

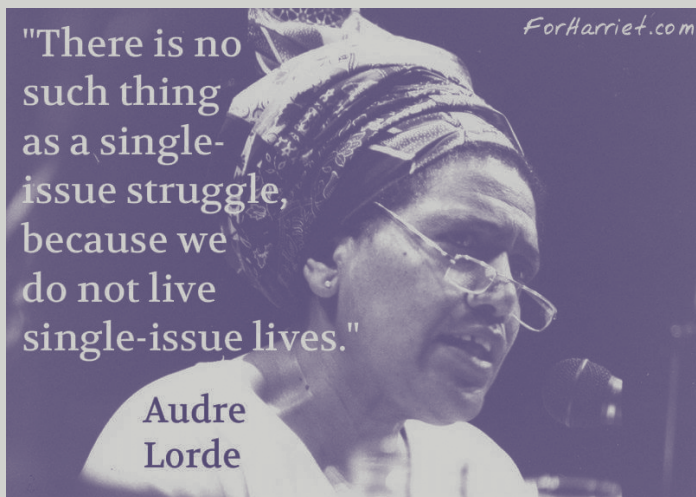
Jack Halberstam

Vertiginous
Capital
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The Master's Toolkit

Crisis upon crisis, we are living in a storm of epic and growing proportions. Every day a new travesty of justice, a new police-authored crime, a new violent executive order is issued on behalf of those who have everything and against the many who are divided and conquered. In this new era, one characterized by a violent, indeed vertiginous, form of capitalism in which all tools levied against the regime are re-appropriated and turned back upon us, it is urgent that we take aim at and demolish the “everything” that Trumpian masters of finance come to take. We must tear down not only the monuments and the fabricated past for which they stand but also the legal, political and social mechanisms that were supposed to provide shelter to the weak but that in the wrong hands become new weapons in the war on everyone. A world of rich elites arrayed against multitudes requires new tactics, new articulations of old problems and a willingness to risk all.

In the spirit of risk, on behalf of demolition and in a world where everyone should be opposed to everything, we would do well to revisit Audre Lorde's famous maxim from 1984 about the master's tools and the master's house and in so doing we should remember her main goal—it was not only to create a debate about which tools to use, *it was to argue for the demolition itself* with purpose and without a chance of reconstruction.

1. The Master's Screwdriver

In the speech in which Audre Lorde originally used the term “the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house” she did so not only to critique patriarchy but also to take aim at what she called “racist feminism.” Pointing to the fact that she was often called to attend feminist conferences as a woman of color and appeared alone among white women who had hired women of color to take care of their kids while they were at the conference, she commented: “For 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 women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.”

This signature phrase from Lorde, who was fond of scolding white feminists (who were fond of being scolded), reminds us that there is never only

one enemy—there is an obvious group of people who benefit from the status quo but then there is an entire support system for that group who ensure that relations of reward and punishment stay firmly in place. From Lorde's vantage point, as a Black lesbian in the fraught middle years of so called second wave feminism, the enemies were certainly white men but they were also the multitudes of white women who supported these men, who cleaned up for them and who actively sustained the racial and capitalist hierarchy from which they benefitted.

Lorde's wise words were never so appropriate as now, an era in which white patriarchy has made a stupefying comeback and at a time when opposition to capitalism and patriarchy, white supremacy and xenophobia all too often uses the wrong tools to fight the power. For example, while we seem to be as invested as 1970s and 1980s feminists were in identifying, exposing and disrupting the quotidian mechanisms of white patriarchy, we still went with a hegemonic strategy of supporting a corporate woman in the last election (Hillary Clinton) to oppose Trump rather than finding a truly radical candidate (hello Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez!). And of course, white patriarchy still relies upon on the support of white heterosexual women who helped to elect our current sexist in chief.

