beyond being a concept and being a material thing does require a level of state support. And without that, and without a level of political power that demands that state support and retains that state support. I don't really, you know, it just still remains a concept, and it's a concept that does get derailed or overridden by this, this idea of black capitalism, or it gets conflated as such, right? Because it's really hard to conceptualize. What does economic development look like for a colonized people or people who are trapped within particular conditions, especially when I talk about, you know, economics being one of the ways that we are entrapped within these particular material conditions that we find ourselves in. It is through the mechanisms of privatization and neoliberalism that are forced upon us because we don't have any political power that we are trying to or attempt to find a way out of or develop a structure or economic development structure out of that. And I think so long as we as those things exist. I really can't say what that looks like.

For Erica, it makes no sense to discuss care in the context of development in a capitalist-imperialist system that produces the conditions of exploitation. Community care, then, cannot be divorced from the broader conditions of exploitation and oppression. For a more holistic view, she looks outside the US:

I can say what [economic development] looks like outside of here, or what I've observed outside of here. And that and that includes 10 to 20 year plans out, assessing for disasters, you know these just-in-case models that are prioritizing a people. Those are ways that I've seen economic development occur through state support. That allowed for what we would probably deem in a Western society as poor conditions. These are people who essentially have housing and can support themselves. And you know, they unionize. And you know, they have free education. And I think that these all encompass ways that economic development could actually develop a people. In not just a neighborhood but in a community.

In this way, Erica theorizes a connection between economic development and care that is about people and supporting people's livelihoods through the state and the community. In line with this understanding, we return to Cuba to understand how efforts for community care interact with grassroots economies.

Afrodiverso: Mutual aid & Grassroots-state pathways of care

Afrodiverso, LGBTQIA+ organization and member of the RBA, is deeply involved in community care at multiple scales. As mentioned during our discussion of culture, I had the opportunity to accompany one of the Afrodiverso organizers in their Caldoza Afrodiversa mutual aid food deliveries throughout their neighborhood. The home cooked soup and toasted bread that they deliver can be tabulated in a

¹⁰⁰ Interview w/ Erica

spreadsheet, but the human connection and conversation, the life-sustaining nourishment, and the community solidarity that they foster with their visits are forms that exceed traditional economic development measures. This is the case with some of their other programs, like Mochila Afrodiversa, which brings school supplies and toys to neighborhood children and their families, or the drag performances that are not only entertaining and empowering, but also create spaces for more inclusion and for people to find a chosen family among the organization and its members. This is a level of grassroots survival and care that is only fully understood when experienced and witnessed, and it is both beautiful and inspiring. And is also an everyday struggle, even within a revolutionary context.

Afrodiverso is also involved in other grassroots efforts that reached far beyond their community. Two of these are particularly notable. First, during a terrible hurricane that passed through the province of Pinar del Rio, organizers in Afrodiverso utilized their organizing and mutual aid experience to venture out and support the communities directly affected and displaced by the storm. This included supporting on the ground in Pinar del Rio and temporarily bringing back to La Habana individuals or families and hosting them until they could find other accommodations. These such efforts connect with broader state support to make Cuba one of the most hurricane resilient tropical countries in the Americas¹⁰¹, at least in terms of outcomes focused on people – life-saved, families housed, etc.

Second, the group was deeply involved in canvassing and neighborhood conversations around the Families Code, which is a law passed in by referendum in Cuba in 2022 that legalizes same-sex marriage, recognizes non-binary gender norms and trans rights, takes one of the most expansive views on what constitutes a family (from a nuclear family definition to, roughly, ‘a group of people who love and care for one another’), and many other incredibly progressive reforms. Afrodiverso was one of the many grassroots organizations that took part in door-knocking, testimonies, popular education, and other on-the-ground efforts of the government-led campaign to pass the referendum and educate the population about the need for progressive change.

Grassroots activity was critical for both efforts, but as Erica noted, without state support and structures, such grassroots initiatives could not sustain their efforts and would be far less effective. In the same vein, without grassroots organizations with deep connections to community and involved in processes of community care, the legitimacy of government-led campaigns would falter, and people would suffer because of that.

¹⁰¹ “Resistance and Resilience: Responses to the climate crisis from Cuba and Puerto Rico” (2022)

Fostering empowered communities

Further from state intervention, programs within both La Muñeca Negra and Todo Turbante are geared around promoting not only production of sustainable products by Black women, but also fostering collective communities of producers and community learners who help to take care of one another. The spread of turbans, through Todo Turbante and others, has been a life-affirming one for many Black women, especially those involved in grassroots struggle and who have taken on the journey of wearing their hair natural. Because of the blockade's reduction of goods entering the island, the low economic wages, the ongoing lack of product availability and knowledge as a result of white and mestiza beauty standards, and Cuba's natural heat and humidity, keeping up with natural Black hair in Cuba is an incredibly difficult effort.¹⁰² The result of this is that many women do not want to leave the house with their hair unkempt but also struggle with maintenance to ensure that they feel whole and dignified in their natural appearance. Therefore, the production and distribution of these turbans is very much an act of caring for their sisters while normalizing an aesthetic that is tied deeply to African roots and African beauty.

Care for their environment is another aspect of these grassroots efforts. The producers/artists of La Muñeca Negra in particular make use of recycled and organic materials, much of it sourced from their neighbors who they have engaged in the process of recycling and saving disposable materials that can be used to make the dolls, art, and other materials that they produce.

While these are two key examples of programs organized within the organizations in the RBA, one of the major efforts of community care that the RBA undertakes happens through connections with organizations outside of Cuba. Because of the unilateral sanctions and blockade on the Cuban people by the US, there are many products that Cubans need and desire that are completely inaccessible, including life-saving medical supplies (e.g., insulin syringes, ibuprofen), life-supporting household essentials (e.g., batteries, cell phones), life-easing tools and resources (e.g., cuticle clipper, plus-sized clothes) and life-affirming cultural items (e.g., African fabrics, Cafe Bustelo coffee).¹⁰³

Beyond aid such as this, the workshops that La Muñeca Negra organizers run provide an opportunity to build relationships and create empowerment among other grassroots women outside of Cuba. La Muñeca Negra's founder has traveled to several countries and has even had the opportunity to sell merchandise regularly in Spain. This is not primarily a business venture, but an exercise in both empowerment and

¹⁰² In fact, on my previous trip to Cuba in 2023, we met the only AfroCuban woman on national TV who wears her hair natural.

¹⁰³ All of these examples are items that I brought and shared with the RBA during my research trip to Cuba. It was a small amount that I raised donations for and carried in two checked bags. But it was something and represented a bit of additional solidarity to coordinators, members, and neighbors of the RBA.

“another manner of survival” because she has been able to generate economic income outside of the confines of the blockade against Cuba.¹⁰⁴

The capacity to facilitate such relationships is a critical component of international and intercommunal solidarity that grassroots economies must develop, particularly when the weight of imperialist domination is as heavy as it is in Cuba. This too is community care, and as we have seen here, all care is political under the context of structural oppression and imperialist violence, and grassroots economic initiatives that know their political nature are well equipped to struggle for their people’s survival and fight for their dignity.

Life Systems Justice

Finally, we end this section with an acknowledgement of the principle that culture, social construction, and community care are impossible without the assets and resources to sustain our livelihoods: food, water, shelter, land, social reproduction, social institutions, and more. I have gathered this principle from a synthesis of what I heard and observed over the course of my fieldwork, and have termed this ‘life systems justice’ because it encompasses not only the intersecting components of land, energy, food, water and more that fall within environmental and climate justice spaces, but also reproductive and gender justice, as well as justice and equity around institutional access, ownership, and protection. Perhaps more so than any of the other pieces covered so far, this principle depends immensely on the social-political and geographical context of grassroots economic efforts.

