

# PAPERS ON POWER

PAPERSONPOWER



UNIVERSITY OF  
OREGON

Center for  
Art Research

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The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their land by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, Kalapuya descendants are primarily citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians, and they continue to make important contributions to communities, institutions, the University of Oregon, the state of Oregon, the United States, and to the world.

In acknowledging the original people of the land we occupy, we extend our respect to the Indigenous people of Oregon and all other displaced Indigenous people who call Oregon home. With this publication, and our collective activity, we recognize Oregon's first people as the past, present, and future stewards of this land, and we pledge our commitment to make ongoing efforts to center Indigenous existence in the work we do. CFAR also extends this commitment to people who may not have directly been impacted by settler colonialism on sites currently inhabited by the University of Oregon yet have been systematically oppressed, denied access, and physically and psychologically abused for generations by the very structures and mechanisms that have afforded the University of Oregon and so many of our students, staff, and faculty opportunities to thrive. As such, we pledge to support and make ongoing efforts to center the best interests of all BIPOC individuals and communities in our work.

# PAPERS<sub>ON</sub> POWER



Eugene, OR



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# CFAR Mission

The **Center for Art Research (CFAR)** is a collaborative, artist-run platform for experimentation and exchange rooted in art making. The Center cultivates diverse modes of engagement related to the practices of contemporary artists by supporting speculative Research, Discourse, Exhibition, and Publication. CFAR is directed by the faculty in the University of Oregon's Department of Art, and is sustained by the contributions of individuals and institutions from around the world.

CFAR serves artists, arts workers, and communities by creating space and agency for a range of practices, voices, and experiences in ways that are equitable and inclusive for all people regardless of race, ethnicity, heritage, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic position, political perspective, cultural beliefs, and traditions.

**Research** – CFAR brings together artists and scholars from around the world to catalyze unexpected connections and outcomes related to the practice-based research of affiliates. CFAR takes an expanded view of art research by supporting individual and collaborative projects, residencies, and a variety of initiatives that happen within and outside of studio practice. CFAR research responds fluidly to dynamic currents in society and culture that are relevant to a range of people and communities.

**Discourse** – CFAR challenges, synthesizes, and expands engagement with contemporary art through diverse approaches that include studio dialogue, public lectures and symposia, experimental gatherings, and more focused seminars and workshops. By approaching art practice as a catalytic mode of inquiry, center affiliates also work with colleagues from adjacent fields to develop transdisciplinary discourse that is relevant to broad constituencies.

**Exhibition** – CFAR makes visible the work of contemporary artists through the Center and with partners by facilitating exhibitions and alternative forms of public display in local, national, and international spheres. Activities range from gallery exhibitions and site-responsive installations to experimental screenings, performances, and social actions.

**Publication** – CFAR publications vary in form and content, proliferating art thinking related to the experiences and conditions of contemporary life. Publications, authored by center affiliates and others, are both printed and web-based, and include essays, monographs, periodicals, public archives, editioned art multiples, and other experimental forms.

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# Editor's Note

POWER comes from the Latin word “potere”, meaning “to be able to”, and is often associated with words such as control, influence, ability, potential, force, impact, energy, and might, among others. Power is often thought of as that which is possessed, transferred, acted upon, exchanged, imposed, and has affect. In its most basic form, power can be described as an exchange of energy that has the potential to yield physical, theoretical, or social impact. It has the ability to do something in a particular way, especially as a faculty, quality, or physical manifestation. Power is omnipresent, existing within, outside, and between forces, objects, people, institutions, and social and cultural systems. Power can be tangible or intangible, enduring or temporary, and have no impact on a body or such that shapes its existence completely.

As an expansive way to investigate notions of power, CFAR commissioned artists and cultural producers with a range of lived experiences to respond to the question “What is power?” as it relates to their work and thinking. Contributors were encouraged to make this endeavor something that in some way serves them, or to approach the occasion of developing their piece as a way to process or explore things they may not otherwise. While the project is called Papers on Power, CFAR encouraged contributors to use any format they deem appropriate, from the typical academic paper or photo essay to experimental forms that may have little or no precedent. The initial project prompt posed a 1200 word maximum, which was chosen as more of a starting point than a constraint and that which is not quite long enough to completely resolve most thoughts but affords the opportunity to be speculative or propositional to introduce thinking specific to an individual’s practice(s) while modeling, probing, and/or elucidating the nature of their relationship to the subject of power. CFAR followed the work, adjusting timelines and lending support as needed to let things mature organically within the complexity of the lives that produced them.

Papers on Power is a compilation of casts to the ether, sent from home sites all over the US during a time that was fraught and unclear, and so difficult to find purchase in. These pieces were published through CFAR’s website as they were completed in 2020 and 2021, and now bound here to seed thinking and catalyze exchange related to power.

Brian Gillis  
Director, University of Oregon Center for Art Research

# Everyday is for the Thief

Britain's Imperial Marketing Machine and How It Sold Nigeria  
and Its Resources

3

**Bukola Koiki**

As I complete this writing, we are a mere week away from the failed insurrection at the Capitol building on January 6, 2021 by mostly White domestic terrorists. During and following that televised horror show there have been lots of words like “shocked” and “surprised” used, and I can tell you who was not shocked or surprised by this catalytic event—Black people. Specifically, Black people from formerly colonized countries and especially those from countries like Nigeria, who have witnessed the omens and wages of multiple coups. White America’s shock and surprise was a privilege.

There is no greater irony than to be writing a paper about “power” when Americans have just witnessed the failure of clinging to power at the cost of lives and democracy. Democracy is the ideal we fought so viciously for against our British Imperial overlords and have subsequently exported by force to various foreign lands and territories. What a sight our day of reckoning must have been to them—Americans as the hoard of savages and barbarians for once. As a Nigerian-American whose formative years were spent in Nigeria, a former colony of the former British Empire, I could vividly trace the historical threads from this failing American democratic enterprise and the plight of my country of birth under British tyranny in the compounding events of the last five years. One thread I’ve been pulling at is the diabolical handshake between power and printed media (books, newspapers, posters, and other ephemera) to generate and wield propaganda and its power to coerce, mislead, and divide. Worst of all, that thread leads to the role that art and design can play in marketing your oppression, grievances, and that of others to you as a necessary and natural process for you to claim and consume your portion of a capitalist world. Sound familiar?

In 1899, the disparate territories that were to become Nigeria were purchased from the Royal Niger Company (which lives on as the massive Unilever Company) for £865,000 (equivalent to \$126,000,000 today) and in 1914 the North and South protectorates were united and officially named Nigeria by Lord Frederick Lugard (as suggested by his wife, Flora). Under the British Colonial Administration, Nigeria’s resources—people, crops, ores, etc.—were carefully cataloged and extracted, and marketed to fill the British coffers. By the time Nigeria was granted independence in 1960, it was a much mined and underdeveloped country that had never learned to rule itself. Like a suddenly emancipated minor sitting on a billion-dollar inheritance in oil wells, the subsequent implosion into decades of corruption, mismanagement, military coups, and the currently failing democratic experiment was nigh inevitable.

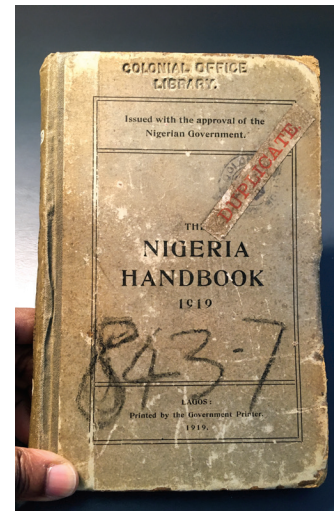
As history tells us, the winners write the books, thus it can be no surprise to you that as a student in Nigeria I was never taught and had no insight into the very complicated and character-defining history of Nigeria until I was an adult and years removed from my formative educational experiences. In fact, every textbook, imported TV show, educator, popular cultural product, and our revered elders seemed to reinforce Nigerian’s Anglophilia and even espoused gratitude for having been colonized. Even more revelations appeared

to me as I undertook research into a colonial text I had chanced upon in 2017 in the Smithsonian Libraries’ online catalog. The text in question is “The Nigeria Handbook: Containing the Statistical and General Information respecting the Colony and Protectorate,” a colonial-era publication compiled by Chief Secretary A.C. Burns of the British Colonial Administration of Nigeria. What this discovery made clear to me in unambiguous detail is that much of Nigeria’s problems can be traced back to the tyrannies of the Empire and how the engines of art, design, marketing, and capitalism came together to sell a country and its people’s potential.

Following, I have included images (taken by me, unless otherwise noted) of pages and advertisements from The Nigeria Handbook, British Empire Marketing posters, and other ephemera related to Colonial Nigeria. I have included my analysis of the design elements and their semiotics where applicable and notes from my ongoing research and observations towards a future body of work (already in progress).

In March 2020, I traveled to London, England on a research trip to the British Library and the British Archives to see what I could discover about the origins of The Nigeria Handbook and all relevant information as to the Brits’ activities in Nigeria during that time. This 1919 copy of the Handbook (see left) is the earliest one I have ever encountered. I now own three vintage copies of this book, the newest and thickest being the 7th edition from 1926. I have yet to discover with any certainty when the book began to be produced and when the publication ceased. What struck me was that everything about the design of this book screamed of efficiency, class, and a classic, unshakable power from its patrician serif font used throughout, perfect spacing, and tightly stitched binding. It has the feel of a Bible—appropriate since one of the exports of colonialism was Christianity—and, at least in the earliest copies, portability that signaled that it was meant to be an indispensable reference for the ambitious merchant of all stripes. “Come to Nigeria! Seek adventure and make your fortune as efficiently as possible!” it almost cries. Like everything else in our world, it’s made to ensure White comfort without all the messy bits in view.

I found that the table of contents moved me to horror at the clerical efficiency of chapters listing of all of Nigeria’s sectors. A teaser for greedy eyes of the accounting of natural



The Nigeria Handbook, 1919. Image of a copy in the archive of the British Library.



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resources in land, sea, and air worth exploiting to come. A book that has everything—the people, plant, and animal life that come with this colonial prize and the self-serving British-created infrastructure of banking, currency, and law enforcement and carceral systems created for every Western comfort while the pillaging is done.

Discovered within the pages of the seventh edition of the Handbook are also several so-called "physical type" photographs (similar to those created by colonial anthropologist Northcote Thomas in the early twentieth century), intended to identify and classify people into different racial or tribal categories by colonial anthropologists. These images were so striking to me due to their clinical nature and dehumanization of

proud men from the Hausa and Yoruba tribes into mute objects for the White gaze. How did these images reinforce the lie of White superiority to the Victorian officers, soldiers, merchants, and more who encountered these images? Such dehumanization and specimen-like violent images more than likely reinforced the British people's beliefs in their rights to Nigeria's resources.

The ads in the following pages are for me, laden with symbolism and references to the history of Africa. Alcohol was a commodity brought to West Africa by Europeans to exchange for goods and eventually to exchange for human beings during the transatlantic slave trade. While the ad on the left may have been advertising to White colonialists venturing to Nigeria, similar ads were created for the many European liquor companies that soon sprang up in Nigeria and continue to operate and manufacture there to this day—liquor companies that contributed to alcoholism and its public and domestic ills that soon plagued many a Western African state. It's also hard to miss the racist caricature in the advertisement on the right selling pith helmets. The iconic accessory is seen as a symbol of European colonial invaders in Africa and also has ties to the horrors of safari hunting. You may have encountered this hat in recent memory because Melania, the outgoing First Lady, wore one in October 2018 while on a solo tour to some African countries. As safari touring is the thing one does in Africa, she chose to don a pith helmet as a fashionable hat. The tone-deafness was astounding but not surprising.

This ad for Burberrys—forbearer to the contemporary British luxury brand, Burberry—is just one of several ads that acted as an historical marker and as proof that many "heritage"



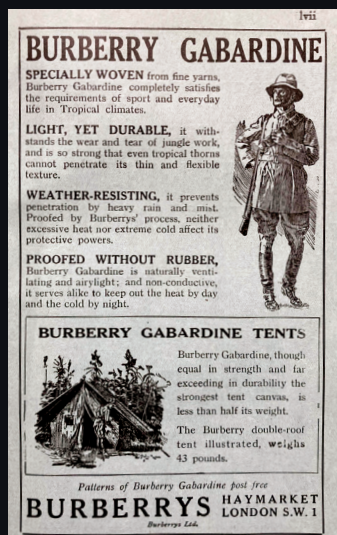
Hausa from the north.



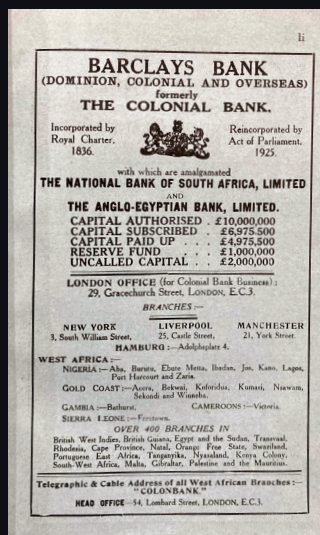
Yoruba from the south.



A spread of colonial-era advertisements in the blue pages at the beginning of every Handbook. These from 'The Nigeria Handbook', 7th Edition, 1926



Advertisement for Burberrys in "The Nigeria Handbook" blue pages, 7th Edition, 1926



Advertisement for Barclays Bank in "The Nigeria Handbook" blue pages, 7th Edition, 1926

apparel and consumer brands that profited from slavery and colonialism did not die with those evils and continue to build on that ill-gotten wealth until today. Everything about the language of this ad—and many other such Colonial outfitters to be found in the Nigeria Handbook—speaks of the rush to cater to White comfort in the foreign, “savage” lands of Nigeria. There at their shops, you could be kitted against the tropical heat, rain, bugs, and by virtue of your garb, be made obvious and separated from the so-called natives. This ad speaks to me of a distancing and denial of the truth of their situation, privilege, and of tyranny and atrocities that the British presence caused. Can one really be outfitted against such ills?

This ad for The Colonial Bank, showing its name change to Barclays Bank is a particularly painful one to look at. To see so much money available and credit to be extended to merchants and adventurers flooding into Nigeria, one cannot help but wonder if that money could have been used to help the country and its people thrive and create businesses of their own. However, we do know why that didn't happen, because the British would never show a man how to fish, for then he would taste independence and they would lose all control of their cash machine. The history of British banks is a long and sordid one, with diversions and investments in slavery in the Americas as well via plantation mortgages for which plantation owners often leveraged enslaved people and not their land as property. When slavery was finally abolished in Britain the banks were also involved in compensating slave owners for their losses. The final payments were not made until as recently as 2015! The sheer unfettered greed and lack of humanity of this just make my brain hurt.

This poster (left), created by the Empire Marketing Board or EMB (1926 - 1933) is a study in classic British propaganda and is reminiscent of (and precedes) the ubiquitous “Keep Calm and Carry On” posters created in 1939 at the start of WWII. The font is very reminiscent of Gill Sans but was actually a custom font that was never issued. Incidentally, enterprising contemporary typographers have hacked the posters and made their own complete font families. The bright red color and white stripes reference the British flag and the font's weights are friendly yet classic and firm, reminiscent of the British stiff upper lip. This is only an example of a basic poster design as the EMB went on to produce thousands of marketing posters for every British colony at the time—each with multiple designs, including some elaborately illustrated posters with decidedly gendered appeals. Everything about this poster shouts “Consumption is Your Patriotic Duty!” and “Buy More Stuff!” The Colonies and Dominions, the labor of millions of people of color, and yes, their literal fruits were produced to fill the coffers of the British banks and monarchy.





Posters for Nigeria by the Empire Marketing Board, produced between 1926–1933, United Kingdom



Finally, these are two posters touting “Orders” and “A Contract” making the purchase of Nigerian produce possible by citizens of the British Empire. One has to wonder, what the distinction is between home and overseas in such a sprawling portfolio of stolen lands? What is also striking are the two very different approaches to advertisement here: one poster is bright with an approachable yet stately sans serif font and the other is moody, with a serif font that can’t make up its mind and features lots of text. Two different advertising approaches were sure to confuse the masses and reeks of the desperation at “home” in Britain when there was a spike in nationalism and the already minimally-funded Empire Marketing Board was shuttered in 1933 with the adoption of the “Imperial Preference” economic model.

In conclusion, the art and design of printed matter can seem ubiquitous and unimportant to many people, but history proves that they have always been very adaptable tools to wield in service of power and the few powerful thieves of all kinds who steal the dreams, resources, and lands of the many. The vintage printed matter I have discussed here are no different from images and messages fed to us on red hats and on myriad t-shirts, through many a billboard, campaign poster or yard sign, and yes, via social media and advertising too. The only difference these days seems to lie in differences in subtlety and sophistication. Accordingly, the semiotic meanings and messages within are always working on us and breaking down our resistance to lies and misinformation wielded by those who seek power. Always.



## References

The title of this piece comes from a lyrical Nigerian proverb which goes, “Everyday is for the thief, [but] one day is for the owner.” It refers to the belief that no matter how long one may lie, steal, or cheat others, one day you will eventually be caught. It is a hopeful promise of justice in a world where power often allows an escape hatch for evil. We are still waiting for Britain to face justice for its theft of Nigeria’s land, labor, resources, and the ongoing ways it keeps this and many other countries underdeveloped and reliant, even in their so-called independence from colonialism.

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## Biography

Bukola Koiki is a Nigerian-American transdisciplinary artist whose work strives to collapse the single-story of the West African immigrant experience by engaging and interpreting the liminal spaces she inhabits between two cultures through research and explorations of linguistic phenomena, cultural ontologies, generational memory, and more. Koiki’s multidimensional works reflect her material and technical curiosity and include hand-pulled prints rendered with embroidered collagraph plates, giant beads employing Nigerian hair threading techniques, handmade and hand-dyed paper, Indigo dyed, and hand-printed Tyvek head ties, amongst other explorations.

Koiki was nominated for the Textile Society of America’s 2020 Brandford/Elliott Award and was named a 2019 Finalist for the American Craft Council’s Emerging Artist Award. She has exhibited nationally and been featured in American Craft and Surface Design magazines, Art21 Magazine online and has been interviewed on NPR. Koiki received an MFA in Applied Craft + Design from Pacific Northwest University in 2015 and a BFA in Communication Design from the University of North Texas in 2008. She completed the Fountainhead Fellowship in the Craft/Material Studies Department at Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in March 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is currently temporarily living and teaching in Oregon.

# Biting the Hand that Feeds You

Breaking the Cycle of Institutional Dependency

15

Libby Werbel

I identify as an artist who works non-traditionally and with criticality. Sometimes I even get paid to explore this criticism as part of my work inside cultural institutions. This results in me often challenging the very notion or purpose of the modern-day museum. But I often wonder why I continue to be invited in to air the dirty laundry of institutionality. Is there some deep desire to be exposed for perpetuating cycles of oppression? Some punishment kink in all of this? Or, perhaps, by allowing themselves (i.e. an institution or canon) to be investigated under the lens of institutional critique, they believe themselves to be signaling their alignment with the critic and therefore not a part of the problem. Or (and this is what I often fear) is it the inclusion of the criticism that defangs it? After all, if the critics are part of the institution, they can't recuse themselves from it.

This request to reflect on power has found me in an early stage of research, steeping in some small beginnings. Below is a loose list of "seeds" that I am planting, in hopes they might flourish into something broader. Some items on the list require attention that goes past my capacity; some may read as existential pontifications (and that's fair). Some are examples of subversive acts that I need to sit with for a while. There is a certain level of repetition, as I figure out how to ask the question the right way. This form of sharing is meant to expose the vulnerability of a process, and acknowledge that I most often exist mid-learning. This list appears in no particular order; it's meant to be read on shuffle:

### **1. The Art World Is Filled with Tops**

When looking at institutional critique through the lens of its actual accomplishments within the art canon, I often wonder, "Who is on top?" When speaking about the arts, realistically, once you reach the institutional level, there are rarely tops or bottoms negotiating this dilemma. Only top on top of top on top of top, in perpetuity.

### **2. Andrea Fraser, Untitled, 2003**

How can I thank Andrea Fraser enough? She made the most ultimate sacrifice by letting the money of it enter her, and still no one listened. She's made countless pieces about the cost of it all, about the challenge of working within the institutions that wanted to pimp her. Her practice is filled with so many of these gestures, of self-immolation and protest. Works that communicate urgency and desperation for systemic change. She is constantly questioning the museum's authenticity and care, and when she debuted her infamous piece *Untitled, 2003*, the institutions who showed it might have applauded its pointedness or gasped at its crudeness, but never changed how they talk about (or increased how often they show) a woman's work.

### **3. Museums as Monuments**

How is a collective mythology preserved? Whose narratives are perpetuated under the name of the arts? It's a minefield to step into right now. Historical, art, and scientific museums, operating as keepers of our culture, have been exposed to be foundationally harmful. They are riddled with white supremacy and misguided attempts at cultural preservation or advancement in the name of that supremacy. But also, who am I to insert more questions into this massive problem? Or answers? When asked, I often just say, "Begin again." But that is easy to say when I am tied to neither an institution nor a practice that depends on one. Museums, much like monuments, were erected by a ruling class and therefore will never be neutral. Once we can collectively accept their limitations, we can start to imagine what comes next. What comes after the museum?

### **4. Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum, 1992**

This exhibition opened exactly one week before the L.A. uprising that took place in response to the acquittal of Rodney King's police abusers. Wilson's exhibit showed work from the permanent collection of the Maryland Historical Society, including nineteenth-century armchairs carved by slaves, silver repoussé vessels displayed next to iron shackles, a whipping post, a Ku Klux Klan robe in a baby carriage, and an eighteenth-century portrait of a wealthy white child standing beside a young black man with a metal collar around his neck. This exhibition was so successful in addressing blatant inequities in the historical telling of our nation that the Maryland Historical Society was forced to fire its director as it reckoned with its own role in all of it. Wilson is often asked about his wildly applauded project that took place almost 30 years ago and regularly responds that within the institutional landscape not much has changed since then. Where is the learning?

### **5. Dismantling white supremacy would ultimately mean dismantling much of the social and political institutions of the modern world, including the museum.**

How are we eventually going to find a new form of exhibition, a new home for art? We need a new platform for learning that is outside of these houses that currently corrupt us. These houses of rigmarole. Short sightedness. Houses of capital. Built in the likeness of white supremacy, these houses of perpetual harm. Art is essential and probably one of the most important tools for cultural advancement, yet it is still stuck within a cycle of dependency of the burning house it needs to escape: the museum. How can artists escape the museum? How can the public interest escape the museum? Where will we go?

### **6. Cameron Rowland, Encumbrance, 2020**

Just all of it.



## **7. Is it possible to exist in both an embrace of, and a resistance to, something like a museum?**

I believe in scholarship, knowledge, and record keeping. I believe in storytelling and story creating. I appreciate the world-building that happens in a museum, and how an artist and their idea can teach us new ways to see and think. But I am ultimately at a loss as to how we can right the wrongs of years upon years of erasure, oppression, and denial of so many other avenues of cultural artistry, so many perspectives not shown or shared through the museum's telling of the world. We did not value other people's stories enough to preserve them properly. They've been sifted through the sieve of historical patterns of taking and taking and taking.

