



Fuck the Patriarchy

September 9-November
18, 2017

Artists:

Jibz Cameron, Paul Chan
and Badlands Unlimited,
Gallery Y2K, Angélica
Maria Millán Lozano, Roy
Martinez, Seth Price, Ana
Roldán, Lauren
Satlowski, Cristina Victor,
YERBAMALA COLLECTIVE

<http://www.gas.gallery>
@gasdotgallery

THIS YEAR

It feels like:

Being pummeled, over and over

The thickest quicksand

A rollercoaster

After November 4, 2016, a perceptible weight. It's like there this heaviness, not only pervasive in my little reality but everywhere. In my circle, there are emergency room visits and kidney stones and sick parents and evictions and bike accidents and lost jobs. In my own personal life, the death of numerous friends and acquaintances in the Ghost Ship fire, the death of my stepfather, a shattered kneecap, a surgery, a break up, and a bad car crash that I'm lucky to have walked away from alive. Simultaneous to all of this, there's a constant palatable fear, anger and worry about the stability of our country and the fool and his party in charge. Daily New York Times alerts that everything is not ok.

This exhibition was organized amidst this tumult. With everything under attack – from immigrant rights to environmental protection to racial justice – the phrase “Fuck the Patriarchy” functions as a banner encompassing the ills we're up against. The works in the show reveal the complicated political and social tapestry of this moment – from the challenge of messaging within a minefield of manipulated affect, such as Paul Chan and Badlands Unlimited's poster *New No's*, to the empowered adornment of Gallery Y2K's gender neutral clothing. I wanted to create a space that applauds resistance in various forms, while airing the overwhelming sense of rage, misery and shock.

Through all of this, I've been thinking a lot about hope. As we settle into the long nightmare of a Trump presidency, its sheer brutality and recklessness, I believe there remains a possibility of hope despite setback and horror. But as

Rebecca Solnit so eloquently argues in *Hope in the Dark*, this hope is not equivalent to the idea that everything will ultimately be fine or realize assured victory, but rather a hope comfortable with the inevitability of failure, and an unknown future. For her, change is circuitous and process-oriented, and action uneven and random in its influence.

Solnit's understanding of historical shifts recalls Theodor Adorno's concept of the non-identical in its embrace of irregularity and dissonance. As the dialectical churn of enlightenment requires that nothing be "allowed to remain outside" the non-identical exceeds the concept, an alterity that is persistently ambiguous, unfamiliar. Negation, as Adorno used it and as I have employed it in this exhibition, is not simply saying "no" or being negative in the standard sense, but rather a critical stance that counters alienation through a genuine thinking and feeling with the world, in all of its difficulty. The project becomes one of listening for these disturbances, or as Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, we act like "the child at the piano searching for a chord never previously heard. This chord, however, was always there; the possible combinations are limited and actually everything that can be played on it is implicitly given in the keyboard."

I believe that this type of compassionate listening and learning described by Adorno is already modeled in pockets of American society, and like the chords on the piano, we will see them play out in forthcoming years as we navigate the violence and incompetence of this administration. I've already witnessed it. In each instance, one is reminded that refusal is continuous, persistent. Behaviors build up over time. When crises hit, major or minor, this knowledge snaps into place. And meanwhile, we can create the world we want to see in the present.

Ceci Moss
October 2017



Joseph R. Winters is an assistant professor of Religious Studies and African and African American Studies at Duke University. A literary and religious scholar, his first book *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016) draws on Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno to problematize narratives of racial progress through critical readings of authors such as Toni Morrison, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and others. Throughout, Winters presents a more complex understanding of hope. This interview was conducted over the phone on October 5, 2017.

I want to begin the conversation by having you describe the term "melancholic hope," which is an idea central to your book *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*.

I started with Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholy. He makes it seem like mourning is a healthy form of responding to loss, whereas melancholy is more pathological, but as you see throughout a lot of Freud's distinctions the dichotomy breaks down as the text moves on.

I got really interested in the ways in which certain authors like Judith Butler, Anne Cheng, David Eng and David Kazanjian were using the language of mourning or melancholy to think beyond the individual response to loss. They were thinking about political traumas, ongoing forms of trauma, violence – some more subtle, some not-so-subtle. For example, Butler was thinking about melancholy to talk about the ways in which our attachments are made possible by certain kinds of disavowals and forecloses. In my work, I'm fascinated by how melancholy gets used as a trope to think about race, gender, class, and citizenship. It became a way for me to organize my interest in black studies and critical theory, American literature and critical theory. For

me, melancholy is both an attitude, it's a mode of an attunement, it's a kind of way of being in the world. It's not necessarily pessimism. Sometimes it's on the verge of that.

