



FEMelanin, Performance Stills from Bedtime Stories of White Supremacy, November 15, 2015 at Mana Contemporary, Chicago

## The Freedom to Oppress

by [Eunsong Kim and Maya Mackrandilal](#)

“The art world is a place that says it wants people to be free.”

—Jerry Saltz

“You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too early. We cannot be free until they are free.”

— [“A Letter to My Nephew”](#) James Baldwin

First, we must name this phenomenon that keeps popping up in our social media feeds: the idea that the lived experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized people pose an existential threat to the foundational values of liberal democracy, freedom, and culture. Let’s call it “Dominant Culture Persecution Complex.” We see it on the Left when Jonathan Chait, writing in *New York Magazine*, laments the return of the [“language police,”](#) who supposedly enforced an anonymous code of proper, non-racist or non-sexist

conduct in the 1980s and '90s before “going into remission.” Now they’re back, and Chait catalogues what he perceives as restrictions on “free speech” from the academe to Twitter and other social media platforms.

In this respect, the Right is in agreement with the Left. On his widely read blog *The Dish*, commentator Andrew Sullivan is equally aghast at the “[extreme identity politics](#)” of responses to Chait’s essay. “Freedom of speech” is repeatedly invoked, even though, for all the deeply problematic metaphorizing of “policing,” marginalized groups are not in structural or state positions of power to enforce censorship. The authors assume that the default white dominant culture’s status quo should enjoy protected status, and the mere expression of other perspectives is an affront to the founding principles of the US Constitution.

Dominant Culture Persecution Complex is not exclusive to the mainstream press and has reached epidemic levels in the art world, where critics continue to treat whiteness as a “neutral” position and imagine themselves above and outside of systemic oppression, rather than implicated in it, while supporting an art world that operates according to the logic of white supremacy.

Art critics may not be the kings of the art world, but their discourse perpetuates foundational assumptions of the neutrality of whiteness. Lines can be traced from art criticism to the art market, the museum establishment, and what becomes disseminated knowledge in art schools.

Our approach is Art Criticism for [Angry Women](#). As ethnographers of whiteness we are fluent in privilege-speak, and inspired by the work of the Zapatistas, we offer our translation services:

In November 2014, Jerry Saltz wrote a post for *New York Magazine*’s *Vulture* blog titled “[When Did the Art World Become So Conservative?](#)” in which he responded to criticisms that writers and artists had faced for their appropriation of the bodies and experiences of historically marginalized people. Saltz’s list includes himself for posting images of a “woman’s thrashed behind” on his Facebook wall and [Joe Scanlan](#)’s [Donelle Woolford project](#), which uses a Black female avatar to perform his fictions regarding Black female identity and has been awarded for this project with tenure and inclusion into the Whitney Biennale in 2014. Saltz also cites Bjarne Melgaard’s update of Alan Jones’ notoriously offensive *Chair* (1969), that allows users to sit on a black woman recumbent in a sexual pose. The list continues, composed exclusively of white men. The through line in these works are the artists’ willingness to debase the representation of women, and particularly treat Black women’s bodies as raw material, empty vessels or objects up for their (white) management.

Saltz’s defense: “This is where the déjà vu comes in. The last time political rules were being enforced in this way was the culture wars of the early 1990s. Language was vigilantly policed; all politics were called into question; art had to be on the right side of the issue [. . .]”

Translation: “Having survived the trauma of the 90s, I find being *called* racist and sexist more harmful than racist and sexist language or representation is to marginalized people. To defend my white liberal honor, I will call you conservative. Conservative for ruining white delight! Conservative in your tastes—never mind that taste—according to the pivotal French Sociologist and Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu—is merely a reflection of class: #intersectionality. Also, I will use the verb ‘police’ metaphorically (erasing the lived experience of its effects), to refer to comments that dispute my opinions rather than the brutality of state control.”

Ken Johnson’s dismissive 2012 *New York Times* [review](#) of *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* at MoMA P.S.1 sparked a petition signed by 1,144 people—including Glenn Ligon, Louise Lawler, and Robert Storr—condemning his “irresponsible generalities.” In response to [David Levi Strauss](#)’ commentary in *Art in America* on the controversy, Johnson, writing in the April 2013 issue of the same publication, responded: “The revolutionaries have become the rulers and bureaucrats.”

Translation: “I fear the pending paradigm shift when I have to consider the perspectives of historically marginalized people. I am blissfully ignorant of the library of studies demonstrating that white supremacy

is alive and well in every field of society, including government and academia. The revolutionaries aren't really in power now, but I'm not into facts. I'm into the way I feel."

Johnson, *ibid.*: "Among elite dealers and collectors, identity-based art is less valued."

Translation: "Even though I said that revolutionaries (such as: disobedient artists of color, all kinds of angry women, white co-conspirators) have become rulers and bureaucrats, I know that capital keeps white supremacy intact."

