

A ROUNDTABLE on COLLECTIVISM

Building Popular Power from within and
across Geopolitical Souths

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Abstract This article presents a discussion among activists, artists, and scholars to center communalism as a political process and methodology in and across geographical and cultural political “Souths.” One of the central questions that this article raises is how to create diverse and heterogeneous strategies for the sustainability and creation of the collective spirit during the conjunctural and structural crises of the Global South and the exhaustion that it produces among those living there. Among themes in the discussion are art, culture, and spirituality as decolonial practices with a historical and ethnic perspective of Black communalism of the South in the context of the United States and Venezuela based on collective life existing before and beyond the European legacies of the commune.

Keywords Black Power, Global South, political left, populism, commune, collectivism

The commune has long been considered a source of inspiration as much as a pragmatic means of undoing “the empire.”¹ From worker cooperatives in the early 1970s in Salvador Allende’s Chile to the communal kitchens of the Black Panthers in the United States, various forms of collective organizing have also been shared transnationally, contributing to a broader movement of anti-imperialism. In the following

conversation, Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson (Highlander Research and Education Center), Meyby Ugueto-Ponce (Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research), Charlie R. Braxton (poet, playwright, journalist), and Geo Maher (Du Bois Movement School) share experiences and their own reflections on organizing through various models of anti-racist and anti-imperialist collectivism in the twenty-first century.

Their conversation was titled, “Commune: Mobilizing Popular Power from Geo-Political Souths,” taking place as the culminating discussion of an international conference on performance and populism that included scholars, activists, and artists.² As a verb, the title “commune” was a call to action and renewed, collective strength. As a noun, a focus on the commune elicited more particular histories of organizing practices that are endogenous to a people and a place from the Andes to the Appalachians. Referencing the Jackson-Kush Plan and recent organizing in the Venezuelan National Assembly, participants reflect on lessons learned and new directions in mobilizing anti-racist massive actions since 2020. In the words of political theorist Jodi Dean (2018), this conversation was not limited to mere “fragments and local one-offs,” rather it resulted in an opportunity “to think again about strategy and power” across language, experience, and geographies.

Drawing from multiple geopolitical Souths as an organizing framework, participants centered on stories of organizing popular power across the Black diaspora for Black liberation while holding space for sometimes radical differences in language, material conditions, and relationships to imperial order. Organizers of the roundtable, including moderator and conference coorganizer Rebecca Struch, conference

coorganizer, Angela Marino, and interpreter Yen Baynes, sought to prioritize perhaps what Houria Boutledja (2021: 101) meant when she suggested an “international division of militant labor” was needed as a praxis to accelerate decolonial resistance both in the Global South and within the south of the Global North.

What follows in this lightly edited dialogue among artists, activists, and scholars concerns aesthetics, modes of assembly, and ways of reflecting on the study of a “politics of ordinary people” or what some have called populism. What we see is that scholarly debates on populism are challenged through this dialogue by radical pluralism and decolonial models that break from fixed ideas of leaders and followers, individuals and the collective. As poet and activist Charlie R. Braxton suggests so succinctly, *collectivism* may be a more tenable term to work with, emphasizing popular education and locally grounded new (and old) models of “people coming together to solve and create a world that they want to have.”

Commune: Mobilizing Popular Power from Geopolitical Souths

Struch: This conversation is an attempt to consider how geo-political formations—real and imagined—shape political subjectivities in specific Souths of the Americas. Panelists will engage expansively with both the commune and acts of communing as practices of embodied, political mobilization that radicalize democracy and build popular power.

Henderson: My name is Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, my homies call me Ash. I use *she/her/hers* pronouns, or any said respectfully and in the right relationship, and I am calling in from Yuchi and

Cherokee land known as Chattanooga, Tennessee, now. I'm the first Black woman to serve as the executive director of the historic almost ninety-year-old Highland Research and Education Center in New Market, Tennessee.

I think there's a lot to be said about contemporary twenty-first-century Black southern freedom movements and what we are learning in the face of some of the most extreme white supremacist violence, racialized capitalism, you know, kicking us in the teeth on a regular basis, and dealing with those real systemic oppressions. We are also dealing with the fact that the left traditionally doesn't understand southern context, whether it be the US South or the Global South, and quite frankly neglects it and concedes it to right-wing forces.

The Highlander Center is a school, and since 1932 we've been bringing people together across differences, having forbidden conversations. Literally we have been trying to figure out how to build these multiracial, multicultural, multisector, multitactical strategies for our movements that bring about this incredible possibility of multiracial democracy. We also understand that we don't want to be building these codependent relationships between our nonprofit organizations and communities, or between communities and the state that very often proves us right when we say that the state doesn't actually care about our people.

