

Visions *of a* New Economy *from* Detroit:

*A Conversation with
Malik Yakini*

Editors' note: *Malik Kenyatta Yakini is an activist and educator who is committed to freedom and justice for African people in particular and humanity in general. Yakini is cofounder and executive director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), which since 2006 has managed the seven-acre D-Town Farm. DBCFSN is also leading efforts to create the Detroit Food Commons, a thirty-thousand-square-foot facility on the city's North End that will include a food co-op, café, kitchen incubator, office, and community space.*

Nonprofit Quarterly: *Could you talk about your background?*

Malik Yakini: I was born in 1956. Both of my parents were postal workers. They didn't go to college, but there were many people with college degrees working at the post office. It was a vehicle for upward mobility.

The 1960s was a period of great hope—it was a relatively prosperous time for a lot of people in Detroit, and things were opening up for many Black Detroiters. The neighborhood we moved into had opened up. Black people followed Jewish people—that seemed to be the pattern, and that's what happened where we moved. Restrictive housing covenants were breaking



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down. The auto industry was booming. Blacks were moving into jobs.

We were in and out of each other's houses. We used to have block parties. There was a real sense of community in my neighborhood. All of our parents knew each other. That was my experience, and it was a wonderful childhood.

In 1966, I played Little League Baseball on the field at Detroit's Central High School. A year later, the field was turned into a military base with the 101st Airborne Division, after what at the time we called "riots" but which activists in Detroit now call an "urban rebellion." In recent years, social justice activists have challenged the language—a rethinking, a reframing of history.

That year was a watershed moment; in some ways, Detroit history can be divided into pre- and post-1967. It was a huge defining point, a period of tremendous hot-fire Black consciousness. Detroit was an epicenter of that—it was certainly a strong epicenter of this Black revolutionary consciousness.

I turned thirteen in 1969. Thirteen is a critical year in many traditions. You go from childhood to the beginnings of young adulthood. It is a time when you're very impressionable and create a concept of yourself. I was going to a school called Post Junior High—one of many schools that were centers of Black consciousness. Walk-outs, protests, were mostly at the high school level, but my junior high was also active. In 1969, a teacher of mine played a recording in the classroom of Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots." I don't follow behind any man, but Malcolm's life example and teachings had a profound impact on me. In fact, in many ways my activism is rooted in hearing Malcolm X for the first time.

That was the beginning of my social activism, and we saw it as the Black liberation movement more than a movement for social justice.

Early on, one of the tenets of Black radical thought was this sharp critique of capitalism. I read Mao, Marx, Black radical thinkers, becoming very committed at a very early age to the idea that capitalism is in many ways the root of our problems—not the *only* problem, but a huge factor. I've been anticapitalist for the vast majority of my life, and anti-white supremacist. Those

are the two pillars. Sometimes I was in a kind of strange space, because many Black nationalists didn't have a clear analysis of capitalism. Much of what some Black nationalists were proposing was a painted Black version of capitalism. Even though I wasn't a Marxist, I was always willing to be supportive of groups that were. If we agree that capitalism needs to be dismantled, we have a strategic alliance. But many of the Marxist folks didn't understand revolutionary nationalism, where you have a clear analysis that there isn't going to be any kind of Black sovereignty as long as capitalism is intact.

There are multiple tendencies within the Black liberation movement. The New Afrikan Independence movement—of which Chokwe Lumumba [1947–2014] was a major voice—are secessionists, and seek to carve out five states. Some favor repatriation. With Rastafarianism, many ultimately hope to return to Africa. Then there are those that see the city as the Black man's land, and seek to build zones of power in cities. In many ways, the Black liberation movement has been fragmented. No matter which of the paths you take, the dismantling of capitalism is the necessary prerequisite. You're not going to be a sovereign socialist state existing side by side with capitalism.

In college, I was chairman of the Black Student Association at Eastern Michigan University, in Ypsilanti. We ran a free breakfast program at an elementary school, patterned after the Black Panther Party, and we also had a co-op—a buying club—that we called the Ujamaa Co-op Buying Club. We would take orders in our organization and the community, and two of us would make the forty-minute drive to Detroit's Eastern Market on Saturday, buy things in bulk, and divide it up. At that point, I didn't know anything about a food movement, but cooperative economics was part of our thinking.

In 1989, I cofounded Nsoroma Institute, an African-centered school rooted in the ideas of unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, and cooperative economics. The school was designed to give African-American children a sense of where they fit into their own cultural and historical continuum. I directed the school for twenty-two years, and doing gardening

work there in the late 1990s got me into the food work that I am doing now.

