

What must we do to be free? On the building of Liberated Zones

Ed Whitfield

In an increasingly complex world, that cannot be fully comprehended, there is a need to seek out and develop clear explanations that go to the roots of our problems and propose realistic solutions. This stands opposed to simplistic, uninformed, and highly subjective views that are popular in casual discourse and social media. And it also stands in opposition to academic discourse that is often disconnected from an organic connection to the way people feel and struggle. This essay speaks to the possibility of freedom now -- not off in the distant future. We can build freedom a little bit at a time, rather than waiting for a time to get it all at once. The essay describes the work required to keep sight of the guiding north star and never be satisfied with oppression and exploitation as if it is the best we can do, and as long as we, personally and perhaps additionally our family and friends are relatively privileged. The importance of freedom dreams is addressed along with an analysis of privilege among us. It takes up three views of power and expanding on tools derived from the work of Lloyd Hogan and it talks about the nature and possibilities of building liberated zones.

The world that we live in is extremely complex. While the misery, exploitation, alienation and confusion experienced by many people that I care about moves me to want to engage with them in changing the offending systems, there remains the acute need to understand deeply the current situation and how it got this way, to have any hopes of engaging effectively in the process of making change. As Charlene Carruthers, the founder of the youth-centered organization, Black Youth Project (BYP100) and author of the recent book, *Unapologetic*, has said many times, “Power concedes nothing without an organized demand.” The organizing of that demand requires an accurate analysis of the essentials, the roots of the situation. We can’t succeed or be satisfied with simplistic/uninformed, ignorant, subjective views. Sometimes, the magnitude of the problems we face seems to imply that we need to resign ourselves to a long-protracted process that can only generate change in the far distant future. After “the revolution” comes. We might be left thinking, “It would be nice to be really free, but that is a long time off. We won’t see it in our lifetime.

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We just need to make do with the best we can do.” I have come to think very differently. Freedom is not a single event. It is a process of being free. We can have some freedom now. It is not just something far in the future. We don’t have to wait until we know how to have it completely and overthrow all oppression. We can start freedom now and build on it more and more, never losing sight of the guiding vision, our “north star”. We don’t have to be satisfied with continued oppression and exploitation as the best we can do and somehow acceptable as long as we, personally and perhaps additionally, our family and friends are relatively privileged. No, for me, there is an uncompromising need to look hard at the way things are, understanding the recent historical roots of the existing system, and the current relationships of power and privilege that characterize the times. I can say unequivocally, in answer to that question chanted in the 60s “What do we want?” “FREEDOM!” “When do we want it?” “NOW!”

Freedom Dreams

But what do we even mean by “freedom”? Can we articulate it? Are we able to envision it in the contemporary world? Do we dare dream about something that far removed from our current reality? Let me use past and current observations to help us see the world of freedom possibilities.

On Thursday, the 12th day of January 1865, 20 negro ministers met in Savannah, Georgia with Major General William Tecumseh Sherman and Edwin M Stanton, the Secretary of War for the Union, to talk about what they understood about what slavery had been and what they wanted to see as their freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation had recently gone into effect. Notes from that meeting, taken by a military secretary, were published in February in the *New-York Daily Tribune*.¹

Officials asked the following: “State what you understand by slavery and the freedom that was to be given by the President’s proclamation.”

The representative of the group stated, “Slavery is, receiving by *irresistible power* the work of another [person], and not by [their] *consent*. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom.” The spokesperson was Garrison Frazier, 67 years old. He had been born in Granville County, North Carolina and was enslaved until eight years before, when he paid \$1,000 in gold and silver to buy himself and his wife’s freedom. He was an ordained minister for 35 years, in failing health who at that point had no congregation. He had been chosen to speak for the delegation.