What we're learning is how to think about cultural organizing in relationship to that twenty-first-century context. Building on legacy, but not using legacy as an excuse for not building stuff in a twenty-first-century context. We think about cultural organizing like a triad, like a triangle. Art and culture, plus faith and spirit at the bottom (or you know a whitewashed version like "holistic wellness"). So, art and

culture on one side, faith and spirit at the base, and then these change policy and practice (the other side). If you're not doing all three in such a way that the grassroots has more power than before you started this activity, then we're not doing the work. You have to be doing all three. You have to be changing policy and practice. You have to be influencing what those policy and practices are through art and culture and faith and spirit. So that's one thing we're learning.

I think another thing that we're learning is the fights of the multitudes—that there is not one unified left. A decades-long attempt at left-wing foundation tries to claim that, but toward thinking about what populism in a twenty-first-century context could look like, there are multiple lefts. We don't have some forced, monolithic southern identity. We also don't concede or create a vacuum where only the Right or the ultra-Left, or anybody in the center, get to make the unilateral decision that this is what southern is, right?

Let me break that down and give an example. In no way do I believe that white supremacists and capitalists get to be the only people who define what "Appalachian" is, or what "southern" is or is not. They don't get to tell the only story about what we've inherited and what we should be, and what all under heaven intact would mean, as we develop a multiracial, democratic reality saying "this is who we are" in *all* of the realities. What we have in common is that we all inherited a colonizer's story about what our differences are, and what those differences were supposed to mean in regard to who we should be. What artists and activists right now get to do is say "no," we don't have to be responding to or always trying to get people to understand that we know we have that colonizer story. What we get to do

now is build our future story, as strategy practitioner, Norma Wong, would say, and live a hundred years into the future. Use this as a moment of collective acceleration, to move far beyond that colonizer story.

We get to now define, in our own voices, through our own cultural practices, who we are in a twenty-first-century context. We don't have to keep relying on course-correcting our colonizer story which we inherited and, quite frankly, we don't have to keep seeing a future that doesn't include people who only haven't chosen to be on our side because we conceded them to the Right. When I'm talking about a southern reality, I don't get to pick and choose the southerners that get to make it to my future story. It's all of us, right? Because if we believe that none of us are free until all of us are free, it really requires us to build a southern identity that is rooted in the multiplicity and fullness of our greatness. That's not just rooted in what we have in difference but doesn't erase our differences either.

I think the last thing that I would say about what we're learning is that dialectics are real. Dialectics are real. Multiple things can be true in a southern context at the same time even if they're contradictory. The South is a place, the US South and the Global South, that's been detrimentally impacted by racialized capitalism, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, ableism—you name the structural oppression. But what we also know, quite frankly, is that it's also been the tip of the spear for resistance.

When we say "as goes the South, so goes the nation," in the United States, and I would say so goes the globe, in a global and universal context, what I mean isn't an opinion, it is a fundamental fact. It is a fact. We've seen that in the United States over and over again, where that was the birth of the abolitionist movement, the

birth of a tradition of radical labor union organizing and worker organizing. Whether that's a twenty-first-century movement for Black lives, we've seen Black southerners be at the forefront of those movements. Whether we're talking about immigration, and what Black and Brown people have been able to do at the southern border in the United States, and across these man-made borders, all of that has been a southern story. I think what we know is that these false binaries that we've inherited about our differences are actually not our stories to tell. Southerners in a global context and in the United States are shifting the way that the camera points at us as problems and backward, to solutions and tip-of-the-spear radical traditions. What we're saying is that we're leader-ful and collected.

We often in the movement for Black lives talk about this as a metaphor—brain surgery. I actually do want someone as an expert for operating on my brain, should I be a person who needs that skill set for my health and well-being. But it doesn't mean that a brain surgeon does it alone. I need a good anesthesiologist that really knows how to do that, just that, and focus on that, right? I need great nurses. I need a cool rehab team. I need a community of care to wrap around me. What does it look like if we actually see meaningful work and multiple tactical interventions across our social movements, and really allow for people to be experts in what their experience is, experts in what they contribute tactically, and really build these multitactical strategies to win. That's the work that I think the movement for Black lives and Highlander is doing, and what gives me, not a naïve but an informed optimism, that the South again will be the tip of the spear in transforming what is possible in a twenty-first-century world.

Ugueto-Ponce: [translation to English by Yen Baynes] Good afternoon. My name is Meyby Ugueto-Ponce. I use *she/her*, and I am from Caracas, an Afro-Venezuelan, a descendant of two communities that managed to achieve their freedom: Curiepe and La Sabana. Today I am here as a researcher, activist, teacher, and artist. I am part of the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research, and I am also an activist in *Trenzas Insurgentes*, a Collective of Black Afro-Venezuelan and Afro-descendant Women.

Today I will be presenting on collective action embodied in Afro-Venezuelan women, and the mobilization between popular power and constituted power. I examine the mobilization of popular power in Venezuela within the constitutional power, through the actions of the Afro-Venezuelan congresswoman, National Assembly representative Casimira Monasterio. I show how she embodies the collective action of a group of Black women organized in social movements and in communities, attached to both state and independent institutions. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and through digital platforms such as WhatsApp, IG, and Zoom, there have been collective actions, in order to deepen the progress made against racial discrimination in Venezuela in the legal field. Rising to the speaker's podium, on September 1, 2021, Casimira Monasterio, as a representative in the National Assembly, called for approval of the Draft Agreement declaring August 31 International Day for People of African Descent. This signified the performance of popular power embodied in Afro-descendant women, mobilizing with collective actions, within the constitutional power of the nation.