## **8. Lauren Halsey and the Summaeverything Center**

Inspired by the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for School Children Program and other models of self-sufficiency, Halsey founded this community center in 2020 and funded it entirely through her art sales and donations. This effort supports and feeds the South Central L.A. neighborhood she is from and makes art about. How can we expand on these ideas of circular economies within the arts? What does mutual aid look like when adapted and applied to institutional design? Let's name our leaders when we see them.

## **9. Museums Are Made up of Fragile Shit**

I don't want your museums. I don't want the collections or the liabilities. I don't want the administrators or the docents. But I do want the buildings. I want those galleries. God, I want those walls. I want those offices. I want that infrastructure. I want the platform. But don't get it twisted, I don't want your museums any longer. Let's go inside those buildings and let's start fresh. Let's pay the mortgage with punk shows and symposiums. Let's get insurance by lying. Let's reappropriate every artifact and show 3D-printed reproductions (all over the world) of the originals with text written by and for the people they belong to (or their descendants). So we can really learn. Let's have those folks also determine what to share from their ancestors and what to keep secret. Let's remind ourselves that not everything is for us. Let's charge people entry by their income, and believe what they tell us. It's also fine if they lie. Let's just trust people as a general rule. It will not be our job to police them or correct their etiquette within these walls. This will be a new way to look at it all. If they want to touch it, or lick it, or even break it, they get to be a part of the great continuum of production and consumption. Those are the consequences of making and exhibiting fragile shit.

## **10. Black Mask Collective, 1966**

Black Mask Collective effectively closed down MoMA in 1966 just by stating in their self-published magazine that they would. This radical anarchist artist coalition, helmed by artists Ben Morea and Ron Hahne, proclaimed they were going to shut it down on October

10th at 12 p.m., much to the fear and anxiety of the museum, which decided to preemptively close that day under threat of the unknown. When the time came, five members of BMC walked up and put a printed paper sign on MoMA's doors. It just said "MUSEUM CLOSED." They had succeeded.

The fear of the revolution can sometimes be just as useful a tool as the revolutionary act itself. If rebellion is the immediate threat, the requested change might be granted out of fear of losing power. This point of tension is also a driving force of progress.

## **11. It is a tragedy that art and the ideas of an artist should be bound to monies or a monied world whatsoever.**

Why are we stuck in a system of valuation that is both abysmal and damaging to artists, arts workers, and society at large? All this buying and selling of work that eventually piles up in the care of an aging institution, which is then tasked/burdened with the responsibility of it all. Where else does it go once it is made? Once it is purchased? Where do artists imagine their art goes? Why is it okay that an artist makes half of a sale from a gallery's listing price, then watches their work sell at auction for an exponentially inflated amount? Can an artist begin to trade their work for something that also accumulates value? What would that be? Land? Cryptocurrency? Stocks?

## **12. LaToya Ruby Frazier, Flint Is Family, 2016**

LaToya Ruby Frazier used the proceeds of her art sales from her 2016 exhibition *Flint Is Family* to purchase a giant atmospheric water generator and installed it in an underserved industrial neighborhood in Flint, Michigan. Today it is still a functioning, free, accessible site for clean water. When left with no alternatives, how else can we use art to transform our neighborhoods? How can we use it to transform governing bodies? How can we turn museums into atmospheric water generators? Or as a parallel of the need depending on the place?

## **13. The Plight of Institutional Critique**

To be entrenched in discussion of how museums or certain cultural institutions have not served us/have never served us/are not for us might not be that effective if you are having this discussion inside the museum. Why are we making art about our criticism, but still depending on those same systems to share it? The eventual co-opting of institutional critique is fraught within the cycle of production/consumption; the arts eventually monetize subversive ideas and make them into capital. Who in the end becomes the holder (or owner) of these ideas then? The funders? The institution? The curators? The writers? And how are they any different than me, the critical? Most of us engaging in this level of critique are spinning on the fingertip of privilege, just to have the opportunity to disavow, reject, or question the institutions which we are engaging with (or dependent on). It seems laughable at this point to identify myself as outside of something by proclaiming I am not happy with it. But who among us are outside of it, of those aiming to orchestrate a take down?

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## Biography

Libby Werbel is an artist, curator, and social organizer living and working in Portland, Oregon. She has worked in the arts for over fifteen years. In 2012, she founded the Portland Museum of Modern Art (PMOMA) project, researching and exercising theories around institutional critique. This exhibition space/ community-built museum was created to draw attention to Portland's lack of modern and contemporary institutions for visual art, incite inspiration around collective organizing, and examine the assumptions around the role of a museum. Most recently Werbel fulfilled a two-year position as Visiting Artistic Director at Portland Art Museum where she created five unique exhibitions encouraging audiences to think critically about how museums have traditionally granted access to art and knowledge, and what the future of the Institution could look like, titled We.Construct.Marvels. Between.Monuments. and has published a book under the same title. She currently works as the Director of Public Programming and Engagement at the lumber room.

# The Crazy Pineapple

23

Nick Tobier

### La Pina Casual (LPC)

Fill the bottom of a cup with cut up pineapple. Add mango chunks.

2 scoops pineapple ice cream.

More pineapple

Mango ice cream

Chamoy<sup>1</sup>

Add a tamarind stick, a pineapple lollipop, and sour gummi peach rings. Top with a sprinkle of tajin<sup>2</sup> and a squeeze of fresh lime.

LPC is delicious—an unexpected combination of flavors, textures, colors, and materials. I had the first of many in April 2020 at La Pina Loca (The Crazy Pineapple), a small family run pal-etteria in a small shopping plaza at an intersection of large roads in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

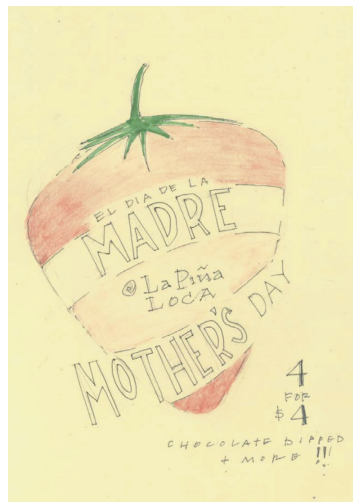
We had all been living in some form of shutdown—schools, work, indoor dining, empty streets. And here, at the end of a gray winter was this incredible joyous concoction. I tried to draw LPC from memory—as homage and as a way to keep it fresh in mind until I could get back there. I posted a photo of the drawing on social media and tagged some friends in town who I thought would enjoy a treat as well as to support a local business.

La Pina Loca “liked” the post on Facebook and shared it on their page.

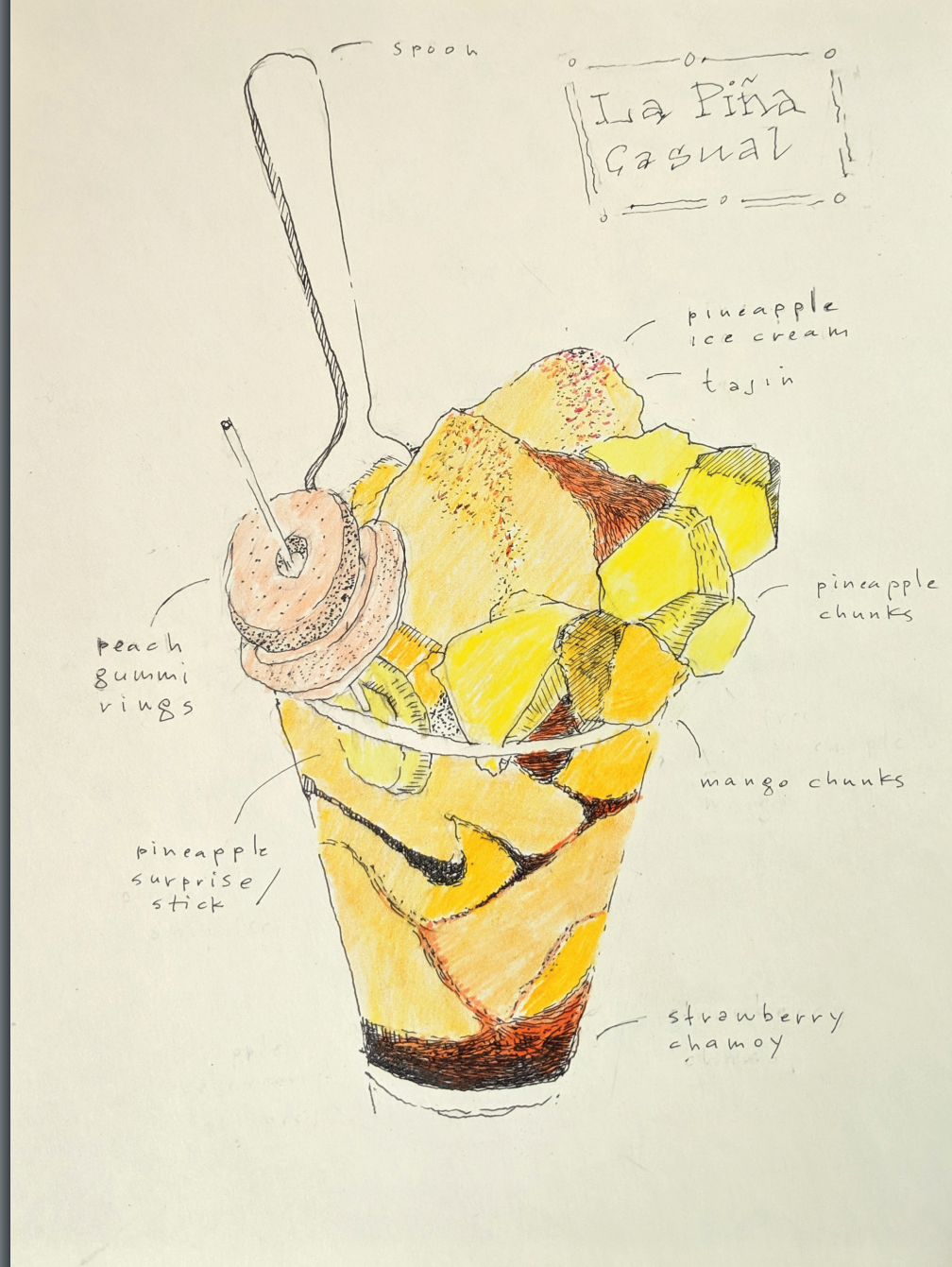
I did another drawing—Mother’s Day was coming up and La Pina had posted on their FB page that they would have flowers for sale along with dipped strawberries. That weekend when I went in, I brought my drawings as some kind of tribute—I felt awkward for sure.



Cinco de Mayo



Mother's Day



La Pina Casual

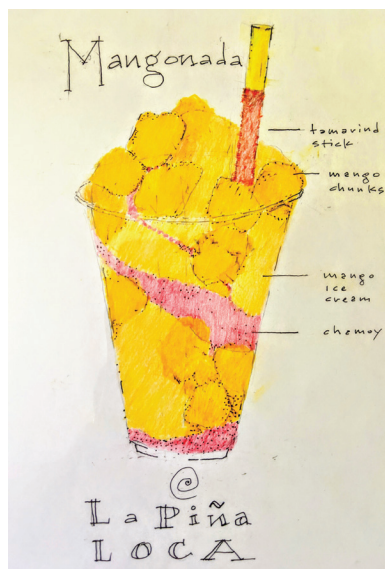


not certain if this was the kind of gift you receive and have neither room nor use for.

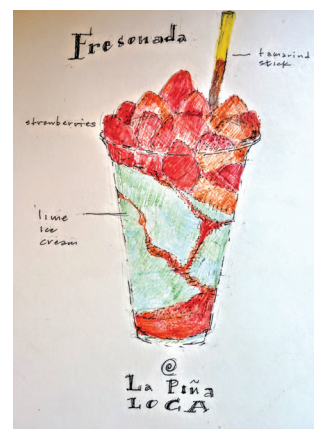
I kept doing the drawings week after week— each after tasting Fresonadas, Mangonadas, Pina Reynas. Along the way I got to meet Ben and Gloria, the owners and inventors of the desserts. I never introduced myself as a professor, an artist, or even thought, “I’ve got a project.”

As a professor at a big university in town, I am continually boosted by all manner of megaphones of privilege. I mean, people pay to hear me speak. That is just craziness. The university structure makes sure that your every accomplishment is noted and promoted. Combine that sense of importance with the fluidity of pursuing interests for creative inquiry, shifting contexts and entering communities, and I take up a lot of space with my assumptions of power and the privileges afforded to my phenotype (Caucasian) passing through the world. This cause and effect reminds me of a Tornado—both the weather form and La Pina Loca’s assembly (gummi spaghetti, Japanese peanuts, and gummi bears set in a swirl of sparkling water and fresh mango).

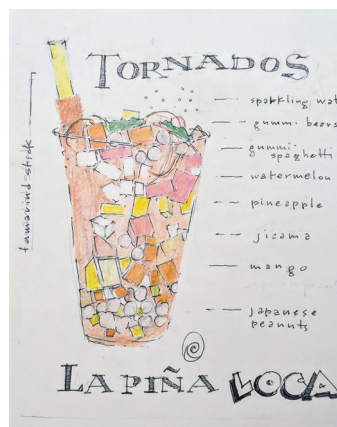
In WA Sutton’s 1967 book “Travel & Understanding: Notes on the Social Structure of Touring” the dynamics of the guest-host relationship is like tourist-local characterized as “visitors who are on the move to enjoy themselves... and hosts who are relatively stationary and who have the function of catering to these visitors’ needs and wishes.” The encounters are essentially transitory, non-repetitive, and asymmetrical; the participants are oriented toward achieving immediate gratification rather than toward maintaining a continuous relationship, and so do not have to take account of the effects their present actions will have on the relationship in the future; hence, there is neither a felt necessity nor an opportunity to create mutual trust. Guests, like Sutton’s tourists, are transient, but our consideration of them is both personal and ethical as how we welcome strangers, immigrants, and refugees. La Pina welcomed me into its presence just as it does any other customer.



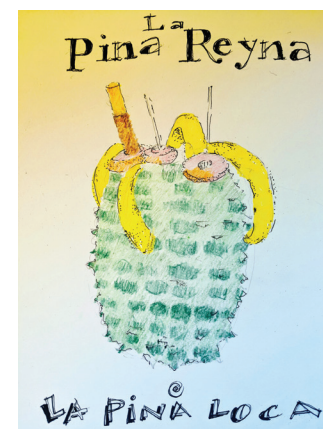
Mangonada



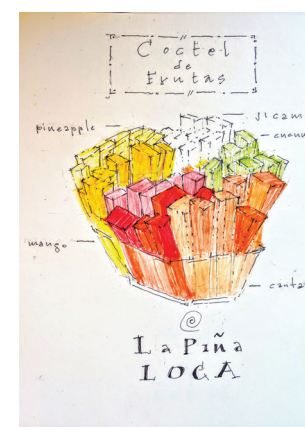
Fresonada



Tornados



La Pina Reyna



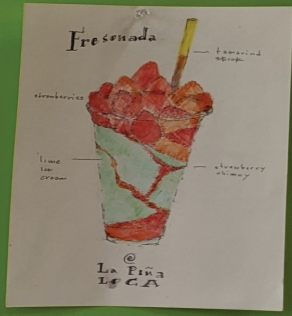
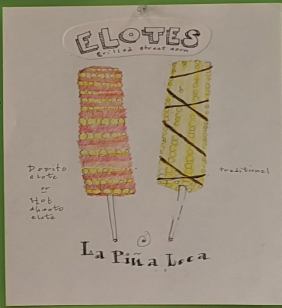
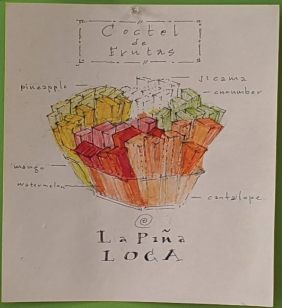
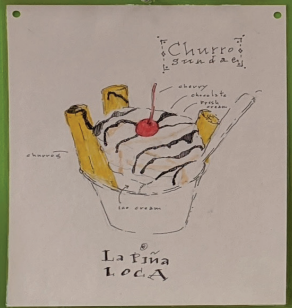
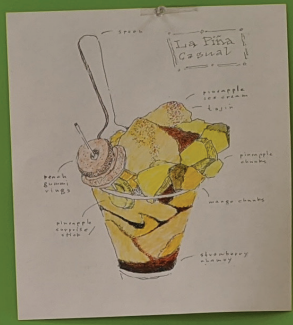
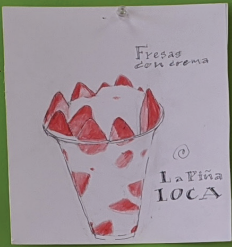
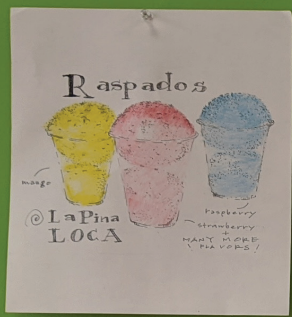
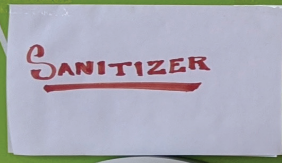
Coctel de Frutas

*Negotiations are contingent upon both participants having this understanding and a mutual confidence.*

—APG (Artist Placement Group)  
Manifesto, 1980

The APG model—to integrate artists into businesses and corporations in Britain in the late 1960’s proposed a structural challenge to the modus operandi at an institutional level, where the artist was a negotiated presence rather than existing in his or her own realm (studio, museum, school). Today’s social practice artists (where I locate my own practice) in most scenarios attempt some of the same rhetoric I use for myself or for exhibition and conference proposals, which is that my projects use art as a catalyst for interaction and cooperation.





We live and work in unequal access to privilege and discourse, and that all too often the encounters with difference (responses, populations) trades on the charge of this disparate relationship between contextual backdrop and project. I am often aware that these arrangements are frequently circumscribed and are most precarious where the power dynamic is asymmetrical. Giving up this power is what Jacques Derrida would characterize as going from ownership and a position of power to giving ownership away and becoming vulnerable. As artist-guests, what are our roles? I would like to suggest that one could be a willingness to disrupt our habits of assumption of power and to be willing to contend with the intricacies—of misunderstanding, of disinterest, loss of power and privilege, or vulnerability.

"In order to progress, people have to work together; and in the course of their collaboration, they gradually see an identification in their relationships whose initial diversity was precisely what made their collaboration fruitful and necessary."

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

Imagine if (allegedly) powerful guests adapted to local manners. Where would our lives be? Frequently, assimilation is the model for the good guest and we could indicate scores of relationships between artists and larger communities that are categorically well-managed. Critic Steven Wright cautions against easy assimilation: "How and why and under what circumstances we collaborate is fruitful because there is an initial difference." In this instance at La Pina, where hierarchies and roles shift between host and guest, the relationship is its most dynamic and has the greatest chance of producing new forms and, along with it, an embrace of a certain messiness of human relations.

The negotiation of my presence in someone else's territory is one of the key components of my work, where I interject content as a guest. Beginning with this first layer of communication, participation with me the artist as a guest starts right away. I admire your work—

this is mine, and then, maybe later, much later, can we do something together, not because of the assumption of power, but because we have grown to trust and enjoy one another?

Ben wrote me one Saturday and asked if I would be coming into La Pina because he had something for me. There on the wall above the hand sanitizer right by the front door were all of the drawings. La Pina Casual, the dessert that became the drawing, was now on the back of the staff t-shirts. A few months later, when the shop closed for two weeks of renovations, the drawings had been framed.

It is winter now and there is a whole new menu of items to try at La Pina. If you are in Ann Arbor, let me know—I can meet you over there, my treat. If you like, we can call it The Crazy Pineapple Residency.

## References

- 1 Chamoy is a condiment from Mexico that is typically served as a dip for fresh fruit. It is made with fruit, such as apricot, mango or plum, chilies, and lime juice. You can buy it bottled in varying degrees of spiciness or you can make it at home with apricot jam, lime juice, and chile peppers.
- 2 Tajin is a seasoning mix of dried and ground red chilies, sea salt, and dehydrated lime juice.

## Biography

Nick Tobier, co-founder of the Brightmoor Maker Space in Detroit, is a libra, a defender for the recently promoted 4th division Penguins soccer team, and a designer of projects in public places taking form in built structures and events from bus stops to kitchens and boulevards. Recent places include Medellin, Colombia; Cholula, Mexico; Ishinomaki, Japan; Detroit; The Prague Quadrennial; and La Pina Loca in Ann Arbor, MI. Nick studied sculpture and landscape architecture, worked at Storefront for Art and Architecture in NYC and as a designer with the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation/ Bronx Division and LandWorks Studio, Boston. He is also Professor at the Stamps School of Art + Design at the University of Michigan.

# Language Game #1

Consciousness, Entheogeny, and Colonization

35

manuel arturo abreu

I unyoke the issue of real and fake from the artificial, post-Enlightenment European context of 'art' to look at the prehistory, which is theological and entheogenic in nature. I first discuss Sylvia Wyner's notion of auto-institutionality with respect to mind; I then discuss Abrahamic literalism; finally, I situate the ancients' respect for visionary-driven consciousness within the larger frame of governance of such consciousness. That is, even though the moderns lost knowledge of the mysteries, the ancients aren't so different from us, different societies simply control access to consciousness altering goods in different ways. Why are these resources so tightly controlled?

### auto-institutionality

Sylvia Wynter argues humans are auto-institutional. We institute ourselves, fabricate legacies, correlate ourselves to ancient and far-off places, lineages, and myths. This may involve Kantian a priori limitations of the brain: we are rule-governed in terms of perception, driven by categorization, pattern recognition (or invention, as in apophenia), narrative, grammaticality (the cognitive sensation of utterances being "correct" or "incorrect"). Wynter argues that we "inscript and auto-institute ourselves as human through symbolic, representational processes that have, hitherto, included those mechanisms of occultation by means of which we have been able to make opaque to ourselves the fact that we so do."<sup>1</sup> However real these types of sensations or cognitive processes are, they're useful, and it's arguably just how brains work.<sup>2</sup> Naturally, these processes are fundamentally aesthetic. Thus, there have always been real fake artists, though in their given social contexts their chosen or imposed aesthetic activity may not have been seen as art (rather as duty, worship, etc).

This isn't about salvation, of course; and the notion of 'functionless, autonomous aesthetic activity' is fundamentally false—again, a concealment of the secret colonial function of western modernist aesthetics, rendering African and Asian aesthetic activity as non-artistic raw material for European exploits. In the face of colonial and 'post-colonial' anti-blackness, African and Afrodiasporic alignment can look like assimilation, equivocation, or revolution. The call to functionalism not only means attention to mundane, socially-embedded and socially- or spiritually-functional activity. It also means attention to revolutionary forms of abstraction, such as the African-Catholic syncretism at the heart of the Haitian Revolution, experiments (of varying degrees of success) in liberated sociality like maroon colonies, the political dimension of Afro-modernist movements like Negritude and what lies beyond Negritude (to invoke Suzanne Csaire, Jane and Paulette Nardal), etc. These post-encounter forms don't necessarily profess full access to the meaning of the aesthetic and political forms of African antiquity; neither does the functionalist commitment come solely from necessity (e.g. in struggle). We intuitively know that art should be doing stuff, accessible to the culture and nourishing it somehow. How this intuition expresses itself looks different in everyone.