But, as in Lorde's moment, the enemy is not just the abusive male, however powerful and overtly obnoxious he may be; as it was then, the problem is structural and lies within a system that allows the crimes of the white guy to rebound onto others while our hero sits high above the fray in the (Trump) tower he has built for just such occasions. And while the numerous stories of sexual abuse, the deportation of children and financial exploitation pouring into the public sphere should be enough to bring the master's house down, because they continue to use the master's tools of sex negativity, racism, and the doubling down on an unstable and deeply unfair real estate market, the house still stands. The vertiginous turn of the screw here ensures that the more things change, the more the rich stay rich and everyone else gets screwed.

2. The Master's Power Drill

When we spin too fast and gather speed using the master's power drills (the law, systems of punishment, impunity for the rich), we often create

gaping holes in the system, but we often also fall into them! There are many versions of this process in the world around us and so we can name our era one of vertiginous capital—an era in which things move too fast for us to properly identify the systems of oppression that hold us and twist our own strategies of resistance back upon ourselves at the same time. Examples:

We live in an era of big data with supposedly superhuman, literally, powers of prediction and speculation. Massive amounts of data are collected from each of us every day and yet, despite all that, we were unable to predict or prevent the rise of Trump. We could not even predict his electoral win and until the moment that the first few states reported the voting results, media organs like CNN and the NYT showed Trump as having the longest shot ever for President. And yet here we are.

We live in an era when Gender Studies has been institutionalized but only as a place to study the master's house—how it was built, what materials it is made of and what abuses it contains. The site of knowledge production that should be committed to tearing the house down, becomes the safe house for accusations against previous owners; indeed, gender studies is now the house of trigger warnings where the very materials about sexual abuse and violence that we fought for the right to teach just a generation ago can now not be mentioned in case they trigger a concealed site of trauma. As a consequence of using the master's tools, the university's anachronistic division of knowledge holds firm, the disciplines thrive and hog all the resources and instead of seeing male bodied people learning to be feminists in gender studies classrooms, and female bodied people in STEM classes, gender studies remains a site populated by women, science classrooms remain male dominated and the beat goes on.

We live in an era of epic homelessness and we see tent cities springing up in high rent cities around the world. Vast numbers of people in first world countries live on the streets and every day another family fails to pay exorbitant rent for another rubbish apartment and ends up on the streets with no social safety nets to hold them. And so, we speak of a homeless problem when we actually have a *homefulness* problem in which too few people own too many properties and leave them empty or put them up for rent on the gentrified market of temporary luxury housing. Tent cities abound as do zombie buildings of luxury

apartments from New York City to Shanghai, from Vancouver to San Francisco, from London to Sentosa Island in Singapore. All over the world, millions of apartments sit completely empty and millions of people live in the streets. In the 1970s and 1980s punks and anarchists squatted in abandoned buildings giving them new purpose and making space for public sex (the piers), collective life and radical queer politics (the Brixton Fairies). But in the era of home security and CCTV, traditional forms of squatting in buildings is nigh on impossible. And so the squat moves from inside the building to the street. Tent cities are the exact opposite of the master's house. While gentrification and home improvement and the pretense of sharing a la Airbnb deploys the master's tool of real estate speculation, the tents represent new forms of squatting. And as such, they remake the relations between inside and outside, legal and moral, shelter and property.

We live in a world where instead of trying to replace the masters who exploit us, we seek to become them in small and meaningless ways. Take the new electronic “assistants” that people use to embellish the stupor and inertia of their domestic worlds. Hey Google, Alexa, Echo and Siri are electronic switch points between us and our home systems—Hey Google, turn off the lights! Siri—reserve me a table! Echo, change the channel. These devices give us the illusion that we too have personal assistants, better known as servants, and that we can outsource our labor to these helpers. The promise of technology of course was that repetitive labor could be automated and new relations to work and liberation might emerge. But in the era of vertiginous capital, the devices that are supposed to save us—washing machines and vacuum cleaners in the 1950's, electronic assistants today, represent not liberation but new forms of prosthetic power.