Casimira Monasterio and Roraima Gutierrez, elected on December 6, 2020,

leveraged international decrees as a *cimarrona*, or maroon, strategy to frame the struggles of Afro-Venezuelan popular power. On this occasion, the agreement was achieved as part of the United Nations declaration, in 2021, as the inaugural year of the International Day for People of African Descent. Casimira Monasterio, a woman with a long career, a teacher, and a militant. With impetus, proud of her origins, with humility and dignity, she stands up in the hemicycle of sessions of the federal legislative palace of the National Assembly. She does so as the second Black woman, after Argelia Laya, who addresses the nation occupying a legislative position from the ethnic-racial, gender, and class consciousness. And above all she does it, with the awareness that both she and Roraima were elected by the Afro-Venezuelan people because they are precisely Black women, proud of being so. These representatives embody the maturity that the Afro-Venezuelan people have today in matters of identity, cultural, and political self-recognition. Let's listen to some of her words, a little over a month ago in the aforementioned act [translating from news clip]:

We took the political leap, not only cultural recognition, but also we recognized ourselves as part of a class and we recognized ourselves politically as a fighting people. In recent years we have made progress, we have had to fight for it to be assumed and accepted that there is racial discrimination in Venezuela. . . . [Hugo] Chávez, with his ability to listen, heard us, understood us, and assumed us to be, together with the Indigenous people, an Afro-descendant people. It is not by chance that the national oligarchy called the commander Zambo since his appearance, a way of saying "you are not white, you are not white at all." But hey, if one is standing on both feet and with his head on,

he knows that he does not have to be ashamed of that, quite the opposite. Commander Chávez assumed himself Indigenous and assumed Afro-descendant. Standing here after Argelia Laya and Aristóbulo Isturiz is not easy at all. And with that legacy . . . " (Monasterio 2021)

The performance of this woman was simple, classic, and at the same time profound. Walking to the podium and embodying power. Starting from some perspectives on performance, we say that an epistemology was embodied here (Taylor 2012). The deputy transcended the culturalist and stereotyped expressions of Black subjectivity and made the Afro-descendant more complex as a political subject of the nation. To occupy the podium, was to occupy the power constituted within the influence of popular power, with intersectional awareness. It was also a performance within an ancestral and collective lineage of struggle. It was also a pedagogical action, aimed at Afro-descendants, but above all at the entire nation, in order to rise up in the face of racism in Venezuelan society.

Racist sentiments have been exacerbated within the existing political polarization in Venezuela, which has caused much damage in all areas of national life. There is a regional context of sustained attack on the progressive projects of the twenty-first century during the last twenty years. Venezuela especially faces the aggressions of the United States through coercive unilateral measures since 2005. At the same time, the contradictions within the Bolivarian Revolution, owing to the rentier dependence based on oil, the failed processes of transition toward non-extractivist economies, and the complaints of corruption, have caused a strong institutional and social crisis in the country.

Parallel to this, popular power, the

basis of the Bolivarian Revolution, is constantly being reconstituted. Within this difficult scenario, it seeks to make use of the ways of life that have allowed its subsistence for more than five hundred years, to sustain the achievements made in twenty-two years of the revolution, and finally and with great effort, it seeks to deepen them. For example, in 2011, for the first time in Venezuela, the Organic Law against Racial Discrimination was signed by then president of the Republic, Hugo Chávez. This law has been in legal silence for ten years, suffering from a lack of regulation that would allow its implementation.

Amid this situation, organized Black women are aware of the role they play in Venezuelan society and specifically within the revolutionary project. An example is the mobilization that has arisen to influence the deepening of the Organic Law against Racial Discrimination. At the beginning of August, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and through the WhatsApp platform, the Afro representatives activated a discussion chat to collect opinions, reflections, and proposals to present a reform to the law. Women participated mainly from the *Trenzas Insurgentes* and *Cumbe de Mujeres Afrovenezolanas* collectives (Braided Insurgents and Collective of Afro-Venezuelan Women). The digital interactions generated a collective document that collected the impressions and contributions for the reform project of this law. The document was approved in the first discussion by the National Assembly. It was then opened for public comment. The collective action generated an expedited call through social networks, mainly WhatsApp and IG. Through the Zoom platform, Black women who are part of institution building, such as teachers and women organizers in social movements, heeded the call to organized

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in their communities and independently. Other sectors of Venezuelan society did so as well.