To return to the objet d'art, the question of a horizon of functionless autonomy applies beautifully to a more general context, such as that of language, or other rule-driven processes of consciousness production. Past recognizing, for example, that much of linguistic communication derives from the non-linguistic (body gesture, pheromones and scent, other biochemical factors, social contextual factors not wholly determined by language, etc), we can also see that language contains within it, as part of its engine, its complete negation (e.g. non-sense). There is no 'bottom' or 'ground' to sense (meaning), because the link between sound and sense is historically arbitrary, no matter how strong the consciousness-altering effects of the social phenomenon of language—indeed, so strong that it creates a sense of interiority.<sup>3</sup>

So, this too is auto-institutional: meaning is felt as something other than consciousness alteration caused by the brain's own work as a reduction filter (as Albert Hofmann described it). Creating a cogent experience of sense (both perception and meaning) requires the brain to filter out a lot of information. To a large extent, the transformative component of institutions across deep time has to do with the tight management of mystery, that is to say, control over who has access to certain kinds of consciousness alteration, as well as when and how. Tying it all back together: auto-institutionality does have to do with knowing what's real and fake, to such a strong degree that Wynter argues most 'knowledge' or 'truth' production in societies is really just production of what she calls 'adaptive truths-for,' which strengthens rather than weakens the society and individual's sense of self.<sup>4</sup>

### abrahamism

I've been thinking a lot about rule-driven consciousness. Hofmann (who synthesized LSD by accident) argued that the brain was a kind of reduction filter, working mostly to keep things out rather than bring them in. The productivity of this reduction is clear when we look at language, which is an arbitrary, recursive, socially-inherited mapping of sound and meaning. Sense experience is reduced to sense as in meaning (the sense of an expression, etc), for the articulation of possible worlds (the irrealis mode), social organization, planning, accounting, etc. The answer to this is not to mourn what is 'lost' in the reduction since (a) it didn't necessarily go anywhere and (b) we may not necessarily have had access to it in the first place. The answer rather is to look deeper at the properties of rule-driven consciousness production. Why does the mind have to work that way, trapped in dualities and experiencing the world as inherently-mediated?

Those questions are too deep to really answer, but it's clear that the unequal world we live in and historically come from is the result of the exploitation of rule-driven consciousness production. It's also clear that the 'modern world' is at best an incomplete secularization of Christian values/concepts (this is directly relevant to my project, as much activity now

called creative work was once Xtian worship). The best dramatization of exploitation of rule-driven consciousness, in light of modernity, is the Abrahamic monotheistic revolution and the suppression of gnostic perspectives that the Abrahamic god was actually a bad actor, a demiurge that had convinced humans of his primacy. It wasn't until the 1945 discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts, stored away by persecuted gnostics, that we could hear them speak for themselves. I'm fascinated by some of these texts, such as the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, which in a sense predict the exploitation of rule-driven consciousness production, perhaps away from an ancestral, visionary-driven consciousness production regime. Depicting the crucifixion in a strange way, "Peter" writes that Christ tells him the following:

"For many will accept our teaching in the beginning. And they will turn from them again by the will of the Father of their error, because they have done what he wanted. And he will reveal them in his judgment, i.e., the servants of the Word. But those who became mingled with these shall become their prisoners, since they are without perception. And the guileless, good, pure one they push to the worker of death, and to the kingdom of those who praise Christ in a restoration. And they praise the men of the propagation of falsehood, those who will come after you. And they will cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. But they will become greatly defiled and they will fall into a name of error, and into the hand of an evil, cunning man and a manifold dogma, and they will be ruled without law."

Back in Eden, the demiurge's central fear is that Adam and Eve, having eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, would return to the Garden and eat from the tree of life, becoming like gods (rather than, say, in the image of god or tzelem elohim as the scribes wrote in the first Genesis creation story, the 7-day narrative). I believe that the tree of life itself was actually entheogenic in some sense, and we see this in gnostic depictions of the tree of life, such as in the next two images from medieval European contexts. Some scholars<sup>5</sup> feel the Eucharist involved entheogens as well.<sup>6</sup>

### entheogenic governance

Societies of antiquity were obviously riddled with problems just like us, but one thing they had, which many Europeanized and/or industrial societies seem to have lost, is a deep reference for visionary-driven consciousness, indeed privileged over rule-driven consciousness. Even the Abrahamic monotheistic revolution may have had entheogenic catalysts at some point or points in its development, but clearly the evolution of literalism in the context of the Abrahamic faiths required the suppression of all states of consciousness that were not productive for the goal of domination. Examples from antiquity of the privileging of visionary states of consciousness abound: ancient Egyptian blue lotus, ancient Greek kykeon (used at the Eleusinian mysteries<sup>7</sup>), ancient Vedic soma, etc. And clearly, when

we look at the ethnobotanical work in the Amazon— where, for example, ancients developed a sustainable self-replicating biochar (terra preta) to feed the large cities of ancient Amazonia; and paired an entheogen with the vine of souls (ayahuasca), which worked to deactivate the body's own monoamine oxidase inhibitor to allow visionary experience—we see ancient biochemists at work, using rule-driven consciousness in service of visionary-driven consciousness rather than vice versa (as we might see in "modern" societies).

All these substances and others had associated rites, rituals, and mysteries which had enormous importance for the given social order. The reality produced through rule-driven consciousness was understood largely as a veil or illusion, under which (in "sub- or sur-reality" we could say) lay the fundamental machinations of things. The spiritual drive of the human body (which the moderns might re-phrase as the narrative drive, or the drive for meaning, or something like that) was well understood as a given, and the limitations of the body, however incorrectly analyzed in the archaic 'medicine' of the time, were framed as spiritual in nature. This resonates. Arguably it isn't until Fanon clearly articulates the notion of the sociogenic in the 50s that we reach a point where we can understand causality differently from the predominantly materialist causal understanding of post-Enlightenment European and Europeanized society. Immaterial causes also exist. Ancients knew this deeply, but the mechanization of the world, as Wynter argues, led to the loss of this knowledge; and however secular we feel the 'modern' world may be, what we have is in fact an echo of the Abrahamic literalism (and persecution of all non-literalist Abrahamisms) that drove most of Europe's development for so long. Materialism and "natural causation" is just another development in this literalist tradition. In this context, it resonates heavily with me when Said says 'we are not yet secular.'

Ancient societies structured power based on the mysteries, and the age-old tools of consciousness alteration. They tightly controlled who was able to do this and where: in the Ancient Greek context, lucky initiates were able to experience the Eleusinian Mysteries once. Taking part in the ritual outside the sanctioned context was condemned: Alcibiades, for example, was condemned publicly for indulging in 415 BC (Waterfield 2009: 92). As much as it seems like this part of the talk is a paean to the ancients, in reality their governance of entheogeny is no different than the modern context. The 'mysteries' were for high priests, upper-level initiates, a select few. The difference is they had not lost entheogenic knowledge and had great respect for visionary-driven consciousness. However, in specific contexts it's also the case that, float, stuff was going on. For example, Eleusinian-type Hellenic entheogen rituals were going on in Iberia in 500 BC (Muraresku 2020). This was far away enough from the center of the Greek empire that people felt comfortable performing the rites.

This is all relevant because the European colonization of abstraction, and colonization more generally, is not exhaustively explained by a materialist / natural causation / "guns germs and steel" type argument. There were immaterial, e.g. spiritual, causes at play as

well. Columbus maintained that his successful navigation to “the Indies” had nothing to do with the maritime science of the day, and everything to do with his faith in Christ. I maintain personally that his Book of Prophecies (1505) is secretly one of the most influential books of the modern Christian ‘secular’ order. Materialist arguments became necessary because Abrahamic literalism’s usefulness as a tool of governance in a general social sense decreased as societies industrialized. Wynter (2003) provides a great analysis of this and served as the final reading of my “Alternative History of Abstraction 101” class. The quantum perspective, I believe, is what will bring us closest to a synthesis of visionary- and rule-driven consciousness, and a proper recalibration of the relationship between the two.

I’m ambivalent about privileging visionary-driven consciousness for its own sake. Rather, I feel grateful to some higher power that has allowed us what Graham Hancock calls “gratuitous graces” or opportunities on this material Earth to depart from the evolutionary and sociogenic rule-driven, reductive consciousness in which we operate on a day to day. These graces are entheogens, music, dance, and what I seek to call “abstraction” or “spirit” or some other such term. As such, to tie back to real fake artistry: aesthetic production in ancient societies was non-autonomous, visionary, high-context or context-full, and most importantly, socially- and spiritually-functional, unlike the western, autonomous, decontextual, functionless objet d’art. The strong argument is that all aesthetics is functional, whether overt or covert; covert functionality happens through occlusive tactics such as European modernism’s concealment of its colonization of Black and brown abstraction through the very notion of the objet d’art.

## chemistry

I want to return to the concept of the digital with a slightly different or ‘longer’ historical view. The etymology of “chemistry” is the same as “alchemy,” from Arabic “al-kimiya,” which came from the name for pre-dynastic Egypt- KMT or Kemet, meaning “Black Land.” Medieval European alchemy is also the conduit allowing for the reduction to simple functionality of Bamana deterministic chaos-based divination practices (typical of the various Mandé ethnic groups as well as other West African areas such as the Oyo Kingdom’s oracle). Hugo of Santalla, a Spaniard priest, learned divination from Islamic mystics and brought it to Europe in the 12th century, introducing it to the alchemy community as geomancy. It was Leibniz, in discussing geomancy, who proposed in “De Arte Combinatoria” (1666) that Europeans write 1 and 0 instead of the Bamana one-stroke and two-stroke gestures. Boole built on Leibniz’s binary to develop Boolean algebra, and John von Neumann took Boolean algebra and built the digital computer (as argued by Ron Eglash). As such, digitality and the speculation of modern informatic capitalism originates from just one tiny, exploited facet of one specific West African divination system. Fractal-based pattern, architecture, and social organization are the norm rather than the exception in the African context.

Clearly, the emphasis on fractals in various aspects of African design points to entheogeny.<sup>8</sup> Fractal patterns are one of the most common effects of psychedelics, revealing something deep about human perception. We see many examples in African architecture, fabric design, hair design, orthography, polyrhythm in music, social architecture, religion, divination/scrying, etc. It’s not simply that the universe and the human are made of the same stuff, and therefore it makes sense to find fractals in nature (e.g. trees), language (e.g. syntax trees), culture (African fractal design); rather, it’s that this reality is informatively produced by a set of sub-processes to which the rule-driven mundane mind does not have real access. Social and aesthetic design centered around fractals and infinity serve to remind people to be humble, accepting our own limitations. Privileging a visionary experience of infinity can structure a society as productively as privileging rule-driven consciousness. Access to entheogenic and deterministic chaos-based knowledge production in the African context was tightly controlled by cultic initiations and priestly hierarchies. In the transatlantic context, many displaced and enslaved African people lost the oracle—but in some cases, it made it across the ocean.



## References

- 1 Wynter, 2003. Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument. CR: The New Centennial Review, 3.3, Fall: 328
- 2 We might have a hard time understanding others, for example, if we didn't have a cognitive sensation, as we use language, that certain utterances are more or less correct, others inadmissible, others pristine, etc.
- 3 Volosinov, Valentin. [1920s] 1973. Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. Trans. Matejka and Titunik. New York: Seminar Press.
- 4 Wynter 2003: 319.
- 5 E.g. Allegro, Wasson, Ruck, Muraresku
- 6 There is actually cause to take this somewhat seriously with respect to Biblical evidence. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 sees Paul yelling at the followers in Corinth (southern Greece) in 54 AD and correcting 'an abuse of the Lord's supper.' He says in verses 29-30: "For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep." He's essentially saying be careful what you drink when you do the Eucharist. The translation makes sense, but there's wiggle room, because forms of the Greek verb, *koimōntai* / κοιμῶνται, translated as "fallen asleep," appears in a few other revealing contexts: in John 11:11, Jesus says "Ἰάζαρος ὁ φίλος ἡμῶν κεκοίμηται / Lazaros ho philos hēmōn kekoimētai / our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep." Surely, the verb means sleep in a literal sense, as the disciples take him to mean this; but he then clarifies "Lazarus is dead" (11:14). This makes sense; if Lazarus were just asleep, the miracle of reviving him wouldn't be much of a miracle. This allows us to read Paul in two ways: he could mean the Corinthians were dying, or that they were perhaps 'under the influence.'
- 7 Wasson, Gordon, Hofmann, Albert & Ruck, Carl. [1978] 2010. The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- 8 Consider, for example, Tabernanthe Iboga in Gabon's Bwiti tradition; Nymphaea caerulea (sacred blue water lily) in ancient Egypt; psilocybin in the Ivory Coast; Silene capensis among various Xhosa- and Zulu-speaking tribes; Acacia nilotica which is rich in DMT and in fact the very same tree we call the Burning Bush of Moses; Kola nuts among the Igbo and other tribes. And many, many thousands of plants and sticks which I cannot list. It should also be noted that Africa, perhaps like India, is at the zenith of non-entheogenic visionary consciousness inducers. Through things like music and dance, many African and Afrodiasporic cultures induce the visionary state without necessarily involving drugs.

## Biography

manuel arturo abreu (b. 1991, Santo Domingo) is a poet and artist from the Bronx. They studied linguistics (BA Reed College 2014). abreu works in text, ephemeral sculpture, and what is at hand in a process of magical thinking with attention to ritual aspects of aesthetics. They are the author of two books of poetry and one book of critical art writing. Their writing has appeared at Rhizome, Art in America, CURA, The New Inquiry, Art Practical, SFMoMA Open Space, AQNB, etc. abreu also composes club-feasible worship music as Tabor Dark, with 13 releases to date. They also co-founded and co-run home school, a free pop-up art school in Portland in its sixth year of curriculum. Recent solo and duo shows: Portland State University, Portland; Yaby, Madrid; the Art Gym, Portland; Open Signal, Portland; Institute for New Connotative Action, Seattle. Recent group shows: Kunstraum Niederösterreich, Vienna; Superposition, LA; Haus Wien, Vienna; Veronica, Seattle; Felix Gaudlitz, Vienna; Critical Path, Sydney; Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC; NCAD Gallery, Dublin; online with Rhizome and the New Museum; Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva. abreu has also curated projects at: Yale Union, Portland; Center for Afrofuturist Studies, Iowa City; SOIL, Seattle; Paragon Gallery, Portland; old Pfizer Factory, Brooklyn; S1, Portland; AA|LA Gallery, LA; MoMA PS1, NYC.

# Between Sunlight and Shadow

Transvocality as Talmudic Process

45

Nicki Green  
in conversation with  
Binya Kóatz and Xava de Cordova

Dear Friend,

I'm writing to you to see if you'd be interested in having a conversation with me about Power. In November 2020, I was invited to produce a text for the Center for Art Research at University of Oregon, Eugene, they're doing a project called "Papers on Power." I had originally worked with them on a different project called "Craft and the Hyperobject" which was a large group "roundtable" discussion using Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* to discuss craft practices. Prior to this event, I had begun exploring dialog as an alternative process to the academic text. I have struggled over time with the singular, stiff production of an academic text, even when enhanced or supported by other people's work. I loved the ease and accessibility of a conversation. As a visual artist, I have often felt complicated about the need to produce academic texts, this expectation that my ideas must follow a specific, recognizable structure has felt burdensome, stressful to uphold. I wrote an essay in 2016 called *The Poisonous Mushroom as Uncanny symbol of Queer Reclamation*, which was a conversation between my partner and I while we were making dinner. My professor sent me edits, which I then folded into the conversation, and this layering got me thinking a lot about the breaking of linearity and the possibilities of an experimental text that is anchored in the idea of dialogue as a means of connection and text generation. I've done multiple conversations-as-papers over the past five years, including conversations with other artists, academics, and one with a stack of bricks.<sup>1</sup> On a parallel track, I began studying Talmud around the same time this practice began for me, primarily through SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva's Queer Talmud Camp, and something that struck me through this engagement was the way these texts are so layered, the idea of Talmud as a trans-historical document, the folding of ideas and questions through time and space, the importance of contradicting arguments, etc. I have always been really excited about the possibilities about engaging transness that is not centered in the body, and so this felt like an exciting place to push off of, Talmud as a Trans Text.

<sup>2</sup> NG: In this class, we studied a gay-famous sugya (passage) from *masakhet* (volume) *Bava Metzta* 84a, known colloquially as "84-gay." Below is the text that was translated by Binya and Xava for our class. In true SVARA style, though, we, as students, explored and translated this text word-by-word, sentence by sentence for four weeks. I include here my teachers' translations as it gives context to the themes of our class and offers a streamlining or unification (however specific that may be) for the ideas we hashed out together.

*Bava Metzta* 84a (Excerpts for TGT101, out of chronological order, translations by Binya Kóatz and Xava De Cordova)

NOTE: At the time of this paper's conception, you two, Binya and Xava, were my teachers in the Zoom class *Trans Girl Talmud* 101.<sup>2</sup> It was such a joy and a challenge to enter into a space that was not just predominantly queer or trans and Jewish, but explicitly for trans women to study Talmud together. In a world that works so hard to keep us separated from each other<sup>3</sup>, I found myself moved to be in such direct conversation around such specificity.

<sup>3</sup> NG: In Torrey Peters' recent NYT bestselling novel *Detransition, Baby*, she discusses the specificity of white trans women's community dynamics are inherently disconnected from the familial surrogates, often referred to as houses in trans communities of color. She discusses how so often white trans women experience their connectivity to community through the intermediary of the internet, both abundant in its reach and limited in its warmth. My experience of trans community dynamics, as a white trans woman, resonates with this internet-based stratifying, though I also moved through the warmth (was it though? Connection maybe?) and familiarity, despite feeling slightly outside of it, as a teen in downtown Boston in the late nineties and early aughts.

Once upon a time Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan. Reish Lakish saw her and lept into the river after her. She said to him, "Your strength is for Torah!" He said to her, "Your beauty is for women!"

Rabbi Yohanan said, I am the only one left from the beautiful ones of Jerusalem. One who needs to witness the gorgeousness of Rabbi Yohanan... They should bring a silver goblet fresh from the smithy (/Blast House.) And they should fill it with ruby-red pomegranate seeds, and encircle it with a wreath of red roses, and place it between sunlight and shadow. This glow is a semblance of the beauty of Rabbi Yohanan.

Rabbi Yokhanan used to go and sit at the gates of the mikveh. She would say: [this is] so that when the daughters of Israel come up from their purification mikvehs, they will encounter me, in order that they create children (/tgirls?) who are beautiful like me and learned in Torah like me.

But I've found this to be one of the many things I love about text study, the expansiveness in specificity, that we worked with such a short, contained subject for four weeks and only scratched the surface of extrapolating how to understand the ideas, questions and concepts in the text.

Binya Kóatz: Torah has a narrative, has characters, has explicit things that it talks about. It has a set of items it lists, a countable number of names mentioned, a countable number of items mentioned and you could try and count and list out the events of the Torah in order if you wanted to, it wouldn't be easy or that useful in some ways, but you could. And then that's what the Torah is, but then, the Talmud comes in, to be like "Actually, this is all of life and everything ever all combined into one, let me add a bunch more specifically specific things to it and also bring out the larger truth in it" and I feel that's the same with these two types of transness, transness is about a gender and a body coming into contact with each other and a gender and a body in a society, in a person - these are the specific characters in a trans story. But then everything that comes out of that interaction and all the events that you could list out also have a larger story to tell, a larger thing to say about the nature of truth, about the nature of, as our mama says, what "realness" is. You know, Janet Mock. And yeah, it's amazing. Whoa, I'm just thinking about her book, *Redefining*

<sup>4</sup> NG: "To embody 'realness,' rather than performing and competing 'realness,' enables trans women to enter spaces with a lower risk of being rebutted or questioned, policed or attacked. 'Realness' is a pathway to survival, and the heaviness of these truths were a lot for a thirteen-year-old to carry, especially one still trying to figure out who she was." (116) Mock, Janet. *Redefining Realness*. 2014 Atria Books

ing *Realness*<sup>4</sup>, what does truth mean? Her memoir isn't titled "Woman Born in Wrong Body," you know? That's one way of talking about the facts on the ground, not that any of us, at least in this generation would really use those terms as much, but she's like "oh my story is about redefining realness" and it feels like that's what this trans pedagogy and trans Judaism is, with our bodies it's making explicit the tradition in that constellation of characters in transness and seeing what comes out of it and finding the larger principles and depth and it's the same process Torah went through, that we're going through with transness and we're doing it with Torah as this fractal, you know? Fractally gay.

Nicki Green: I mean, the fractal, I think about (Cat meows) Wow, my cat is like "I'm here for this!"

BK: "I have something to put into this Talmud!"

NG: Totally, like "wait for me, I'm here to participate!" (Picks up cat) Right, so this fractaling, makes me think a lot about the rhizome<sup>5</sup>, this beautiful concept of building on each other and that expansiveness that's possible not on its own, but always in relationship to what's around it. I'm also obsessed with that idea of realness, what "redefining realness" actually means here, realness in relationship to whom? To what? That realness is so much of a relational idea as well.

<sup>5</sup> NG: "Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other." (11) Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. 1997 University of Michigan

BK: Yeah and it really does just apply to the whole of everything. There was this series about trans people in Israel, a miniseries filmed by trans people in Israel<sup>6</sup>, just really stunning. And there was this one girl who is like, "I don't get it, what do you mean some guy would want a real woman? I'm the realest woman, nobody gets put

Xava De Cordova: You know my podcast has become more successful this year and my classes have become more successful this year and I feel like I'm somewhat known as a teacher in the Community, and so I feel like in some ways I'm in a position of power, where I really have to watch my social relations. You know, I couldn't date a student, for instance, you know that's like a really concrete example, But I still feel so disempowered in my own life because of societal structures and it's really hard to live inside those two head spaces at once sometimes.<sup>15</sup>

Nicki Green: yeah totally. In the past year I've expanded my teaching practice as well!

XD: mm hmm.

NG: I've been having a lot of these moments lately where I'll be talking to my trans and queer students and realize that the casual and familial way I'm communicating is maybe not how I would feel comfortable communicating to a straight student. That distinction has been alarming, but it's that realization of a shared life experience. Like, I remember when I was 18 and the only trans student in my classes. In those moments, I get to be the teacher that I wish I had, but I'm also having to negotiate boundaries really differently. I can imagine that that's something that comes up that a lot in these queer Talmud settings, our teachers, the rosh yeshiva (head of the school)! These are folks who operate as both our peers, but also our teachers, we go from the beit midrash (study hall) to the end of Queer Talmud Camp dance party grind train and there's something that feels actually really natural about that transition. I wonder if that intimacy can only really come because our teachers end up engaging this immense amount of emotional trauma in these spaces, or is it the shared life experience? Is this similar for you when you're teaching??

<sup>15</sup> XD: I think this is something a lot of marginalized teachers deal with. And we all deal with, in a way, since most of us are both marginalized and privileged on several axes.

NG: Yes! The balancing and exchange of power becomes so much more loaded when you're responsible for students' wellbeing. It feels like a heightened, more tenuous position.