It's a kind of openness to the forms of violence that are often denied in order for a coherent picture of the world to be operative. For narratives of progress, of freedom, of optimism, I'm asking what has to be denied, what has to be disavowed in order for that picture of the world to hold sway. I'm thinking about the kinds of possibilities that are opened up through melancholy, through a kind of attachment and attunement to the forms of loss that usually get disavowed in our narratives of progress.

One of the continuing themes of the book is the subject of pain and trauma, particularly within literature and the African American experience, and how it becomes negotiated in the present. In chapter two you discuss the trope of "the cut" in jazz, and its literary equivalences. Can you talk about that cut being both a wound and an opening that allows more compassion and connection towards others?

In addition to Toni Morrison's work, I'm really indebted to Fred Moten and his text *In the Break* as well as the work of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa. Particularly in Morrison's text *Jazz*, the cut and the break are practices associated with jazz. Cutting is a kind of competition between jazz players, usually you play the same instrument, and the break is when a soloist departs from the broader ensemble. The spotlight is on him or her.

Morrison takes those practices and makes them into an organizing trope within the novel. Whether the cut is thinking about certain forms of dismemberment, real and figurative, breaks in the community, she is also thinking about lynching, the violence in the North, black bodies migrating from the South to the North and the kind of violence that caused certain people to carry a knife. She's thinking about real cuts and breaks, but like you said,

there's a way in which that opening, that sense of a cut or break, is both an enduring sense of pain or a wounding injury, but also, potentially, a kind of opening or intimacy with the other. You can't leave her meaning of jazz and her novels without a sense of a lingering trauma that is never going to be fully resolved. But also through aesthetic, musical-related practices, people have found ways to re-articulate that pain and suffering.

You find moments of ecstasy, intimacy, and I would say, even joy. For me, what I liked about the cut and the break is that tension, and you see this in a lot of jazz, in terms of being "out to lunch" or a sense of movement, what Fred Moten would call "fugitivity." You also find the cut and break in hip-hop. With the wound, and the possibility of the wound opening up something, one doesn't resolve the other. It's not as if the opening now becomes an instance to say, okay, we can forget about the wound. It's actually both moments, that tension, that interplay that for me, that's crucial to getting beyond notions of progress that are always about overcoming, always about redeeming, and always about fixing. And that's where I think the notion of the cut keeps a certain kind of tension. That's what I was thinking.

The encounter you're describing also goes back to Adorno's idea of the non-identical. In your book, you follow Adorno's argument that we should use one's attention to the present to allow for the full range of human experience, including the disturbing and uncomfortable. I've been thinking about how your and Adorno's argument for an attuned present might square with the accelerated affect of our current technological milieu (for example, click bait journalism) and its placement within the constant shock and awe of Trump's administration, which has seemed like a never ending crisis since the inauguration, from the immediate implementation of the Muslim Ban, to multiple attempts to repeal the ACA, to the disastrous response to the humanitarian crisis in Puerto Rico...the list goes on. How do we

respond to this present? How do we create constructive narratives around these events?

This is what I'm thinking a lot about now. For me, I always want to be careful of the language of crisis. I worry sometimes about the way in which the language of emergency or crisis can deflect attention away from the kinds of ongoing crisis that are already under way. Yes, there's something new about the language Trump is using on social media and Twitter, and the way in which he says things in an unfiltered way. He lacks traditional political savvy. Certainly the practice is a strategy.

I have to hold some kind of balance between on one hand, acknowledging wow something really critical is happening right now, but at the same time, to acknowledge that these expressions are kind of manifestations of conditions that have already been in place.

We need to construct more narratives that inflect or are inflected by the negative. Narratives that are complicated, tension-filled, antagonistic, that acknowledge vulnerability, that acknowledge the ways in which we can be complicit.

But I am worried about the ways in which certain kinds of narratives end up reproducing the idea of American exceptionalism - a fantasy of America that I see as part of the problem. A certain idea of America that disavows the ways in which some of these strategies are actually very much a part of our history and our practices and our dispositions.