Johnson, *ibid.*: "As for *Now Dig This!*, the paradox I wanted to address in my review was that of using a genre developed under the aegis of modernism—ostensibly a cosmopolitan ideology of free thought and expression for all—for the art of a particular group's identity-based solidarity."

Translation: "Modernism, which I associate with the art of Empire, is about freedom and expression. As for everyone else, who knows what they care about?"

Johnson: "Black artists like John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy and Melvin Edwards embraced the esthetics of assemblage while *narrowing* its potential meaning and altering its relationship to the potential audience." [Emphases Ours]

Translation: assemblage/pastiche—as offered by white male artists Duchamp, de Kooning, etc exhibit proudly the colonial possibilities of property.

Response: assemblage/pastiche as critical theorist [Grace Hong](#) has written, is "the expression of the material remnants of the processes of colonization." Black artists are not narrowing for the sake of limiting the affective possibilities for the white, non-Black POC audience—but specifying and making explicit what the violence of abstraction has held in that particular context.

Johnson's articulation that assemblage is the white art of the free is actually quite fantastic in cementing this particular tradition of art and the white male artist. He explicitly makes the connection between a particular kind of "assemblage" (apolitical, expressive, modernist) and another kind of Black "assemblage" (political, contextual, only of its racial category). Throughout the critique, Johnson consistently claims that it is the fault of the curators of heavy handedly contextualizing the works of artists such as Purifoy—and not *allowing* it to exist *freely* in the quotidian abstract white space of traditional modern art made by white men—that *tainted* the show. In this rhetorical move, he insists that he—more than any other critic or complainer—wished to see the true value of the work: as free, detached, and in line with other important modernist work. He condemns those who would insert what Hong has called the "messiness" of race, gender, and sexuality into a space that should be *free* of it. He insists on the freedom to be abstract—the freedom to be *clean* and *naïve*.

In [The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin](#) (2011), political theorist and journalist Corey Robin, writes that "conservative" describes the preservation of hierarchy, the unwillingness to give up power. But when Saltz disdainfully says "conservative," he isn't pointing to those who want to protect the status quo. He is among them. Instead he's pointing to voices without mainstream platforms. The screams and protests that urgently demand a contextualization of art in our culture.

Hong's invocation of colonialism points to the real origins of the matter. Saltz's date was wrong. The conflict didn't begin in the 1990s. It began with settler-colonialism, chattel slavery, property, and religion—the authorities that granted freedom to those who possess whiteness. That is the reality behind the myth of America. We could look to the Bill of Rights' 5th Amendment, granting the right to "life, liberty, and property," or when Patrick Henry tellingly wrote: "Perfect freedom is as necessary to the health and vigor of commerce as it is to the health and vigor of citizenship." We see it in the Federalist papers: the Constitution as the guarantee of white property, a unified state as the most effective mechanism for

colonization, freedom as foundational to white solidarity. In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison reminds us that the Enlightenment's conception of freedom produced the possibilities of chattel slavery and colonization. The sociologist Orlando Patterson traces the sources of freedom, "[S]lavery and freedom are intimately connected [...] it is indeed reasonable that those who most denied freedom, as well as those to whom it was most denied, were the very persons most alive to it." Slavery was and is the basis for US Freedoms. Slavery created what we now accept as "[the Modern World](#)."

We see that freedom is dependent to capital, capital parasitic to power, and power predicated on oppression. It is the carrot in one hand and the stick in the other. It is a symbiosis. For centuries, while white men have pursued freedom, evangelized the production of their art, and were funded unevenly by [people of color](#) being subjected to violence, chattel slavery, indentured servitude, poverty, resource theft, and debt.

Freedom to own property. Freedom through capitalism. Freedom as capitalism. The truest expression of freedom is the freedom to hunt, torture, kill, and then to [represent](#) your enemies. Freedom to never read the works of Black feminists. Freedom to never be bothered by anti-Black racism, colonialism, rape culture. Freedom to dominate. Freedom to ask for an explanation of an oppressive past—nonchalantly, in a column, respectfully! Freedom for white dreams.

Art thus far has been implicated and been an active perpetrator of imperial violence. Art as we understand it acts to aestheticize images of imperial glory. Saltz believes art is for the free, because he is free. This antiquated yet foundational understanding of freedom is dependent on the oppression and abjection of others. "Freedom" is a state of exception that exists amid oppression. Art's white cube of freedom depends on the myth that aesthetics are devoid of oppression. The white male critic's acknowledgement that it isn't would entail a responsibility to cede his freedom, which is why requests for him to do so often produce a wounded cry of protest— freedom of speech, i.e. the freedom to "express" is the aestheticization of the myth of freedom. Because before we "move on" to the notion that "art is for the free" we must account for the foundations of US Freedom.