More than one hundred proposals were received to deepen the legal instrument, fundamentally aimed at the construction of the regulation of the law, the construction of an educational plan for the training of the population and the institutional framework in matters of racial discrimination, the classification of crimes, the care and accompaniment of the victims, as well as the follow-up of the problem through the creation of an observatory. From this collective action, which moves between the spaces of constitutional power and those of popular power, to deepen the fight against racial discrimination in Venezuela, I am inclined to think that the performance of Afro-Venezuelan representatives with ethnic-racial awareness, of gender and class, constitute a powerful text of the self-recognized Afro-descendant as a political subject. It is the affective embodiment of an ancestral commitment, which denounces with corporeal presence the hypocrisy of Venezuelan society, which continues to deny racism. But this performance, above all, surges forth with political tools and intellectual contributions to face it.

Braxton: My name is Charlie Braxton. I go by the pronouns of *he/him*. I am a poet, playwright, a journalist, a cultural critic, currently residing in Jackson, Mississippi. I was born and raised in McComb, Mississippi, which is the cradle of the civil rights movement. My family was heavily involved in that movement; I learned a lot of my fundamental beliefs from my family. I learned a lot on the porch from my grandmother, who taught me the fundamentals of sharing, which is the basic core principle, I believe, of socialism.

First of all, I am very inspired by the presentations of Meyby and Ash-Lee, and I want to sort of piggyback on something that Ash-Lee said, in terms of art, faith, and policy, that triad. I think it's very important that we, as artists, understand the role that we play in helping to mobilize the masses. Because the capitalists totally understand the role that artists play. And that's why they try to use art and subvert art to push their ideology on the people. I think that it's important that we highlight the role that the artist should play in terms of educating to enlighten and inspire. When I mean educate, we need to educate the masses on who is responsible for their oppression: what is capitalism, and how capitalism connects to the oppression that they suffer, whether it's ableism, patriarchy, or environmental racism. We need to be able to create art that connects the people to that understanding. We also need to be able to create art that inspires them to change the conditions and challenge capitalism. Because until we can do that on a grassroots and a regional and national and global level, we're going to steadily have these one step forward, two steps back.

I want to bring an example of how art works in terms of—again I told you all that my family was involved in the civil rights movement—Hollis Watkins, the great SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) singer, who is a cousin of mine. And one of the things he always talks about is how, when they were discouraged, when it looked like the movement was going to take a step back, they would always sing. And that singing would inspire them to keep moving. The same thing happened in South Africa. I'm really pushing that in terms of helping people to understand the role that artists play because mass mobilization and art go

hand in hand. My son is a visual artist, and he flies all over the country painting protest signs for protestors. That's very important. He doesn't think so. But I tell him it's extremely important because those signs, people can see those signs and instantly get what's going on. Because art can move people. We need to pay attention to aesthetics. It's important we pay attention to aesthetics. Because the Right is using the aesthetics to confuse people and subvert our movement, we need to pay attention to that. How do we continue to inspire artists to encourage more artists, young artists, to join the movement, and use their art to inspire the masses? Because at the end of the day as the great Amílcar Cabral points out, it's the masses who make history.

Maher: My name is Geo Maher. I use *he/him* pronouns. I'm joining you from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, although I teach at Vassar these days, so I am in between the two. I think one of the prompts was what are we thinking about, what are we bringing into the room, and I'll say, especially given the presence of comrade Meyby, that I'm always thinking somewhere between the struggles in the United States against the police in particular and also the liberation struggle of the Venezuelan people and the grassroots revolutionaries fighting there every day.

To think about what communal life looks like, how it offers again what Marx called "the form at last discovered" for working out the contradictions of our lives, for working out how to live collectively together outside of capitalism, without a separation between the economic and the social, and without a separation between the political and the people, I just want to say maybe three different little pieces about how the commune enters into

some of the work that I'm particularly dedicated to.

The first is the question of thinking through the commune. Theorizing the concept of the commune again, this is something that even people who are Marxists need to recognize: that it was only decades after the *Communist Manifesto* that Marx himself discovered the commune established by the people in the streets of Paris, right? When they established this collective form of rule, it fully reshaped the way in which Marx thought about the power of people organizing themselves collectively, putting meat on the bones of the critique that he had been putting forth. But theorizing the idea of the commune also means understanding that the commune and collective communal forms didn't begin in 1871 in Paris. We need to stretch those chains backward, we need to think about what I call decolonizing the idea of the commune, decentering Paris to think about communal struggles, communal experiments, and I do this in the context of Venezuela to think about the Afro-Cimarrón communities who were practicing communal life long before 1871, and that has resonances, crucial resonances, for today.

The second question is precisely what the commune has meant in Venezuela. Again, the reference point tends to be the emergence of communes from above in and around 2009, under the leadership of Hugo Chávez, and with the struggles unleashed from the grassroots level. But again, the communes didn't begin in 2009: they drew from far longer histories. For those that don't know, the communes instituted in Venezuela were, and continue to represent, a crucial reference point for what it would look like for communities to build together, to build sustainable production, to produce what they need, what

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they desire, and what the community itself requires. To do so democratically through communal parliaments, through direct decision-making processes, in which it is the community itself that decides what to produce, how much to produce, how to distribute it, how much it should cost, who should work, what they should be paid, and what to do with any surplus.