Community control of institutions and assets

While incomplete, there is perhaps there is no better summation of to paraphrase the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party (BPP): ‘we want freedom and we want the power to determine the destiny of our communities, and in order to have that freedom, we want and demand land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace’.¹⁰⁵ For the BPP, one critical solution to achieving these demands was community control of their institutions in their local environments. Nick, a community organizer and municipal employee in the Chicagoland area describes a similar vision about what self-determination means in terms of community control: “Self-determination at its core is about power – basically, can Black people dictate and determine their destinies?; Let’s say that we can’t reconcile the Atlantic slave trade – we should have some pot of money that goes to our development to institute community control of

¹⁰⁴ Interview w/ Margarita & Maritza

¹⁰⁵ “Black Panther Party 10-point program” (1966)

police, schools, grocery stores. So, we need power, but we also want to go beyond the capitalist framework with it.”¹⁰⁶

The visions of what this looks like from organizers and practitioners I spoke with in Brownsville and East New York is very much aligned with the values of the BPP and such radical demands. However, the realities of building community control in 2024 in a place like New York City require grassroots organizers and practitioners to make difficult considerations with regards to full “control” versus working within the state apparatus and slowly grasping additional bits of the ‘social wage’, as Gilmore puts it. For ENY Restoration, environmental justice is a critical aspect of the work that they do, and questions of power are critical, but linking the everyday relationships that people have to the environment around them, and questions of structural relationships and social-political power are a major challenge¹⁰⁷:

I would say that the disconnects are many. We suffer the problems, we talk about the trucks but we don’t always connect it to the high rates of asthma. We suffer from heat in different parts of the community and sometimes it takes place in different ways, but again we are not part of the discussions about how can we mitigate it. We are not a lobby force so we see our job as education, advocacy, but also job training so that we are part of the workforce that impacts on it.

In this way, the response from ENY Restoration is to take a programmatic, community-centric approach (v. an advocacy one) that aims to build up the people of East New York to combat the environmental ills in their neighborhood over time. In discussing another opportunity around urban gardens and food access, Colette highlights the grassroots success of urban gardening in the neighborhood, but the challenges of that expanding because of the need for legitimacy and legibility in traditional institutions of power¹⁰⁸:

I’m writing a grant now about urban gardens, we have a lot of gardens. One of the strengths of our community is we have over 50 little gardens, and we have a lot of interested older people, in the main, who are gardening. We support them with the SYNPs kids but there’s a need for coordination and when we talk about food access and food safety, when we talk about combatting some of the things, the gardens are doing it, but you need [someone] to come to do a study about it so you can write it up.

She is arguing that the grassroots economic solutions to combat many of these challenges are working, but coordination and top-down legitimacy are lacking to take these solutions to a larger scale. In a revolutionary socialist context like Cuba or Venezuela, there might be an entity that is able to operate outside the strictures of the profit motive that could support such coordination or people-centered centralization that might make these smaller garden projects, seed even more, and make them greater than the sum of their parts. In Venezuela, the grassroots organization Pueblo a Pueblo plays such a role and

¹⁰⁶ Interview w/ Nick

¹⁰⁷ Interview w/ Colette

¹⁰⁸ Interview w/ Colette

coordinates between rural producers, urban farmers, and consumers to break the market hold on agriculture and build food sovereignty.¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, New York City is the heart of the capitalist empire and ENY Restoration must contend with that.

Much like ENY Restoration, Central Brooklyn EDC is involved in job training efforts from a perspective that is attempting to include more community accountability, access, and participation into the green economy projects that are expanding, particularly in offshore wind. Looking toward future industries and attempting to get their people, who have been traditionally excluded from the ‘innovative’ sectors of the job market, is a core piece of supporting residents’ economic aspirations and needs. At a community level, LaShawn is also concerned with the tens of millions of dollars that leave (i.e. are extracted) from the community every year because of a lack of institutional ownership.

Shifting relationships to resources

Crystal, a co-founder of People’s Power Cooperative in California and a coordinator of the national Energy Democracy Project, describes how these questions of ownership and community control depend deeply not only on power, but on how the own mental models that top-down forms of economic and political systems have encouraged us see the world, “You are more than a consumer, you are not a consumer. Our job is not to work several jobs – the purpose of our lives is to love and care for each other – we internally oppress our own mind, but that is not what we are born to do. When we are thinking about taking care of each other, we think about ‘what we need in the household.’”

For Crystal, energy and other systems of our life are about what we need and how we care for one another, not about the usage of your utility company records. Getting to a place where energy justice exists requires redefining relationships to these ‘resources’ or ‘assets’, and the process to do that is one that she believes is about engaging people to challenge some core beliefs about these systems that relate deeply to our broader social-political context¹¹⁰:

You can’t own and control something that you don’t understand: energy is the life and labor of our system, food is our energy, breathing is our energy, our joy and inspiration that we get from each other is our energy, it’s important that people understand that so they understand that we have the power. If you move beyond a fuel source, then getting people to think about what energy truly is, so that we can reorient ourselves to build a village and community – it is our arrangement to each other that needs to change....We need to be engaging in conversation about what people think about energy. Once we’re more aware, we can think about how to arrange these things differently. But the basic understanding of where we are now is severely lacking. Understand energy as more than a commodity –

¹⁰⁹ Gilbert & Pascual Marquina “Circumventing the Blockade: Pueblo a Pueblo Builds Grassroots Food Sovereignty (Part II)” <https://venezuelanalysis.com/interviews/15769/>

¹¹⁰ Interview w/ Crystal

when nature is seen as a commodity, we will dehumanize those who should be humanized and continue the oppressive hierarchy.

Taking this all together, it is clear that power is fundamental to building justice in our life systems, but at a grassroots level, shifting these economic relationships also means shifting at a large scale the collective narratives about our community ‘assets’, ‘resources’, and ‘natural environments’. The work of these grassroots efforts has largely been in doing this in a way that both moves with community and takes into account the political, economic, social, and cultural context in which these life systems operate.

‘If not this, then what?’

Sabrina, co-founder of a radical housing and land organization call Anti-Displacement New York City remarked on the need for grassroots organizers and practitioners to become proficient and destroying the old and building up the new, while also bringing up a question of how we do this while interacting with the systems that continue to perpetuate many of the battles that grassroots economies are attempting to resolve or circumvent¹¹¹:

On the ground, it’s building new social institutions that divest from white supremacy, capitalism, etc. and also building solidarity economies, federations of coops, and using our own institutions to sustain each other. Keeping money within our communities so that we don’t need that system at all There’s always the question of the state and that’s an important question, but there is a need to use the state for scale, for homes, for food, help orgs on the ground expand their capacity – fascism will still be lurking until we get through generations, in the meantime we need to build organizations so that durable change is possible.

While here we have dealt less with the intricacies of interactions with the state (or corporate actors), those lurk in the background of all of these grassroots economic endeavors, whether supportive or antagonist. Here we have seen responses to the hostility or inadequacy of old institutions and relationships, and how new ones are emerging.

‘*If not this, then what?*’ is the question Gilmore poses to us and that we attempted to illuminate by looking at four broad ways that grassroots economies are being shaped by organizers, practitioners, activists, networks, and other actors. Cultures of liberation developing through struggle and self-actualization serve as a foundation for processes of social (re)construction that have visions for self-determining communities with an ability to support some levels of autonomy for Black/African peoples. Meanwhile, these cultures and reconstructive processes are possible because of an ethos of community care both within and between communities that keep people alive and push back against exploitative and violent systems. Finally, achieving a semblance of justice in the various life systems operating in their

¹¹¹ Interview w/ Sabrina

communities is perhaps above the capabilities of organizations and movements that do not have the capacity to take state power, yet it is a core piece of this struggle. In these ways, grassroots economic organizers and practitioners across the Americas are grasping some of the social wage, and striving for a simultaneously dynamic, ethereal, grounded, and material vision of their collective present and futures.

It is to the question of strategies that inform grassroots economies relationships with states, municipalities, and other social-political institutions that we turn to next.



“See? See what you can do? Never mind you can’t tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind you lose your name, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it. Stop sniveling,’ [the land] said. ‘Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, and if you can’t take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this county right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don’t you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one too! Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on – can you hear me? Pass it on!”

Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Beyond a freedom dream: geographies of revolutionary praxis

Picket lines, school boycotts // They try to say it's a communist plot // All I want is equality // For my sister, my brother, my people, and me – Nina Simone

The 2005 Georgetown flood in Guyana devastated the country. The heavy rains and floods lasted over a month, affected almost 300,000 people (over 1/3 of the population), caused almost \$500 million in damage (~60% of the GDP), and killed three dozen people. In a 2009 report, the late Afro-Guyanese organizer and scholar Andaiye describes how grassroots women organized to account for their own unwaged labor and how that process improved their ability to survive and support their communities during massively destructive floods. Andaiye's organization, Red Thread, supported grassroots women in completing a time survey with diaries that helped them visibilize and understand the unwaged labor and care work that they undertook on a day-to-day basis. This was both a process of collective empowerment and a political act, as counting unwaged work "reveal[s] the cost of coping with militarism and war, natural disasters, massive migrations, intolerable debt, and in the case of Cuba, blockade."¹¹²

It was within this context that Red Thread supported these grassroots women in mobilizing speakouts and engagements after the 2005 floods that destroyed infrastructure and increased the burden on women and all unwaged care workers. In these engagements with media, NGOs, trade unions, and government units, the women described their relationships to the unwaged, subsistence, and low-wage labor they undertook, and the technologies and tools that enabled this work. This process allowed women to assert their agency and make demands of government and social institutions, in ways that both enhanced their ability to do the care work they needed to, as well as extract concessions and resources from the state. In the face of a climate disaster and social emergency, this organizing effort was essential: "In material terms, the women's organizing helped win a small amount of compensation, replacement for small livestock and plants lost, and assistance from the ministry of agriculture to villages that it had not visited. But they won much more than that; they won the invaluable experience of mobilizing and organizing to win, and of winning."¹¹³ While Red Thread and these grassroots women could not have fully predicted the impact that their work would have three years later, these grassroots economic organizing strategies enhanced their communities' resilience against disasters, as well as their survival within everyday violence and injustice of underdevelopment.

¹¹² Andaiye (1994) pp. 113

¹¹³ Andaiye (2009) pp. 120

For grassroots economies, it is not enough to only understand the principles that we are aiming for, as described in the previous chapter. We must also know what it takes to win the present and the future that we want and need – through strategies that orient this vision. While these strategies are many, we will briefly touch on five that became apparent during the process of this project. First, the building and advancement of political consciousness through organizing efforts and liberatory placemaking that allows the people to be in the driver seat of the ever-changing circumstances around them. Second and related, the process and aim of mass-based community power that rejects the elite capture that fuels neocolonialist takeover and derailment of radical and revolutionary energies. Third, carving out liberated zones and communes that might be spaces of renegotiating social relationships to *embody* the imagination and materiality of what liberation might be. Fourth, the strategic utilization of the state, especially municipal resources and power, to demand that survival necessities be redirected to the grassroots, in ways that do not undermine the dignity of the people and their neighborhoods. Fifth and finally, the establishment of authentic mutual relationships and flows of international solidarity and intercommunal cooperation that are not premised in subservience to the requirements of global racial empire.

At minimum, these strategies can be seen as forms of survival and ‘counter-war’ against the war of imperialist domination visited upon the racialized, colonized, and oppressed peoples of the world. Beyond this, though these strategies might also be seen as part of re-negotiation of humanity against the oppressive norms of the white supremacist capitalist-imperialist status quo that reduce humanity to a measure of individual and group usefulness to the ongoing systems of hierarchical production, and which are the hallmark of traditional forms of local economic development and planning. In this way, these strategies can be tools to create ‘counter-humanism’ that emerge from the masses of people, neighborhoods, and communities themselves.¹¹⁴ While grassroots organizers and practitioners may choose to engage with the state or other actors, doing so from their own power and organization is a critical strategic necessity to advancing liberation.

Heightening political consciousness

Sabrina, co-founder of a radical housing and land organization Anti-Displacement New York City (ADNYC) describes the need for grassroots education and political consciousness-building in fighting for just and public housing:

We are suffering from undereducation, especially in knowing our history. That is holding us back from being able to progress because people are misinformed and susceptible to propaganda and misinformation from so many places. A big part of this is putting out

¹¹⁴ Burton (2023) pp. 5-11

analysis about the crisis, counter narratives – this work is about ideas and it's a dialectical war of ideas, just to be blunt, because we are fighting against liberal and fascist ideology and it's important that planning is political and comes from that orientation because the current orientation is both side and half in....That both sides is harming our communities.¹¹⁵

For Sabrina, this process of education is about raising political consciousness for the people themselves to engage in struggle and processes of 'planning'. In the realm of local economic development and planning as it relates to housing, consciousness raising is critical because engagement with the state is inevitable and necessary. This means that grassroots organizers and practitioners must not only think about how to destroy the old and build up the new, but also do this while interacting with the systems that continue to perpetuate many of the battles that grassroots economic actors are waging. Bazile continues:

[The goal of] organizing is not just to bring people together and to fight for change, it's also about divesting and I think a big part of that – interpreting the question of fighting against liberalism and liberal ideology – is building social institutions and creating spaces for education but also spaces for people to learn how to think critically on their own...On the ground, it's building new social institutions that divest from white supremacy, capitalism, etc. and also building solidarity economies, federations of coops, and using our own institutions to sustain each other. Keeping money within our communities so that we don't need that system at all There's always the question of the state and that's an important question, but there is a need to use the state for scale, for homes, for food, help orgs on the ground expand their capacity – fascism will still be lurking until we get through generations, in the meantime we need to build organizations so that durable change is possible.

The deep connection between political consciousness and social institutions is something that we saw in the previous chapter's discussion on social (re)construction. This process of creating institutions based in a radical political consciousness is critical, as is the personal and collective process of developing the consciousness and confidence to make demands on the state or on other public, private, or social entities. To undertake an organizing process focused on transformative change that might birth spaces of liberation, nurturing a shared political and human consciousness is critical. Gilmore shares how ordinary people “create the conditions for our everyday lives by organizing ourselves and materials and environmental resources” and in doing so “we're creating a place.”¹¹⁶ Therefore, the spatial manifestation of political consciousness can be seen as a form of liberatory placemaking, which goes beyond the mainstream versions of 'placemaking; that focus primarily on the appearance and programming of sites in the built environment.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Interview w/ Sabrina

¹¹⁶ Gilmore (2022); Gilmore & Kolhatkar (2023) “Envisioning a New World Through Abolition Geography”

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/social-justice/2023/02/07/ruthie-wilson-gilmore-abolition-geography>

¹¹⁷ Gilmore (2022)

This advancement of political consciousness toward a more liberatory placemaking allows for everyday people at a grassroots level to be part of the processes of change in their local, regional, and national economies. Butler’s philosophy tells us that the only constant in life is change. While this may be true, people and communities need to feel a sense of agency in the neighborhoods to live fulfilled and healthy lives, and there is a difference between choosing to leave and being forced to. In Binet et al’s study of the health and healthy equity impacts of neighborhood-level processes like “gentrification, climate adaptation, and suburbanization,” the authors look at the level of agency or empowerment that neighborhood residents have over their own circumstances, or their ‘destiny’ in these change processes, and describe a new construct called “ownership of change.”¹¹⁸ Ownership of change is the ‘psychosocial process’ of a person’s “evolving sense of empowerment over the changes around them, such as development of new housing or shifts in economic opportunity,” and is associated with positive health outcomes and greater health equity in neighborhoods. This is a concept that does not depend on changing the entire political apparatus, but developing political consciousness at a large scale advances the potential for transformative changes.

Scholar Tamanisha John goes further in speaking on the primacy of political consciousness in the three transformative Caribbean revolutions in Haiti, Cuba, and Grenada. The establishment, maintenance, and strength of the Cuban Revolution’s political consciousness among the masses of people in that nation, John argues, is a core reason why they have been able to withstand a 65+ year blockade and waves of imperialist assaults.¹¹⁹ Early on in the revolutionary history of Cuba, Amilcar Cabral made a similar observation while deliver a speech in Havana, Cuba, “No power in the world will be able to destroy this Cuban Revolution, which is creating in the countryside and in the towns not only a new life but also – and even more important – a New Man, fully conscious of his national, continental and international rights and duties.”¹²⁰ Like Gilmore, Cabral identifies that this culture must have a “reciprocal nature of its linkages with the social and economic reality of the environment, with the level of productive forces and the mode of production of the society which created it” and identify with the material and spiritual realities of a society for both individual people’s self-consciousness and their consciousness as participants in a wider society.¹²¹

With the local processes of the Red Barrial Afrodescendiente (RBA), this reciprocal nature of consciousness development and culture within broader Cuban society is clear. The societal processes of political consciousness that they have inherited from the Cuban Revolution contributed to their ability to

¹¹⁸ Binet et al. (2022) “Ownership of change: Participatory development of a novel latent construct for neighborhoods and health equity research”

¹¹⁹ John (2024) Haiti, Cuba and Grenada: Three Caribbean Revolutions with Tamanisha John”

¹²⁰ Cabral (1966) “The Weapon of Theory”