According to pedagogue Paulo Freire, "the oppressors are afraid of losing the 'freedom to oppress.'"

We crossed the borderlands. We sharpened our pencils, packed up our textbooks and carried our backpacks into your schools. We learned your language, your history. We were studious. We listened when you said that we were all created equal. And that's the problem. The problem is that we believed, and still believe, that our bodies matter, that the bodies of our ancestors mattered, and it is from the wreckage of these broken promises that we launch our attacks.

Because unlike you, we do not live in the white cube, safe from context.

We are interlopers. We live in this world, indebted, temporary and made replaceable. For some of us, context is inescapable. Our bodies will not let us leave it behind. For some of us, every street corner is a battlefield, every awkward silence at a party a salvo, every moment of intimacy an act of rebellion.

Toni Morrison insists that "the function of freedom is to free someone else." We join her in asserting that we're not here for a freedom that asks us to turn against our siblings for our own security. The freedom to oppress. The failure of the white imagination. We're here for something that doesn't depend on the subjugation of others, something outside of the symbiosis.

If we trace the etymology of the word "free" we find a root that means "to love: the connection between friends, family and lovers" (in particular, from the Sanskrit *priyah*). We find a link (through German) to *Frige*, an Anglo-Saxon goddess of love, sexuality, and the knowledge of bodies. Instead of freedom based in oppression, we demand our *Friges*: Gayatri Spivak's intimate sabotage, Martha Graham's queer divine dissatisfaction, and James Baldwin's love that unmasks, that is a battle, a quest of daring and growth. The horizon: *Frige*s and the pursuit of radical justice.

Epilogue:

This essay began in 2014!!! (!!!!!)! We saw a pattern in the art world (freedom = oppression) and we wanted to write about it. We were approached by a well-known, well-funded, well-established art world print publication to write for their upcoming issue. We told them what we wanted to write about (freedom = oppression) and offered a second idea (a historical accounting of the term “identity politics” and how it’s been used in art criticism). They expressed interest in both but asked to see the former essay first.

Under the editorial [management](#) of this well-established publication, “Freedom to Oppress” went through a process of at least seven thorough edits, which lasted a year. We were told that 1) the essay needed to be accessible for a wide audience (which meant that our imaginary (white) aunts had to be able to understand our article) 2) that our formal approach (direct address, hashtags, inventing language) was inaccessible to these imaginary white aunties 3) therefore the “form” of our essay needed to be restructured which they believed would not “hinder” the contents, because whiteness believes form and content are separate 4) But the “content” was a problem: the managers of the editor we were working with did not agree with our thesis regarding slavery as foundational to US conceptualizations of aesthetic freedom 5) The managers at the magazine had never heard of intersectionality—so how could imaginary white aunties in the world?

Dear white editors of the world: you are not telling us anything new. We have heard these “critiques” before.

The ironies in their critiques: the artificial separation of “form” in order to negate our “content;” the imagining of a room of white aunties as defining accessibility (P.S. some of our aunts don’t speak English, but the ones who do, do not find intersectionality to be outside of relevant mainstream discourse); the need to approve or correct our thesis while acknowledging a lack of expertise; the demand for more evidence that needed to be revised, “clarified,” reworded, and finally dismissed.

For months, these constantly shifting critiques and edits (explain this more! now delete those explanations!) slowly whittled away at the core of the essay. Word by word, the very politics of our positions were diminished into a vague summary of Saltz & bros., until the final edit, where two solid paragraphs that had survived a year of passive-aggressive micromanaging oversight were removed with little explanation, and we were left with a shell of what the essay had once been. And then we realized that this essay would never be published, that the magazine would never allow it to be published, and this entire process, with a paltry writers fee dangling in front of our faces, had been a predictable exercise in disciplining and gaslighting. And so we did the thing women of color aren’t supposed to do: we walked away.

It’s true that this essay is not for white aunties, or gatekeepers who have never bothered to learn about intersectionality, or editors who believe that form and content can be separate (P.S. [It cannot be](#)). The problem with our essay was not our “form” our “style” our “approach”—the problem with our essay was that what they wanted was diversity window dressing, and we will never comply.

We’re learning how to navigate the politics of inclusion and exclusion—this experience with the white editors at the white publication was a fruitful exercise in learning how to say *No* to white magement. We have said it once, which was good practice for us to hopefully say it again in the future.

In this yearlong experience in which our collaborative writing practice was derailed by the incessantly #basic commentary of white editors, we started wondering: who else is this happening to—and how can we get the first drafts of your pieces?

We want to read the drafts they denied, the drafts before the disciplining, before they tried to make you comply to their “diversity” projects. We want to read and publish your formally despicable, speculatively out there, angry women essays. Adore you without ever having met you, please keep in touch <3

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