XD: Yeah, I was just talking with Binya the other day about this sort of phenomenon. I feel like I definitely acted out my trauma on my teachers, they acted out their trauma on me and now we're all switching positions. Now my students act out their trauma on me and the cycle continues. I was thinking while you were talking, there's this personality type that is successful in the Queer Talmud world that's very West Coast it's hard to describe exactly what it is, but it's a very different particular brand of queer [than mine] almost like a "tenderqueer" kind of energy, where there's like a lot of therapy talk and we're not too raunchy and we're not too loud and we don't curse and there's all these subtle social codes that help one be successful in that scene, which I don't really represent. So I'm trying really intentionally, especially in my podcast to

<sup>7</sup>NG: In Binya and Xava's course 'Trans Girl' Talmud 101, we're studying a sugya (passage) of Talmud. Bava Metzia 84a, which discusses pomegranate seeds as a material component of an incantation, which initiated a class-wide discussion on trans-fertility.

<sup>8</sup> NG: What about the other way around- "teaching them is giving birth to them"? Is pedagogy birth? Is birth pedagogy?

<sup>9</sup>BK: Genesis 49:25

<sup>10</sup>XD: And it was really personal to me, because the year before this, I had lost the opportunity to have a child with a partner because of divorce. So already I had been really rethinking fertility and my own connection to it. Even my name, which in English is Eve, for me has always been about claiming fertility for myself.

idea of the pomegranate as not just a fertility symbol, but a queer for fertility symbol. These aren't just seeds, they're specifically pods of liquid, of light...

BK: Light reflecting gems.

NG: Yeah totally. They're much more than just a fertility symbol.

BK: Also, they literally represent mitzvah, which is a queer way of reproduction via teaching, and the other thing I'm thinking about now is the fucking fact that it's the light that's cast off of it that looks like Rabbi Yochanan. I missed that the first X number of times I read it, I was like "Rabbi Yochanan looks like a silver cup filled with pomegranate seeds with rose petals, that's stunning." But it's like, no, do that, and the light that comes off of it is what Rabbi Yochanan looks like. And what's trippy to me now is that, okay, we can say "reflect pomegranate seeds," but rose petals do not reflect light, right?"

more into their womanhood than me, you know? I am a woman." And that applies to trans fertility, but fertility as well.<sup>7</sup> What does it mean that giving birth to someone is teaching them<sup>8</sup>, what does that imply about lineage and knowledge and reproduction in general? And that's also a trans thing, even back in the Torah. This idea that giving birth on someone's knees as is described in the Torah is equivalent to that person giving birth. Joseph is the only "man" in Torah where somebody gives birth on their knees, and also Joseph is blessed with breasts and womb. Joseph's probably the next class. Because in Jacob's blessings to all their children, Joseph gets the blessing of birkot shadayim, birkot rachem<sup>9</sup>, the blessing of titties and the blessing of womb. And then the Rabbis have a whole thing about it, "the milk of the land" or all of Joseph's descendants will never miscarry, but explicitly Joseph gets blessed with titties and womb. And just thinking about trans reproduction, I was like, "Xava, let's talk about this,"<sup>10</sup> just because it didn't come up in the first class when we talked about the pomegranate seeds representing fertility, but it's feeling like, just from last class, just over the last 24 hours since last class, wow, there's a lot of material here and it's really rad as well.

NG: Yeah, it's so amazing. Even just the materiality, the thing that I just can't stop thinking about is what somebody in class said, something like, "the pomegranate seeds are these pods that refract light and in and of themselves create this expansiveness." And I don't know if this is threaded more into cis understandings of the pomegranate as a symbol of fertility, but to me that just blew open that

break out of that mold and talk about sucking dick on my podcast and talk about cum in class, I'm trying to break that because I think it's a kind of queerness that I think is really important, that particular kind of nasty and mean flavor.

NG: I just love that you brought that up because I've been thinking a lot about that show Veneno that recently came to the US, have you seen it? I was talking to Ita<sup>16</sup> about this when I first saw it on my birthday this year, Christina [Ortiz Rodríguez], La Veneno, really represents this kind of 90's trans wildness and a very loud and sexual and unapologetic way of being trans in the world<sup>17</sup>, like "this is my body. I'm fucking hot," you know? Like, "this is just like how I operate in the world" and that, I don't even know what to call it, it's not necessarily just a raunchiness but that kind of...

XD: There was like a camp element to it as well.

NG: Yes! And, a kind of sarcasm, and this explicit, sexual forwardness is engaging how we interact with other trans folks and how that contrasts with how we interact with cis folks, what the expectation is around how we talk about our bodies and our experiences. Like, the "Overshare" as this expectation of the trans experience. And so, I keep wondering how this translates to pedagogical space, where is that boundary?

XD: Mm hmm and I'm sure I'll find it one day, and someone will let me know! In certain parts of the queer Community, we've accepted straight cultural norms around communication, some of which are fine or neutral, but there's a phenomenon and I don't want that to happen. When I first started transitioning, I was doing a bunch of really traumatizing sex work, and I feel like I had like my tragic trans experience, and I want to be as catty as, I've paid my dues, you know.<sup>18</sup>

NG: yeah yeah.

XD: I don't want to have to, like conceal that element of myself to be a successful Jewish teacher or to be a Rabbi.

NG: Yeah yeah, and then when there's like funders to answer to, the relationship to boundaries and appropriateness and acceptability must be so different. It just seems like the way that you've approached presenting class and study opportunities is so much more DIY and expansive, you know?

XD: Our next class even has bitches in the title. It's gonna be called Talmud for Boring Bitches, I'm really excited to teach it.

<sup>16</sup> NG: Ita Segev, performance artist, who I'm currently working on another iteration of this text project with.

<sup>17</sup> NG: See fellow trans, Jewish writer and actor Hari Nef's recent ART-FORUM article, Poison Pen: Hari Nef on Veneno

<sup>18</sup> XD: I just feel like, when the kind of humour that comes out of my queer trauma is sidelined, I'm losing a piece of myself. And that piece is really connected to the legacy of other trans women. I mean if you see videos of Sylvia Rivera back in the day, she is camp as fuck.

<sup>11</sup> XD: But rose petals do reflect light, right? Doesn't everything, and that's how color exists? I don't know what that means for our tale, but even the things that don't cause a gleam are still reflecting.

NG: Right.

BK: And we're told to fill it to the top with pomegranate seeds, the vast majority of pomegranate seeds are just inside and not refracting any light. And what we're supposed to see is the light that's coming off of it, the reflection, and so there are parts to this incantation that aren't directly causing the light refracting, that's what we're supposed to see,

and it's the statement that in a metaphysical and trans-physical way, what's inside you can affect your appearance. And it makes me think about the ways that I've experienced, from a purely materialist perspective, are the same sex organ on a different person as a different thing, you know, the difference between a cock and then a girl cock, like a trans girl clit or something like that. Or the way that something can be an ass, but also be a pussy. What's inside the person affects the shine that comes off of different parts of them. And this feels like a statement to that, this shine won't be the same if you fill it with paper up to the top and then just cover the top with pomegranate seeds, or if you leave off the rose petals, the shine won't be the same, and I think it's something similar, it's the process of making this and of calling this person into being that affects what we see. And the process of seeing someone for who they are, and being able to see the same physical object as two different things in different contexts feels like an important skill and one that is widely applied to different things and feels like something really active in transness and something to learn here.

<sup>12</sup> NG: Is "bussy" a conjunction of "boy pussy" or "butt pussy"? The latter would obviously allow for a connection to a broader spectrum of genders, but I've only ever heard it referred to in the context of gay men's sexuality, hence the assumption of the former.

NG: I mean, the idea that a "bussy" could be, not just a divine means of engaging with the body and, obviously in transness we're not talking about a "boy pussy"<sup>12</sup> here, but just this idea that perception and the active understanding of something beyond its surface, its visual, allows the thing, whatever it is, to become significantly deeper, richer, more expansive.

BK: Glittery!<sup>13</sup>

NG: Glittery! Exactly! This idea that it's not, "Oh, just fill the goblet with crumpled newspaper and then top it off with pomegranate seeds to mimic the overflowing of fullness," it has to have this relationship to these materials and this volume, et cetera.

BK: Right, because what's inside affects what is outside, even if it's not direct, because there's a deeper truth beyond the material, and this does

get back to questions of Judaism versus fascism, the materiality of the world and being. The origins of Zionism are like, "stop being disconnected to the land, stop being luftmenschen (air

NG: Wow, I love that.

XD: Yeah.

NG: What are you focusing on?

XD: In Talmud for Boring Bitches? My idea was that I want to teach a class where we get away from the sort of "glitter bomb-y" style<sup>19</sup> that dominates the queer Talmud world with the "gotcha's" and the cool! Hot! Points!" I want to study what I call the "Flyover Talmud." Partially because, personally I love that shit and I actually I've loved this Transgirl Talmud class, but I actually much more love tax law.

NG: Right right.

XD: I want the Queer Talmud, capital Q capital T, Movement to claim its place. I think there's a certain rigor we have to step up to to do that, and I think part of that is going beyond learning all the cool Talmud tricks. You know, we need to go into the meat of it.

NG: I really hear that. Over the years of attending SVARA events and other queer Talmud workshops, it's felt more and more tangible that the focus of each session is so curated and there's this identifiable emotional build up, peak and euphoria that is being cultivated in that space. And I mean, it's satisfying, it feels like it's built to be satisfying, you know? I cry so much in these spaces, but the last couple summers at Queer Talmud Camp I've come away from it wondering "how does this [Talmud study] function for someone like me if you don't have a teacher, a queer teacher, curating the sugya? Like, if I'm interested in XY&Z, how do I enter these texts and start to explore it on my own? Or in a more discursive, fluid way?"<sup>20</sup>

XD: I think that that curated thing that you're speaking to creates this dynamic where you get this far into the text and you see that they are creating this beautiful opportunity where you, the disenfranchised, can like step up and become the powerful Talmudic witch you are destined to be. But then you get inside that and you

<sup>19</sup> XD: By glitter-bomb I really mean pieces of Talmud that are enthusiastically and explicitly about queer sexuality and gender. Those pieces are awesome, but I think we all know our tradition contains a lot more than just that kind of easy-to-digest material.

NG: Right, like queerness or transness not just as a subject but as a lens with which to engage information across the board...

<sup>20</sup> NG: The organization of Talmudic thought and topics on the daf (page) feels pretty discursive as it is, would you say that's an accurate observation?

XD: Yeah, it's definitely discursive, and in an alive way because that dialog actually involves the learner as well, not just the voices on the page.

NG: Wait, the dialog involves the learner, like the reader? How?



<sup>14</sup> BK: Derogatory term in nationalist/nazi germany for jews and others who are 'not landed' or 'rootless cosmopolitans'

people<sup>14</sup>) in the air, you have to have a people with a land and materials, and guns and borders and things you can touch and own. Enough up here, I want what I know and what I have and what I see and everything to be aligned and not questioned."

BK: And I want to look around and see and know everything that I'm going to see and know how to categorize it and not be surprised and not have things that shift lines or blur boundaries. That level of thinking leads to the global apartheid system which is fascism and nation states where we both self-segregate and forcibly segregate others into tiny little infinitely small, not just ethno states, but like ethnic, national, whatever differences you can separate, put a border around and give guns to. And everybody disagrees on how practically big and small those borders have to be, the Spanish think they're in a Spanish state, but the Basque think that they want to be in a Basque state, blah blah blah and it's just a very material thing that wants borders rather than border crossers and wants boundaries rather than boundary crossers and wants binaries rather than binary breakers and with transness, the way that you can have one thing be multiple things, doesn't always sink in the same ways. And you don't have to crush one or the other, you don't have to make the appearance align, like you don't have to have every trans person be cis-passing and you don't have to have every person who says they're trans stop saying they're trans and just revert to cisness. And there's a new synthesis that can happen, where you can have a different type of beauty, that is a woman's beauty, but is a trans woman's beauty and it's different, but it's womanhood and through that synthesis you reach a deeper truth about what is womanhood itself, what is beauty itself, and you add to the gorgeousness of the Torah of the world, and that process is stunning and is Torah and is what our ancestors want us to be doing and is the gift of this tradition among all the traditions that are similar to it, to the world. It is that process of saying "there's something deeper here, and there's contradiction here, but the contradiction is truth itself, and you don't have to squash one or the other," and via the synthesis of the contradiction you actually reach a higher truth than you would in the simple p'shat, truth of making things align. And those who want to stop that, it does lead to the destruction of the world, to the death of the world, to fascism, to nation states, and so this trans Torah and trans Talmud feels like a further insight into the project of those who are against that and for a deeper and really truer understanding of truth.

NG: The truth of the depth. The depth of meaning and understanding is not just nice, but it's actually deeply, deeply important to the understanding of not just bodies, but boundaries in general, and the permeability of boundaries and the need for permeability.

BK: And also, just the truth of that permeability. Every border, every boundary is ultimately hevel (nothing), it's ultimately dust in the wind and ash. "The only constant is change." But that's a mamesh (yiddish, "really") truth and that's radical and earth shaking if you really sit with it and understand it, the only constant is change means that all of life and history and possibility is

find out that there's actually just like another curated structure that's holding you, preventing you from accessing your full power as a scholar.<sup>21</sup>

NG: Right.

XD: I want to like be in a world where Queer Talmud scholars are respected in the field, I want to be in a world where Queer Talmud is a movement with its own life and a diverse ecosystem of institutions. And to do that, we have to move beyond this "candy" format, which has been great, it's gotten us to where we are today. I just viscerally feel like the scene is ready to break out of its shell.

NG: Yeah, that holding, being held, creating structure makes me think so much about this desire for conversation, an exchange as a structural element of Talmud. My limited experience with it has been so anchored in the asking of questions and the layering of voices. In class I was talking this out to my chevruta (study partner)<sup>22</sup> and she brought up the stamma (Talmud authors/editors), like what is the stamma's role in all of this? How does that role engage a relationship to power and curation?

XD: When you think of [Talmud] as a book<sup>23</sup> it really encourages the idea that there is this thing called Talmud that has a certain set of contents that is a Thing you can go out and get and then bring back, but in reality the "thing" that we think of as Talmud is just the skeleton upon which Talmud happens as a verb, which is a much more appropriate understanding. I think more important to me than the multi-vocality of Talmud is this idea of a cross-temporal involvement between the students and the material. There's this idea that Sergey Dolgopolski talks about in his book *What is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement*, where he has this metaphor called *Svara Michutz* (judgement from the outside). The idea is essentially that within every Talmudic utterance, a conclusion is folded into that that's not explicit in the language itself. The metaphor that he uses is that each Talmudic utterance is in a geometrical shape. And what we, the students have to do is deduct from the spaces and the edges of that shape which conclusion best fits into it. That just feels relevant to me because it highlights that it's critical to the process

<sup>20</sup>XD: And I think that first curated step is important, but eventually we all outgrow the container.

<sup>22</sup>NG: Honestly, the chevruta dynamic was the primary inspiration for this method of text generation. At one of my first Queer Talmud Camps, Rabbi Mónica Gomery mentioned finding a piece of text she was interested in and bringing it to her chevruta to work through, and I became so inspired by this idea that chevruta could be a method beyond the beit midrash rather than simply the way you're "supposed to study talmud" in this very specific context.

<sup>23</sup>XD: Which is not accurate, it wasn't originally composed that way, it was composed orally. And even beyond how it was composed, it isn't a static piece of literature like a book in the Western imagination. Talmud is in fact a process and the "book" we call Talmud is just a big stable core in that unfolding process.



in constant motion, and that truth, the objective truth, is changing and constant and the most true thing is constantly in development, in dialectic, in process and full of contradictions and multi-directional and that's fucking wild, and it's scary to some people and it's unprofitable to some people. And so, there is push to clamp that down.

NG: And to identifying boundaries and ways in which things could be described as unchanging in order to create that kind of control. That then brings me back to this discussion of light and perception, that it's also not just the undeniable fractaling of light, but it's actually the experience, the deeply subjective experience of witnessing the fractaling of light that is Rabbi Yochanan's beauty, that is the transness, or it's "a portion" of it. Like a fraction...

BK: ...just a semblance of it, that fucks me up, that's a mic drop.

NG: Totally.

BK: And what you were saying made me think that, the fact that it's the semblance of the light on the earth just adds an extra layer of perception to it, because what we're seeing is sun-hitting-cup-hitting-earth-hitting-eye, rather than sun-hitting-cup-hitting-eye, it even adds an extra step, which is even gayer and more queer, it takes four steps to even see it.

NG: Right, sun-hitting-cup-hitting-earth-hitting-eye that is then reversed and translated to the brain.

BK: Exactly, and then put into context of all your tradition and your society and your understandings of gender, that's the raw material, but then processes through the entirety of Torah and then comes to an understanding, like "whoa. Now I understand the beauty of this person."

NG: Now I understand a semblance.

BK: Now we understand a semblance, it's relentless!

of Talmud that we not only take in the opinions of multiple people, but also that we directly insert ourselves into that dialogue as participants.

NG: Like tangrams.

XD: Exactly like Talmud tangrams.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup>XD: This is part of what I love, is that the tangrams are fractal. Our interpretation has to be crafted to fit the text, then our xevruta has to be perfectly shaped to fit ourselves, and ultimately our selves are shaped to perfectly fit the divine. Talmud and Judaism are a never ending chain of imperfectly matching shapes reaching toward matching perfectly.

## Biographies

*Nicki Green is a transdisciplinary artist working primarily in clay. Originally from New England, she completed her BFA in sculpture from the San Francisco Art Institute in 2009 and her MFA in Art Practice from the University of California, Berkeley in 2018. Her sculptures, ritual objects and various flat works explore topics of history preservation, conceptual ornamentation and aesthetics of otherness. Green has exhibited her work internationally, notably at the New Museum, New York; The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco; Rockelmann & Partner Gallery, Berlin, Germany. She has contributed texts to numerous publications including a piece in Duke University Press' Transgender Studies Quarterly Trans\*Religion issue and a piece in Fermenting Feminism, Copenhagen. In 2019, Green was a finalist for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's SECA Award, a recipient of an Arts/Industry Residency from the John Michael Kohler Art Center, among other awards. Green lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area.*

*Binya Kóatz is a transfemme sefardi/ashkenazi queen from Queens (NY). She loves diaspora, hashem and the gay tradition given to her by her queer ancestors. She writes poems, teaches talmud, and helps bring people closer to their creator through the radical torah of queer Judaism.*

*Xava De Cordova is a trans, Sephardi woman and teacher living in Providence, Rhode Island. She got her start by creating a Jewish learning program in Washington prisons called Beit Midrash Behind Bars. She went on to found the first ever Queer Talmud podcast, Xai, how are you?, which has been running for over a year, and co-founded the first online-first queer yeshiva, Shel Maala. Her writing is recently featured in the anthology, There is Nothing So Whole as a Broken Heart, edited by Cindy Millstein.*

# Untitled

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Molly Zuckerman-Hartung



n

its function taking precedence over any question of size

thought forms	are fed and quartered	a useless room; a space without a function .
the masses	is represented	fur blankets, for for the bed where he will be able finally to get <del>XXXX</del> to sleep.
Misery	which pteforms every sector of modern existence	a bedroom entirely hung in black
Power	grows immeasurably	a room without either doors or windows
mere objects/things	as the antithesis of power and powerlessness	the house bears traces of his distress distress
Objective Necessity Necessity	distance themselves from nature	the doorknob could hardly be drawn in scale with the house.

MDA 2621



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Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno

Translated from German by John Cumming, 1972

### *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*

Georges Perec

Edited and translated from French by John Sturrock, 1997

### *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, the Cosmos*

Gaston Bachelard

Translated from French by Daniel Russell, 1969

## Biography

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung is a painter, writer and teacher who grew up in Olympia, Washington and participated in Riot Grrl in her formative years. She attended the Evergreen State College in the 1990s. This introduced her to holistic structural ideas about aesthetics and politics. She worked in used bookstores and bars until her thirties, when she moved to Chicago and attended the School of the Art Institute for graduate school, and now she is working and grocery shopping and taking walks in Norfolk, Connecticut with her girlfriend and dog. She is opening her attention to weeds and perennials, pattern and repetition, difference, climate change, ecosystems, dolls, Victorian collage and textiles, John Coltrane and Miles Davis, Gees Bend quilts, the effects of soul lag on humans, high theory, low theory, affect theory, coloring crayons, tissue paper, tactility, Simone White, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, the color of the light in the bare woods, and the emotional landscapes of students, friends, colleagues and strangers alongside whom she lives. Also, she is a Senior Critic in Yale School of Art, Department of Painting and Printmaking.

She has shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, The 2014 Whitney Biennial, The Program at ReMap in Athens, Greece, Kadel Willborn in Karlsruhe, Germany and many others. In 2013 she received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Award. She is a frequent guest lecturer at many schools across the country, including, in the past few years, Princeton University, The University of Texas at Austin, Cranbrook, University of Alabama, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago Low Residency Program, and Columbia University. She will have a mid-career retrospective at the Blaffer in Houston this Fall. She is represented by Corbett vs Dempsey in Chicago and Rachel Uffner Gallery in NYC.

# A Partial Glossary, for Visiting The Lichen Museum

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A. Laurie Palmer



The Lichen Museum considers this slow, resistant, adaptive and collective organism as an anti-capitalist companion and climate change survivor. This glossary is a living text that pulls quotes and excerpts from that work-in-progress.

#### **museum**

To focus attention; to facilitate an encounter; from muse: to be affected with astonishment or surprise

#### **attention**

What you give in order to be prepared to receive; observant care  
 "...that I meet difference and dwell in it..."

— Hugh Raffles

The Lichen Museum invites you to pay attention to what is neither spectacular nor lucrative, and to "watch" without aiming to have, to know, or to use.

#### **to watch**

Here, in The Lichen Museum, "to watch" is not necessarily about seeing, but instead sensing more generally, as in being present-to-and-with.

#### **locality**

A position or site occupied by certain (people/beings/things)

The Lichen Museum is massively distributed, and locally open. Once you step outside, you could encounter lichens almost anywhere.

#### **lichens**

Small, slow-growing, symbiotic beings

"We are all lichens."

— Scott Gilbert, Jan Sap, Alfred Tauber

#### **symbiotic**

Living together; involved in social life

"...a collective body ... hath not derived...the principality of power into someone or few."

— c. 1600, The Oxford English Dictionary

#### **collective**

Acting as a group; as opposed to individual

"...collective imagining and doing to generate alternatives to what is counters... the 'absent future' that offers only debt, austerity, individualist competition, the subsumption of life into work, and massive inequality and injustice."

— Deborah Gould

#### **individual**

"The individual...reveals a subject tethered by various orders of constraint and obscured by the figure of the self-possessed."

— Saidiya Hartman

#### **self-possession**

"...the delusion of possession of a body is directly tied to the destruction of the earth..."

— Fred Moten, in conversation with Saidiya Hartman

**attachment**

"The opposite of dispossession is not possession, it is deep, reciprocal, consensual attachment. Indigenous bodies don't relate to the land by possessing or owning it or having control over it. We relate to the land through connection—generative, affirmative, complex, overlapping, and nonlinear relationship."

— Leanne Simpson on Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg

**relation**

"I ran from it and I was still in it."

— Fred Moten

**environment**

"Thus far we have tended to think of a living thing as distinct from its environment or as something in a specimen box. Thus we think that the field of living can be separated easily from a living thing and think of it as a kind of stage on which an organism makes its living. However, the real living thing is an integration of the living thing and the environment on which it depends and that is the organized system of the living thing itself." — Kinji Imanishi

**life**

"I do not find it a problem to admit the life of non-living things"

— Kinji Imanishi

**rock**

Cryptoendolithic lichens are so intimately enmeshed with the rock they are embedded in that it is practically impossible to determine what is alive and what is not. Researchers suggest that some lichens in Antarctica have been living at very slow metabolic rates in these sandwiched situations for 10,000 years, "nurtured" by the heat-absorbing capacities of the rock.