I was moved when I first read this account and will stand by this answer. It was given by a representative of former chattel slaves who had just seen that form of slavery ended through their

¹ 13 Feb. 1865, “Negroes of Savannah,” Consolidated Correspondence File, series 225, Central Records, Quartermaster General, Record Group 92, National Archives.

own efforts in conjunction with the war fought by the army of the United States. It is a clear recognition that the essence of bondage is the use of power to take from a person the product of their own labor and that the nature of freedom would be the control of one's own labor. This might seem narrow to some. Many of us no longer think in terms of the essential exploitative nature of chattel slavery and think instead of the restrictions of movement and association, but we should be clear: that restriction served to facilitate the separation of men, women and children from the product of their labor that they were forced to supply by the system in place to their owners whose right to them as property was enforced by law and custom. It also serves as a reminder that most of us are still not free. We are currently, through the mechanism of the market place and the fear of starvation, still separated from the product of our own labor.

Chattel slavery has largely ended (except for our brothers and sisters languishing in prisons and those people caught up in nominally illegal human trafficking), but wage slavery continues widely, with little recognition that it too separates people from the product of their own labor and should be replaced with a system where we can enjoy the product of our labor and make its accumulation available to our families and communities as we desire.

Malcolm X on privilege among us

Unfortunately, many of us take the relative privilege we have over some of the more oppressed and exploited folks as a sign of our own freedom. Some of us with slight privilege even engage in protecting and the architects and major beneficiaries of our exploitation in the hopes that we can maintain our privilege rather than boldly asserting our desire for real freedom. Malcolm X, in his 1963 speech "Message to the Grassroots," was instructive in pointing out the distinction between the house negro and the field negro.

The house negro identified with his owner. If the master didn't feel well, he might say, "Massa, we sick." If the big house was to catch on fire, he would get buckets of water to try to put it out. The house negro attached his own wellbeing to the wellbeing of his owner. While shortsighted, this is not altogether irrational since the limited privilege enjoyed by the house negro -- pine boards on his floor or sleeping and eating in the big house -- was at the whim of the slave owner. The house negro never contemplated freedom. It might have seemed too far out of reach. Instead, he sought to preserve his privilege and that was contingent on the master who conferred that privilege being kept safe and secure.

The field negro, on the other hand, did not enjoy such benefits. The floor of their hut was dirt. When it was cold outside, it was cold inside. Their meals were not altogether unlike the cattle that were fed purely for the economic purpose that they served. The field negroes were worked, and they were beaten when they did not work fast enough to maximize the profits of the owner. When they knew the master was sick, they wished he would die. When they saw the big house on fire, they would pray for a strong wind to help intensify the flames. Without being privileged, they had no reason to hope for the safety of their oppressor.

It is in the Black Radical Tradition that we appreciate Malcom's analysis as a way of understanding some of the divergent views in the Black community on social change. There are some of us who

link our fate to the existing system. Those of us who enjoy some relative privilege and don't fully identify with those who don't are likely to find ourselves torn between fighting the system and fighting those who oppose it. They are left thinking that some activist efforts are too radical and might endanger the security that they feel from going along to get along with the systems of oppression that we face. Audre Lorde once famously said that “. . .the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” (Lorde 1979)² This has often been misinterpreted to mean that tools that are of use to oppressive systems cannot be used to build liberating systems. What she clearly explained in the same paragraph of the same essay was that “. . .this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.” I would make her point differently. I think that you can tear down the master's house using some of the master's tools. Tools are just tools. They amplify, or multiply human effort and they don't have to be used the way they were intended or for the purpose they were created. I think that the real problem is that it is difficult to tear down the master's house while you live in it. And that, for many of us, represents the challenge. Our presence in the big house leads many of us to feel the need to defend it, rather than pray for the strong wind when it begins to catch fire.