¹²¹ Cabral (1971) “National Liberation and Culture”

organize their neighborhoods, and in return their organizing has contributed to an advancement of anti-racist capacity, practice, and policy locally and nationally. A core function of the RBA, Martiza Lopez says, is to “give capacity to their people to fight racism” in their everyday and at a grassroots neighborhood level. This is complemented by the group’s participation, as a collective and as individuals from their different vantage points, in the advancement of the National Program Against Racism and Skin Color Discrimination in Cuba, which aims to bring equity and justice to Afrodescendants and Black Cubans at a both a structural and interpersonal level.¹²²

Despite this revolutionary context, for the RBA an ongoing challenge with political consciousness-raising and advancement of an anti-racist society is the debilitating and discriminatory outcomes of the unilateral US sanctions on Cuba. These sanctions and the broader war on Cuba deepen existing inequalities, and create new ones, which favor white Cubans who typically have more connections and family members outside of the island. For this reason, and to support the survival of their communities, the development of an economic culture of solidarity is a key aspect of ongoing consciousness-raising efforts. As Idelsi, a member of the RBA’s coordination describes, without these consciousness-raising efforts, the well-meaning local and national programs of the social and solidarity economy cannot be fulfilled:

The [social and solidarity economy programs] haven’t been achieved yet because there is not this type of culture in the economy of the country – our country does not have an economic culture. And even less so at the level [of small businesses]. At a municipal level, the leaders can buy, trade, or sell what they have or need with other municipalities. This is the ideal scenario but there is not yet an economic culture among the people or among the [government] directors to be able to do this effectively. There needs to be a focus on the personal aspect and relationship for each individual and what they are receiving from their economic project. It is not the same to have an *emprendimiento* (economic project) in Playa Miramar as an *emprendimiento* in La Lisa because the communities are different. The economies that they have are different. Therefore, the prices have to be different... So you see the community work and social work needs the solidarity economy. With Afrodiverso, if they didn’t have this basis of solidarity economy in their work, it wouldn’t happen because the people [in their community] don’t have the resources on their own to support la Caldoza Afrodiversa.¹²³

In this way, the RBA sees the critical role of consciousness-raising and development in also advancing material economic support at a grassroots level in a way that might grow a solidarity-focused economic culture at a municipal and then national level.

Liberation through consciousness development and sovereign culture are deeply intertwined, then, and it is the process of action and struggle within an engagement in political-economic and cultural projects that creates a more revolutionary and solidaristic identity and material relationship among and between the

¹²² Republica de Cuba (2022) “Programa Nacional contra el Racismo y la Discriminación Racial”

¹²³ Idelsi during “Meeting with RBA coordinators and emprendedores”

people, which creates the capacity for social change. Nurturing this culture not simply through words but through practice, is fundamental. On a practical level, this means engagement with the grassroots and consciousness-raising are fundamental inputs and ongoing practices of making a people, place, and culture through action and struggle.

Organizing mass-based community power

On my final full day in La Habana, I accompanied Maritza and Idelsi, two of the leading coordinators of the RBA, to a project that was considering entering the network. El Cabildo, the project, is in La Guinera, a neighborhood on the outskirts of La Habana and where some of the most intense protests against the government on July 11-12, 2021, took place. In this context, we found ourselves within a 2–3-acre farm and grassy area clearly still in an emerging process of development and construction. Maritza and Idelsi led the conversation to understand this project and their goals, which include creating a cafe to sell food and drinks in the neighborhood, raising animals, building light agricultural industrial capacity (wine, vinegar, etc.), creating crafts, and hosting cultural and educational activities. To do this, the organizers of El Cabildo were very focused on formalizing their projects and being recognized by the government.

Maritza and Idelsi, however, rejected that prioritization and pushed these folks to draw their legitimacy from the people themselves, not official sources. In supporting grassroots organizations, the RBA does help their member organizations in engaging with the government, with the party (Communist Party of Cuba), with other grassroots organizations across the country and region, and in various cultural spaces. However, what seems most critical in the circumstance of grassroots economies is continuously helping grassroots projects and movements center their own people and the processes that are necessary to make sure entire neighborhoods and other communities advance, not just individual representatives. Maritza gave El Cabildo's leaders the following advice, "make sure the community sees what you are doing, integrate yourself with the community, and ensure that the community knows you and begins to get closer to your work...you cannot depend on an institution to recognize what you do, it is the reverse. The community must recognize you and then the institutions will give you respect."¹²⁴

Outside of this singular visit, this is a philosophy that the RBA takes to their work and support – the people must be in front and must be the guide for any work that happens on their behalf or with them. This is where political consciousness receives its power, through mass support, action, and powerbuilding. For the RBA, whose coordinators are trained in the Freire school of popular education, this emphasis on the masses is essential and non-negotiable – the people are primary when it comes to

¹²⁴ Field notes from El Cabildo visit w/ Maritza and Idelsi

grassroots planning and economic initiatives. This focus on building from the masses is one that resonates with Lorenzo Komboa Ervin's understandings of Black Autonomy, which form the basis of revolutionary Black Anarchism and connects to CLR James and Lucy Parsons' writings on deep, direct democracy.¹²⁵ For Ervin, building bottom-up deep democracy for Black peoples is a priority for Black liberation, and in this the "role of the organizer is not to lead people, but to empower them and let them take over their own local struggles."¹²⁶

Cierra at Boston Ujima Project describes a similar perspective on mass participation and provides a deeply personal and collective understanding of the processes that need to happen in order for the masses of residents to be ready to participate in local planning and economic development processes. For her, the fundamental aspect is an 'embodied knowledge' that rests within people and that they must tap into to understand at a deeper level what they really want and need, and how they can relate to other people and take part in participatory processes of planning with others. "Even when we're doing votes [on community investments], people abstain because they don't feel like they have enough knowledge," Cierra says, but their cultural and political organizing aims to help people "embrace that [they] have knowledge and power, and that [they] do have enough information to decide what [they] need." This cultivation and recognition of embodied knowledge is critical not only for mass-based participation, but also allowing people to think differently about how the systems and communities around them can function.

In Baltimore, Erica makes a similar argument around the importance of political education in building mass-based organization and power to win community control over resources. For her, this is critically because Black/African people in Baltimore are politically stunted because of lack of decision-making power, economically disenfranchised and underfunded, and socially policed by occupying police forces and programs that repress whole neighborhoods – zionist state training exchange programs (Deadly Exchange), 1033 program allowing local purchase of military weaponry, the federal policing bills, private police forces, 'cop city' training centers, and a new \$1B jail planned to be built. In the face of this, mass-based power needs to have embodied knowledge of their capacities, which come from political education:

Our first efforts are to politically educate our people, by discussing community control in the material environments that we are in. We need to leave [these ideas] as clear cut as possible. A lot of these demands are the first time people are seeing these and thinking of themselves differently...Seeing ourselves as African people within empire, and African people that have a colonial relationship with the empire is critical...It is a struggle in how people understand ourselves as colonized people because the conditions they are finding

¹²⁵ Ervin (2021) *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*; James (1956) "Every Cook Can Govern"; Parsons "The Principles of Anarchism"

¹²⁶ Ervin (2021) pp. 74

themselves within in Baltimore, an emphasis on community control is an emphasis on the same types of self-determination as in an anticolonial struggle: we are worthy of control over our lives.¹²⁷

This understanding that ‘we are worthy of control over our lives’ is an essential part of building bottom-up mass-based community power.

Avoiding elite capture and neocolonial redirection

These processes of mass-based power are critical to avoid the pitfalls that scholars of the Black ‘internal colony’ in the US and neocolonial developments globally have long warned about and analyzed, as well as more modern weaponizations of identity to push forward projects that do not advance the interests of the majority.¹²⁸ In William Tabb’s assessment of Black economic development through a revisitation of his interpretation of the internal colony thesis, he highlights how the demands coming from the urban revolts and Black radical organizing of this revolutionary period were channeled into two forms: Black capitalism and Community Development Corporations (CDCs).¹²⁹ Both of these represent(ed) a form of neocolonial capture of – one that attempted to integrate economic energies directly into the capitalist system and the other that utilized incentives to push social change efforts into dead-end programs mired in bureaucracy. Olufemi Taiwo expands on the concept of *elite capture* as a hallmark phenomenon of neocolonial rule by Black “bourgeoisie” to increasingly dominate their local social systems and hide behind an identity reductionist¹³⁰ version of identity politics that ignores collective benefit and excuses their actions because they, as an individual, are Black. In short, “[e]lite capture happens when the advantaged few steer resources and institutions that could serve the many toward their own narrower interests and aims.”¹³¹ This is often combined with a perverted form of identity politics that gets away from the intention of the Combahee River Collective – using identity as an onboarding to coalitional organizing that can transform systems – and is reduced to supporting individualistic aims.¹³²

Elite capture is endemic to the practice of planning and economic development, and not only because of the ‘tyranny of experts’. Nominally ‘participatory processes’ often don’t have the democratic accountability to the needs of the masses of people, they are easily captured and influenced by “deference politics,” wherein a single, or few, spokespeople representing a much larger group are inside of ‘rooms’ of power and steer the conversation and resources toward their aims and needs.¹³³ For Taiwo as well, creating mass-based institutions, focusing on accountability over conformity, establishing information

¹²⁷ Interview with Erica

¹²⁸ Frazier (1962), Nkrumah (1965), Allen (1969), Tabb (1970), Rodney (1973), Ball (2023)

¹²⁹ Tabb (1979) “What Happened to Black Economic Development?”