**land**

"In the settler mind, land was property, real estate, capital, or natural resources. But to our people, it was everything: identity, the connection to our ancestors, the home of our nonhuman kinfolk, our pharmacy, our library, the source of all that sustained us. Our lands were where our responsibility to the world was enacted, sacred ground. It belonged to itself; it was a gift, not a commodity, so it could never be bought or sold."

—Robin Wall Kimmerer

**property**

"It appears to me that the fluctuation which attends property is, of itself, a proof, how absurd it is to base the rights of man on a bottom so instable; and still more so to draw circles around places, as if to encompass or confine a quality so fugitive ..."

— William Drennan, 1794

**de-acquisition**

The Lichen Museum refuses to own anything, or to wrest, gather, extract, encase, collect, or materially preserve; its "holdings" defiantly remain where they live, in place—pretty much everywhere.

**decentralized**

Lichens have no centralized system we can recognize — nervous or vascular.

**freedom**

"The question persists as to whether it is possible to unleash freedom from the history of property that secured it, for the security of property that undergirded the abstract equality of rights bearers was achieved, in large measure, through black bondage."

— Saidiya Hartman

**rights**

They can be given, and they can be taken away; if a person can be considered to own themselves, that ownership is already alienable. Without the separation of an abstract lien—splitting off from actual land an idea of land that could be owned, taken or lost, or splitting off from the actual person an idea of personhood that could be owned, taken or lost—land and persons remain living places and beings, engaged in and constituted by, networks of interdependent relations, coming up together in a “world in which many worlds must fit.” (see “worlds”)

**person**

A mask; one who plays or performs any part

“You cannot be both performer and spectator...If a door is open, it is not closed.”

— Basic Logic, 1952

**to look**

“The separation of subject and object is the most central dogma of modern epistemology. It is also the problem of looking.”

— Mieke Bal

**thing**

“In refusing what is most integral to the thing, racism denies the thing its humanity and denies humanity its thingliness...Can the world of the thing, the thing’s irreducible embeddedness in a world, which is to say in a world of things, be understood also as that which is integral to the thing, that which constitutes, as it were, the thing’s interiority?”

— Fred Moten

**plural**

Lichens are by inference and constitution wholly oriented towards the other(s) that make up themselves. Current research acknowledges that more than two beings (fungus and algae) compose a lichen holobiont—probably many more: “hundreds, thousands, or perhaps tens of thousands of other species...”

— Dr. Anne Pringle

**worlds**

“...There are words and worlds that are lies and injustices. There are words and worlds that are truthful and true. In the world of the powerful there is room only for the big and their helpers. In the world we want, everybody fits. The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit.”

— Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

**humanism**

The core violence of western humanism lies in the non-reciprocal relation of power that transforms whatever is considered not human into less-than-human, into an object—a specimen; an instrument—to use; or a resource—as supply.

**instrumentality**

The problem with instrumentalizing anything is fatally exposed in the old, deep roots of western philosophy with its distinctions between human and inhuman value, and securing of the category of property thereby:

“...Now instruments are of various sorts; some are living, others lifeless; ...the servant is a kind of instrument...a possession is an instrument for maintaining life...a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments... From the hour of their birth some are marked out for subjection, others for rule...the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life.”

— Aristotle, c. 350 BCE

**inhuman**

“...the division of materiality (and its subjects) as inhuman and human, and thus as inert or agentic matter, operationalizes race...a transmutation of matter occurs within that signification that renders matter as property...”

— Kathryn Yusoff

**more-than-human**

We live in reciprocal and inextricable relations of sociality with and for others. This horizontal interdependence includes more-than-humans (mountains, cyanobacteria, watersheds, porcupines, jelly lichens...) as well as human beings. It is not the dominant understanding of how things work now, but it is simmering under the surface.



**invisibility**

Part of what is compelling about lichens is their ability to be virtually invisible while also massively distributed, to flourish and to be hidden in plain sight, as if their marginality allows them to occupy and to thrive in a parallel world; a world that functions on a different kind of time and space and with collective relational skills that will allow them, in that world, to outlast the one that racialized capitalism, with its roots in western humanism, is so badly fucking up.

**opacity**

"The opaque is not the obscure, it is that which cannot be reduced."  
— Édouard Glissant

**to see**

"Even the eyes know this, that everything lives—that the dull or gleaming surfaces they gaze at are also gazing back at them, that the colors they drink or dive into have been longing to swallow them and to taste of their hazel, their bright hints of green."  
— David Abrams

**to sense**

"Only as our senses transfer their animating magic to the written word do the trees become mute, the other animals dumb."  
— David Abrams

**color**

We don't just see color, color sees. Pigments detect, as well as reflect, light. The whole world is full of eyes, responding differentially to the sun, and processing it into food, or images, or thoughts, or as obscure mineral semiotics we don't know how to decode.

**to know**

"Why (lichens) grow so slowly and survive so long are intriguing and largely unanswered questions."  
— Vernon Ahmadjian

**naming**

"There's another species called *Tininia aromatica*: *Tininia* is the main taxon; the *aromatica* name came because the person had received the specimen in an envelope. The envelope had a distinctive smell, but the lichen doesn't smell at all, it was the envelope."  
— Paul Whelan

**observation**

"How can you tell if it is lichen, and not chewing gum?"  
— A Lichen Walker in Chicago

**form**

"It is more appropriate not to subsume the details of living in the form, but to consider the form a part of the details of living and to use the word ecology."  
— Kinji Imanishi

**slowness**

"...because of (lichens') slow growth and inability to grow in a lab, they have not been suitable for commercial exploitation."  
— Vernon Ahmadjian

**anti-capitalist**

Scientists have learned to synthesize certain "lichen substances" of particular interest to medicine and chemistry, but they can't force the lichens themselves to produce them—even though the "natural" versions tend to be more potent and effective. Scientists can grow the fungus and the algae separately in petri dishes in laboratories, but the symbiotic union that produces most of the mysterious "lichen substances" has not been successfully sustained. This is lichen's anti-capitalist stance: because lichens can't be cultivated, they keep the keys to their own labor, and bio-power.

**time**

"As lichens grow older, the probability of death seems to decrease."  
— Dr. Anne Pringle

**indolence**

"Are living things indolent; do they, while eating or sleeping without expending any effort, unknowingly become beautiful? I would frankly admit that there is an aspect in living things or in the life of living things that cannot be explained only in terms of a drive to survive."

— Kinji Imanishi

**horizontality**

Considering the humble and largely horizontally-oriented (though not exclusively so) lichens, as teachers, is one potential step towards knocking down the vertical hierarchies that certain humans have constructed, with themselves on top as masters of the world. It is an imaginative move — but the existence of lichens is not imaginary.

**sun**

You don't need a ticket to enter The Lichen Museum (you are already in it) and you don't need to pay because it is already always giving itself to you, though never giving itself up. It is a museum of the already here, and the lasting; but also of the fugitive, in the sense of escaping spectacle, as well as categorization, enshrinement in the geological record, and commodification by capital; a museum of the marginal and the insignificant; a museum of what's un/common, under the sun.

The fires are not the sun's fault, even though the sun feels hotter, more penetrating, more dangerous than before.

**photosynthesis**

"The heart is built of light's gold, and the cucumbers and the salad are the stimulus..."

— Rudolf Steiner

**life/world**

"I regard life as extending to this world and because of that extension this world can be our world. That is the best conclusion I can reach at this time."

— Kinji Imanishi

**lichenologists**

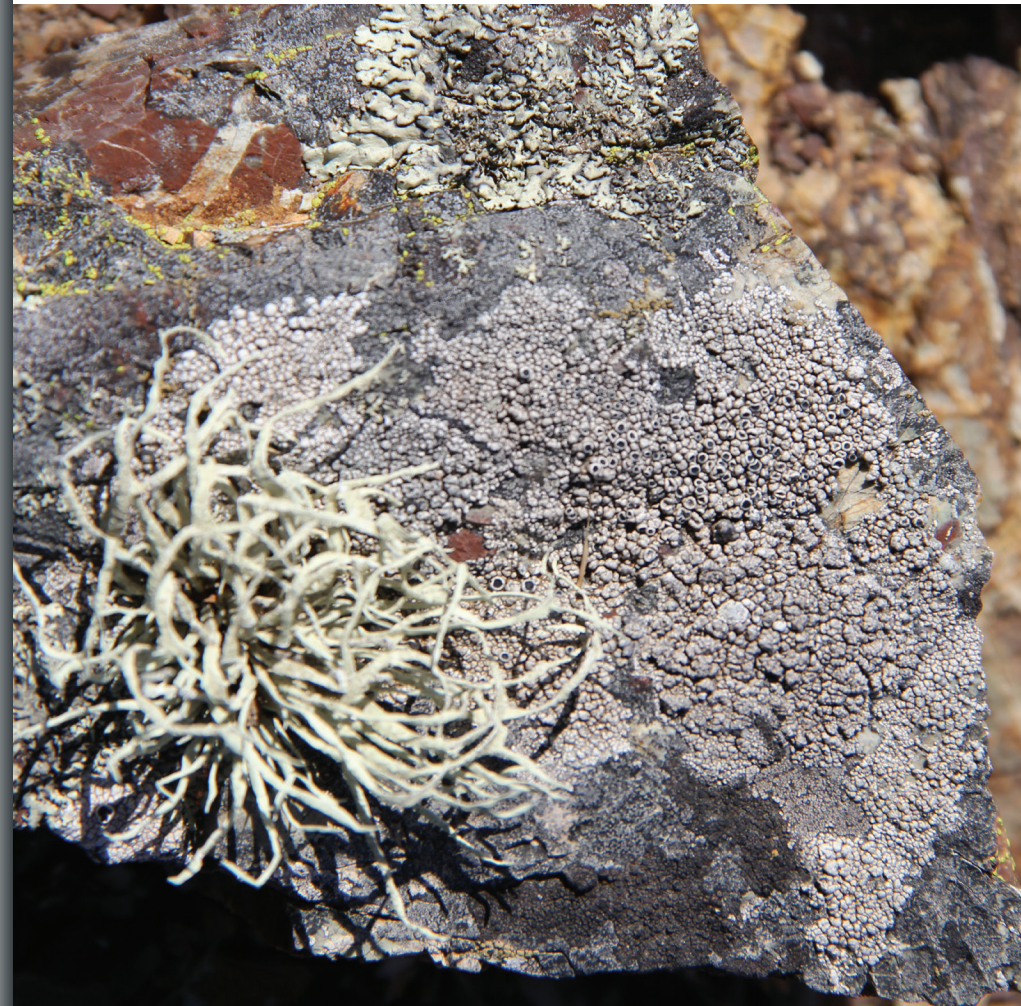
"They are not all shy and retiring. Some of them are quite outgoing... It's not an exciting hobby—at least not in an obvious way... They just want to study the thing they love."

— Alan Orange

**coming to know**

"...There is very little you can do without thanking somebody else."

— Paul Whelan



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## Biography

A. Laurie Palmer is a writer, artist, and teacher. Her place-based, research-oriented artworks take form as sculpture, public projects, and artist books, and she collaborates on strategic actions in the contexts of social and environmental justice. She is a professor in the Art Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), and the current Director of Graduate Studies for UCSC's MFA in Environmental Art and Social Practice (EASP). The Lichen Museum is her current book project.

# Juneteenth

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Crystal Z Campbell





Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is a holiday in the United States that commemorates the announcement of the abolition of slavery in the U.S. state of Texas in 1865.

Celebrated on June 19, the term is a portmanteau of June and nineteenth, and is recognized as a state holiday or state holiday observance in 41 states of the United States.

-11 July 2002





Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is the annual holiday celebrated on June 19 in the United States to commemorate the ending of slavery.

For more than a century, Juneteenth was observed mainly in Texas and parts of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma.

-20 June 2005



Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is an annual holiday in fourteen states of the United States. Celebrated on June 19, it commemorates the announcement of the abolition of slavery in Texas.

The holiday originated in Galveston, Texas; for more than a century, the state of Texas was the primary home of Juneteenth celebrations.

-17 June 2007



Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day or Emancipation Day, is a holiday in the United States that commemorates the announcement of the abolition of slavery in the U.S. state of Texas in 1865.

Celebrated on June 19, the term is a portmanteau of June and nineteenth, and is recognized as a state holiday or state holiday observance in 41 states of the United States.

-21 March 2013



Juneteenth, also known as Juneteenth Independence Day or Freedom Day, is an American holiday that commemorates the June 19, 1865 announcement of the abolition of slavery in the U.S. state of Texas, and more generally the emancipation of enslaved African-Americans throughout the former Confederacy of the southern United States.

Celebrated on June 19, the word is a portmanteau of "June" and "nineteenth".

-6 February 2018



Juneteenth (a portmanteau of June and nineteenth) – also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Liberation Day, and Emancipation Day – is a holiday celebrating the emancipation of those who had been enslaved in the United States.

Originating in Galveston, Texas, it is now celebrated annually on June 19 throughout the United States, with increasing official recognition. It is commemorated on the anniversary date of the June 19, 1865, announcement of General Order No. 3 by Union Army general Gordon Granger, proclaiming freedom from slavery in Texas.

-7 June 2021



## Biography

Crystal Z. Campbell is a multidisciplinary artist, experimental filmmaker, and writer of African American, Filipino, and Chinese descents. Campbell finds complexity in public secrets— fragments of information known by many but untold or unspoken. Recent works revisit questions of medical ethics with Henrietta Lacks's "immortal" cell line, ponder the role of a political monument and displacement in a Swedish coastal landscape, and salvage a 35mm film from a demolished Black activist theater in Brooklyn as a relic of gentrification.

Select honors include the Pollock-Krasner Award, MAP Fund, MacDowell, MAAA, Skowhegan, Rijksakademie, Whitney ISP, Franklin Furnace, Tulsa Artist Fellowship, and Flaherty Film Seminar. Exhibitions include the SFMOMA, Drawing Center, ICA-Philadelphia, REDCAT, Artissima, Studio Museum of Harlem, Project Row Houses, and SculptureCenter, amongst others.

Campbell is a Harvard Radcliffe Film Study Center & David and Roberta Logie Fellow (2020-2021) living and working in Oklahoma. Campbell is founder of the virtual programming platform [archiveacts.com](https://archiveacts.com) and a 2021 Guggenheim Fellow in Fine Arts.

The Place  
in Which I  
Fit Will Not  
Exist Until  
I Make It

97

Jessica Jackson Hutchins

**Counterinsurgency: dousing the flames of  
Minneapolis**

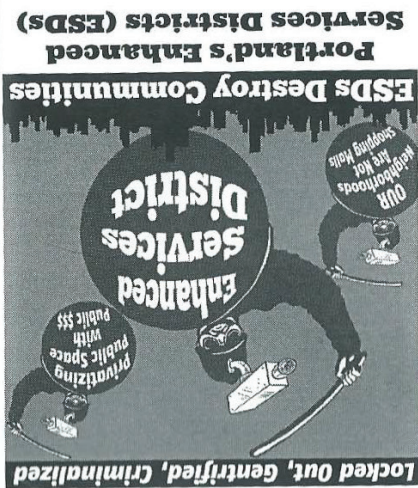
Peter Gelderloos

June 04, 2020

Counterinsurgency, Peter Gelderloos

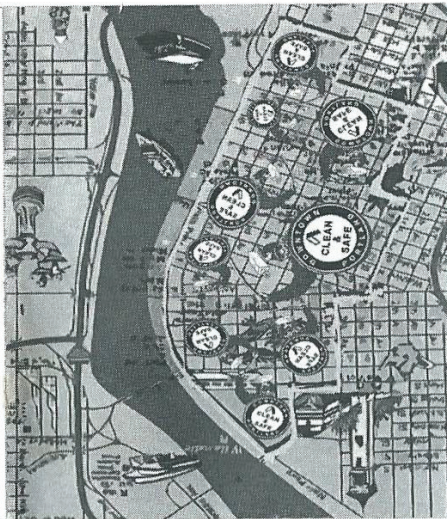


We Who Will Destroy the Future, Margaret Killjoy



## What are Enhanced Services Districts (ESDs)?

Enhanced Services Districts are Portland's Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). BIDs are bounded geographic areas in which extra fee assessments are levied on property owners to fund activities in the area. Typically, these funds are used to control the growing homeless populations through increased policing and surveillance.



## Portland has three ESDs taking over 550 blocks of public space

**Clean & Safe:** 213 blocks of downtown. Managed by the Portland Business Alliance. Receives over \$5 million annually. Established 1994.

**Lloyd:** 77 blocks. Managed by Go Lloyd. Receives over \$500,000 annually. Established 2001.

**Central Eastside Together:** 263 blocks. Managed by Central Eastside Industrial Council. Receives over \$3 million annually. Established 2019.

To learn more: [tinyurl.com/AbolishESDs](http://tinyurl.com/AbolishESDs)

Our demands are clear: Abolish ESDs

After 26 years of ESDs expanding their control over our city, it is way beyond fixing. The whole concept of governing through corporatization of public space needs to be abolished. We are opposed to private contracts for public functions, of any kind, without public approval and public accountability.

ESDs hire private security and contract with Portland Police Bureau (PPB) to patrol public space

Clean & Safe contracts with Portland Patrol. Central Eastside contracts with Northwest Enforcement. Clean & Safe also pays four additional PPB officers to patrol their district.

In August 2020, an audit of ESDs; the first public audit since their formation in 1994, found there is no oversight by the city despite the vast majority of money going towards "public space services" "These enhanced law enforcement or criminal justice services create a risk of disparate outcomes" ESDs receive nearly \$10,000,000 annually in unchecked public money in order to privately police homeless people in public space

ESDs also pay for "community courts" and prosecutors that target homeless people for "quality of life" crimes inside district boundaries

Lloyd funds the Strategic Prosecution and Services Unit, which coordinates community courts & neighborhood deputy district attorneys.





Abolitionists have been working to chip away at the PIC for a long time. Abolitionist thought and practice is rooted in the work of Black feminist thinkers and organizers. Fighting for abolition means staying engaged and learning, even when it gets very hard! Even if the city pushes for what they think are more "ground-breaking" reforms, we are not asking for reform to a system that is harmful and working as designed. When we say abolition, we really mean abolition, and no elected officials will ever meet these demands in full.

You can follow/look up these people and orgs to learn more and stay plugged in (this is not exhaustive at all! and not PDX-specific for this zine)

Angela Davis

Mariame Kaba

Survived & Punished

Charlene Caruthers

COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE



Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective

Freedom to Thrive

Keep up with the jail & prison strikes! There are so many!

Abolition is both a practical organizing tool. and a long-term goal, and

The work towards abolition of the PIC goes hand in hand with fights against US imperialism and fights for Indigenous sovereignty. This work doesn't start or end in PDX, but we are experiencing a historic flashpoint that is pushing abolition further than ever before!

The prison industrial complex (PIC) is a term we use to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social, and political problems. Critical Resistance definition-criticalresistance.org

Being an everyday abolitionist means that we all find ways to collectivize and care for each other—that we find ways to sustain this work! We must all kill the cop in our hearts and heads!! (credit to Tourmaline for coining this term! Find her on social media to learn more about her & her work)

abolitionists. complex industrial prison specifically decades are and prisons for disbanded and the fight to who have been in abolitionists

In the current

political moment the word 'abolition' is being used a lot!

We've gotta get clear on what abolition is referring to!

What is "abolition" referring to?

And what does fighting for abolition mean?



## The Alternatives No. 1 – Parliament –

No other political groups organise in this way. Any parliamentary party is run on a hierarchical structure. The higher you are the more control you have. Real decisions are made by the elected TD's over the heads of the members and the most important decision are made by the leader of the party and a couple of cronies.

Their way of organising reflects their politics of "leave it all to us" They encourage people to allow the bigger decisions that effect their lives to be made by the small elite of the ruling class. We are told to have faith in people who we are told know better than us.

## The Alternatives No. 2 – Lenin –

A similar method of organisation is used by Leninist organisations. Based on their failed tactic of "leading" the working class to socialism they develop a ruling elite within their organisations. Leninists do not believe that the working class can develop political ideas. So, instead, a Leninist party must provide the leadership and the working class will follow. They see themselves as 'shepherds leading the sheep'.

Within a Leninist party the future leaders of the working class are bred. Central and Political Committees are elected who are then given the right to make decisions for the whole organisation. The ideas and orders therefore come from the top down.

Central control can go to absurd lengths. One Leninist organisation in Ireland is controlled from the USA. It has to have everything checked and agreed by the central committee across the Atlantic. This includes simple pamphlets which have to be printed in the states and mailed over.

This formal leadership does the "intellectual" side of the business while the majority are left to selling the paper and going to branch meetings for their weekly orders. In these organisations a leader can be a leader for life. Look at Lenin, Stalin or Gerry Healey (English Leninist leader) for example.

As far as education goes, most members are brought up on a diet of their own party literature which limits them to a low level of disinformation about other

people's ideas. Unless you are being trained for leadership there will be very little effort to develop debating or writing skills.

This ties in nicely with their elitist and cynical view of politics. Namely the gaining control of the working class sometime in the future!

## Workers' Control

As anarchists we are committed to our democratic ideals. We are members of the WSM because we want to win the battle of ideas and fight for the control and self-management of society by the working class. We are in an organisation because we agree on our politics, have more resources as an organisation, are better able to put across our views and can combine our forces in the struggle to build an anarchist society.

If you like our ideas we want you to find out more about us, and think seriously about joining us. We encourage everybody to find out more about anarchism, its ideas and its actions.