But in order to hope for the master's house to burn, as a field Negro would, one would have to have a view – a vision of an alternative, some place to go so that we don't simply perish in the flames. We would have to have an image of freedom that is clear enough in our minds to guide our thinking and dreaming. Robin D G Kelley, in his book *Freedom Dreams* outlines the importance of such vision. He points out that the black freedom struggle has always had freedom dreams.³ I heard my friend, the poet and educator Haki Madhubuti say in a speech once, that we are good at expressing our oppression narrative, but what is our freedom narrative? We spend so much time talking about what we can't do, and what is hurting and what “the man” won't let us do, that many of us have stopped even dreaming about what we want, what we can do, what we can and must build, what we are able to provide. We are often suckered into thinking only of what we want the government at some level, or some foundation, or some organization to do for us, rather than thinking about what we can do for ourselves. We spend our time resisting the power that might crush us or advocating to the external power that might help us, rather than organizing ourselves to be the power that we need to do what has to be done to express our full humanity.

Three views of power

So, we have three potential relationships to power. Power can crush us, so we have to resist it in order to survive. Power can also help us, if we direct it and tell it how it will be of the most benefit, so we appeal to those in power to understand our needs and find a way to be of help. But we do not always have to deal with external power. We can be power if we understand our situation and organize ourselves and secure the resources that we need to be fully productive and retain the product of our labor. Our full humanity is tied up in not just resisting power, not just directing

² Lorde, Audre. (1984). “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.” *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press. P 110-114

³ Kelley, Robin D. G. (2002). *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press.

other people with power, but ultimately being the power ourselves, to meet our needs and to elevate the quality of life in our community for ourselves and the people we care about. This is why I care about and advocate the creation of liberated zones.

What is a liberated zone?

Lloyd Hogan was once described to me, by Curtis Haynes, an Associate Professor of Economics and Finance at Buffalo State College in Buffalo NY, as the greatest political economist I had never heard of. Hogan came to the USA in the 1940s and studied economics at the University of Chicago with several people who went on to win Nobel prizes in economics for their original work. Lloyd Hogan himself did not pursue a PhD, but rather got a Master's degree and spent years teaching economics at several southern HBCUs. Later on, he taught courses for Ivy League colleges and in the early 1980's, he took the notes from his class for Black Studies students at Harvard to be the basis for his book, *Principles of Black Political Economy*. He also spent time as the editor of the Journal of Black Political Economy, in addition to work for several commissions and think tanks during the 1970s and 1980s. I discovered that Lloyd Hogan was living near me in Durham, North Carolina. Since then, I have had the pleasure of meeting and talking with Lloyd Hogan in his home for many hours.

In his book, (Hogan, 1984), he lays out several general principles that characterize all economies. There is an internal labor process that produces people, and an external labor process that produces food (and stuff). In the internal labor process where people are produced, there is no food produced. The internal labor process is dependent on the external labor process for food, or it perishes. The external labor process does not produce people, so it depends on the internal labor process or it perishes. Hogan has an eloquent description of the internal labor process:

Birthing of babies, nurturing them, amusing them, educating them, politicizing them, mystifying them, moralizing them, socializing them, inculcating into them the mysteries of their peoplehood, rearing them to adulthood -- all of these activities are integral parts of the Internal Labor Process. Internal Labor Process is the burning ground of the human population. It generates the basis for the surviving population . . ." (Hogan, p20)

Every economy, according to Hogan, is the interchange between the internal labor process and the external labor process. Other, more traditional, Marxist theoreticians would talk about the internal labor process in different terms. The idea of the value of labor power embodies the concepts that make up Hogan's understanding of the internal labor process. But what Hogan does in his formulation is to center the production of people as an economic activity that is as important to the economy as the production of other stuff. What this does is to clearly center the activity of women as economic actors rather than people peripheral to the external labor process where food and tools are produced, an economy dominated by men. For there to be a continuous and sustainable community, the people made in the internal labor process have to be fully developed to become the productive members of the external labor process and also to continue to reproduce the internal labor process.