¹³⁰ Erica Caines

¹³¹ Taiwo (2022b) pp. 22

¹³² Combahee River Collective (1977);

¹³³ Taiwo (2022b) pp. 69-82

networks and political action to limit the violence of the current system, redistributing social resources and power, and building power expansively.

More specifically to local economic development and planning, the way that this capture manifests is in the neocolonial forms that scores of Black and colonized radical authors during and after the urban revolts of the late 60s / early 70s warned about.¹³⁴ The push for community development programming and processes around this time had a noble intention – to truly empower Black communities in a large-scale manner and change economic hierarchies in the US. The past failures of attempts to build development models informed by traditional African societies or communal Black values came largely because of their conflict with the core structurally capitalist and deeply individualist values of broader US society.¹³⁵ This fundamental contradiction meant that the communally-oriented economic development demands of the Black Freedom Movement, which included but was not limited to the struggle for civil rights, were politically provocative in that they challenged the status quo of economic and social – and therefore political – hierarchies in the country. And for this, they were attacked or defanged – subjected to the forms of ‘movement capture’ that Burton details from the perspective of urban and prison radicals during the Long Attica Revolt.¹³⁶

One of the most effective ways of defanging CDCs and broader Black social change efforts has been entrepreneurialism, or a focus on promoting individual successes and market-oriented solutions to structural socioeconomic problems. This entrepreneurialism, whether in private business, government entities, or social sector organizations, supplanted previous community organizing strategies – political consciousness-raising, internal popular education, group capacity-building, economic boycott campaigns, and other collective political efforts – and became the dominant form of ‘doing’ economic development. Fighting against individualism and entrepreneurialism in our grassroots economic practices is fundamental to avoiding these forms of capture and co-optation. Organizing mass-based community power in our institutions, actions, and goals can help win new terrains of community control and defend what has already been achieved.

Carving out Liberated zones and Communes

In Baltimore, Erica describes a goal of their organizing being building liberated zones to advance popular struggle locally while fighting against the many oppressive institutions. In the Chicago area, Nick, an

¹³⁴ Frazier (1962), Nkrumah (1965), Ture & Hamilton (1967) Allen (1969), Tabb (1970), Rodney (1973),

¹³⁵ Taiwo (2022b) pp. 83-85

¹³⁶ Burton (2023) pp. 30-31

organizer and municipal employee, lays out his understanding of the importance of liberated zones in supporting Black autonomy and advancing justice and liberation for Black people within empire:¹³⁷

We need to be building out civic and cultural institutions and its imperative that we have a complete say in that and are able to determine those for ourselves. We want power but we also want to go beyond the capitalist framework. A framework that captures this is liberated zones – cooperative practices and institutions within that framework, as well as having economic, social, and political decisionmaking. We of course want to collaborate with other forces and not be told what to do. But this is a process and a phase, we have to demand more and go further and see what that looks like. Do we want a nation? We can be structured and go beyond that. Black liberation would require more autonomy and agency for us.

This is an understanding that forming liberated zones and building Black autonomy are deeply dependent on our local context and political-social-economic conditions, but regardless they both provide a possible framework for grassroots economic planning and practice beyond capitalism and represent a tool for winning concessions – grasping the social wage, as Gilmore might say – from the state and private actors.

In discussing the construction of Black Autonomy, Ervin describes the need to create dual power institutions to support autonomous Black organization. This entails creating forms of organization and power that compete with mainstream electoral politics and representative government. Among other things, this involves organizing “collectives and communes in cities and towns all over North America, which become, in fact, liberated zones outside the control of the government” that challenge capitalist and white political control, while crippling the capitalist state’s ability to exploit through employing revolutionary organizing tactics. This understanding of forming liberated zones and communes is something that has long resonated within the context of Black liberation and local economic development and planning. The Republik of New Afrika has since the 70s been a state-building project that is deeply focused on local and national forms of planning and economic formation. Cooperation Jackson is one of the more well-known modern examples and is building various forms of mass-based organization and cooperative enterprises toward having the capacity to establish liberated zones and communal economies in Jackson, Mississippi.¹³⁸ We can also look outside of the U.S. for understandings of what it has meant to oppose capitalist-imperialist exploitation through forming liberated zones or communes.

In Colombia, where the history of national politics is conservative and marked by national and local racist and class-based violence, recent strikes have led to liberated zones that shut down economic business as usual and forced concessions from state and private actors. In the specific example of Buenaventura, a largely Afrodescendant port city on Colombia’s Pacific coast, a 2017 civic strike led primarily by

¹³⁷ Interview with Nick

¹³⁸ Akuno (2023) “Build and Fight: The Program and Strategy of Cooperation Jackson”

Afrodescendant groups shut down the most important port in Colombia for 22 days and forced the government and private actors to negotiate with the ‘Buenaventura Civic Strike Committee for Life with Dignity and Peace in the Territory’ to create new economic arrangements around the port.¹³⁹ While the civic strike represented a form of insurgent planning and protest of ‘organized abandonment’ of the state, in the end, the appeal to inclusion within Colombia’s capitalist and hierarchical system have limited the potential to create transformative grassroots economic shifts, as only a limited number of the concessions won have actually been implemented.¹⁴⁰

In Cuba, where a political, social, and economic revolution has already taken place, the battle against capitalist-imperialist forces is one that the nation is undertaking. Yet, building autonomy is still a goal, and projects like el Cabildo, which has land and is creating economic projects at multiple levels, represent a form of commune that is possible in a revolutionary context. The forms of Black Autonomy that the RBA is building are in deep alignment with the revolutionary goals of the Cuban state, even while they attempt to advance certain anti-racist processes and outcomes within the state.

In Venezuela, Chris Gilbert describes the communes being built and practiced as having ideological and practical foundations in the revolutionary socialism of the Venezuelan state, marronage in Black Venezuelan history, and indigenous autonomy historically and presently. In Venezuela, the ongoing process of socialist construction in the country includes building communes in urban and rural settings across the country, and “the essence of the commune is a new set of social relations” that put labor under democratic and direct social control.¹⁴¹ Importantly, for Gilbert, communes in Venezuela have a necessary feature, which is directly social labor, or “labor activities that are carried out in the name of goals and with methods that the community itself decides...that is, whose social character is not mediated by commodity exchange.” This includes things like care work, domestic labor, subsistence activities – all the forms of social reproductive labor – which communes liberate by making this work shared and collective.

Communes are built on self-organization, yet in Venezuela they are enabled by national legislation, Popular Power Laws, which allow for communal planning, communal cities, federations of communes, and a communal state, all towards the transformation of productive relations. The core features of these communes are non-alienated work, collective property, production of goods focused on use-values, and expanding the satisfaction of needs in the population.¹⁴² These economic forms also pair with non-

¹³⁹ Cuero Campaz, Dest, Ojulari (2021) “Buenaventura Strikes Against Racial Capitalism”

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*

¹⁴¹ Gilbert (2023) pp. 11

¹⁴² *ibid* pp. 21

commune forms of directly social labor in the case of Pueblo a Pueblo, a food sovereignty organization in Venezuela that connects agricultural producers and consumers through non-market means¹⁴³. In this way and in others, communes in a revolutionary context show us the possibilities of economic practice when state support allows for autonomous and social productive practices, and when grassroots action is strong and dedicated.

Both communes and liberated zones are tools of fighting against economic oppression and creating grassroots-based alternative economic arrangements. Again, the challenge here is how to do this in a way that is defensible and sustainable to ensure community survival and protection.