NPQ: *What is the story of Detroit that we do not hear?*

MY: There has always been this revolutionary consciousness in Detroit. A sharp critique of capitalism has been part of the thinking of many activists in Detroit for a long time. And the labor movement, while not anticapitalist, provided an analysis of the economy and how the average person should have greater benefits than those enjoyed within the rampant capitalism that existed pre-union. There is a certain consciousness in Detroit's having been shaped by movements—as being a movement town.

Contemporary Detroit is informed by its own history. The Detroit People's Food Co-op is rooted in that history. For some time, we had various visions of how we might create an alternative economy within capitalism, at least on a community level—how we might stop the hemorrhaging that occurs in Black communities, and how we might find ways to capture our own value instead of having that extracted from us. Instead of being seen as a market for larger forces to dump cheap goods into, how do we start seeing ourselves as an answer to our problems? How do we create structures where we are cooperating with each other to meet our own needs?

One of the things that [*Collective Courage* author] Jessica Gordon Nembhard points out is that many efforts that we can call “cooperative” didn't necessarily call themselves that. They were sometimes framed as “self-help efforts” or “mutual aid societies,” but they functioned cooperatively for the collective good. There is a strong history of efforts to create a more just and more cooperative economy.

One of the things that is so stark about Detroit is the clear racial element of the wealth extraction that is going on. It is so clear, that the average person sees it and sees how it impacts his or her community every day—and that makes it easy to appeal to people. Many of the stores are owned by Chaldeans, an ethnic minority from Iraq. You have a city that is 80 percent African American,

yet few Blacks own stores. The average person can see that, and experiences it every day. So that kind of explicitly racialized way in which wealth is being extracted, at least in Detroit, is quite evident. There is a need for us to cooperate for our own collective benefit.

NPQ: *Some within the Black community have suggested that the pathway to liberation is through changing the color of capitalism. Why isn't that adequate?*

MY: There are some efforts now by progressive Black folks in Detroit to do just that. One reason it is not adequate is that there are fundamental flaws in the concept of private land ownership. Who has the authority to own the earth? This is a rhetorical question, of course. It is just based on who has power. The universe doesn't bestow authority on anyone to dole the earth out. The whole thing is a con game. We need to push back on that.

I don't want to advocate going backward, but we need to think about how to move forward informed by the ideas of indigenous cultures, who saw themselves as stewards of the earth and as temporary occupants in harmonious balance with the animals and plants, in recognition of the matrix of life. That whole idea of private ownership of land, which in large part is how wealth is generated in capitalism, is problematic. The question of access to land is critical. It is on land that we build houses, communities, extract resources; it is where most of our food is grown, how we acquire many of our fibers and materials for housing. What we used to say in the seventies was land is the basis of power. If land ownership is based on who has the most might, those with the most might will also have the most economic power. We need to figure out different ways of relating that reduce the disparities in wealth that in large part are based on land ownership.

The other flaw—which can exist in socialism, also—is the idea that the earth is a commodity, and what we need is more production, more extraction. I think a new way of looking at our relationship to the earth is required.

But the other thing is that because capitalism intersects with white supremacy, you have an

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enormous amount of wealth concentrated in the hands of (usually) a few white men. That is a huge problem, as the Occupy movement pointed out. It is based on the genocide of indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, and the enormous amount of wealth that forced labor created in the process of industrial production. We have the vast majority struggling to survive and a few people with an obscene amount of wealth. There are multiple reasons why capitalism is flawed and shouldn't be replicated in blackface.

NPQ: *What do you see as guiding principles for a more socially oriented economy?*

MY: In terms of guiding principles, I don't have it all figured out. We might have some ideas of what a post-capitalist alternative economy might look like, but not a clear, coherent plan by any means.

We need to figure out ways that communities benefit from their own labor, instead of having that labor extracted to create value for someone else. Another principle might be communities meeting their own needs. So, if people in Detroit need something, such as shovels, how do we produce shovels within the community? And, since I'm an advocate of cooperatives, if we can have a shovel cooperative, it creates collective wealth, collective ownership, and greater participation in democratic decision making. To me, that is the preferred mode. How do we first find ways to supply our own needs, and in the process capture the value of the wealth that we generate?

Communities don't have walls around them—they are porous. I'm talking in generalities here. It's not like there are clear lines of demarcation. I don't think we want communities to be in isolation but rather to be pods or liberated zones that connect in an economic way and also connect socially and culturally. That would be a principle of what this might look like.