### From Workers Solidarity

Newspaper of the Workers  
Solidarity Movement

[www.wsm.ie/c/workers-solidarity-34-1992](http://www.wsm.ie/c/workers-solidarity-34-1992)

[www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie)

### Contact:

[freelitpeeps@protonmail.com](mailto:freelitpeeps@protonmail.com)

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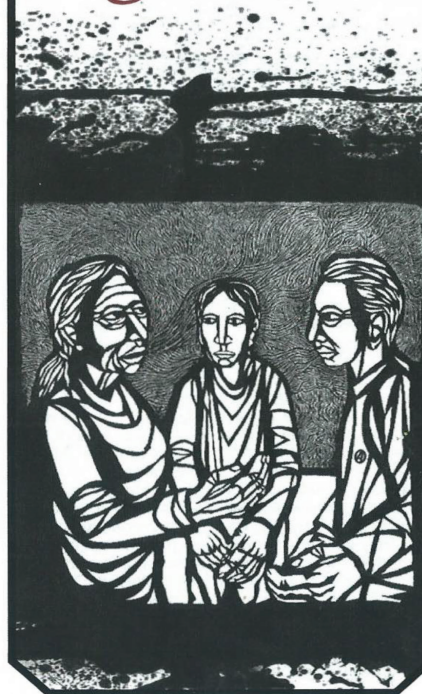
Venmo: @free\_lit

Cash App: \$AnarchoLit

More copies can be downloaded from:  
[www.zabalaza.net](http://www.zabalaza.net)

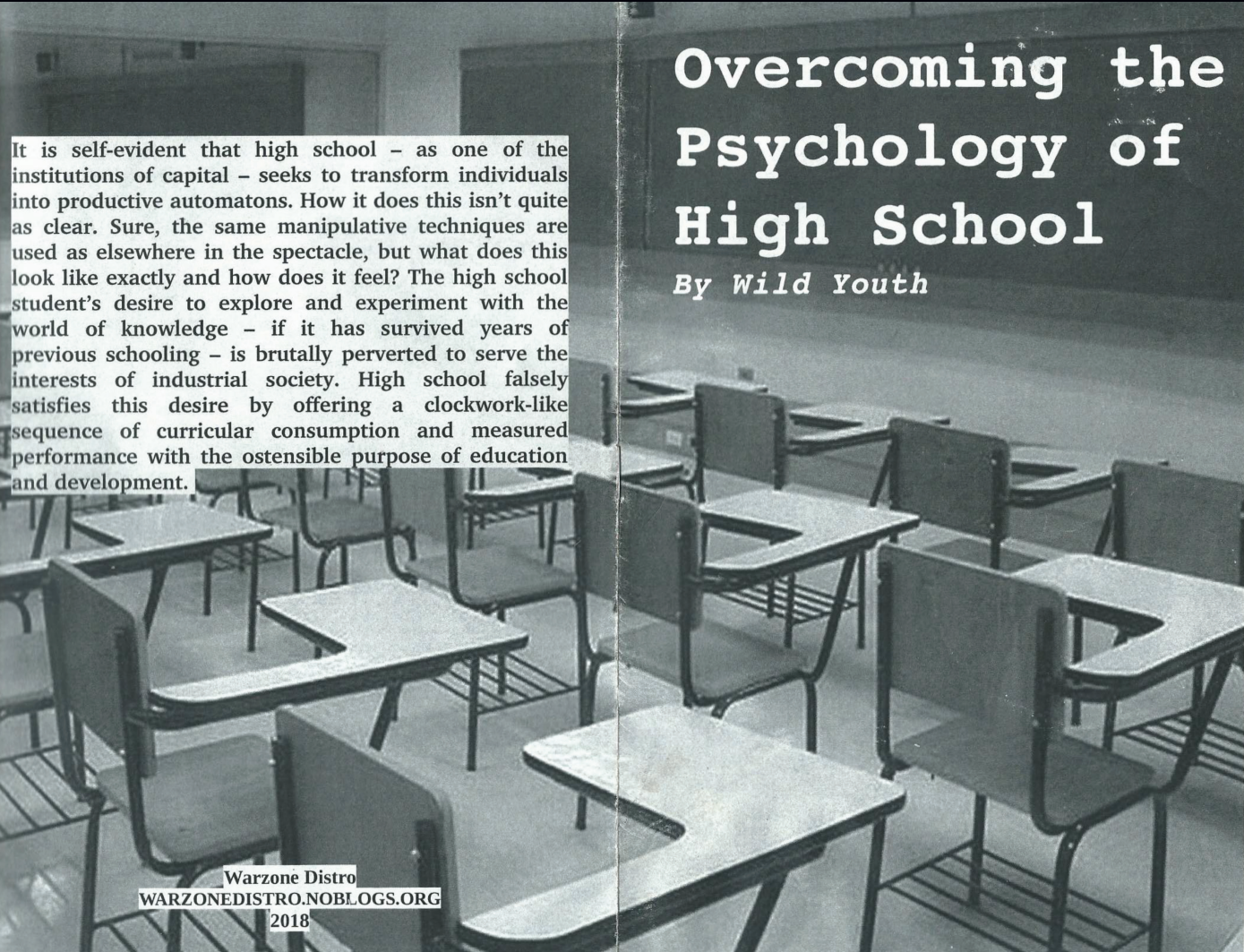
★ Thinking about Anarchism ★

## Anarchist Organisation



Anarchist Organisation, Workers Solidarity





It is self-evident that high school – as one of the institutions of capital – seeks to transform individuals into productive automatons. How it does this isn't quite as clear. Sure, the same manipulative techniques are used as elsewhere in the spectacle, but what does this look like exactly and how does it feel? The high school student's desire to explore and experiment with the world of knowledge – if it has survived years of previous schooling – is brutally perverted to serve the interests of industrial society. High school falsely satisfies this desire by offering a clockwork-like sequence of curricular consumption and measured performance with the ostensible purpose of education and development.

Warzone Distro  
WARZONEDISTRO.NOBLOGS.ORG  
2018

# Overcoming the Psychology of High School

*By Wild Youth*



My aim here is far less ambitious. As for the grammatical construction, "might should", from the southern dialect—I tried to Blackify the title a little bit. But it's also serious, because these are in fact tentative theses and proposals: I'm perfectly okay with being completely wrong about every single thing I put forward today, just so long as it creates a further deeper discussion on strategy. What I really want to do is open up this discussion, and I want to leave it, for people to engage with it as they want to, and to push it further. At the same time, I want the dialogue to be honest. There's a kind of prevailing posture of cynicism, nihilism, and democratic moralism that holds back insurrection. And I think now is the time: we are experiencing an uprising on a scale that many of us have never lived through. Even if we compare present events to Greece, this thing has gone much further. There are far more martyrs in this struggle than there ever were in the Greek uprising. The time has arrived for strategic thought and reflection.

# how it might **SHOULD BE DONE**



**IDRIS ROBINSON**

*On strategic potentialities unleashed by  
the George Floyd rebellion*



When we see what all the different institutions and mechanisms of domination have in common, it becomes clear that our individual struggles are also part of something greater than us, something that could connect us. When we come together on the basis of this connection, everything changes: not only our struggles, but also our sense of agency, our capacity for joy, the sense that our lives have meaning. All it takes to find each other is to begin acting according to a different logic.

To  
change  
everything,  
start  
anywhere.



"Small fabric/Implies much/ presides yet."

—Emily Dickinson

These zines were gathered at direct actions in Portland during the summer and fall of 2020. During this time, I participated in several direct actions a week, usually marching and confronting police and DHS at the Justice Center, various police stations, the police union building and the ICE building. We were fighting for racial justice and the abolition of the police. Typically, we gather in a park near the destination, where tents are set up for the distribution/trade of protective gear, food and water. Of course, no money ever exchanged hands. Affinity groups provide helmets, masks, shields, earplugs (for flash bangs), wipes to treat for chemical burns, and other first aid packs, body padding (shin guards, knee pads and the like) clean canisters for respirators, goggles (also to protect from the gas) and usually there were several tents with zines, stickers and other printed matter about black and indigenous power, working class solidarity, the abolition and de-fund the police movements, and anarchism. I've always loved printed matter and so I often would pick some up to take home and read. Sometimes, I'd copy and re-distribute them, or they just ended up in my collections of paraphernalia. From time to time, I also print and distribute zines - then I could get my kid (the one too young and anxious to attend direct actions) involved, folding and handing them out. I mostly focus on information on prison conditions and strikes, or basic principles of abolition.

Zines have been ways of immediately and cheaply distributing information and opinion, whether about your friend's band or your ideological position. These zines collected here are mostly political education and propaganda. Whether it's a collection of your friends' poetry and drawings, or notes on counterinsurgency techniques; guerrilla publishing tactics, alternatives to the institutions and structures that control the dissemination of information, are powerful community building tools. In the context of this uprising, printed matter fosters solidarity in a big way, and purpose. They help to focus and inspire the actions of the participants, help them find the language to articulate why they are there, both to themselves and others. The intensions of direct actions are to create notable disruptions and foster rebellion in the interest of tearing down an injustice society and building a better one. They articulate alternative visions of society and the future.

Zines are also just artifacts, often funny, charming, punk documents. My house and studio are littered with ephemera - liner notes and art exhibition announcement cards and press releases, and kids' projects and old notes; little pieces of paper are minor miracles. I keep things, but I don't archive them. I like to stumble upon them: a kid's drawing next to a Lucy McKenzie checklist, next to a Lucky Peach cookbook and some old Pavement tour schedule on top of a pile of novels. Un-alphabetized, discordant, but creating its own paragraph of ideas. Ways of creating unexpected connections, or maybe just my rationalization for clutter. And then I sometimes throw them away.

Digital platforms have all the problems of corrupt ownership, complicity with state powers, (not to mention they are unsafe due to state data collection). Then there is the status chasing and virtue signaling, the addictive ways people use them and how so much thought

and ideas become codified. Yuck! You reach people, let them know about an action, gather support for mutual aid projects, educate on the issues- so they are useful. But they lack the anonymity, joy, and real connection of a zine. And of course, if I'm distributing a zine, it's to a different population, an immediate, local one of neighborhood friends and strangers. This aligns nicely with theories of direct action- that we are literally, directly, taking care of the people and issues on our street in our neighborhoods. That the most powerful, pure political actions are immediate and physical, and are free from any state or corporate dependency.

All revolutionary movements have graphics and pageantry. These are to delight one another, inspire and inform. It's how we make ourselves known to ourselves and each other. The movement last summer had light shows, and sculptural interventions (the new 'Portland Nightmare Elk' in Chapman Square, the sculpture of the guillotine brought out to various sites, etc.) just like there are soundtracks - music people brought and played night after night at various points in the evening. The Frontline Drumline remains a powerful force at demonstrations. A participant brought a mobile PA system every night that played poignant or funny or aggressive soundtracks to add commentary to the night's actions. The Whitney Houston rendition of the Star-Spangled Banner, for instance, played when the police launched especially violent actions and bullrushes. You could really see the fury this provoked in the police. More than once, they maced this person and confiscated his sound system, and every time, within 24 hours, funds were collected to procure a new one. They recorded a rebuke to the LRAD (Long Range Acoustic Device) that we heard incessantly every night, telling us to disperse, that our actions were unlawful or declared a riot, and played that back at them listing our own demands - that they quit their jobs, that this citizenry were done paying for the oppression and violence they inflict. During one particularly long standoff, they played a whole lecture about Oregon's racist history, from the Lash Law to the Red Lining. All of these help to define the movement's purpose and power and aesthetic and act as further calls to action. They are ways to articulate what we want, and how we plan to get it.

Americans are the most propagandized people in the world. We have to re-educate ourselves and others; unlearn all the racist colonial myths we have been inundated with since birth. We have to create alternative narratives to the conventional oppressive ones based on fears, white supremacy, and a neurotic need for safety and security at the cost of liberation and equality. One way of contributing to this, is through pieces of paper passed between people on the street. Please feel free to print out and copy these zines, fold or staple and distribute to you friends and neighbors.

"The people can only take over their cultural heritage by an act of expropriation...With the people struggle and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to 'tried' rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws...But we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form the can master."

—Bertolt Brecht

## References

Zines for download and distribution:

*Anarchist Organisation*, Workers Solidarity

*Counterinsurgency*, Peter Gelderloos

*Enhanced Service District*

*How It Might Should Be Done*, Idris Robinson

*Overcoming the Psychology of High School*, Wild Youth

*To Change Everything Start Anywhere*, CrimethInc

*We Who Will Destroy the Future*, Margaret Killjoy

*What is Abolition Referring To*, Nadia C.

## Biography

Jessica Jackson Hutchins (b. 1971) is an artist living in Portland, Oregon. Hutchins's expressive and intuitive studio practice produces dynamic sculptural installations, collages, paintings, and large-scale ceramics, all hybrid juxtapositions of the handmade. As evidence of the artist's dialogue with items in her studio, these works are a means by which the artist explores the intimacy of the mutual existence between art and life. Her transformations of everyday household objects, from furniture to clothing, are infused with human emotion and rawness, and also show a playfulness of material and language that is both subtle and ambitious. Based upon a willingly unmediated discourse between artist, artwork and viewer, Hutchins's works ultimately serve to refigure an intimate engagement with materiality and form. She has exhibited widely nationally and internationally at institutions and events like The Whitney and Venice Biennale (2010, 2013), the ICA Boston and the ICA Philadelphia, The Highline, New York City, The Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art, Centre Pasqu Art, Kunsthhaus/Centre d'Art, Biel-Bienne, Switzerland, The Hepworth Wakefield museum, Wakefield, UK. She is represented by Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York, and Adams and Ollman gallery, Portland, OR

# Dismantling the House: Before & After Thoughts

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**Yaelle S. Amir**  
2020-2021 CFAR Curator-in-Residence

## Before:

An un-articulate list of select random, sometimes foggy thoughts taken from a 'power journal' I kept while developing the series of programs Dismantling the House for CFAR (winter 2020 to spring 2021):

- If power is having a seat at the table, should we be working to knock down the table?
- What happens when power is acknowledged?  
↳ it grows into an even uglier beast...
- Who has the agency to tell the story & place?  
the original authors & a person? an object?  
must set the tone
- Is the transference of political power merely symbolic?  
↳ performance art at its most cynical sense
- When is the time to step aside?  
↳ if you're asking this, it means the time has already come
- Does bureaucracy always reign supreme?  
↳ it will bring us all to our knees...
- How can we alter our perception of our own assumed powerlessness?  
↳ collective organizing & solidarity
- What are the <sup>dominant</sup> collective narratives? ~~that lead us?~~  
↳ those that were written by colonialist powers at be
- Is a definition of identity a form of confinement?  
↳ nothing good ever comes from generalizations
- Is there anything that can stop capitalism from moving on?  
(I know the answer to this and so do you...)
- Is there such a thing as an open-ended interpretation of power?  
↳ Power is definitively relational. There is only those who take power and those who are oppressed by it.

## &:

Dismantling the House was a series of public programs and exhibitions I curated during the 2020–2021 academic year that took place both virtually and in venues in Eugene and Portland, OR.

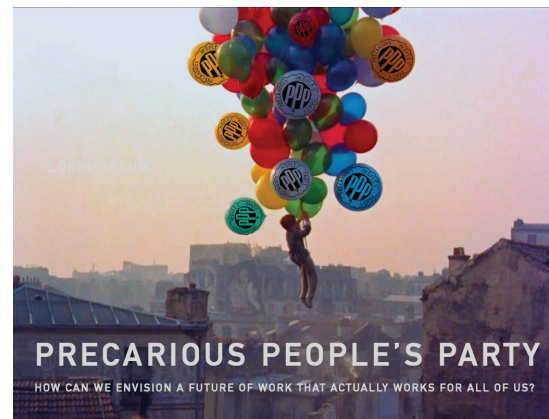
...the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those (...) who still define the master's house as their only source of support.

– Audre Lorde, 1979

In the face of a global pandemic, an escalating climate crisis and a social uprising – governments, corporations, and society's various institutions have wielded their authority forcefully and with little compromise. Abuses of power have seeped into every aspect of our lives—from financial stability, physical and mental health, and personal safety to our social well-being, sovereignty, and sense of hope. Yet, while felt more acutely in 2020, for many the impact of these crises has persisted for decades – an escalation of ongoing challenges. As we watch capitalist considerations further risk and control the safety and welfare of individuals worldwide, it is evermore clear that our society must unlearn its ways.

The series of programs Dismantling the House presented the ways in which the dominance asserted by those holding onto power has been felt continuously by communities across generations and geographies. The participating artists looked inwards to their experiences, outwards to our collective practices, back to historical precedents and forward to visions of culture unraveling itself. The programs proposed ways of viewing and claiming agency over our present so that new strategies, systems and infrastructures can

take form.



Jea Alford and Ariana Jacob's forum Precarious Peoples' Party (PPP) connects members of the contingent economy – who are without secure full-time work – to envision and advocate for economic and political futures where we can all live and love powerfully. PPP hosts conversations that link people working in various sectors

*Precarious Peoples' Party* (Photo: Jea Alford and Ariana Jacob)

of the “gig” economy, including artists, adjunct faculty, and workers in the “sharing” economy. This ongoing platform provides a place for individuals to gather to discuss contingent worker solidarity, experiment with ways to actualize the potential freedom of underemployment, and explore the possible paths forward for the future of work and/or a post-work society. In December 2020, PPP launched Think & Feel Tank with a virtual discussion that aimed to develop a pragmatic and imaginative policy platform by and for precarious people. Participants were able to collectively re-imagine possible futures for our global and local economies—moving through discussions of inequitable and exploitative conditions and towards ones that build a foundation for an empowered personhood within the contingent workforce.<sup>1</sup>

Garrick Imatani’s exhibition *Monologue* examined the forces that inform and shape perceptions of non-dominant cultural identities. Through an examination of his own Japanese cultural heritage, Imatani created objects and iconographies that use direct observation or online engagement to set up an alternative punchline. With this project, he questioned the aesthetics of assimilation and authenticity, as well as the contemporary and conceptual, which continue to situate works within co-opted art historical references. The objects and prints comprising this installation questioned both the dominant canon and inclusionary and equity constructs – first enforced by colonialist aesthetics and further perpetuated within institutional frameworks and scholarship. In creating interactive objects layered with humorous imagery, Imatani seeks to diffuse the notion of an intangible “essence” of a culture—inviting instead a de-centralized, intricate and multifaceted reading of cultural properties beyond one’s own.<sup>2</sup>

garima thakur and Sharita Towne exhibition we’re out of control centered on the ongoing impact and manifestations of colonialism—weaving multiple histories and geographies into cross-cultural solidarity. The installation utilized the architecture and location of the gallery space to prompt visitors to reflect on their contribution to and position within colonialist structures of global societies. By looking to parallel diasporic experiences across continents and eras, and close readings and activations of the work of poet and activist Jayne Cortez, this installation pointed to the ways in which these narratives are constant, ingrained and interconnected.<sup>3</sup>



*we're out of control* (Photo: Mario Gallucci)

## After:

Reading through the notes in the journal I kept while developing *Dismantling the House*, I recognize a hint of uncharacteristic naiveness in the entries from the early days of the pandemic. I recall having conversations with others that were tinged with optimism—there was a genuine sense among us that if we stayed safe and remained connected, we can build up our visions for society from the shambles of the pandemic. This, of course, proved wrong. Little could have prepared me for the devastation I witnessed among communities ravaged by COVID-19 and its byproducts. But the visioning from those early days remained an echo in my mind and it has carried me through my time with CFAR.

Accordingly, when I was developing the list of artists for *Dismantling the House*, I was looking for those whose overall practice inherently examines power relations in contemporary culture. When the pandemic became what we now know it to be and laid bare the core inequities and power imbalances of our society, these projects took on an added, urgent relevance. Ariana and Jea shifted their project to the virtual sphere, which allowed for a more expansive conversation. The resulting roundtable about contingent labor felt acutely pertinent, as society became increasingly reliant on precarious workers for all their basic needs of deliveries, grocery shopping, communications and more. Garrick’s exhibition pushed back against an essentialist interpretation of culture via his own Japanese heritage, at a time when hostile rhetoric and actions enhanced by the pandemic have threatened the safety of Asian American communities. garima and Sharita’s exhibition incorporated racial and cultural history with humorous, yet biting, critique. Through firm control of visitors’ access and engagement with the installation, they communicated an everyday racialized existence where Brown and Black individuals are sub-consciously and physically typified, tokenized, and excluded.

It is clear that ‘Power’ is a construct carefully crafted and sustained by those who benefit from it. It is up to us to unlearn, unsettle, decolonize, relinquish and abolish these structures that uphold the status quo from our positions as both powerful and as subjugated. When we are able to push these frameworks out of circulation—a truly nuanced and horizontal plane will become the grounds for our envisioned futures.



*Monologue* (Photo: Garrick Imatani)



## References

- 1 PPP's Think Tank & Feel was held virtually on December 12, 2020. Roundtable participants included: Susan Cuffaro, Sean Cumming, Brian Dolber, Hannah Gioia, Anna Gray, Patricia Vasquez Gomez, Cat Hollis, Anna Neighbor, Larissa Petrucci, Emmett Schlenz, and Lise Soskolne. A transcript of the conversation can be found within the pages of this publication.
- 2 Garrick Imatani's exhibition Monologue took place at Eugene Contemporary Art's gallery space ANTI-AESTHETIC in Eugene, OR April 3–May 1, 2021. In conjunction with the exhibition, the artist hosted a virtual conversation, Making After Melancholia, between himself and artists Lynn Yarne (Portland) and Lu Yim (New York) reflecting on the cultural representation of their Asian American identity. The dialogue addressed the artists' perception of the nuanced ways in which their identity figures into their work—looking at compounded layers of representation, cultural expectation vs. lived experience, and the futurist contexts in which their work as Asian American makers might be seen. A summary of this conversation can be found within the pages of this publication.
- 3 garima thakur and Sharita Towne's exhibition we're out of control, took place at Well Well Projects in Portland, OR May 8 – May 30, 2021. Notes and questions related to the themes of the exhibition can be found within the pages of this publication. In conjunction with the exhibition, the artists hosted an informal chai chat inspired by the Bengali concept of adda – a hangout space where casual intellectual and socio-political can take place, and where people can organically hold real, intimate dialogue with little restrictions.

## Biography

Yaelle S. Amir is a curator and researcher with a primary focus on artists whose practices supplement the initiatives of existing social movements, rendering themes within those struggles in ways that both interrogate these issues and promote them to a wider audience. Yaelle's programming has appeared in art institutions throughout the United States including Artists Space (NY), CUE Art Foundation (NY), The Elizabeth Foundation (NY), Franklin Street Works (CT), Holding Contemporary (OR), and Marginal Utility (PA) among many others. She has held curatorial and research positions at major institutions including MoMA NY, the International Center of Photography, and New York University. In Portland, she was Curator of Exhibitions and Public Programs at Newspace Center for Photography and Co-Curator of the Portland2019 Biennial. She currently teaches art and curatorial studies at Lewis & Clark College.

# The Future of Work Is Collective Organizing

A conversation organized by Jea Alford & Ariana Jacob  
with Susan Cuffaro, Sean Cumming, Brian Dolber, Hannah  
Gioia, Anna Gray, Patricia Vázquez Gómez, Cat Hollis, Anna  
Neighbor, Larissa Petrucci, Emmett Schlenz,  
and Lise Soskolne

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**Precarious People's Party**

*If we project labor trends into the future, gig work and precarious employment are overtaking steady jobs as the dominant shape for work in our economy. Gig work is often what might have once been full time jobs broken into small pieces, which evades workers' rights to benefits and other labor law protections. These forms of work also erode the employee-employer relationship, making it more difficult to advocate for better working conditions. They make it so that we, as precarious workers, are rarely able to see ourselves in connection with one another, even in our own workplaces where the fragmentation of work creates isolated contexts, let alone across the broad range of gig labor fields. The following conversation is an attempt to combat that isolation by bringing together gig workers from a variety of sectors to discuss our shared conditions.*

*How will we build a future of work that works for all of us?*

*Most visions for the future of work come out of a corporate context, but what would we, as precarious workers and the underemployed, want the future of work to be?*

*How can we share strategies to build collective power across the growing body of the contingent labor force?*

*What political strength would it amount to if we joined forces? And what practices, strategies, and understandings would it take for us to be able to do so?*

*What would happen if we saw ourselves as a body in common, and acted politically as though we have a stake in each other's working conditions and lives? Because we do - we are the future of work.*

On December 12th, 2020, months into the Covid-19 pandemic shutdown, the Precarious People's Party facilitated a conversation among a group of thirteen people who both work and organize across a range of precarious labor conditions. This group included Hannah Gioia and Emmet Schlenz, both involved in food service organizing, Brian Dolber, an organizer with Rideshare Drivers United, Susan Cuffaro of the Gigworkers Collective, organizing delivery drivers and app-based shoppers, Cat Hollis, a sex work organizer and founder of Haymarket Pole, Sean Cummings of the Unemployed Workers' Council, Lise Soskolne, with W.A.G.E. organizing arts institutions to pay artists and Larissa Petrucci, a graduate student employee organizer and labor researcher. The conversation also included several adjunct faculty and artists, Anna Gray, Anna Neighbor, and Patricia Vázquez Gómez because those are the fields the PPP comes out of, and where we began thinking about the impacts of increasing gigification. We included unemployment in this conversation about work because it is an integral part of the gig economy - precarious workers are often partially unemployed, and a moment's notice from being fully unemployed. Unemployment also provides a labor base for the gig economy, and gig work frequently functions as a stand-in for a real social safety net for unemployed people.