Utilizing state and municipal resources

While building liberated zones and communes focus on more prefigurative forms of social transformation, they require either full revolutionary potential breaks with the capitalist-imperialist system, or high levels of capacity for communal self-defense against the capitalist state. In making this assertion, it is important to note that the state is not singular or static. As Wallerstein writes, the state exists because of, and is partially formed by, the modern world economy.¹⁴⁴ The state, including local government, is beholden and owes its legitimacy to a much broader economic and political system. While it is not autonomous, the state does have significant agency, and as Gramsci describes, is deeply implicated in establishing ‘cultural hegemony’ and dictating the social-economic-political norms of a society at many scales.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, state actors, offices, and resources can act both in support of and in opposition to the domination of the capitalist-imperialist world system.

As Erica states, “some people have tried to curtail the power [of capitalist states] by using cooperatives, and those aren’t one-size fits all, but they do negate exploitative measures of economic development...what’s happening in Jackson and connection to cooperatives there is doing this,” however she continues, “real development requires a level of state support, and without level of political power to demand and retain that – it still remains a concept.”¹⁴⁶ It is this challenge of working within existing state power structures, attempting to overturn them, or trying to thread the line between the two. Many radical grassroots efforts are strategically utilizing the state to support their practices and people.

For East New York Restoration, this has meant taking on various contracts and partnerships with the City of New York and the Brooklyn Borough President’s office. For climate justice work, this has proved

¹⁴³ Ibid pp. 16-23

¹⁴⁴ Wallerstein (1974)

¹⁴⁵ Bates (1975) “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony”

¹⁴⁶ Interview w/ Erica

critical, as so much of this is done through public job programming and/or through projects on public lands. Nonetheless, there are challenges, including racism in selection processes and a lack of adequate jobs for neighborhood residents involved in job training programs. While there are many contradictions with working with state entities while trying to build people-centered movements, making meaningful improvements to the lives of the majority in their communities requires grassroots organizations to consider how to extract material gains for their people because state power is a powerful tool.

However, as Sabrina of Anti-Displacement NYC notes, there are limits to the depth of change through state processes. It was the experience with government and its neoliberal, race-neutral perspective that inspired them to found an organization to push for housing justice from outside of the government system. For Nick, who occupies both municipal and community organizing roles, “development” in the form of infrastructure, wellness, and quality of life has value as a goal, but the structures of government make it unaccountable to the majority of people. For him economic development and planning go wrong in the hyper focus on singular measures of improvements: “the issue is that in practice, economic development is solely attracting businesses to incentivize job creation.”¹⁴⁷ Many times, he notes, these job creation numbers are temporary or subsidized to a degree that much of the money invested goes directly to private hands. Instead, grassroots efforts can be a part of demanding more and creating more popular municipal processes through organizing on their own terms but with connection to municipal processes:

There is such a value to organizing on the local level and having municipal knowledge of how you run a city and take that to organizing. We need to understand what we’re doing, so that when we do seize power, we are equipped to do so, and know how to distribute water, how to utilize financial systems to yield outcomes that we want...I think there is value and viability in local organizing with the municipal and seizing power, taking over charters and seizing budgets.¹⁴⁸

In addition to this, Nick describes grassroots efforts as creating the possibilities for true democracy that seeks maximum participation through creating “civic participants” who are bonded, who are in true community, and who are part of building social and economic processes together, with institutions to support them. To be able to engage with state actors, and build democratic economic and social processes,

We have to reinvent how people see organizing and think about what they deserve because it’s not about not about hard work, whether you work hard or not, but about opportunities and exploitation. We have to ask ourselves, how do we have dignity, how do we build from bottom up and have that based on our needs? We want a culture of demanding more. Right now, we make such compromises and concessions, and we need to fight for what we need,

¹⁴⁷ Interview w/ Nick

¹⁴⁸ Interview w/ Sabrina

not what we can get. People-Centered Human Rights puts it in the power of the people with what it looks like and how they can get it.

When considering engaging with state processes then, we must still start with the power of the people and focus on restructuring relationships, using the tools and resources available. One framework that can anchor this process is People(s)-Centered Human Rights (PCHRs), which Nick mentions as applying to his organizing work in the Chicago area. PCHRs are a term coined by Ajamu Baraka, then-National Organizer of the Black Alliance for Peace, which is a revolutionary Pan-Africanist organization based primarily in the United States¹⁴⁹. Instead of being gifted from above by a Eurocentric secular-deity these PCHRs are rights that “emanate from and address the everyday realities, needs, and challenges of racialized and colonized people,” are guaranteed only through bottom-up mass struggle, and are informed by a Black, revolutionary, and intersectional tradition.¹⁵⁰ According to Baraka, this requires four steps,¹⁵¹

“1) an epistemological break with a human rights orthodoxy grounded in Euro-centric liberalism; 2) a reconceptualization of human rights from the standpoint of oppressed groups; 3) a restructuring of prevailing social relationships that perpetuate oppression; and 4) the acquiring of power on the part of the oppressed to bring about that restructuring.”

In short, this construct of human rights not as a static framework, but as a dynamic result of a process determined by the masses of people in a society, toward a vision of “dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”¹⁵² For local economic development and planning, this means that there is no simple checklist exercise to confirm that rights have been fulfilled, but rather the people and communities themselves must be self-determining in what their values and needs are, and then have the power to make their desires a reality. It is from this place of power that engagement with state and municipal processes must take place.

Establishing transnational solidarity and cooperation

Finally, if there is one lesson to be learned from the history of liberation struggles at a local, regional, or national level, it is that meaningful solidarity with other movements and struggles is paramount. We cannot fight this counter-war on our own. We must hold the global-local and local-global connections beyond the spaces and containers that empire has set up for us.¹⁵³ Looking toward translocal grassroots economies is fundamental. In all my conversations in La Habana and Brooklyn, each person commented on their past and current efforts around international organizing, and their desire to be more connected

¹⁴⁹ I have been a member of the Black Alliance for Peace since 2021 and on the Coordinating Committee (leadership body) of the organization since December 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Baraka (2021); Burden-Stelly (2022)

¹⁵¹ Baraka (2021)

¹⁵² *ibid*

¹⁵³ Such as free-trade conventions, UN forums, and ‘multilateral’ negotiations that do not name imperialism

internationally. Some of these connections were facilitated through UN forums, as was the case for LaShawn and Colette in Brooklyn, this international organizing has historically taken place in UN forums. For the RBA in Cuba, this has primarily been self-organized grassroots engagement with likeminded projects, or attendance at symposiums and meetings convened through social organizations.

Erica, who is involved deeply in both local efforts in Baltimore and international solidarity campaigns, describes clearly that this need for transnational solidarity is to simply because of morality or shared culture, but because the core enemy of capitalist-imperialist violence affects us at home and abroad¹⁵⁴:

I always in my work attempt to connect what's happening locally, domestically, with what's happening globally. And that includes when we say the sanctions are a form of war. But then, how do we understand sanctions here domestically? We could see that in the welfare act, right? And we could see that in the food deserts. We could see that in for-profit healthcare. We could see that in the privatization of our water power, internet. We could see that in our low wages that stifle us. We could see that in this sort of underfunding of public education, the lack of affordable housing. All of these things restrict us as a people and not only do they restrict us economically as a people, which, again, is one of the ways that we can understand ourselves as colonized...So that in itself affects working class Africans and working class African communities. We should probably be clear that it does not drastically affect them in this way that we would see it impacting nations like Haiti or Zimbabwe, or the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Afghanistan, or Cuba, or Nicaragua, or Yemen like the list goes on and on...These are the ways where our struggles stop being so disjointed, and we start to really understand there's a primary contradiction here that is affecting all of us.

In this understanding, the same primary contradiction that oppresses the people of Cuba, imperialism, also leads to underdevelopment and state violence against Black peoples in the US. Robert Allen argued that this programmatic and political task would also require an economic program on a national level and the proliferation of international solidarity with 'Third World' peoples to defeat imperialism through an:¹⁵⁵

all-encompassing, planned communal social system on a national scale and with strong international ties. Such a struggle would begin to break down capitalist property relations within the black community, replacing them with more socially useful communal relationships. Consequently, any benefits accruing from the planned economy could be distributed throughout the community according to individual or family needs, or income could be reinvested to increase the capital assets of the community. Furthermore this struggle would aid materially in breaking black dependency on white society...The establishment of close working relationships with revolutionary forces around the world would be of great importance. The experiences of Third World revolutionaries in combating American imperialism could be quite useful to black liberation fighters. For the moment, mutual support between Afro-American and Third World revolutionaries is more verbal than tangible, but the time could come when this citation is reversed, and black

¹⁵⁴ Interview w/ Erica

¹⁵⁵ Allen (1969) pp. 278

people are well advised to begin now to work toward this kind of revolutionary, international solidarity.