I actually wanted to bring that up, especially in relation to your reading of Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* in Chapter 5 of the book. You discuss how the triumphant tenor of the American dream and American exceptionalism expressed within Obama's rhetoric forecloses and shields the violence of the construction of American identity. In contrast, Trump's view of America is deeply pessimistic. He uses that as a tool to

rouse fear, among other things. Further, the actions of his administration have made that violence exceptionally clear, the Muslim Ban being one example among many. I'm curious to hear your thoughts about how you foresee the lofty narrative of the American dream playing out over the next four years under the Trump's administration?

I've been thinking a lot about the discourse around pessimism. One of the things that people keep saying is, "At least Obama sounded hopeful and optimistic. Trump is giving us gloom and doom."

I would say, yes and no. On one hand, at least during his presidential campaign, you had a candidate who would say, "Yes, things are messed up. We're failing, we're declining." But then he would always be like, "I can fix it." That moment is crucial because it's not like he leaves us alone in a moment of pessimism. It's like, I'm going to show you we are in such a dark place, but follow me and I can actually get you out of that position.

Even in these moments of doom and gloom, even in these moments where he seems to be articulating a kind of pessimism, there's always a way in which he brings back some familiar narrative around America, around himself. But I also think that precisely because he's not really filtered, he doesn't seem to mediate or constrain his speech that those kinds of contradictions unwittingly just come to the foreground. He performs them in a way that is hard for him to act nice and contained, and that is kind of interesting. It's almost like whatever he's trying to contain around the idea of American exceptionalism, progress, etc., it tends to break down precisely because so many contradictions run through his rhetoric. If that makes any sense.

I think that makes a lot of sense. In the past, presidents tried to smooth over that, whereas he kind of revels in that. It's a device too, it's like he's

weaponizing that confusion.

Right, exactly.

This hinges on one thing I wanted to talk to you about too, and it's something you bring up in your book, going back to the idea of the cut. I've been spending a lot of time with Judith Butler's writing about precarity these past few months, particularly her suggestion that precarity is a shared condition under neoliberalism, and one thing that the left can do to move forward is to create an understanding of how precarity crisscrosses and intersects across different communities and identities. How does your concept of the cut play into this understanding? And what kind of collectivity – or collective consciousness – do you envision? One that's problematized and not cohesive, but still allows space for a complicated understanding of the past and the present?

I'm interested in how precarity creates this universal human condition, inflected and informed by certain kinds of power relationships. On one hand, yes, we're all mortal, we're all contingent. But certain kinds of bodies are made vulnerable differentially, to not only to physical death, but social death, so it's almost as if the fantasy of defeating death or escaping death, certain kinds of bodies have access to that fantasy in ways that others don't. Butler's book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* was actually very crucial for me while I was writing my dissertation on Adorno and Toni Morrison. It was that book that made me be like, oh yeah, this is how I can powerfully articulate the ethics of precarity, vulnerability, and melancholy.

I'm constantly worried about how people distance themselves or separate themselves, even in their imagination, from other kinds of bodies that are seen as signifiers of death and violence. Often, Americans associate violence elsewhere, so the problem comes from elsewhere. Here's a perfect example. I saw a tweet in response to the

terrible mass shooting in Las Vegas where a soldier said, "I'm a soldier in Iraq and those kind of guns don't belong in the United States." And someone else tweeted, saying, "Well, they don't belong in Iraq, either."

I want to be careful. For me, what's so important in those moments where a cut happens is that we see some narrative become undone. But that narrative can just reappear in a different way. Even in an instance of shared vulnerability in a pessimistic world, we still somehow get attached to some idea of America as being outside of, or exceptional within all that.

Butler also acknowledges the ways in which that moment of shared vulnerability often shows up in one's fantasy of being triumphant, of being separate from, or somehow being buffered from, the violence that we all participate in. And I'm wondering about that moment, maybe that's what you're getting at. The question that you asked, what kinds of narratives, what kind of practices, it's really about the aesthetic. We need to look at spiritual, contemplative, and aesthetic practices, for example, or other kinds of practices that can prevent us from turning the cut into something that sutures our identity in some way. Or that can prevent that moment of vulnerability, for instance by turning it into something that becomes triumphant, and therefore becomes a way to deny our common precarity.