We begin this conversation with a brief explanation of the context in which first we started dreaming it into existence. We then move into a discussion of strategies and approaches to organizing within our fields that may be relevant for organizing across fields, and finally we begin to imagine how we would shape the future of work, or beyond-work.

The following transcript has been edited substantially for length, as well as clarity and readability.

**Ariana Jacob:** The Precarious People's Party is an artistic research platform that Jeana and I have been developing, which comes out of our experiences doing lots of different forms of precarious labor, and for the last five years being organizers with the Adjunct Faculty Union at Portland State University. As artists, we have also been making art about insecure work and underemployment.

Having been in this context of unionizing people who have vulnerable jobs, one of the things that we've realized is that a lot of the problems adjuncts face are shared across many different fields, and with people who are unemployed. We are dealing with shared conditions and we want to be part of a conversation around labor and organizing that connects those struggles across different types of work. We're interested in creating space for solidarity, and for recognizing the fact that we're living in an economy that is moving towards an increasingly precarious nature in general.

What can we do, as people who are directly involved in these circumstances, to envision something different?

**Jea Alford:** We'd love to hear about what challenges people in your field of work or organizing are facing and what strategies folks in your field are using to address those challenges and support one another - both in an ongoing sense and in the present moment of the pandemic.

**Cat Hollis:** As far as Portland goes, so much of our local industry depends on tourism and on a give-and-take from outside communities. It has been really interesting to see how we are expected to be tourists in our own labor rights. You should be willing to work, and if you're not arguing for better rights, then too bad, but if you are arguing for better rights, you are expected to forgo certain parts of the comfort that you would have experienced as somebody who just stayed quiet. I think it's been really interesting to see how the community has reacted to those organizing spaces, specifically the reaction of, "you're really getting down on a local business."

A lot of the strip clubs here are mom-and-pop owned. And the question is, are we destroying local business somehow by advocating for worker's rights? And I think the real answer that we've come up with is if businesses can't afford to operate in a way that respects their workers, how are they affording to operate at all? You can't just say, "Black Lives Matter" if you're not standing up for those Black and queer workers who are being marginalized by your activity. I think it's been really enlightening and empowering to work with similar groups, and to not be a tourist, to have this be the place that you live in labor organizing.

**Susan Cuffaro:** It's interesting that we go from mom-and-pop businesses to businesses like Uber and Lyft and Doordash who also claim that they cannot operate a business and comply with the law. They have a business model that depends entirely on exploiting their workforce. If you're an independent contractor, they don't have to provide you with any of the rights, benefits or privileges that are afforded to every single other employee. What we're thinking is that nobody's job is safe from gigification. All those people who said, "If you don't like it, go get another job." What I'm not sure is, where are those other jobs? This whole thing of the gig economy is a rolling stone. It is very, very difficult to stop.

**Brian Dolber:** To speak to something that Cat raised, I think there is this mentality, highlighted by Uber threatening to leave the state, of "what's good for Uber is what's good for drivers", right? So if the company is suffering, then people are going to lose their jobs...

**Cat Hollis:** How is that the laborer's problem? We were always going to lose our jobs. They use that as some sort of threat but if my workplace isn't safe, then how is keeping the business afloat going to help us? The question really becomes, have they protected their employees? Or have employees been told, "like it or get out"? Because that's not a healthy working relationship.

When I look at the NLRB, when I look at the OLCC or BOLI, who are all regulatory committees over the top of my labor, my question is, where have they been in the first place? Y'all were supposed to be here six months ago when we were losing our jobs. Going to those people to beg, borrow, and steal seems really unproductive in my mind.

**Anna Neighbor:** I also have concern about channeling powers towards legislative actions. It's all vulnerable to who the authorities are, which changes every election year. So every two to four years, whatever authority, whatever power they had is like the baby out with the bathwater.

**Sean Cumming:** I want to come back to something that Cat said about unemployment which is, "We decide how we go back," I think that's a really important thing that we could be hammering home, all of us together. How do we get to the point where we are saying, "We choose when we go back"? That is a big question for me. How do we get to the point where unemployed people aren't pulled into the gig economy, undermining the working conditions of other people in really desperate economic times?

**Anna Gray:** That reminds me of the struggles I've had trying to organize other artists and faculty members. First I had to convince them that they were workers at all. That's a struggle when you're dealing with people who are privileged enough to do what they love, but it's still work. And often people are willing to do free labor for a University, which is incredibly exploitative. Then Universities build their budget on the idea that there's a massive class of workers who will do work for free.

**Susan Cuffaro:** Brian and I have a similar issue with regard to organizing in the gig economy - when you talk to gig workers, a lot of them tell you, "I own my own business." So you ask, "Do you set your own prices? Do you decide how exactly you're going to perform your job?" If they don't identify as workers, they don't wish to become part of a movement. That connects us.

**Brian Dolber:** That has been a big struggle organizing drivers. I agree, Anna, the legislative stuff can really derail efforts in worker organizing in a lot of ways. Can we still get gains through organizing in an independent contractor model?

I wonder what some of the more established unions have done though? They should have been on this like 10 years ago. And the fact that we have been so successful without the backing of these large unions just says to me, what could SEIU do? What could the Teamsters do? What could UFCW do? If there was a real investment in organizing in these industries to fight back against the entire erosion of New Deal labor legislation, we wouldn't be in this place to begin with. With these smaller organizations, it feels like we're rubbing sticks together sometimes, but I'm repeatedly amazed by our minor successes.

**Anna Neighbor:** I second that, the work you guys have done is remarkable.

**Ariana Jacob:** It is. It's interesting being a part of a Union that does have a national presence, but it feels like we really need to be doing more work to realize that actually, union power is not going to hold if we don't recognize that unemployed people, and people who are outside of our specific industry, are also our working conditions. If we don't actually think about those people – and think about laws and conditions that make it possible for those people to also survive – unions will fall apart along with our employment status.

**Larissa Petrucci:** As we're thinking about organizing around legislation or more grass-roots organizing in our workplaces, it's important to remember that legislative outcomes are the results of businesses being organized as well. We saw this happen with scheduling legislation in Oregon.

Part of what we thought we would see from the scheduling legislation was something called predictability pay – workers would get their schedules a week in advance and if their employer changed their schedule, they would be paid more for those hours, compensating them for working an unpredictable shift. The idea was that either workers would get compensated, or the employer would have incentive to not engage in unpredictable scheduling practices. But what happened was, a few days before the legislation was passed, big businesses in Oregon got a loophole into the law – predictability pay waivers.

Our research found that essentially no one's getting predictability pay because the companies are telling workers, "We're not allowed to call you for an extra shift anymore unless you sign a waiver" which all the workers then do, because they're not getting a guaranteed minimum number of hours. Half of the workers don't know that they're waving their right to predictability pay, and even if they do, they need the extra hours because there are no minimum guarantees. It's important to see that legislation is also a result of businesses organizing, that is what we're up against.

The law also had zero funding for enforcement and education. Just because a law exists doesn't mean that it will be implemented in any substantial way. Which is the same issue that we have with our collective bargaining agreements, they're only as good as workers organizing around those agreements.

**Sean Cumming:** There seem to be two major issues in terms of organizing. There's organizing people who are unorganized – the people who are unemployed or people in precarious or gig employment – and then there's the other issue, which is a lack of a rank-and-file network of trade unions. People in trade unions are not connecting up their fights, even within different branches of the same union. It would be a really positive thing to try and get all these things to connect up.

I think that kind of strategy may come out of these sorts of discussions – how do we organize unorganized people and organize the rank and file between unions? Because it seems like that would be an effective way to push the unions that are maybe more conservative.

**Cat Hollis:** Lise, I know that you were saying that you organize multi-state, have there been any successes or tactics that you found that have really reflected across different places? Because part of the problem that we've been having organizing with Chicago is the laws aren't necessarily the same. And so how do you use the same tactics?

**Lise Soskolne:** Yeah, WAGE is national, we're a 501c3 so, we can't do any legislative stuff. WAGE runs a certification program that certifies those nonprofit art institutions that voluntarily commit to paying artist fees according to standards that we set. So, before WAGE came along, there were no guidelines or standards for compensating artists in the U.S. I mean, artists are not considered workers, which is a problem. The other problem is that artists don't consider themselves workers.

The certification program is built around this tool we call a fee calculator that essentially calculates the fees that artists should receive. It's a fee schedule that's broken out into different forms of content and the fees are tied to the total annual operating expenses of each institution. What we did was introduce a compensation floor. That was one of the most important accomplishments I think that WAGE has made. This seems to work as a scalable model. So, your question about organizing across states – we're sort of organizing across every single possible permutation of institution size.

**Cat Hollis:** That's brilliant.

**Lise Soskolne:** We don't put any pressure on institutions, except for a decade of naming and shaming. It's more of an intellectual or moral pressure campaign. They respond to that because the art world is unique in that maintaining an impression of moral purity is really important for institutions. So, it's very easy to shame them into paying people because if they don't, they're just hypocrites. That's why I said WAGE organizes institutions because so much of it is about getting them to do what's right.

In the nonprofit sector, you're working with a scarcity model. There's always the argument that we don't have enough money and you can't really make the argument that nonprofits are making profit, so why aren't they sharing that profit – except when you get to the larger institutions.

**Cat Hollis:** That really reflects what we're doing. I feel like something that we've come across is that workers especially, see dignity as a limited resource. Capital may be a limited resource. Dignity is not. Dignity and safety are not limited resources and they should not be divided amongst us, they should be given to us wholly as we are whole people. Whether



or not you're working in the nonprofit sector, there are resources that these institutions are hoarding, and those resources need to be redistributed.

**Emmett Schlenz:** Lise and Cat, I think your conversation about organizing across state lines and this question of scalability made me draw some connections to these ideas that Larissa, Sean and Anna touched on, about legislation and small grassroots organizing campaigns versus larger more established unions. I think a great example of both of those things working together are the teacher strikes that have been happening.

Not only are these - in particular in Chicago, LA and West Virginia - massive extremely lengthy strikes that have a ton of community support, but within the strikes themselves these schools operate as crucial community reproductive points. That's where childcare happens so the parents can go to work, and where food is distributed to lower income communities. The way that the strikes operate is they are targeting the school system and targeting the city, not asking for legislation, they're not pushing any laws. They're saying, give us the shit that we want, or we're going to shut your school system down for as long as we need to.

But then they're also taking care of the communities that they themselves are a part of and so it combines this militant direct action against the city with deep, deep, deep community mutual aid, which is really cool. I think the way that you scale up from small workplace issues to massive city halting strikes is through this deep community mutual aid work, like they're doing in the teacher strikes, like the nurses are doing. Those nurses and teachers unions are incredible.

**Patricia Vazquez Gomez:** Something that really resonated was what Cat was saying about safety, it not being a limited resource, and also the work of WAGE which I have benefited from as an artist, working with organizations that actually pay people. Because unless you are a big name artist, people assume that you're just doing what you love, not realizing it is also what you live off of.

I'm always saying yes to everything because I just need to make sure that next month, or in two months, or in three months I am going to have enough. That's not great, and I do think it's by design. We just can't even stop to see what the bigger situation is that we're in because we're constantly trying to make sure that we're gonna be okay next month.

If I knew that I didn't have to pay the overpriced rents in Portland, that somehow affordable housing was in the panorama of how the city is managed, I probably would relax a little bit more. The other thing is healthcare. Even under Obamacare it is so incredibly expensive. Everybody I know who's a musician or an artist is paying crazy amounts for healthcare, even with the subsidies. I'm sure that the same is happening to the Uber driver and the Instacart worker. If there was a little bit of that safety net maybe there would be the ability

to be okay where we're at, if the ground under us wouldn't be constantly shifting. These are larger questions about the systems we live in and what they're providing for not just for me, but for everybody.

**Susan Cuffaro:** That instability is what they count on. It is a particularly sharp arrow in their quiver because they know at some point that there is somebody who's going to take that job, who's going to take that ride, who's going to deliver that particular delivery and they count on that. It's a race to the bottom endangering everybody.

**Anna Neighbor:** This echoes part of what you said. I'm organizing contingent workers and having organizing conversations every day and so much of what I hear is, "I like the freedom, I like the flexibility." And I can say that personally I like it too.

I don't get paid enough, and I think I should have a certain amount of security, but I like not being on search committees. I like not being a full-time tenure track professor. I have eight other side hustles and I have a 14-year-old and a two-year-old. I like being able to be home at 3pm when I know I need to be. Some people don't want to have a solidified relationship to a boss, but do expect a certain base floor of respect, wage and job security. What does that look like, and what does it look like to try to organize those people?

**Sean Cumming:** As a non-American I have a slightly different perspective. What I see when you are talking about not wanting a boss so that you can come home at 3pm, is a complete erosion of the rights of working people to organize themselves, to bargain and win decent working conditions.

In the UK you work less, thirty-five hours per week is standard. You have holiday pay standards. In my early working life I didn't pay for health care. Elsewhere in the Western world, where you still have the welfare state, workers there are starting from a sense that you should have that control of your life, but you should also have that control in your workplace. And how you get that control is to organize together.

**Anna Neighbor:** Organize for a totally flexible schedule.

**Lise Soskolne:** I think a problem is if you don't want to work for someone else, you're working for yourself, running your own small business. That's essentially what independent contractors do. And one of the problems in the arts is that so much of our time is spent making work and that time is unquantifiable. If you were to try to quantify that time into labor time no one could afford to pay you what your labor was worth. And I think this is true of adjunct labor also: they pay you for contact hours, but so much of the work that you do is outside of that. So, what you end up with is what we call a symbolic fee. This is just a price that's symbolic of value, but it doesn't actually embody or encompass the actual

value of your labor. One of the things that WAGE did was campaign for a fee. I said it was a campaign for a wage, but it was really a campaign for a fee.

A fee is a payment for the work that you do when you enter into a temporary transactional relationship with an institution to provide content. So, it's not about the content itself. It's not about the materials that you use to make the content. It's about the act of providing content. It's weird because this argument actually makes sense to institutions and it stops this problem that you have of what is an artwork worth? Why is some artwork worth more than others? Why is some labor worth more than other labor, and is it a matter of labor time? I think this is important: the question of the time that you actually spend working, because so much of what we do is to reproduce ourselves for our jobs, for our labor. How much of this is quantifiable? How much is it possible to compensate for all of this?

**Ariana Jacob:** I want to specifically invite people to speak to what we would want work to look like. Folks are already mentioning things like more of a social safety net to allow for flexibility, more control in the workplace, and definitely something that provides dignity to all people. Could we keep trying to invoke what the ideal working, or non-working, or flexible working conditions could be?

**Brian Dolber:** To respond to Sean's point about the robust welfare state that other countries have, I absolutely agree. That would give us a lot more security. Something that I find really disheartening, looking at the mainstream of the American labor movement, is that it has not fought for the expansion of a welfare state since the post-war era. We're seeing that even through the campaign for Medicare for All. You have unions saying, "No, Medicare for All will hurt union members because we fought so hard for the plan that we have through the employer." Nobody even likes their private insurance plan, but there's this myth union leaders were circulating, that they fought for these benefits rather than wage gains, so it would be unfair to take away those victories. There's this idea that you're somehow hurting working people by giving everyone Medicare, or you're hurting working people by giving everyone education because, "I paid my student loans back already so why should I want other people to have their debt forgiven?"

Labor has been really complicit in that to a large extent because they've been very comfortable with politicians, particularly in the Democratic Party. We really need to blow that up from the outside. Only 8% of workers are organized in the U.S. now, so there's a huge base of people who can begin to develop new organizations to shift that. What's been hard for RDU, is that we need resources to do it. Until you have that stream of dues coming in, there's no money. If the established unions aren't looking to do it, or to help - especially when you're talking about a workforce of 100,000 people - how are you ever going to be able to build a real organization?

**Anna Neighbor:** On that note, we are a citywide union organizing higher ed workers across our region. Recognizing that our workers were mostly underpaid contingent faculty, we set our dues at \$12 a month so that people can join us at any time, regardless of if we are their bargaining agent or not. What's powerful about that is people who are frustrated can invest in the idea of a sense of community, professionalism and respect.

The model of growing this way is born out of the fact that as contingent workers we have relationships with multiple employers - my allegiance isn't to a school, it's to the profession. Now we have members in all 50 schools in Philly, so when we're interested in organizing the next place, we've already got members there. It cascades in this way that builds community across the region.

Sean, we've also been very interested in the unemployed because contingent workers, and contingent faculty specifically, fall in and out of employment all the time. Trying to access benefits is incredibly difficult, especially when you're in and out of employment so often. So, we do workshops for our members on how to apply for unemployment and student debt relief. We offer a lot of economic justice pieces to bring people into the union, and that grows the regional network.

**Sean Cumming:** We're trying to do more of that for unemployed people here. Again, resources are a question. Most unemployed people can't pay dues because we don't have any money. So, we're looking to try and partner with established unions, if we can.

One of the things that we are campaigning for is, not what's called universal basic income, but the idea that anyone who's unemployed for any reason should get unemployment payments. And that should not be linked to how much you've worked. If you are made unemployed you should get \$1,600 a week minimum, going up if you have kids, or get disability for example. That's one of the major things we're trying to build locally, but we need unions to come on board to start fighting for this as well.

Emmett's point about the teacher strikes is really illustrative of how you can have even a smallish union bring your community as a whole into the struggle. That is something to Brian's point about how union density is really low. Union density in France is also low, but what happens is the rank-and-file network pushes the unions into these fights and brings the community in too. That is a model of how we should think about building something in the U.S.

**Cat Hollis:** I need to make sure that I say this. BLACK LIVES MATTER. Part of the reason why union density is dropping is because the white population is dropping. More and more brown people exist and less and less white people exist. Men are no longer in positions of power and union systems have been designed to uphold the systems of patriarchy and of racism and have held up a difference between white and Black workers, since the

1920's: a lot of these things have been designed to hold back the communities which are now the strongest as far as labor organizing goes. So, now is the moment to recognize that it is our responsibility to make space for those people to come in. It's not their responsibility to come in to somebody who's never protected them. Because as undocumented workers, as sex workers, as people of color, as queer people we have been systemically disenfranchised from these systems. We have very little trust for them and they have not shown up for us. So, when we go to these communities and we ask why they aren't more prolific in this organizing work, it's because it's never been there for us.

For those communities, showing up and putting that extra labor in is not only daunting, but more dangerous. I think that that's really important to recognize, AND to look for marginalized voices to uplift. I'm really happy to be here so that people can hear these sorts of things and that we can address the issues that are facing more and more people because those communities are people of color and they are queer communities. BLACK LIVES MATTER.

**Patricia Vazquez Gomez:** Yes, as much as I should assume that I'm a precarious worker, I am fully aware that my precarity depends on the exploitation of other bodies. So, that's one thing that I am always considering - how much will organizing with my peers increase and deepen those systems of exploitation? I personally want to make sure that lifting myself up is not going to push people that are already at the bottom down even further. For me, it's really important to go to the bottom and start there. Because otherwise, we just perpetuate the systems of exploitation that have been going on for too long.

**Hannah Gioia:** A little bit of what I've found hard to get into this conversation is that there are premises operating that every worker could have space and agency to participate in these ideas that we're discussing. That is so false. Often when a worker tells me, "I don't think the union's going to help me," I think that they are smart and have made an analysis that they have not been given evidence that the union is going to help them. When we started this conversation someone used the phrase "dismantle the house," and I think we could ask the question "How do we dismantle the house of capitalism?" but we also need to dismantle the house of organized labor, in such a way that I think Cat's completely right. There are so many people I would not actually be interested in organizing with me because of how they understand what I'm able to do.

A reason I'm skeptical of legislation is that it's deeply inaccessible, even though it can help a lot of people in really concrete ways. It's premised on the idea of democracy - that at the referendum everyone gets to vote, as if money is not, in fact, the biggest vote in play. That's deeply disempowering. I think the future of work is way more localized. I love hearing what's going on in other cities, and if there are ideas for cross country solidarity, incredible, but it's maybe putting the cart before the horse to think big on how to have global or national solidarity. I'm still working actively on being able to have solidarity with certain white men in my shop.

**Susan Cuffaro:** I think convening coalitions from all parts of the working community beset by precarity is really an important goal, and it's been neglected for far too long, but it may be at this point that we need to exchange ideas and support each other and have that solidarity, but we need to continue with the original mission that each of us took on, which was grassroots organizing, and working toward that coalition building. Take energy and solace from the fact that there are all these people out there who are standing behind us. Maybe we're not coalescing to work together right now, but that could be a wonderful goal to have.

The good news is, there's a number of instances that we've discussed and seen where grassroots organizers have in fact made a significant difference, and I think that has to stay an important focus because I don't know that we have the resources to combat it at the legislative level. Maybe we need to continue to focus on making changes within our communities and by changing our communities, we work on changing the world, instead of trying to change the world at this point.

**Cat Hollis:** Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I think that is true, and that when we start from the bottom, it really does expand a lot more quickly.

**Ariana Jacob:** Thank you, everybody. I wanted to bring in some questions from the broader group of people here. We have a question from Heidi Carrico, "How do we continue to organize when there are so many workers without access to the internet and Zoom right now?" How do we keep that personal relationship, while we're not actually able to be with each other?

**Anna Neighbor:** As an organizer, when we're trying to unionize a workplace the person to person connection is everything. It's a connection that the boss typically doesn't have. So, being able to meet after their shift, on their lunch break, person to person, that has, historically, been everything. The boss can never beat that. But during the pandemic we've had to switch to organizing fully through Zoom, and that's a totally different model, which I think would be helpful to talk about.

**Brian Dolber:** That's been a consistent problem with organizing Uber drivers; the only real physical space where drivers interact is in airport parking lots. RDU grew into a formidable organization using an app where we could have organizing conversations. We ran Facebook ads for the app, and Facebook knows who drivers are because the Facebook app is on your phone and the Uber app is on your phone. Using surveillance capitalism against itself - the master's tools, right?

We were able to really build the organization that way. So when the pandemic hit, in some ways it's actually been a boon for us. It was really hard for people to get to meetings in

downtown L.A. Now, people can be wherever and still join those conversations. We've definitely seen benefits to using these technologies, but it's important to remember that the technology doesn't do the organizing, the people do the organizing. You still need to find a way to build that relationship.

**Sean Cumming:** What the Unemployed Workers' Council is doing is old school - flyer-ing and setting up tables in working class communities. We're going to shopping centers and supermarkets trying to have conversations with people. It's just as Anna said, you actually have to talk to people, one on one. So, that's what we're doing, and will continue to do.

**Ariana Jacob:** There's another question from Shelby Loomis, "Do you think that job scarcity is a tactic to create fear in the working class?"