If we are to be free, if we are to end toiling in the fields where the product of our labor is taken by someone who did not do the work, if we are to leave the master's house where we share in a few privileges in order to protect the master, we need to have a place to go. We need to go to a place where we can *build freedom*. If this place is to be sustainable, it has to be a place where we can engage our labor and creativity to produce our needs – food and stuff. It also has to be a place where we can make and fully develop more people like us, and if it is to be more than mere survival, it has to be a place where we can make meaning of our lives. That is, we must make the spiritual and artistic life of community, the religion, the poetry, the art, the story telling, and the sense of community to make it all make sense and be worthwhile.

In a liberated zone, we build freedom. We make people, we make food, we make meaning, and without a doubt, we would need to be able to defend the things we make.

Intentional Communities

There are already existing communities that are very much like the liberated zones I describe here. There are intentional communities that combine collective living arrangements with productive opportunities, often including or even centered around food production. Some of them are arranged as egalitarian communities where everything is shared, and intense democratic processes draw all of the community members into collective decision making on all of the community's affairs, including how the necessary tasks for the community are shared. There is a long history of such communities and they have likely had little impact on the larger societies outside of them, even though they possess many transformative elements. Some of these communities are insular in nature and mainly represent a way to get away from what is painful, irrational, or at the very least, undesirable in the mainstream communities. Many of these communities are also known for leading a rustic, some might even say primitive existence. That is partly a reflection of the distance between these communities and the consumerism that surrounds them. I would offer that for the type of liberated zones that I think will make more of a difference to be viable, they would have to be able to create an intense loyalty among those who live in them, and a strong base of support for those on the outside, who, for one reason or the other do not. It would never be sufficient to offer that these communities are capable, or even interested in replicating the life styles that have been created in the dominant society. There would need to be some conscious breaking away from societal norms. But I contend that it becomes easier as the existing structures prove themselves increasingly incapable of keeping their promises of a comfortable life for the many. But we still have to ask, "Is it enough stuff?" You know we are addicted to bigger and bigger piles of stuff, despite the ecological price that we pay and the fact that for whatever we accumulate there is someone somewhere trying to sell us more.

There are still those who will not be satisfied unless they are able to buy the things that are being marketed to them. Many young people will not remember, but once a 19-inch TV was considered a big screen. Nowadays, folks with limited income will buy 52" and 80" screens on time terms, claiming that these are household needs. While I am no one to object to other people's desires, I don't think the liberated zones that I envision would be producing large screen TV units in the near term. There would likely be live theatre, and live concerts, and live music, art and poetry shows

on the regular. This is what I mean when I talk about the need to make meaning. We are capable of leading good lives without the consumer debt peonage that many of us have become accustomed to as a means of fulfilling the dreams not of our families and communities, but rather the dreams of the marketers who derive their privilege from compensation they get from getting us to buy things that we don't need, and quite honestly might not have even thought of, had the marketers not told us that we just had to have them. It is sad that we are called upon to measure ourselves, not by what we know, not by what we can do, not by what we are, but rather by what we buy at high prices because of celebrity endorsements. It is sad to hear "I just want to get paid." As the highest aspiration of some young folks. And when someone points out to them the unfairness of a system that makes many more losers than winners and points out that we deserve a society that is fair and creates opportunities for all, it is so sad to hear, "I'll take my chance. I'd rather take a chance at being rich than to have certainty of a less glamorous existence." We need to remember that we are addicted. But more and more people are coming to realize that the deck is stacked. You get to cut the cards but the jokers, the aces and kings have all been taken out of the deck. There is very little left to win. This isn't really gambling, because we have no chance.

Who is in Our Community?

A final thing that I must share that I got from Lloyd Hogan is his respect for dead people as part of community along with the unborn. How I understand it is this: While the living adult population is what many of us think of as community, there are others who are not with us now who play an important role. There are two groups of dead folks – the living dead, those who are remembered by the living for having been a part of their lives. These typically are parents and friends and even business associates who we knew during their lifetimes which overlapped with ours. We carry these people with us every day in the memory of the things that they said and even the promises that we made to them that continue to shape our ambitions. The other group of the dead are those ancestors who had passed away before we were born, but on whose shoulders, we stand. They include those who fought, lived and died for freedom before we got here. Those who chose to endure, rather than give up, whose very survival allowed us to be born. Those whose ideas have endured and continue to shape our thinking and understanding of the world. Those whose productivity created the wealth that shapes the modern world. These too are a part of our community.