Though manifested in different specific strategies or timelines, the sentiment around national self-determination and liberation through a Black communally controlled and/or cooperatively-based economy, independent political institutions, and revolutionary solidarity has been shared by many who organized for Black liberation: Claudia Jones (National Self-Determination), Malcolm X (Revolutionary Black Nationalism), and Kwame Ture (Black Power), and more. In 1970, Huey Newton, Black Panther Party Chairman, argued that “in order to plan a real intercommunal economy we will have to acknowledge how the world is hooked up.”¹⁵⁶ For him and the BPP, this meant that self-determination in their contemporary society required forming connections across borders and geographies with other local, regional, and national movements to not only build solidarity but plan for their survival and material advancement at a grassroots level. Even Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, though never a stated Black nationalist or communist, agreed that the problem with ‘the ghetto’ was continuation of the plantation dynamics and the lack of power in Black communities; thus, the required change in society would necessitate radical reforms, mass organization, and a revolution of values.¹⁵⁷

This understanding is not new. During the age of the Haitian Revolution, excitement around social revolution spread throughout the Caribbean because of the popular resistance and mobility of African peoples.¹⁵⁸ In the 18th Century, these information networks served a critical function of exporting ideas of revolution and the abolition of slavery from Haiti to the rest of the region, and were so effective that officials suppressed the spread of ideas by limiting human mobility in the region.¹⁵⁹ Interestingly, here, there are strong historical ties between Afro Cuban communities and Black communities and institutions in the US South, which long pre-date the Cuban Revolution.¹⁶⁰ This included close relationships with Tuskegee Institute and a broader cultural connection between Harlem and Havana, especially during the Harlem renaissance.¹⁶¹ Today, our systems and our world are vastly different, but we need similar efforts of purposeful connection and solidarity. Our struggles are connected, so our people must be too.

One such transnational effort is the Afro InterAmerican Forum on Climate Change, which is connecting cities and organizations across the Americas to work on projects that will support Afrodescendant communities through the challenges of the climate crisis. Currently this focus has been on working with mayors of various cities to have a pipeline of climate-focused projects that they lead and draft themselves.

¹⁵⁶ Newton (1970)

¹⁵⁷ King Jr. (1967) *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* pp. 154-172

¹⁵⁸ Scott (2018) pp. 34-37

¹⁵⁹ *ibid* pp. 37-75

¹⁶⁰ Guriday (2010) *Forging Diaspora*

¹⁶¹ *ibid* pp. 107-150

For the AIFCC, this starts with capacity building from a grassroots perspective, and enabling communities to engage in politics and make changes in their regions. In this, they are working with multinational institutions like the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP16) and the IADB to support a network of mayors from various cities in the region. Despite the deep ties with these multinational organizations, there is the possibility of a future where grassroots communities control these relationships and resources themselves.

Another grassroots effort, which is building political power for grassroots organizations is the Black Alliance for Peace's Zone of Peace campaign.¹⁶² A primary goal of this work is to connect radical grassroots across the hemisphere to oppose imperialist militarism and violence, and to guarantee a zone of peace in the Americas through bottom-up struggle. This has been done primarily through political and social movement connections and campaign-building; however, such connections could serve as the basis for grassroots economies and more direct material support as well. The current challenge for such efforts is now to incorporate more economic and material solidarity into transnational work. Current efforts almost solely have focused on political organizing, cultural connections, and policy concerns. Part of our task now is to expand this potential, and begin to look towards translocal Pan-Africanist economic projects throughout the Americas, as forms of grassroots planning and practice toward Black liberation.

Summarizing strategies of struggle

In this chapter, we have seen how various strategies to achieve those goals of revolutionary survival might be advanced. These strategies – from the heightening of political consciousness, to the organizing of mass-based community power, to carving out liberated zones and communes, to the utilizing of municipal resources and power toward survival, to establishing transnational solidarity and intercommunal cooperation based in self-determination – each vary in their level of applicability given the political-social-economic context of any given municipality, region, and nation. What is clear is that in constructing grassroots economies, we must look beyond the strictures of traditional economic development and planning tools, and not be afraid to engage in what might seem like political battles and struggles that these strategies suggest, because there is nothing more political than guaranteeing our survival pending liberation.

¹⁶² I have been a part of this campaign since its launch in April 2023



*“To survive,
Let the past
Teach you--
Past customs,
Struggles,
Leaders and thinkers.*

*Let
These
Help you.*

*Let them inspire you,
Warn you,
Give you strength.*

*But beware:
God is Change.
Past is past.
What was
Cannot
Come again.*

*To survive,
know the past.
Let it touch you.
Then let
The past
Go.”*

-Octavia Butler, Parable of the Talents

An invitation to revolutionary survival: Grassroots economies and ‘planning’ for liberation

“It is not enough to hate and believe in the past to make a revolution. Hatred and belief in the past are sufficient prods for the rebellion phase. We must love and be future-oriented if we wish to carry out the revolution.” — Ghassan Kanafani

In this study, we have seen how organizers, activists, and practitioners are defining and implementing practices and principles of grassroots economies to struggle for their people and advance collective liberation beyond the hierarchies of traditional economic development. We have seen how they answer Gilmore’s call of “*If not this, then what?*”. In building cultures of liberation, grassroots organizers and practitioners focus on art, health, and community; develop material economies connected to spirituality and religion connected to Africa; form cultural economies that transform ways of being with one another; and advance their work and relationships in *la manera afro*. In leading processes of social (re)construction, they are crafting and implementing people-centered institutions; developing autonomous forms of Black dignity and consciousness; and crafting spaces of freedom reminiscent of the Black Commune. In working from an Ethos of Community Care, we see examples of grassroots mutual aid that advances culture and visibility for marginalized groups like with Afrodiverso; we see East New York Restoration and the Central Brooklyn EDC making connections to state processes that help better care for communities in dire need; and we see communities of empowered Black people being able to live with a little more dignity via Todo Turbante and La Muñeca Negra. Finally, in struggling for justice over the life systems that make up their day-to-day existence, these actors are exploring and developing methods of community control over assets and shifting their people’s relationships to resources.

These are economic acts, and they are also political. And if local economic development and planning is one of the primary ways that we conceive of making our built environments and social relations reflect our collective values and visions, then this field needs to have a clear political orientation, with a principled foundation. Through these principles these grassroots actors are redefining what it means to “develop” an economy and construct by, for, and with the people. These principles are bolstered by various strategic practices that are employed at different scales: heightening political consciousness of community members and institutions to engage in liberatory placemaking, organizing mass-based community power to build self-determinative capacities of the people and avoid capture or cooptation, carving out liberated zones and communes that seek to transform social relations, utilizing state and municipal resources to advance community survival, and establishing transnational relationships of solidarity and cooperation for care and protection. Put together, these are but examples of how various

forms of grassroots economic formations are being envisioned and implemented throughout the Americas, in the name of Black liberation. And we should not get it twisted, advancing Black liberation through grassroots economic practices and planning is a political act.

We cannot afford to think of planning as apolitical because there is always politics behind the decisions being made, it is most often a neoliberal status quo that we are too accustomed to. Imbuing politics here, then, is an attempt to discuss how we think about how to build a durable peace and a real democracy in service of our people, our communities, and our planet— with principles based in collective self-determination, human dignity and equality, ecological justice, and revolutionary love and care. And if these are our understandings of the need of local economic planning, then it is clear that such conception of planning and local economies play a role in the process to overcome underdevelopment and build toward the DuBoisian idea of a ‘durable peace’ by both addressing the everyday needs, social relations, and cultures of Africans in the Americas, while building the coordination and wider economic relationships necessary to fight global systems of oppression that are at their most vicious in capitalism and Western imperialism. We must focus on the primacy of organizing people power as the basis of planning for grassroots economies.