NPQ: *What is the role of education in building a new economy?*

MY: Schooling prepares people to participate in the economy. While that shouldn't be the only reason, it is a primary function of school in this

society. If we are going to create communities that are first looking to serve their own needs, to capture their own wealth and labor, then we have to have an education system that prepares people for that kind of economy. In other words, we need an educational system that prepares us to take our energies and turn them inward to our own communities rather than outward toward an extractive system that we have very little control over.

NPQ: *Do you see principles of a new economy being articulated widely in Detroit?*

MY: There is the Allied Media Conference in Detroit that is advancing these ideas and attracting people across the country. The production and planning of it is an articulation of the principles, and the principles are articulated at the conference itself. There is the Boggs School. There are a few African-centered schools. There is urban farming. Not everybody is involved for the same reason—some are profit driven, some are social-justice focused. There are a number of small co-ops. There is the Colors Co-op Academy, run by Restaurant Opportunities Center. There is the work of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. There are a number of small efforts that are manifestations of this vision of a new economy.

NPQ: *How should nonprofits and philanthropy respond?*

MY: The nonprofit sector is diverse, of course. You have people on the left-leaning radical edge who are functioning within nonprofits, and you have others who are very conservative upholders of the status quo. For those who see themselves as consciously working toward a new economy, what we need is more cooperation among the groups. If we are trying to work on a new economic vision, that is bigger than the work of any single organization. What are the individual pieces? Who is creating what? How do we make linkages between those pieces?

Sharing of staff might be one piece. Maybe not every nonprofit needs its own accountant or finance department. Maybe we create a cooperative business that serves multiple

nonprofits, allowing those nonprofits to use their hard-fought-for funding more effectively but also generate another institution that builds the alternative that we are trying to create.

We need to sharpen our analysis. We need more discussions about the big ideas. I was on a panel last week talking about the big ideas that sometimes are not on the ground, although I do on-the-ground work, too. It is important to ask the bigger questions. We can't just do the day-to-day. We need to have some vision of where we are headed and align our work with that. If we don't have time to create the vision—if we don't have time to explore the big questions like, What would a just society look like or a cooperative new economy look like?—then we can't get there. We need to get a little bit out of the boxes we are in so that we can align our actions with our visions.

There is a robust discussion within the emergency food sector about the limits of the charity model and how in some ways giving food to people may create further dependence. So, how do we think about the causes of the hunger? How do we foster community self-determination? We need to spend more time collectively looking at the bigger goals of a society that we are trying to bring into being. We need to have a dream of what we want in order to move in that direction.

NPQ: *You have said in talks that none of us escapes the impact of white supremacy. How does racial equity get incorporated into community economy building work?*

MY: The last several hundred years of the history in the so-called Western Hemisphere have been shaped by a European colonial-conqueror narrative. It is so pervasive that it is almost like the air that we breathe. It is so much around us, it permeates our consciousness. In broad generalities, people who are defined as white tend to have a sense of arrogance and a sense of feeling that their particular experience is the universal experience by which others should be evaluated: their standards of beauty, their ways of operating, their ways of being. It functions in so many ways, this sense that their way of doing things is somehow better. People of color have issues of inferiority,

and of feeling like we have to measure up and that we're inadequate, and that white people have some special monopoly on shaping reality.

We have all been debilitated. Even as we struggle to bring about a more just society, inevitably what happens is that this white arrogance still manifests itself. It is not even always intentional. White people have been conditioned. The only way to get past that is to first recognize that it exists, that we have all been afflicted by it. Then, most importantly, enter into a course of action to heal the damage from the system of white supremacy. It takes a life-long commitment. Hopefully, we can pass a saner way on to the next generation. It takes a real commitment, particularly for white people—people who are defined as white—to be introspective and to look to value ways of being beyond what has been their experience.

Inevitably, when we try to create multiracial formations, this rears its ugly head. Across the country, I hear Black folks pushing back. In nonprofit settings they feel marginalized, with white men taking up all of the air in the room. It takes commitment to recognize and hold ourselves accountable. It is one thing to say that you believe in racial justice and equity, but what does that look like? Who are you accountable to? If you get off track, who holds you accountable?

If we talk about a fair and just society, we need to change not only our relationship to the economy but also how we see ourselves as human beings. Otherwise, we will replicate, maybe in different ways, the same sort of distorted relationships. The same can be said for the socialist-capitalist argument. Capitalism promotes racial division and inequity. But changing from capitalism to socialism doesn't mean that the same kinds of racial elements won't be replicated in socialism. White supremacy is a system that is overarching. It can infect both a capitalist society *and* a socialist society.