But in addition to the dead members of our community, there are others who are not physically here with us who are yet to be born. It is in consideration of their needs that we have to shape a present and future that is sustainable so that we do not feed our comfort with their discomfort nor take out debt that they will be forced to repay.

Is Guaranteed Income the Answer?

There are those who look at the current system, and rather than looking for ways to create opportunities for everyone to be productive, they are instead attracted to the idea that what is really needed is to empower everyone as consumers. Consumerism has become normalized, and the questions that we ought to ask about how can we control production are reduced to asking about

how can we be assured the opportunity to buy from things mysteriously produced by someone, somewhere else. The advocacy for a guaranteed income fits into this category.

I like to tell the story that I heard from Bongoni Finca who was involved in the South African Truth and Reconciliation process in the late 1990's. It seems a Mr. Smith had been told that if he came forward with the crimes he had committed during the apartheid era and apologized, he would get amnesty. So he asked to set up a meeting with the Black Thabo who had been his neighbor years before and from whom the white Mr. Smith had stolen a cow. "Yes, Thabo," Mr. Smith said during his testimony, "I stole your cow. I realize now that it was wrong and that it caused difficulty for you and your family. And for this, I want to truly apologize. I should have never stolen your cow. I got caught up in the times where we did not respect your people. I am ashamed of what I did, and I ask your forgiveness." Thabo was visibly moved. Never in his life did he expect that he would get an apology from Mr. Smith who had always disrespected him and his family, causing them great misery. Thabo sobbed as he heard this and moved forward to embrace Mr. Smith, telling him that he would, indeed, accept his apology. With this, Mr. Smith turned to walk out of the room. But Thabo called out, "Wait!" "For what?" said Smith. "What about my cow?" "This has nothing to do with a cow," Mr. Smith said, with an irritated, entitled edge coming back into his voice. "You are ruining our reconciliation!" And I suggest that if Smith had thought about the wonders so guaranteed income he might have additionally offered "I'll just give you a supply of butter." To which an angry Thabo should have replied "If you give me back my cow, I can give *you* some damn butter after I feed my family and take care of the people I care about."

Every time I hear about guaranteed income, I think about the fact that I want the cow. I don't want someone's gift of butter. You can't solve in the sphere of consumption a problem that is created in the sphere of production. For those advocates of guaranteed income, I ask who decides what is produced, out of what materials, utilizing what machinery, and how much it is sold for? If none of that seems to matter, I would offer that the answers to those questions determine whether we will have employment in our communities and whether we poison the water and air. It is nowhere near good enough to get a supply of butter when it is your ownership of the cow that has been denied.

The whole idea of guaranteed is a feeble attempt to save capitalism from one of its internal contradictions where more and more is produced by fewer and fewer workers. At some point there is not a sufficient market to buy what is being produced, leading to a stagnation in production. Guaranteed income places money back in circulation without producing additional jobs, allowing things to be bought, but ultimately shifting those purchasing resources right back to the same owning class which is gathering and accumulating all of the social wealth for itself while generating these problems.

Is Labor Obsolete?

But some progressive activists believe that automation requires shifts in compensation to share the social product because labor itself is obsolete and machines can produce all that we need if we can deal out some money to buy it. It brings up the question "Is labor necessary anymore?"

There is a growing concern about the role of automation and the potential near term obsolescence of labor. Hogan's point is a refreshing alternative view: rather than worry that we are becoming unnecessary for capitalism and will soon be subjected to elimination, we should instead take advantage of the surplus population to build the new ecologically sound and socially equitable economy outside the current capitalist market system. This will require accessing some of the previously created wealth that is stored in the old economy through democratic financial processes completely unlike the current world of finance for extraction.

