



William C. Anderson, *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition*, Chico: AK Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781849354349 (paper); ISBN: 9781849354356 (ebook)

What might it mean to yearn for, to insist upon, a collectivity – a collective, coalitional togetherness, as it were – yet refuse to understand that yearning as a project of nation-building? The nation is not an innocent description of geographical boundaries; the nation, following the language and rhetorical manoeuvre of someone like Édouard Glissant, is a *project*. In other words, rather than the delimitation of boundaries that attempt to define and instantiate an arbitrary identity, a nation can be more closely understood as a regimatic attempt to circumscribe promiscuous coming-togethers, to assert fidelity to hegemonic power over and against unsanctioned assemblages that work, by definition, in subversion of such normative power. Nations require genuflection to wealth, to whiteness, to cisnormativity, to patriarchy because refusing such a call means that the nation cannot stand. Why, then, would those given to abolition and an understanding of blackness seek, in any respect, a nation?

William C. Anderson, a bit like me, is a writer of discovery, I gather: that is, he figures out what he thinks through writing; writing is a vehicle for thought and thinking, which are, always, inextricable from how to promote the survivability and livelihood of black people. In *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition*, Anderson mellifluously articulates something quite gritty and emergent from a certain kind of intellectual, political, experiential trove. His incisive clarity with respect to the ravages of the nationalistic violence propounded, historically and contemporarily, by the United States and other nations that, by virtue of their nationhood, propound violence, comes from a simple yet deeply complex place: from mess. Anderson worked for years as a janitor, cleaning, which is to say tending to mess, knowing and learning mess, what kinds there are, from where and from whom they come, how to eradicate messes. This is how one might begin to live, or a space from which one might learn to live: “As a janitor, you learn intimately what’s wrong with this society because you have to clean it up. You

get to know society very well through its messes” (p.2). Maybe sometimes, if we insist hard enough, we call that mess “America”, “whiteness”, “cishnormativity”, “patriarchy”. To know this mess, we know what it will take to clean it up. And those chemicals, those methods, may very well be harsh.

I do have to wonder, a bit selfishly, if there are other avenues of discovery and struggle, radicalisation and radicality. Indeed, I know, deeply, the ways my mother’s or my brother’s or my kinfolk’s (who ain’t blood but, perhaps, are something even more) toil and struggle in the literal and proverbial streets has been denigrated and, by ethical inverse, need to be championed. I know, and I do that. But I wonder if there is still a way that someone like me – studious in a bibliographic sense, discursive and writerly in a scholarly sense, philosophical in a Socratic sense – has something to share. This is not at all to say those custodial and cafeteria-working and sewage- and waste-cleaning intellects are to be sidelined, as has long been the case. Only, if I may, to say that the work that I and others do, in non-hierarchical coalition, bears a different kind of imprint and evokes a different kind of texture. I, and others, *study*, and that matters too, in a way that, it seems, Anderson would concur with – Assata Shakur graces the opening of Chapter 2, after all: “Part of struggling is learning, is studying” (p.39). Those proximate to the academy study, and some of us – in black studies, in trans studies, in feminist theory, like me; or in ethnic studies or history or sociology, unlike me – study in such a way as to have as that study’s primary aim not so much “knowledge production” or “advancing the field” but, instead, the decimation of the very skeletal anatomy that upholds the violences and hegemonies that pervade our milieu. Anderson’s janitorial study, I submit, is kinfolk with fugitive planning and black *study* (#FredMotenandStefanoHarney #TheUndercommons).

Because it is all in service of something like a new world, which sounds so cliched by now. But it is, in service of a new world, I mean. Or, not even a new world – something else, not quite a world, not quite, at all. “Nation on no map” is giving language to something that doesn’t really request language, in part refuses language’s architectural enframing. But the language is

appreciated, necessary even. The language nods our way that something else is possible, giving us a tilt of the head about a clandestine secret place that has no password and no bouncer, but requires something immense from you. The language lets us know what, and that, we don't really know right now. But will. Must.

"I see the 'nation on no map'", Anderson writes, "as a group of people using skills others may struggle to recognize to develop new thinking, new language, and new societies. I envision a nation that doesn't need to be a nation and that doesn't need to be on a map, because it knows borders, states, and boundaries cannot accommodate the complexity of our struggles" (p.xxviii). Nations and states and borders are not salvageable; they cannot hold what we are moving toward: abolition. But abolition, for Anderson, "is not the revolution itself" but "a step to bring us closer to revolution" (p.160). Abolition is a methodological apparatus, it seems, that gets us closer to what we *really* want, which is revolution. But I'm not so sure about this. By which I mean, lovingly, yeah, abolition is not the revolution itself – it is *more*. In my own work, it seems that I depart from Anderson at the level of semantics: revolution, as I understand it, is akin to a kind of seizure of the means of production, a taking of the office of the president or CEO. But on this reading, uncritiqued and simply taken for granted is the shape of power itself, which is implied to inevitably look like the state. I do not think Anderson thinks this. Indeed, he and I are aligned on this front, very much so, it seems to me. I think I aim only to offer abolition as the language for this coalitional work of what Anderson terms revolution. I aim only to offer the same, or a similar, goal with different language, for some might prefer this language, and we are trying to get as many of our homies in this struggle as possible.

This abolition, or this revolution, seeks no reform, no citizenship or statehood or cartographical mapping. None of that. These are restrictive and, in fact, colonial impulses and residual apparatuses that will not serve us in the end (or along the way). This process is a destructive one, for Anderson, though I see boldly, even if he does not emphasise it, the creative and generative aspects of this destruction. This process, for Anderson, is a "*complete* ruination"

(p.160), a ruination of not ourselves – Anderson, and black anarchism and abolition, are about life and conditions for living, very much so – but the state, its white supremacy, its coloniality. (We might get playful with the language here: a ruin-nation, a “nation” in ruins, predicated on the ruining of nationhood as such.)

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There is a quotidian tenor to Anderson’s writing: it is motivated by life being lived and cultivated by, as he writes, “the roar of a vacuum cleaner, calluses from dust mops, and the balance required to run a floor machine” (p.xxiii). Never is sight lost on the quotidian, the people who clean, who wash, who labour, who tend and care. And that characterises radical transformation. How might we think about the possibility of a transformed world from the vantage not of a spectacularised conflagration but from the quiet moments, the moments in which we might have scolded but instead soothe and hold, in which we might have extracted this or that resource but instead tilled the soil, in which we might have left a mess because it wasn’t in our house but instead mop, vacuum, clean because we need no longer be covetous about things we purportedly own and can now clean and tend and care because we all live here, with and among one another, learning to clean and tend and care precisely because we all live here, with and among one another.

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