NPQ: *What is the role of arts and culture in building a new society?*

MY: I'm a musician. I'm an artist of sorts, also. For many of us, there has never been a line of demarcation between activism and the arts. In

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the 1960s, Detroit was a hotbed of the Black arts movement. We have had a long-standing tradition of socially informed art.

Art can help motivate people, can help people to see the world in different ways. Art can touch people in ways beyond the intellectual touching that might happen as a result of a lecture or of reading a book. Art touches on a deeper emotional level, gets us out of our heads. That's part of the Eurocentric paradigm. The idea of being in your head is very much a construct of European colonialism as opposed to models that look at your heart and how your heart and head are connected to your spiritual self.

Most African and indigenous ways of knowing and being are rooted in a sense of spirituality. This idea of the economy or social aspects of life devoid of spirituality is not rooted in the traditions of African people or indigenous peoples, which is one of the reasons that Marxism has had a hard time in Africa. Marxism has had influence in some places in Africa, but because Africans are largely spiritual, an ideology that is based on materialism often doesn't resonate. As we are building a new society, I would like to see this sense of spirituality—not a reductive religious manifestation that pits people against each other but a universal, respectful, inclusive approach to spirituality that recognizes that the connection we have to each other and to the planet is a fundamental part of how we think of a new economy. If not, then profit becomes the main measure. We need something larger connecting us to past and future generations. If we are not part of the fabric of life, we are moving in isolation. And the arts connect one's entire self.

NPQ: *Grace Lee Boggs talked about how automation and decentralization meant that the conditions that had placed industrial workers in a privileged position no longer hold. She suggested community building from the ground up. Where are the points of leverage today?*

MY: Grace and I disagree somewhat. I agree with her on the importance of building from the ground up, but I think it is still important that we try to kick the legs out from under capitalism.

Yes, it is declining and will eventually decay. Rather than just build our vision for the future, we need to build new community models and still undermine capitalism.

Some of the social movements become points of leverage—for example, the pushback against police killings. People are starting to see how oppression is racialized in the United States—how it connects to wealth and lack thereof. It activates people to push a bigger analysis of society—not just what we *don't* want, but what we *do* want: policing justice, a new relationship to the economy. These are a huge focus in the Movement for Black Lives.

The #MeToo movement that is challenging the historic way that women have been exploited and abused is another point of leverage. It is causing people to rethink many things. It is prompting a rethinking of masculinity, femininity, womanhood, and how women function. To me, what is most important is the shift in consciousness, the shift in how we are seeing and valuing women in families, the workplace, and the larger society.

Another point of leverage is the blatant putting of democracy into a coma that occurred with emergency management in Detroit. And, as I mentioned earlier, the clear ownership of businesses by other ethnicities in African-American communities. Such points of leverage can help to shift people's consciousness and ultimately shift societal relationships.

But once you shift people's consciousness, they need to have specific activities they can become involved in. So, what do we do differently? And on a national level, not just in isolation, because what is happening on the national level is also a point of leverage. There is a tremendous amount spent on the military, while people see suffering and dilapidated infrastructure in places like Detroit. The general regressive and xenophobic approach is something that people can readily see. We are in a time period that is ripe for alternatives. Those of us who have some idea of what those alternatives might be must develop models that people can participate in.

NPQ: *How should nonprofits conceive of social enterprise?*

MY: We favor cooperatives. Social enterprises may be a step above capitalism driven solely by profit, where there is some degree of concern for the welfare of the community and the environment, but it is still short of the benefits that derive from cooperatives. Cooperatives are what we need both to collectively hold wealth and, equally as important, to learn to make decisions collectively. What happens to people in a capitalist system is that their sense of agency is eroded. They become used to being decided for. Having to make decisions on our own behalf, and do that in league with other community members, is a process we need in order to heal ourselves and restore our humanity. People need to exercise those muscles and know how to make decisions on their own behalf.

NPQ: *What can be done to identify, lift up, support existing efforts that build toward new vision?*

MY: This idea of race enters into the discussion again. In many cases, some of the most

progressive efforts are being done by people of color. If we don't hear about them, we can't replicate them. Shifting the narrative is important. Telling the stories of Black-, indigenous-, and Latinx-led efforts is one of the necessary steps. Many of these collective, self-help efforts may not always be called cooperatives. Regardless, identifying and lifting community-based innovations—through social media, speaking, publications, films, video—is important. We run a seven-acre farm. There are many people who have never heard of us. How do we get the word out? There are people around the world who know of us, and people around the block who do not. Most people in positions of power are thoroughly wedded to the capitalist system. Any models that fundamentally challenge that don't get much media play. It is critical that we build a more cohesive movement that is capable of injecting these ideas into the public discourse and consciousness.

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