The importance of communal struggles in Venezuela is an overlooked example that we can use today. To be clear, many people *are* looking to that struggle. You know, Cooperation Jackson and the Jackson-Kush plan drew directly on conversations and relationships built with grassroots Venezuelan organizers about what these models would look like, and these are the kind of transnational relationships that we need to be developing. It also means, getting back to the decolonizing point, recognizing that for example in Barlovento, which is a historically Afro-Venezuelan region, the communes took a different form. They drew from the long history of Cimarrón struggles. They drew on the long history of the *cumbe* as an Afro-Venezuelan Cimarrón form of organizing collectivity and were infused with that. The same goes for Indigenous people and those throughout Venezuelan grassroots movements, who from below insistently stretch the concepts and the ideas and the forms and the models developed from above. So this, this fruitful relationship between the from-above and the from-below.

Finally, I want to speak to what I've been working on most recently, which is police abolition. My newest book is called *A World without Police*, and this is ultimately not a different question from that of the commune. The subtitle of that book is, *How Strong Communities Make Cops Obsolete*, and what does that mean if not

the building of communal power as an alternative to what I call the world of police that we inhabit today? When we think specifically through Angela Davis's category of obsolescence, of what it means for prisons and police to be obsolete, what we mean to ask what kind of a world would be required for police to make no sense at all? For the institution of policing to be irrelevant, to have no function, and to sort of, in the words of Lenin, "wither away"? It would be a world of equality, a world of collective democratic power, a world in which communities themselves organize to keep themselves safe, as we say in the streets. The question of the commune stretches through and connects all these questions, which of course is to insist that abolition is a form of communism. At the same time, that we tear down institutions from above, every abolition is and must be a reconstruction, and what we're reconstructing in those contexts is a collective communal power.

Struch: As you know, the conference theme we have been engaged with prior to this conversation is "performance and populism," but we were really intentional in building this roundtable to think through what these various forms of collectivity do to ideas of populism. Is it important that we think about this collectivity as populist, even though it is sometimes called leaderless? Ash-Lee you called it leader-ful. If populism focuses on leaders and followers, often political parties, what do these types of collectivities do to that discourse?

Braxton: Why don't you just call it collectivism instead of populism? Because it's really the people coming together to solve their problems and create a world that they want to live in. So instead of calling it populism, why not call it collectivism? The

reason why I say this is because I associate populism, especially coming from the South, with mob rule, which is never really good for people of color. I prefer to call it collectivism.

Henderson: Yeah, I mean, I hear my people in my head sometimes when I'm asked questions like this, and I think I hear my dad right now being like "you know sometimes we make finger painting into rocket science" you know what I mean? [laughs] Because if we're being honest, how academics reflected the story of what happened or didn't happen isn't always the full truth about what actually happened, right? When I think about the labor movement, when I think about the Black liberation movement, the Pan-African movements for liberation, when I think about . . . you know, feminist movements and women-ist movements, academics might have centered in on individuals, and quite frankly, even in our movements sometimes we might have focused in on individuals. But it was never, *ever*, just one central leader. That was never true, right? Even when it's Highlander's story, it wasn't just Myles Horton. It wasn't just Martin Luther King. It wasn't just Rosa Parks. It wasn't just . . . you name it, it wasn't just one person. So, what I hope for our twenty-first-century movement is to yes, be intentional, but also not to be in fake fights over say, centralization and decentralization. Why do we have to do that? It's a twentieth-century fight I'm not trying to have.

What I do think we saw is a few things. I think there's some lessons in how to get to, to mass, right? I think that's the debate. I think what we're trying to get to is how to get to mass. And I think if we're honest, across the many lefts, across the many movements, we don't

totally know. Some people have for years been throwing tactical spaghetti against the wall and just praying something sticks. And I think 2020 was an example of that. What we've learned from 2020 in the US southern context is that nobody can control a rebellion, and nobody gets to take credit for it, right? The millions of people that were in the streets last year wasn't just because the movement for Black lives organization said, "hey, we should turn up." That's not what happened. We, yes, had we planted seeds, had our elders and ancestors planted seeds before us that just bloomed in relationship to the cumulative Black death, and grief, and rage that we had seen? Sure, those many seeds blossomed into collective protests, but we haven't figured out how to do—and I think this goes toward [what] Geo, and Meyby, and Charlie have said—is that if we don't figure out how to continue folks working together in that collective practice beyond that singular tactical intervention, we will consistently be reinventing the wheel over and over again.

So, for example, one of the things that we saw was a mass tendency to be asked if the protestors were going to vote in the presidential election. Or were the voters going to go protest and it was like, well these are all the same people, comrade. One. Two: even if they did go vote, if we didn't have a plan for how to keep the pressure on those folks who were elected, not as saviors, but as the folks who would help control the conditions and reduce the harm—if we didn't continue work to put pressure on those folks—that we'd end up in the streets again rebelling because nothing shifted. We knew that they would drive a wedge between the moderates and liberals and the progressives and the Left, and they would throw the Left's demands out for the sake of being able to do what

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the Democrats always do (laughs), which is to not know how to use power.