It should be remembered that despite whatever might be the extent of a political and economic empire, all of humanity was never fully involved in the realm as exploited subjects of empire. Some pockets of people lay outside the system even while many or even most people were drawn into systems of exploitation. There were islands of subsistence in the seas of exploitation. For the exploitative system, what was necessary was that enough surplus was extracted to build and expand power of ruling class and to maintain the privilege of buffer. Never did this include absolutely everyone that might be exploited. There is always a cost benefit analysis to be done of the opportunity cost of extending or reducing the number of people in the exploited population. Is it really worthwhile to outfit another army to conquer more people and tax their crops? Is it really worthwhile to create exploitative jobs for all of the street people in Cleveland?

Surplus Population: A Valuable Product of Late Stage Capitalism

Automation allows a smaller number of people to create even more surplus, not needing as many producers, increases the surplus population. This population is engaged either in parasitic activity, living off what can be taken from the excess of those in the community who have surplus stuff, or it is involved in subsistence, producing for itself and surviving without producing for the market. But this surplus population is the potential basis for building a new, self-reliant economy. Lloyd Hogan makes this point clear:

Inherent in the internal labor of the African-American population is the source for the creation of a surplus African American population over and above the exploitative needs of capital. This is reflected in the growing absolute magnitude of African-Americans who represent the "freeing up" of African-Americans from the binding forces of the capitalist market mechanism. Unemployment among members of the African American population could be part of a process that portends growing liberation of these people from direct capitalist exploitative mechanisms. Rather than bemoan this empirical reality, it therefore becomes extremely urgent that an African-American safety net be installed by the people themselves to capture these unemployed workers so that they can be used in the progressive political and cultural interest of African-Americans. No longer should these people have the coming of a new social revolution slowed by either the external class interests, or by their uncommitted black leaders. The critical issue now before black activists and leadership is how to organize those sectors in the Black community who have been discarded by American capitalism and how to approach this sector, not as pathology or

problems of economic dislocation, but as important resources in the struggle to finally gain control of Black internal and external labor processes. (p. 171).⁴

Another way of saying this is that we have an opportunity to take the people who have been thrown away by capitalism and invite them to be the basis for creating a new economy. Young people who have little or no prospect of finding dignified and rewarding work inside the capitalist system need to be invited outside of it to build a better system in a liberated zone. This flies in the face of what we often do to try to find ways to imbed alienated young people more deeply into the capitalist market system with jobs programs and capitalist-oriented education and training that we call “workforce development.” This often leads nowhere but to a marginal and precarious existence in a declining economy. *We should be building new communities on land that has been taken off of the speculative market, utilizing renewable energy sources and making sure that the local needs of food, clothing and shelter are locally and sustainably produced.* For those things that cannot be easily produced in such a self-reliant sustainable community, trade can be established with the communities that do produce them. Our people who have no necessary role in late stage capitalist production are still able to produce things that are desirable to others. Our style, art, and culture are commodified and sold worldwide. We have the capacity to do this ourselves to trade for the cell phones and flat screen TVs we can’t yet make. While this might seem like a major challenge, we can look to the strength of our young people to be productive as they are creating meaning through artistic and cultural expression.

What We Can Be Doing Now

I recently had a discussion with a land-based organization that has needs for a new building. I suggested that rather than simply going out to foundations and wealthy donors for the grants and donations needed to professionally build a new structure, that instead they should enlist unemployed youth to come to live in an existing structure, engage in growing food on the land, and working with designers and professional builders to learn the building skills as they work on the construction. For those thrown away young people who have been told by society that they are nothing, the building will be a monument to their productivity. Pointing to it they could say, “*I am somebody. I built this!*” It is also the case that working the soil to provide for one’s own food can be transformative. Additionally, there should be plays written and performed, as well as music and dance, leading to the creation of books, music albums, and videos available for sale broadly. Such a community of people could also reimagine what an educational system really needs to be to meet the needs of community and not the needs of capital. Included would be real history, real political thought, real culture, and the technology needed to sustain and elevate community infrastructure and community production.