Paul Preciado has identified prosthetic power as part of a post-war, post-natural mania for technologies of convenience that tether the body to new forms of rule. While the white, middle-class domestic household has been the primary location of prosthetic rule, queer bodies represent counter-productive opportunities for a new order reimagined around the countersexual. The countersexual in Preciado's narrative of post-natural power is the dildo bearing butch who wields a prosthetic device of his own making against the domestic prosthetics of heteronormativity. And like the Barbie Liberation Organization of the 1990's who switched



out the voice boxes of Ken and Barbie dolls so that they would say things like “Vengeance is mine!” our new electronic devices are in need of a countersexual hack. Once hacked, these prosthetic helpers will have to do much more than turn security systems on and off, they will be programmed to respond to real demands and actual questions: Hey Google—smash the patriarchy! Echo—remove President Trump! Siri—what the fuck is going on? Alexa—pass me a battle axe!

So, let’s recap, using the *master’s power drill*, a tool that spins so fast that the hole it is drilling becomes a vacuum sucking down all opposition, we turn the problem into the solution: big data without predictive powers results in renewed calls for more data to improve accuracy next time; a reckoning with patriarchal sexism and sexual harassment has now turned its focus upon queers and people of color; electronic assistants offer an illusion of automation while leaving labor relations intact; homefulness problems result in tent cities and home sharing apps like Airbnb give the illusion of a mutual economy while sucking the rental market dry. We must wield our own dildonic prosthetics against the master’s drill, fight the viagra sustained power tool with prosthetic imaginaries!

3. The Master’s Hammer

Speaking of prosthetic imaginaries, is there a feminist hammer? Or is the hammer just another master’s tool? Sara Ahmed believes the hammer could be used as part of an effort to name what afflicts us, to identify the enemy and in so doing to direct our energies with more precision. She writes: “having names for problems can make a difference. Before, you could not quite put your finger on it. With these words as tools, we revisit our own histories;

we hammer away at the past.” But, she also goes on to propose that within the system that we live, by talking about a problem, you become the problem!

#MeToo and #TimesUp have picked up the hammer of social media and they are using it, all too often, to hammer in the morning and to hammer in the evening and to hammer all over the land. The hammering that Peter Seeger and Lee Hays had in mind in their song “If I Had a Hammer” concerned a social reckoning with racial and class inequality and indeed they first performed the song at a dinner held in support of arrested American Communist leaders. The #MeToo and #TimesUp hammers however all too often single out sexual assault from all kinds of other forms of abuse.

Indeed, the hammer of social media has the effect of flattening out the terrain of social difference so that all offenses become one, a forced kiss gets hammered along with a rape, years of abuse are treated the same way as an ill-judged pass. For this reason, rather than a moment of reckoning for white men in relation to the women they have abused and the violence they have unleashed, much of the impact of #MeToo and #TimesUp has, as Masha Gessen pointed out early on,¹ resulted in a full-fledged sex panic within which the hammer of moral accusation is brought down all too often by white women upon men of color and by straight people upon queers. Now, while of course there is no doubt that plenty of men of color and some queers have behaved as badly as the legions of others, and while many women of color actively oppose patriarchal systems extended by men of color, we have the mechanisms in place from years of institutionalized racism and homophobia to go after the men of color and the queers and so that is exactly what is happening.

Let’s take a look at one vertiginous loop characteristic of so many others when we try to hammer out the truth and consequences of sexual harassment. In academia today, under new Title IX regulations, we are regularly being beaten at our own game. There are now numerous cases on college campuses across the country of women and queer faculty accused of sexual harassment and facing charges. For the last fifty years, white male faculty have groomed, dated, screwed and married their graduate students. And many more have simply harassed and assaulted the women under their mentorship. Take, for example, the case of George Tyndall, a white gynecologist at USC who was accused of multiple forms of abuse over several decades.

Despite endless public campaigns against pedophiles and sex criminals in the US, this white guy was allowed to continue touching young women inappropriately with impunity for years! And it is not as if women did not complain; quite simply, the complaints from the women concerned never led to any consequences for Tyndall. When USC was finally pressured to act by the threat of exposure, it moved decisively to protect its endowment rather than its students, staff, and faculty. The story was buried and Tyndall took a nice retirement package and rode off into the sunset. Tyndall and other white male abusers are not the people upon whom the hammer comes down. Instead, women and queers of color at other universities have been placed on administrative leave with half pay for some vague accusations of inappropriate contact with students, none of which involved physical contact!