So, I think it is critical that we not get so lost in the sauce about, like, should there be leaders, and should there be followers. That's not really the fight, the fight is: how do we generate enough collective will, especially when people are exhausted from intersecting crises. Not even intersecting but like, colliding and conflating crises for the sake of being able to return to common practice and common spaces and common governance and common economies. I think that anybody that says we have the full answer for that is lying. I think we're in a grand stage of experimentation, to try to figure out how to do that. But what we're starting to learn for certain is that it's got to be multiple tactics. "By any means necessary" has to be "by all the means," whether I engage in all of them or not. It has to mean being really intentional about figuring out how we can stagger our participation in ways that can make it more sustainable.

There's a huge question about governance, right, that we have to be not just talking about government but governance, as it relates to building a mass commons. If we just get control of the government and not the economy, we will fail. If we just get control of the economy and not the government structure, we will fail. And how do we do those things without creating more and more codependent extractive relationships between the state and grassroots communities. I think that's the grand experiment of our generation.

We've got to be building these experiments in a way that both center the economy and governance, that don't just replicate codependent relationships between our communities and the state. For example, I think Jackson is an example of this, even beyond—everybody talks

about Cooperation Jackson and that's true, but some of these comrades who I love are from Detroit. I'm talking about Jacksonians who have been experimenting with collective governance through cooperatives since the 1920s, right? [laughs] You know, Charlie and me are probably cousins cause I got people in Kilmichael and Sunflower.

I think we're talking about how to build peoples' movement assemblies, which we got from our brothers and sisters and siblings in the global South, right? Like, they been about that collective governance life in Venezuela, Afro-Colombians, Afro-Brazilians, folks in South Africa. Black people have been about this life all across the global South, and we've got to be replicating *those* systems as we do the harm reduction in the government structures and economic systems that exist. That's to me, the point of a socialist transition: from what is to what ought to be. I think that folks are leaned-in to engaging in that more than I think I've ever seen in my lifetime. To the point about abolition—I agree with you Geo—as a left framework, very explicitly, it's also about abolishing more than just policing and prisons. It's also any of the systems and structures that would harm our people, including borders, including the state, including all these things, and figuring out how do we, how do we get from here to there?

Ugueto-Ponce: Leadership is a matter of process. We can probably find specialists, people who have more insight into a problem at one point or another within communities during a certain process. I believe that in Afro-descendant communities this type of leadership has to do with the different types of organizations that exist and the historical origins of the communities. I'm not just talking about communes or

collectives, but also about internal spaces that were created in communities whose historical process is distinctive, such as the founding of towns that were created, for example, by free Blacks. These spaces of which I speak were created in organizational processes in which one leader or another was chosen for their capabilities, at a given moment, by a community. The community followed those people at the time, but those specialists didn't stay in that leadership position all the time. To show this I want to make a simile of the political organization in some Afro-Venezuelan communities with the soundscape that is produced internally, from the performance of three drums that make up a "conversation" among themselves.³

The first instrument makes musical time, that is the "cousin," the second speaks with the first instrument and can provide a little bit of their skill with what is called *floreo*, this drum is called *cruza*. The third drum is incorporated into the previous two with more rigor and many more "flourishes," its name is *pujao*. A conversation is established between the three drums, which is maintained for a period of time. That conversation is led by the first drummer, who is the "cousin," and in the simile I am doing, it is equivalent to the oldest people in the community. The adults are equivalent to the *cruza*, who follow the older ones, bringing some changes. Young people are represented by the *pujao*, who restructure the sound, with great changes. This allows the sound to move between them. From the oldest leader to the other leader who takes the second drum, to the third youngest leader who generates the changes. I think that this idea of a single leader is renewed, depending on the processes that revive them and the need of each specialist. But the idea is to assume and recognize

that the collective is an important part in accepting these leaderships. And recognize that it is not a specific manual. I think the problem is that we want to have a single manual for the Left, and that is not possible because the diversity that exists within the Afro and all our colleagues is very heterogeneous. And that is where we find this model of the state, we find this space that creates true diversity.

Maher: Part of the problem is how movements that emerge are then saddled with the term *populist* or labeled as populist, especially when we think of how many newspaper articles compared Trump to Hugo Chávez. I think in some ways what we need to identify is what's happening and say that first, these are opposites, they aren't similar or the same thing. In that sense populism is seen as anything that mobilizes and that, as Ash puts it, creates a mass outside and against the system, right? We don't want people on the Right doing that, but the strategy I think of as left populism is very important because the Democratic Party fails to grasp this completely, and it does involve a different kind of politics.