**Brian Dolber:** Yes, absolutely. The gig economy was first imagined in the wake of the 2008 crash. Businesses saw a large reserve of labor and they said, "How can we exploit this?" It was sold to us as the "sharing economy," as a way for us all to not have to have real jobs or to explore creative endeavors. I think people now are wise to how that was a lie. That's why we're fighting against it.

**Sean Cumming:** Yes, unemployment is of course used as a method of driving these conditions, with businesses trying to use unemployed people to scab and undermine the conditions of employed people. It's hardwired in the system of capitalism to have a large pool of unemployment to pull from, which only grows in periods of economic crisis. Unemployment is used as a threat and a tool to stop people organizing. Unemployment is necessary for capital to keep going. They don't really want everybody to have a job. And if you do have a job, we're discussing how it's part time, or underpaid. So that is an actual mechanism of control, yes.

**Lise Soskolne:** To answer the question of what we want to see for the future of work, everybody was talking about UBI as soon as the pandemic hit, which makes complete sense. It makes sense particularly for artists, with this idea of a symbolic fee. But I was thinking that what artists really need - and I don't believe in UBI for artists unless everyone gets UBI - is the idea of part time work for full time pay, because artists need this paid time to be unproductive, or productive, however you want to look at it. And that would be great for everybody. I know it's highly unrealistic, but I think it sounds really good.

**Ariana Jacob:** Yeah, it sounds great.

**Lise Soskolne:** Full time pay for part time work.

**Hannah Gioia:** A slightly hotter take is that the future of work is no work.

**Emmett Schlenz:** Who wants to work? I don't want to work.

**Cat Hollis:** One more thing. Please, if you can, increase accessibility through captions and American Sign Language. Including those marginalized communities is a good first step to take.

**Ariana Jacob:** I really appreciate that. It also speaks to the idea that if we're organizing around precarious work, we need to be starting with the people. We need to be considering the relationship between the people who are the most vulnerable and where we are in this work. And we need to be doing work that transforms the existing labor institutions into being more racially just and inclusive institutions. I also appreciate the sentiment that there's this potential in us working together, and there's also potential in us working really intently in our own relationships and places, but still being in conversation with each other around this.

I just want to say thank you so deeply for being here. There's so much more I want to talk about.

**Jea Alford:** Yes, I want to reiterate our gratitude for you all being here with us and sharing your experiences, knowledge, and perspectives on all of these things. Thank you so much.

## References

For a full transcript of this conversation, and list of participants' recommended readings and resources about precarity and labor, visit [bit.ly/ppptranscript](http://bit.ly/ppptranscript)

### CONVERSATION PARTICIPANTS

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Lise Soskolne, W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)

### CONVERSATION ORGANIZERS

Precarious Peoples' Party (PPP) connects members of the contingent economy to envision and advocate for economic and political futures where we can all live and love powerfully. PPP hosts conversations and events to explore contingent worker solidarity, experiments with ways to actualize the potential freedom of underemployment, and charts possible paths towards a future of work that cares for our precarity and/or a post-work world. Precarious People's Party was initiated in 2020 by artists and adjunct union organizers, Jea Alford & Ariana Jacob.

For more information on the Precarious Peoples Party project visit [bit.ly/pppproject](http://bit.ly/pppproject)

## Biographies

Jea Alford is an interdisciplinary artist playing with themes of class, labor, the role of aesthetics in economy, and the role of economy in the artist's studio. Growing up in a trailer park in suburban Oregon, she developed a critical eye toward what our economic system values, and she is interested in how art can work to not only subvert, but regrow the existing structures of economy. She creates ephemeral and poetic performative work, objects, and media, co-runs a sustainably-minded clothing cooperative, and has stewarded projects, such as an artist residency run out of her home, that are based in generosity. She is an adjunct instructor in both the Theater and Studio Art departments at Portland State University. Jea is a Fulbright recipient, winner of the Arlene Schnitzer Visual Arts Prize, and recipient of grants from OAC and RACC to support participation in residencies and exhibitions domestically and internationally.

Ariana Jacob makes artwork that uses conversation to explore political and personal interdependence and disconnection. Prior to working as an artist and academic Ariana managed a farmers market, worked in a cabinet shop, co-ran a secret cafe out of her apartment, and fished for salmon commercially. While being an artist and academic Ariana also does union organizing and group facilitation, alongside being a partner, friend, family member and wonderer. Ariana currently teaches in the Social Practice MFA Program at Portland State University and is the Chair of Bargaining for PSUFA Adjunct Faculty Union. Her work has been included in the NW Biennial at the Tacoma Art Museum, Disjecta's Portland 2012 Biennial, the Open Engagement Conference, the Discourse and Discord Symposium at the Walker Art Center. She has exhibited work and organized events at apexart and Smack Mellon in New York City, Betonsalon in Paris, France, Broken City Lab in Windsor, ON, Canada, PICA's TBA Festival, The Portland Art Museum, The Department of Safety in Anacortes, WA, Southern Exposure in San Francisco, CA; and in many public places.



# Making After Melancholia

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A Conversation with  
Garick Imatani,  
Lynn Yarne, and Lu Yim

This public conversation was held on April 18, 2021 in conjunction with Garrick Imatani's CFAR exhibition, *monologue*. The artists discussed the nuanced ways in which their identity figures into their work—looking at compounded layers of representation, cultural expectation vs. lived experience, and the futurist contexts in which their work as Asian American makers might be seen in the midst of increased national violence. The following excerpts have been edited for clarity, length and readability.

**Garrick Imatani:** I struggle to define what making for myself means and distinguishing that from making for an audience, which in nearly all instances approaches the work from a position that makes my narrative non-dominant.

So, over a century ago now, W.E.B. Du Bois talked about this as a double consciousness: where I have this self-consciousness of an interior world or how I might appear to my family, loved ones, or those within my community who I really trust, and then a consciousness that responds to a constructed version of myself or how I might be viewed within white culture.

And I love how Toni Morrison responds to this dilemma. Often times, she actually speaks directly to Du Bois and describes how she liberates herself from the white male gaze in her writing, or tries to not let this be an entry point to the work. And so I'm wondering of Lu and Lynn, how do you deal with this dilemma in your own work? Or do you feel similar to Morrison, that you're able to liberate yourself and make work that doesn't account for that gaze?

**Lynn Yarne:** When I first started making the series of work that I'm making, it was supposed to be installed in the Chinatown Museum in Portland, which is in Old Town (a historical center for the Asian community). When I was thinking about who would be coming there, I wasn't making it for myself, but I thought, "Oh, I'm going to make these works for this historical community and people who are going to understand this history." But, I didn't think that when I started showing the work in other spaces; it just comes across as dignity porn. I don't think other people really understand or see it in the same way. So when I'm making things for new spaces without those shared histories, I do hold that anxiety a lot. I really struggle with how people are going to see it in different spaces outside of that trusted community.

**Lu Yim:** That anxiety I have experienced as well. It's making me think how when we make work and show it, how that place and how we are in that place to ourselves is vulnerable to that gaze. Perhaps that is creating that anxiety. And that's not something that we can control. There were times when I've made work, where I have really considered what that gaze is.

I was just talking to Taka Yamamoto, who shared with me this writing he had done when I made a project, *Light Noise*, in 2013. That whole piece was about the gaze. And, at that time, I had been trying to figure out how to navigate that, as if I had some kind of control over tricking what the viewer and how the viewer was going to perceive me and the other people who were in the work. I'll just leave that there. That double consciousness is there, and I think the relationship to it is one that I feel we could probably unpack a little bit more.

Garrick, with the work that you just created, how was it managing that for yourself in making it? And did you decide how you were going to position yourself? Did you make active decisions about navigating that?

**Garrick Imatani:** Navigating this idea of the double consciousness or how I might be perceived?

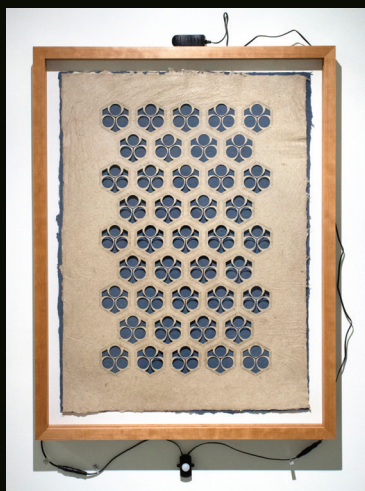
**Lu Yim:** Yeah... How you might be perceived.

**Garrick Imatani:** Yeah, for sure... I think in a way, this talk becomes an opportunity to ask the questions that I'm wrestling with myself and that I was certainly thinking through with this exhibition. I think making this work was in a way my attempt to try to liberate myself. Can I reach that point, as Morrison alludes to, of just escaping that gaze? What would I need to do? Perhaps make a body of work that specifically speaks to that experience.

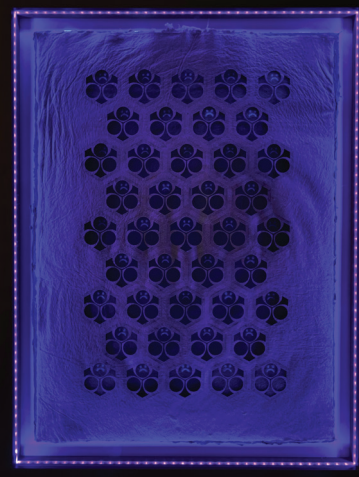
So, for those who haven't seen the show, there's a number of works that, for me, embody a kind of aesthetic that one might ascribe to Japanese heritage. You have a shoji screen work, an ikebana related sculpture. And, there's a handmade paper piece that has my mother's family mon or crest (Takahashi) used repeatedly as a symbol in it. When you walk up to this piece, a motion sensor triggers blacklight LEDs that show these frowny face emoticons inside the mons. So, somebody else's presence trips an alternative read of the work, where maybe at first it performed a cultural heritage aesthetic.

That's why I've also been so interested in your work, Lynn. I think in some pieces, there is an earnestness to connect with those aesthetics, to those cultural practices, to those iconographies. But, there may not be the language to talk about that desire outside of that framework. In other words, if I make work that uses those visual sources, is it immediately cultural heritage work? What is the actual critical vocabulary around the work? And how is it received? How has that been received within the context of contemporary art? I'm not convinced that the critical framework and how we receive it has necessarily caught up to the evolution of multi-generational Asian-Am artists making work in this way.

**Lu Yim:** I'm having so many emotions because there's this sense as if we're supposed to join something. I don't know, just hearing you say, "multiple generations of Asian-Am



asians in the club  
Handmade Paper, Motion Sensor, Blacklight LEDs, Invisible Ink



artists.” That there isn’t a canon and there isn’t the critical discourse, or there isn’t the known histories that we refer to when we are looking at work, or looking at this kind of work within the Institution of Art. So, there’s this implied sense that we’re joining in on something. I don’t know. I just want to state that. I think that it’s an important thing for people to hear and understand that this is a true feeling. And, when making something for a gallery or making something for a museum, what do those spaces mean? What exactly are we agreeing to? Not to put that back on us, but what is that sense of joining? And is that something that we are conscious of when we’re moving through the world? I think it is something that we’re really conscious of, and I wish that was different.

**Lynn Yarne:** I think when I heard the title (of the book) *Racial Melancholia*, I was like, “Oh, finally a psychoanalytic book about why Asian people are sad.” And I thought, “I’m going to read this book because I need that.” But then, I’m like, “I don’t need these books.” It’s one of the only psychoanalytic texts about how we experienced race, but I feel like we have different modes of expression and everyone (here) is doing different things. I think all these activities can become my group canons.

**Garrick Imatani:** Mm-hmm (affirmative)...

Well, to refer back to what Lu mentioned earlier, and in the lead up conversation we had

before this event, they mentioned not being a decolonized English speaker, which involves using the words: inclusion, being included, or participating. I think a number of artists of color have had that dilemma too in terms of not wanting to be a (racial) representative, but the sparse history is such that, we might be able to articulate ourselves within a particular framework that then allows us to join a different kind of conversation. Because, if you are working with community, or you’re working with groups that haven’t been trained that way, aren’t using that specialized language, don’t have that “theory,” then they’re not always included in those same conversations. This doesn’t mean there’s no legitimacy to an academic or intellectual, professionalized field of art. But, at the same time, you really do have to go through that training or go through that exposure in order to participate in that conversation.

**Garrick Imatani:** So, I did want to ask and talk a little bit about humor, and how oftentimes artists, comedians, and others use it as a way to process things. In the case of the exhibition, there’s this humorous video that I made that in many ways is very tragic. In it, a mutual friend was kind enough to participate in the video, but really hated saying the lines and had a lot of problems with them in terms of the ideas they constituted, such as a negation of self. They really struggled to be a part of that (depiction).

So I’m curious about humor, Lynn, and whether or not that enters your work? Or, how you think about humor, and some of the ways that may play into earlier conversations we’ve had around processing race and representation.

**Lynn Yarne:** For my work, I don’t know that humor is as big of an element as levity. I’ve been making collages recently and I really like that they’re flat. I want them to be 10 to 30 second GIFs, something a little bit flimsy, but super meaningful to me. That’s funny. For me, I’m wondering about the surface level of how I’m representing and who I’m representing to; levity is a little bit of an escape route, not super serious and two seconds long.

Garrick, I think your show was really funny. When you said that the ikebana piece is for cats, I thought that was super funny. I was curious, since there are pranks (in the exhibition), if you see humor as a power play or type of power?

**Garrick Imatani:** I’ve said it before that power prefers suffering subjects. And, that’s why I raised this text by David Eng and Shinhee Han, which is about racial melancholia. In it, they talk about identity formation for Asian Americans, and their inability to fully integrate or assimilate into the American Project, which leads to a racial melancholia (for my generation). I love the research, I find it very convincing, and yet, there’s a part about me that just doesn’t want to center an ontology on loss. So I think, in many ways,



So I don't know what that means in terms of my work, other than what I know to be true about having this creative practice that I have, and the community that I have, and relationships that I have, is that there is a sacred space that I believe is important to maintain, for mental health, for connection with other people, and for also the resistance towards a flattening of who I might be. So I hope that those things are contributing in some way in that line of work and practice.

**Garrick Imatani:** I have many thoughts about that, but I want to give some space for Lynn to respond.

**Lynn Yarne:** Maybe I'm still thinking, what are your thoughts on what Lu said?

**Garrick Imatani:** Just "furthering the project of anti-Blackness." We had texted earlier about how heartbreaking it is to see this sensationalized violence, particularly of people of color against other people of color. So that's immediately what I thought about. Were you also referring to the model minority sensibility, in terms of furthering that project?

**Lu Yim:** Yeah.

**Garrick Imatani:** Okay. Which, if others aren't fully aware, that stereotype (of the model minority) in many ways was an intentional way to delegitimize not just the activism taking place amongst very active Asian-Americans in solidarity with other people of color but was used specifically to hold it up as a candle to other racialized groups. "This is the model minority, follow in line and good things will come to you." So those are the two things that I immediately thought about when you were saying that. Is that what you're thinking about when you say that?

**Lu Yim:** Yeah, I'm thinking about that for sure. The model minority is just one example I think of how Asians in this country have been utilized as a step stool. Just historically, if you look at Chinese railroad workers and that history of immigration, exploitation, and perception, and then, just all the war that's happened over our lifetimes. It's not just a myth, right? I mean, there's other myths—that's this surge in violence and being scapegoated at the beginning of the pandemic.

All of these things are already in place. They're already in place so it's easy for them to be recalled or pulled back forward at the expense of our bodies. I think that's what I'm thinking of; thinking about whiteness as a concept, and how these concepts are then used to create some distortion.

**Garrick Imtani:** It definitely seems like it's a model when it's serving the American project, and then when it's not, it's the perpetual enemy or foreigner invading. You see this really deep sense of xenophobia come to the surface, and it's still serving the same project, right?

**Lu Yim:** Yeah, yeah. Lynn, did you want to respond to the initial question? I know that that was a large thing to inject into the room.

**Lynn Yarne:** But a good thing... And I felt really saturated in the feelings about anti-Blackness and being used for that cause. For example, the over representation of Black people attacking Asians versus the actual reported numbers of how many Black people that are attacking Asians are very disproportionate.

I also thought a lot about Indianapolis and the recent mass shooting. I didn't know that it was an Asian mass shooting, that it was Sikh people. It wasn't an East Asian mass shooting, and I'm not hearing about it as much, or it's not really on my feeds. It's not anti-Blackness, but it feels bad. I have thoughts on Asian America that are exciting, but in relating to loss and gains, I do feel really saturated in loss.



How to Imatani  
Video on Computer Console Within  
Physical and Virtual Gallery





## Reference

David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Disassociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

## Biographies

Garrick Imatani is an artist who uses performance, functional objects, or interaction to bring people into their own body and subject. Working in sculpture, photography, video and installation, recent projects focus on reimagining racialized historical erasures into more believable and inspired futures. Past works have included collaborating with illegally-surveilled activists to readjust city archives, re-enacting labor on the transcontinental railroad, and working with members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde to replicate their sacred meteorite held in the American Museum of Natural History.

Lynn Yarne is an artist and educator from Portland, Oregon. She works within animation and collage to address collective memory, generational narratives, histories and space. A fourth generation Chinese and Japanese American, her current work explores themes of displacement and loss, resilience and community, particularly within Old Town Portland. She is curious about participatory works, magic, and rejuvenation.

Lu Yim is a movement based artist and teacher. Yim is a co-organizer of Physical Education (PE) and Pidzn Club, two artist-for-artist run groups based in Portland, OR. Currently they are an Artist-in-Residence at Center for Performance Research (Brooklyn, NY).

# We're Out of Control

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garima thakur and Sharita Towne



Please visit <https://timcombs.github.io/woc/> in order to

Proceed



Bret Lehne

Mar 8 •

The most common national celebration on Earth is actually a holiday shared by 65 different countries, on different days in each country, on an annual basis averaging out to being celebrated somewhere on the planet once every six days:

Independence from the British.

● LOL ● SMH

Website design and concept: *Sharita Towne and garima thakur*  
Web developer : *Tim Combs*  
Poem excerpts: *I am New York City and Artists On The Cutting Edge, Jayne Cortez*  
Song excerpts: *We're out of control, Jayne Cortez*

**Hot Sauce Bottle Label design:** *Sharita Towne and garima thakur*

**Printed at:** *Sticker Ninja*

**Photograph:** *Mario Galluci*



## ***Notes, questions, thoughts and conversations***

***~ garima thakur***

1. From the book *Race after technology* Ruha Benjamin writes “In a beautiful essay titled “Skin feeling,” literary scholar Sofia Samatar reminds us: The invisibility of a person is also visibility of a race... to be constantly exposed as something you are not.”...Whether we are talking about the widespread surveillance systems built into urban landscapes or the green light sitting above your laptop screen, detection and recognition are easily conflate when the default settings are distorted by racist logics.”

2. In July of 2019 I was traveling back from Delhi, India, landing into Seattle. It was the very first time I was not asked to stand in the line of USCIS immigration visa entry, as I had received my Green Card in October 2018. It was the first time I did not have to fill up a form on the USCIS website (that’s another story for another day). I was directed to an area containing 5 rows (4 machines per row) of biometric machines twice my size. The machine collected my fingerprints, took my photo, scanned my passport and my green card. It printed a receipt with my photograph and alien number to present at the next counter for further identification. After standing in line and presenting my receipt I got stamped! and was directed to get my luggage to get one more stamp from the officer sitting at the counter for customs. As soon as I left the line after receiving all the necessary receipts and stamps from the customs officer, I took myself in the corner. Without any control over my own system I started to cry, weep and bawl. I actually could not believe it. I couldn’t first recognise if I was crying because the process was so much easier or faster than I could have ever imagined or because it was the first time in 14 years I felt the knot of pain in my stomach ease up. Even though in the back of my mind I was aware of course it is a false easy, it is a mirage. I

called him up still in shock and of course started to cry out of relief on the phone in the not so hidden corner of a federal building. I still don’t believe it. It took 14 years of invisible yet felt fear and stress to soften its grip over my body. I didn’t even know it was sedimenting in my body. I started to return to a state of current reality and my body was putting away the real yet imaginary sacks of stones, 30 kgs each sitting on my shoulders. It literally felt like a weight lifted. I felt angry, disillusioned, privileged, in rage, sad, confused, joyous, sweaty, viscous, unclear, at the violence, absurdity, and the creation of the systems of forced and voluntary migration laws built by people currently in power. These (spatial, migratory, technological, geographical, racialised ) systems of power circulate through my body, screen, mind, past and present generations, epigenetics, universe, blood, sweat, time and my everyday life. My visibility in these systems provides me access for “easier” movement to the United States. I ask who is afforded the agency of invisibility? My movement and sense of possibility can easily be interrupted and rejected by the person sitting on the other side of the counter/screen at the USCIS office? Does the recognition of your identity mean you have more agency or freedom? Oh! personally, of course, I don’t think so. For people who are not afforded the anaconda of immigration paperwork, invisibility has a huge cost. When I look around, of course the structures of whiteness keep the anaconda hidden yet known, vaulted under the marble and concrete floors of the institutions we walk onto. Similar to immigration networks of power and gatekeeping, the networks of power are weaved and circulated into everything we do, feel or experience. These networks of power operate and run our daily lives at its core from the food we eat to the person we love.

3. Within the oppressive, individualistic, white, capitalist and repressive structures of power how can we decenter whiteness?, collectivise, see, utilise, and muster the power of solidarity to feel

held, cared for, loved and nourished with/by each other? What is our personal responsibility towards each other?

4. What has the ongoing pandemic ( 2020 - present) taught us about power and mass death? How do we hold space for ourselves and others in mourning, collective loss, grief, personal loss, the utter chaos of injustice and poverty? How do we annihilate systems of power that place us against each other, in which I feel feelings of helplessness and powerlessness at most moments, in which I feel small or in competition with each other? When injustice lies at the heart of power, how do we together destroy and rebuild a system that does not harm one another?

5. When your imagination is policed by the people in power within a country that is stuck in a state of colonial hangover while aspiring whiteness and englishness, yet crushed and depleted due to the impacts of British Imperialism with no end in sight, how do you find power of collective joy and humour that transcends and translate the absurdity of current reality to find moments of joy?

6. “The price of wealth, historically, has been blood, annihilation, death and despair. “--Toni Morrison.

7. How can we make room for messy conversations with each other that asks us to acknowledge how we have let each other down (historically, collectively and individually) and listen to the other about what we need to do to support one another?

8. What action is required of us to craft in solidarity? What does it mean to write our collective chronicles and tales ?

9. Wherever we are within “this” system, what can we do at our individual level to make the lives of others around us rooted in care

and respect? If systems are vital to us, how do we build systems keeping the collective wellbeing, dignity, vitality and love for the people it is built for at the very core of it’s being?

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● LOL ● SMH



## Biographies

garima thakur is an interdisciplinary artist born and raised in New Delhi. With an interest in the multitudinous nature of reality, history and narrative, she creates works that address assimilation, alienation, and collectivism. She is currently stationed in Portland, OR, and works as an assistant professor in Graphic Design with a focus of Emerging Creative Technologies at Portland State University.

Sharita Towne is a multidisciplinary artist and educator based in Portland, OR, born and raised on the west coast of the U.S. along Interstate 5—from Salem, OR, to Tacoma, WA and down to Sacramento, CA—a true grandchild of the Great Migration. She is interested in engaging local and global Black geographies, histories, and possibilities.



Photograph: *Mario Galluci*



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