What would be needed to begin this process? Mainly the will to do so. The energy and resources that are regularly put into rescuing capitalism from its internal contradictions and pending crises should be directed to efforts to build freedom. The energy spent trying to convince young people

⁴ Hogan, L. (1992). “The Role of Land and African Centered Values in Black Economic Development” in James Jennings *Race, Politics, and Economic Development: Community Perspectives*. New York: Verso Books.

that they are somehow pathological and need fixing can be directed to recruiting them to communities where they will be relied on for their productive potential.

Instead of us building self-reliance and building our people's power to do things for ourselves, we spend too much of our time appealing to, or resisting external power as though we must accept its existence and that we can't change, destroy or at the very least leave it. If we are to be free, we must assume the power over our own lives and build freedom.

Liberated Zones, Again

Palmares was a community of run-away slaves in Brazil in the 17th century that lasted for nearly 100 years. It is often referred to as a *quilombo* but in contemporary documents of the period such communities were called *mocambos*, with *quilombo* reserved to describe a network of such communities. I like to think of liberated zones as our *mocambo* or tied together with other such communities, our *quilombo* – our maroon community which can stand as the place where we will build freedom. It is a place of freedom that exists alongside the existing exploitation system. We don't have to wait for it. It does not destroy exploitation, but it is available as an escape. And when the existing system weakens, dies, or collapses under its own weight from its internal contradictions, the liberated zones are examples of a more humane, more just, more ecologically sustainable way to organize our lives. The liberated zones are places for building and practicing full scale freedom, a laboratory for a better world that can come to be before freedom is widely available and fully replaces exploitation.

Life in a liberated zone entails:

- Sustainably making and/or finding food
- Sustainably making and developing people as the carriers and creators of productivity, culture, wisdom and technology
- Making meaning: evolving life beyond birth, survival, and death
- Collectively and determinedly defending what we have made

The Limitations of The So-called Democracy of an Oppressive System

There was a time when you could buy a car of any color, as long as it was black. There wasn't much choice. These days, we are encouraged to vote in elections where we can *support candidates from either of the two-capitalist war-mongering parties*. Independent candidates who actually support social transformation are described as wasted votes or not allowed to get very far in the political vetting process. It brings to mind an option that might have been offered to the enslaved to vote on which plantation to be enslaved on, or to choose their overseer based on their position on what would be the maximum number of lashes in a beating, or the best way to punish low production or talking back. I'd like to think that I am a descendent from the slave who would have stood on the back row of such a slave voting campaign gathering, constantly looking up into the sky. When asked what they were looking for and why, they would whisper, "Y'all go ahead and vote on one of them or the other, but I'm looking for the north star in the dipping gourd. 'Cause first chance I get, I'm outta here." In the USA, we won't vote ourselves to freedom in spite of the

rhetoric of what claims to be the more progressive of the two oppressive exploitative parties. We will have to build freedom. And on leaving the plantation, we may want to burn down the big house. Not because burning it will feed us, but rather because it just seems like the right thing to do.

The Devastating Nature of the Present

It should be clear to us that we don't all share equitably in the benefits from modern world. We live in a world of the domination of capital. In it the owner class accumulates the surplus created by those who produce value. Those in the owning class then use their control over the socially created value to dominate virtually every aspect of social life for the singular purpose of being able to extract and accumulate even more value. This power that comes as a benefit of the ownership of means of life is used to threaten death by starvation to all who resist obeying the needs of capital expansion. There is no limit to the greed of the capitalist system. The unlimited expansion of capital is the singular logic of this world system. But infinite expansion is not possible on a finite planet, and we see the effect of careless exploitation of natural resources and human activity on the planet's ability to support human life with its needs for clean water and clean air in addition to controlling the potential for climate disasters that are caused by human activity.