I would say especially in a US context it's precisely what Charlie and Ash were pointing toward, which is for example southern collective culture, this neglected base for collective struggle that is forgotten by the Democratic Party in its essence. And for me, it's also a question of momentum. Populism is this creation of momentum, and the question is how you then sustain this momentum toward a horizon. Precisely what Charlie was pointing to is that it is sustained through collectivity, or that is sustained through the institutionalization of struggle. We saw a mass revolt in 2020, but what sorts of collective spaces will give that revolt some sort of

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staying power and permanence, and allow it to cohere in time as we then build more established structures of resistance and build these alternatives? For me, populism is that moment of explosive momentum, and then the question is how we move that momentum forward to something different and clearly toward a left project.

Henderson: To Geo's point, we know what the response to our collective action is, and to be honest I think we got as close to the united—to a left populist united front that I've ever seen in my lifetime last year. It was international, it was Black led. It was led by women and queers and trans folks, and it started before the election took place in November. It impacted the election but didn't throw away all the other social issues we were fighting for. In fact, it forced the question of how we unite so that the Right and the liberals can't, you know, pull us apart from each other. And we made the *explicit* inference that we had to work together beyond the next neoliberal administration, even if this Congress might be more progressive than we've ever seen, and even though we might be in more relationship with our comrades across the globe.

What we've seen is that more people in the United States are working together. Let's think back to August of 2020 at the least. What we saw is more people in the continental United States working together across sectors and across technical expertise, right? The direct-action people were working with the policy people. The policy people were working with the organizers and base builders. The organizers and base builders were working with the direct service and mutual aid people.

That was just in a US context. Then we saw on top of that, that we were connecting with our comrades in countries

all over the world that were teaching us from what they already got right and were learning from what we were starting to build. We started to build this diasporic relationship between southerners. On top of that what we saw was that folks not only worked together toward that electoral intervention to save this country from the grip of fascism, the last semblance of democracy.

What we also did was say, We can't just stop post the election. We need to keep converging our issue areas because they're all intertwined, and both the neoliberals and the right wing will use wedges between us to get out of accountability. They will toss out the Left and our demands, particularly around defunding police, particularly around talking about budgets as moral documents, particularly about making sure that our people without papers are treated like freaking humans in this country and abroad. If we don't stay together, they will pick us off issue by issue, and nobody will get a damn thing.

And that's exactly what we said should happen, and that worked through the first hundred days, right? But after the first hundred days—people have been burning it from like, March when COVID-19 hit, through the May and summer uprisings, through the election, through the insurrection on January 6, that's not even to include all the things that were happening globally, right?

We know what has been the challenge in keeping the united front together and operating. Exhaustion. State repression. We've seen Trump and William Barr, the attorney general at the time, literally saying that folks that were in protests in defense of Black lives needed to be charged with federal charges when the state or local equivalent was appropriate. We saw literal state repression of

Black dissent, while we also saw January 6th and people getting away with literal murder.

I think we know what is keeping us from the united front functioning. I think it is a historic lesson both now and in relation to the many hate crimes that state governments have done, the same sort of repressive tactics all over the world, particularly to Black-led movements. I don't know that we know yet if we could keep it together, and I think that's the challenge; the sustaining of the mass is going to be our generation's thing to figure out.

Conclusion

Sustaining the "mass" or a united front of Black-led liberation in the face of military repression is indeed the challenge of our generation. In this dialogue, activists, artists, and scholars shared ideas of how to do just that, to find radical alternatives and deepen both local and transnational movements across multiple Souths. Whether in strategies of dual power (Shakur 2020), or to "occupy the state," as Afro-Colombian vice-president-elect Francia Márquez says, "what we want is to live well until dignity becomes a habit."⁴ The idea, in Márquez's words, "vivir sabroso," she clarifies, is not only about economic equality. It is to live openly, without fear, and to insist on the conditions for diverse peoples of the world to live in peace and with dignity as a daily habitual act.

To demand this kind of collective dignity also confronts the reality that US imperialism moves consistently against Black-led movements of the South, both domestically and in foreign policy. Whether organizing inside and outside prisons, or as a state, municipality, or neighborhood, such movements have fought for collective power. In the United States, as many scholars have pointed out, this

emergence has consistently been met with police killings, impunity, and the instigation of counterrevolutionary forces. Venezuela, what Geo Maher calls the "communal state," likewise has endured relentless attack through years of coup attempts, economic destabilization, and vice-grip sanctions by the United States. Despite these attacks, Meyby Ugueto-Ponce argued, ordinary people, including teachers, mothers, and workers of all kinds who make up the collective backbone of popular power in Venezuela, have advanced a legal platform toward national anti-racist action. What this dialogue brings to the forefront is how states differ in relationship to collective Black power: the highest offices of government in Venezuela support such projects, whereas the US police, as Ash-Lee says in the opening, are "kicking us in the teeth."