Reckoning with local economic development and planning

Local economic development and planning, if it is to serve the people, should not be an exercise in aesthetically beautifying streets, increasing municipal bond ratings, returning good job or grant reports, or distributing extra pennies to people struggling to make ends meet every day. To support liberation, this is not enough. The principles and strategies of grassroots economic practices that we have seen might allow us to break from what planning and economic development have traditionally meant. As practitioners, organizers, and/or scholars in local economic development and planning, there should be no question as to how this field has often vacillated between a passive and collaborative participant in the warfare on African peoples, as well as racialized, working class, and poor communities. Local economic development and planning have been wielded by the powerful to prey on the marginalized. We see this in the violently-enforced spatial injustices of racial segregation in the Jim Crow and apartheid in both South Africa and Palestine; we see this in the community devastation wrought by urban renewal in the US and development-induced displacement throughout the Global South; we see this in the land theft from Black farmers and corporate land grabs of agricultural and forested lands globally – just to name a few.

As we have already discussed, Black/African peoples and communities striving for liberation have had to do so outside of the norms of the professionalized public, social, and private sectors because their conditions demanded radical solutions and mainstream society was unwilling to recognize that. That demand for radical change remains necessary; yet even the more strongly social justice-oriented forms of

economic development and planning have not been able to respond to these conditions effectively. The failure of economic development to deliver better outcomes should force us to rethink how we understand something that is sold to us as being a positive or at least neutral asset to our local environments.

In our contemporary practice, we have comfortably reached a point where most are willing to admit that planning is not neutral and can be utilized to exert political goals based on power and difference.¹⁶³ Yet, while we may have convinced ourselves that planning for social justice can overcome these historical travesties, when solutions are articulated, they almost always fall into the category of ‘reform’ not transformation. And we would be wise to remember Burton’s observation that reform and repression are the two complementary strategies of the state’s war on radicalism¹⁶⁴. In recent years there has been more aggressive and sustained critique of the way local economic development and planning have perpetuated white supremacy, patriarchy, and injustices through various forms. However, this must go further to interrogate the very real fact that without divorcing the tools for (re)constructing economies from the ideologies, policy frameworks, and material flows of global racial empire, planning and economic development will only beget empire and its perverse forms of domination by another name.

After the 1960s failure to institute durable radical changes in our social hierarchies, individualism, entrepreneurialism, and elite capture have become the dominant trend in urban and regional planning since the 1970s.¹⁶⁵ Gilmore names this as well, arguing that “[t]oday’s political-economic superstructure is grounded in the radical failures and counterrevolutionary successes of an earlier era, as exemplified by the antagonism between insurgents and counterinsurgents in 1968.”¹⁶⁶ This historic counterinsurgency against Black liberation struggles led to the dilution and demobilization of more radical, communal economic development efforts that were informed by Black Southern social relationships and traditional African societies. This must be overcome. As William Tabb wrote after reflecting on the failures of ‘Black Economic Development’ in the 70s and 80s, “[l]ike it or not the only way the demands of the oppressed can be really met is to end the systemic oppression of the economic system.”¹⁶⁷ Fighting to end this systemic oppression and build a new alternative requires new and revolutionary actions and actors.

A closing word on liberation and ‘the planner’

Planners must stop “Planning” as it has professionally been done, and instead become “practitioners of freedom dreams that occur outside of planning education and profession” and contribute to “movements and redistribut[e] resources to them.”¹⁶⁸ The role of the revolutionary planner in this might be to support

¹⁶³ Gilmore (2002)

¹⁶⁴ Burton (2023) pp. 17

¹⁶⁵ Harvey (1989)

¹⁶⁶ Gilmore (2007) pp. 29

¹⁶⁷ Tabb (1979), pp. 85

¹⁶⁸ Dozier (2018)

the self-determinative capacities of the people and to resource communities so that they might develop a present and future where all can survive and grow – doing so with values of revolutionary love, justice, and care. Such planners might also embrace an understanding of Wood’s Blues Epistemology when facilitating and supporting community self-determination, through a vision that embraces the role of culture, history, and many forms of lived knowledge from individuals and community members – particularly those most marginalized and exploited by the capitalist-imperialist system under which we live. This might allow us to form and inhabit spaces of actual freedom where people have the resources they need to survive with dignity on a material level, be connected to their natural environment on a sustained planet, and have the ability to express their culture, humanity, and spirit as well.

When Eric Williams wrote that slavery was war, he was naming a fact that enslaved Africans in Haiti in 1791, in New Orleans in 1811, in Jamaica and Southampton County, Virginia in 1831, and in so many other places across the Atlantic world knew – that they were subjected to war and they had to rebel.¹⁶⁹ Today, we do not have that mass recognition and consciousness, so we must build it; we do not exist in the social relations that serve life and survival, so we must transform them; we do not principally determine what happens with our land and territory, so we must take that power. Planners and others who care about delivering on transformative change must work with the popular movements opposing these forms of imperialist and neocolonial domination — how can one talk about abolitionist planning¹⁷⁰ but not mobilize against Cop City? We must look to support anti-imperialist, community-centered processes of self-determination, without getting too caught up in the purity of the emerging forms of popular sovereignty, and at least start to make the connections in our heads and in our communities between what is happening “elsewhere” and what is happening “at home”. Because they are one in the same.

We cannot afford for local economic development and planning to hide behind apolitical masks because as George Jackson said, “people are already dying who could be saved...generations more will live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution.”¹⁷¹ The project of constructing grassroots economies toward Black liberation is one piece of the puzzle to establishing new material, cultural, and spiritual understandings and relationships that might lead us forward into collective liberation within this ever-changing world.

¹⁶⁹ Williams (1944)

¹⁷⁰ Abbott, Aslan, O’Brien & Serafin. (2018)

¹⁷¹ Jackson (1971)



“...We have dared to be free, let us be thus by ourselves and for ourselves. Let us imitate the grown child: his own weight breaks the boundary that has become an obstacle to him. What people fought for us? What people wanted to gather the fruits of our labor? And what dishonorable absurdity to conquer in order to be enslaved.

Enslaved? ... Let us leave this description for the French; they have conquered but are no longer free.

Let us walk down another path; let us imitate those people who, extending their concern into the future, and dreading to leave an example of cowardice for posterity, preferred to be exterminated rather than lose their place as one of the world's free peoples.

Let us ensure, however, that a missionary spirit does not destroy our work; let us allow our neighbors to breathe in peace; may they live quietly under the laws that they have made for themselves, and let us not, as revolutionary firebrands, declare ourselves the lawgivers of the Caribbean, nor let our glory consist in troubling the peace of the neighboring islands. Unlike that which we inhabit, theirs has not been drenched in the innocent blood of its inhabitants; they have no vengeance to claim from the authority that protects them.

Fortunate to have never known the ideals that have destroyed us, they can only have good wishes for our prosperity. Peace to our neighbors; but let this be our cry: “Anathema to the French name! Eternal hatred of France!”

Natives of Haiti! My happy fate was to be one day the sentinel who would watch over the idol to which you sacrifice; I have watched, sometimes fighting alone, and if I have been so fortunate as to return to your hands the sacred trust you confided to me, know that it is now your task to preserve it. In fighting for your liberty, I was working for my own happiness. Before consolidating it with laws that will guarantee your free individuality, your leaders, whom I have assembled here, and I, owe you the final proof of our devotion.

Generals and you, leaders, collected here close to me for the good of our land, the day has come, the day which must make our glory, our independence, eternal. If there could exist among us a lukewarm heart, let him distance himself and shudder to take the oath which must unite us. Let us vow to ourselves, to posterity, to the entire universe, to forever renounce France, and to die rather than live under its domination; to fight until our last breath for the independence of our country.

And you, a people so long without good fortune, witness to the oath we take, remember that I counted on your constancy and courage when I threw myself into the career of liberty to fight the despotism and tyranny you had struggled against for 14 years. Remember that I sacrificed everything to rally to your defense; family, children, fortune, and now I am rich only with your liberty; my name has become a horror to all those who want slavery. Despots and tyrants curse the day that I was born. If ever you refused or grumbled while receiving those laws that the spirit guarding your fate dictates to me for your own good, you would deserve the fate of an ungrateful people. But I reject that awful idea; you will sustain the liberty that you cherish and support the leader who commands you. Therefore vow before me to live free and independent, and to prefer death to anything that will try to place you back in chains. Swear, finally, to pursue forever the traitors and enemies of your independence.”

-Jean-Jacques Dessalines, “Dessalines’ Declaration of Independence Speech” (excerpt)¹⁷²

¹⁷² Speech given in Gonaives, 1st of January 1804, the first year of independence of Ayiti

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