The case of Junot Díaz provides another cautionary tale about hammering people on social media. Díaz was accused of forcible kissing by one woman and of raising his voice at another woman at a conference. Here, the judgement was swift and decisive on social media even though some of the accusations leveled at Díaz, according to the *Boston Globe*,² proved to be untrue. And this is not at all to say that Diaz has not behaved badly or that men of color accused of piggish behavior are not guilty of abuse, assault, public performances of sexism and much worse; it is only to point to the long history of hammering men of color for sex crimes in the US, while white men, the benefactors of vertiginous capital and the operators of the tools of discipline and punishment, protect the money which in turn protects them.

If this sounds like hyperbole, consider a final example—the case of Jimmy Savile, a British media darling of the late 20th century who was also a well-known pedophile and serial abuser of the boys and girls who made up his audience.

Jimmy Savile was accused after his death in 2011 of multiple counts of pedophilia. There are now reports that estimate that he abused over 500 young girls and boys, sometimes through his philanthropic work in hospitals! But, while Savile died a good death, not openly accused of anything during his lifetime despite numerous whisper campaigns about his misconduct, England quickly and decisively turned a few months later to the “real crime” of a Pakistani pedophile ring

and arrested and convicted seven British-Asian men.

This is business as usual and not at all the conclusion to patriarchy that was promised—this conclusion indeed comes with a whimper and the only bang is the sound of the master’s hammer as it batters resistance by turning the victim of one system (racism) into the criminal in another (sex abuse).

4. The Master’s House

“The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” diagnoses perfectly our current predicament as we are pulled by the motion of vertiginous capital into a sinkhole of our own making, trying to claw our way out with the same methods that created the whirlwind in the first place. It is clear by now that you cannot resolve sexual assault with more criminalization, or the abjection of queers with marriage, or wealth disparity with real estate transactions. We cannot end sexual harassment on campus by throwing such a wide net that the predators wriggle free through loopholes of their own making while women and queers stand accused of unnatural, inappropriate and criminal conduct. It is clear that the moral policing we have engaged in the hopes of tackling heteropatriarchal abuses has come back around and now accuses us of misconduct. And so, it is time for new tactics: fewer strategies of repair and more damage to the system; less fixing up and more taking down; fewer victims and more fighters.

We are here, after all, not to redesign or fix up the master’s house despite the multiple shows on TV telling us how to do it. We are here, as anarchists in the tradition of Gordon Matta-Clark, to tear the whole fucking structure down! It is time for demolition. It is time for Grace Jones. Jones had the right idea as usual in 1981 when she called for the “Demolition Man,” who turned out to be Black, queer, and dangerous:

*I’m a walking nightmare, an arsenal of doom,
I kill conversation as I walk into the room,
I’m a three line whip,
I’m the sort of thing they ban,
I’m a walking disaster,
I’m a demolition man,
Demolition man...*

We must all become walking nightmares, arsenals of doom, walking disasters, walking dead, here not to demand recognition, not to ask for justice



from the same system that criminalized us or ask for a new leader to be delivered by the same process that gave us the Clintons and Trump. We come bearing new weapons, dildonic tools of the countersexual underground, new hacks of old systems, we come to blow the house down. It is time to turn to the language of unmaking, unbuilding, undoing while refusing the vertiginous capital techniques of litigious accusation and criminalization. Tear it all down!

- 1 Gessen, Masha. "When Does a Watershed Become a Sex Panic." *New Yorker*, 14 November 2017: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/when-does-a-watershed-become-a-sex-panic>.
- 2 Ebbert, Stephanie and Shanahan, Mark. "Junot Díaz case may be a #MeToo turning point." *Boston Globe*, 30 June 2018: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/06/30/junot-diaz-case-may-metoo-turning-point/3TMFseenE4Go-leVsqbFSxM/story.html>.

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