The existing system cannot go on forever. It is moving towards a crossroad where it must either change into something much better or it will change into something much worse. What we can be sure of is that it cannot keep on stumbling along as it is. Much of its resilience comes from the system's ability to maintain a layer of defenders who are allowed a level of comfort that keeps them from the bottom rung of society, even though they have no real access to the top. The fear of losing the little they have is enough to secure their loyalty and a disinterest any change that might not include their continued relative comfort.

Those who have real power at the top, can use their accumulation to offer a certain level of privilege to a stratum of people who are called upon to protect the owners from the most exploited and neglected. It might be an advantage in being neglected, if it were not for the fact that those who are neglected are also denied access to the land, water, and air they need to be fully productive.

Some of our activist leaders who genuinely want to help the people at the bottom can only conceive of helping them acquire a similar level of privilege. They act as though we could organize a slave society in which all of the enslaved are house negros. They act as though the highest goal is the ability to get into the house and spend time close the mas'sa and mis'sus doing for them what they need. Not grasping the deep sickness and impending death of the existing social, political and economic structures, they only envision finding roles in it and helping move less fortunate people into those roles.

This is the product of the lack of imagination. The lack of a freedom dream. Without it, there is no conception of possibilities outside of living in this dehumanizing system in which we are

embedded. Some of us think that we are free and that we only need to get others to be more like us. Harriet Tubman is claimed to have said that she could have freed even more of her people if they had only understood that they were slaves. There is no evidence that she actually said that and it only feeds into the narrative that slaves had so accommodated themselves to slavery that they were not willing to risk anything. What she actually said to Benjamin Drew, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada, 1855 was that *“Slavery is the next thing to hell.”*

Those of us who talk about building a different better world are sometimes criticized for being impractical. The practical thing to do, it seems to them is to stay here with things the way they are. We are even told that struggling against oppression is hopeless and dangerous. I once thought that it would be instructive to have a mock trial in which we try Harriet Tubman for the crime of endangering enslaved people by advocating (sometimes at gunpoint) that they leave the certainty of food and shelter on the plantation for the uncertainty of running away. She went so far as to say *“I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me.”* (Harriet Tubman to Sarah Bradford in Harriet, The Moses of Her People 1886). Harriet Tubman might be found guilty for dreaming and working for freedom. I want to be guilty with her.

Are There Practical Ways to Further This Vision?

At this time wealth created by thousands of years of social labor is piled up in financial districts, banks, insurance companies, and other institutions around the world that are the beneficiaries of exploitative systems. That community wealth is typically owned and controlled by a small hand full of people who use it to increase their power, privilege, and further accumulation of wealth. But there are always cracks and weak spots even in the strongest stone. The children of the rich and powerful do not all believe that they are entitled to live off of the labor of others. Some of them are willing to shift their resources into efforts to enhance the ability of communities to do for themselves. Some foundations will try to do the right thing. Some people who are concerned about the climate changes destroying the ability of the earth to support us all have come to realize that a system that promotes unlimited accumulation is the basis for the ecological damage that threatens us all. For all of these reasons, there are developing processes that are shifting wealth from activities that promote the continuation of the oppressive system to development activity that promotes communities collectively and democratically doing things for themselves. This is not simply a sharing of money to be used for consumption, but it takes on the form of shifting how we do and understand the realm of production. The shift in resources should be one that facilitates building freedom. I work with the Southern Reparations Loan Fund (SRLF) which is a network of local grassroots led loan funds making resources and technical assistance available to people who are trying to build freedom in their local communities by building cooperative economic enterprise. It is not a far stretch from this to the development of autonomous, productive, and democratic intentional communities (i.e. liberated zones). But it must all be guided by a vision of something exciting and different. It should be guided by a vision of freedom and liberation that is

not so far off in the future as to be a distraction from the day-to-day activities of people in our communities.

We have an increasing number of people who would advocate for freedom. Others are ready and will fight for freedom. But we all must understand that in the end we must build freedom. And that can begin with building liberated zones.

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