This is where communing and the commune are vital as both a practice and a space to expand and consolidate a political project to overcome imperialism. For participants and organizers from the global South and the South in the global North, this means organizing from multiple cultural and aesthetic languages to confront such oppression and come to "mass," with all its variances and widespread points of eruption and agency. To commune engages an array of unification strategies and methods of collaboration, assembly, dissolution, and reconstitution. Ash-Lee Henderson and others at the Highlander Center consider this process a triad of art, culture, and spirituality, such that collectivism is formed in relationship to these three integral components of their shared struggle. Likewise, Charlie R. Braxton reminds us to bring these principles into the work of education, in porch conversations, door-to-door neighborhood gatherings, festivals and block

parties, poetry, essay, and radio. Being in relationship with community generates spirit and connection, which the artist-as-educator circulates in a continued network of production.

This roundtable dialogue, which developed out of a three-day international conference on the topic of populism and performance, also offered an opportunity to reflect on whether populism as a term and field of study could generate a praxis for the kind of engagement that Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007: 35) called on “to engage the racial as a modern political strategy.” In other words, is populism a useful framework to build Black-led mobilizations across geopolitical Souths outside a logic of exclusion? Histories of white supremacist populism are carried forward with this term in ways that detract from engaging with it in any meaningful way in praxis. Moreover, with too few exceptions, discourses of populism have generally played critic for “leaders,” with little to say for those who supposedly “follow,” and even less for the flexible and culturally specific kinds of leadership within more deeply participatory processes that seek to build popular power. The very models that isolate leaders and followers are in themselves inadequate, relying on liberal conventions of representational governance while failing to account for embodiment and performance practice as a potential modality of organizational power. One of the major breakthroughs of this conversation was, therefore, a selective critique on populism as an analytic framework. Especially when considering how to sustain heterogeneous forms of large-scale activism amid the exhaustion that imperialism imposes, the discourse around populism tends to fall short of being useful for what is happening “on the ground.”

Engaging with the cultural, aesthetic,

and embodied particulars of political action, however, is the starting point of real relationships that ultimately strengthen the material and symbolic spaces that emerge “on the ground” in collective struggles against imperialism and anti-Blackness. The *cumbe* is one such space. The *cumbe*, as the inspiration for the anti-racist education project in Venezuela, known as *el cumbe educativo*, is the proposal made by leaders in Black community and institutions toward the transversalities of Black culture to the educational training in Venezuela. It is the ancestral space of Black life, which situates subjectivity both uniquely and by what collectively dignifies one as a people. Rather than naming the space of racial difference as that which is excluded from an otherwise “universal” (i.e., European/Western) globalism (Ferreira da Silva 2007), the *cumbe* is its own space not seeking or predicated on being included in another presumably transparent “universal” entity. As organizers in Venezuela have encountered, Black cultural or aesthetic spaces are typically torpedoed by the Right and reactionary groups “in ways that directly annul the valorization of difference proportionate to how Afro-descendant movements have advanced them” (Monasterio/Perozo Díaz 2021). Moreover, such spaces are often reduced or left out altogether in populism debates that have yet to question the ontological problem of universality.

Collectivism, once realized through ideological processes, political events, or demands, establishes a criteria to build mobilizations that are capable of expressing a profound sense of our needs as a people. Building movement assemblies, as Henderson describes, is the work of building the future now, to reach for and expand “a moment of collective acceleration, to move far beyond that colonizer story.” And

it is this collective acceleration, as a shared practice through education, that is learned, taught, repeated, and remade.

Notes

1. In reference to the Paris Commune, in 1871 Karl Marx ([1871] 2021: 46) famously wrote that the “direct antithesis to the empire was the Commune.”
2. The conference was titled “Performance and Populism: Mobilization, Popular Power, and Embodiment on the Left,” jointly organized by the University of Warwick and the University of California, Berkeley, November 3–5, 2021, with the support of the Institute of Advanced Study; the School of Creative Arts, Performance and Visual Cultures and the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies of the University of Warwick; and the Department of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.
3. *Conversación* refers to the musical dialogue created from the execution of the drum set of percussion instruments, consisting of three dual-membranophone drums, which have a different configuration, fingering, and rhythm. They are called *prima*, *cruzao*, and *pujao*, both in the Fulia rhythm and in the *culo é puya*, which are part of the soundscape in the festive-religious ceremonies of Barlovento, the Afro-descendant region located at the central-north coast of Venezuela.
4. “Hoy los nadies, las nadies estamos aquí ocupando el Estado porque queremos vivir sabroso, con alegría, en paz, con dignidad . . . vivir sabroso no solamente es plata, es posibilidades de que la gente no viva con miedo, es posibilidades de que la gente pueda vivir en sus territorios tranquilos, en paz . . . implica tener unas condiciones de dignidad y eso implica que el Estado llegue con presencia a cumplir con su mandato constitucional donde nunca lo ha hecho, eso significa garantías para los derechos de las mujeres, de las juventudes, de los pueblos étnicos que históricamente han estado excluidos, afrodescendientes, indígenas, palenqueros, raizales.” See Márquez 2022.

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