

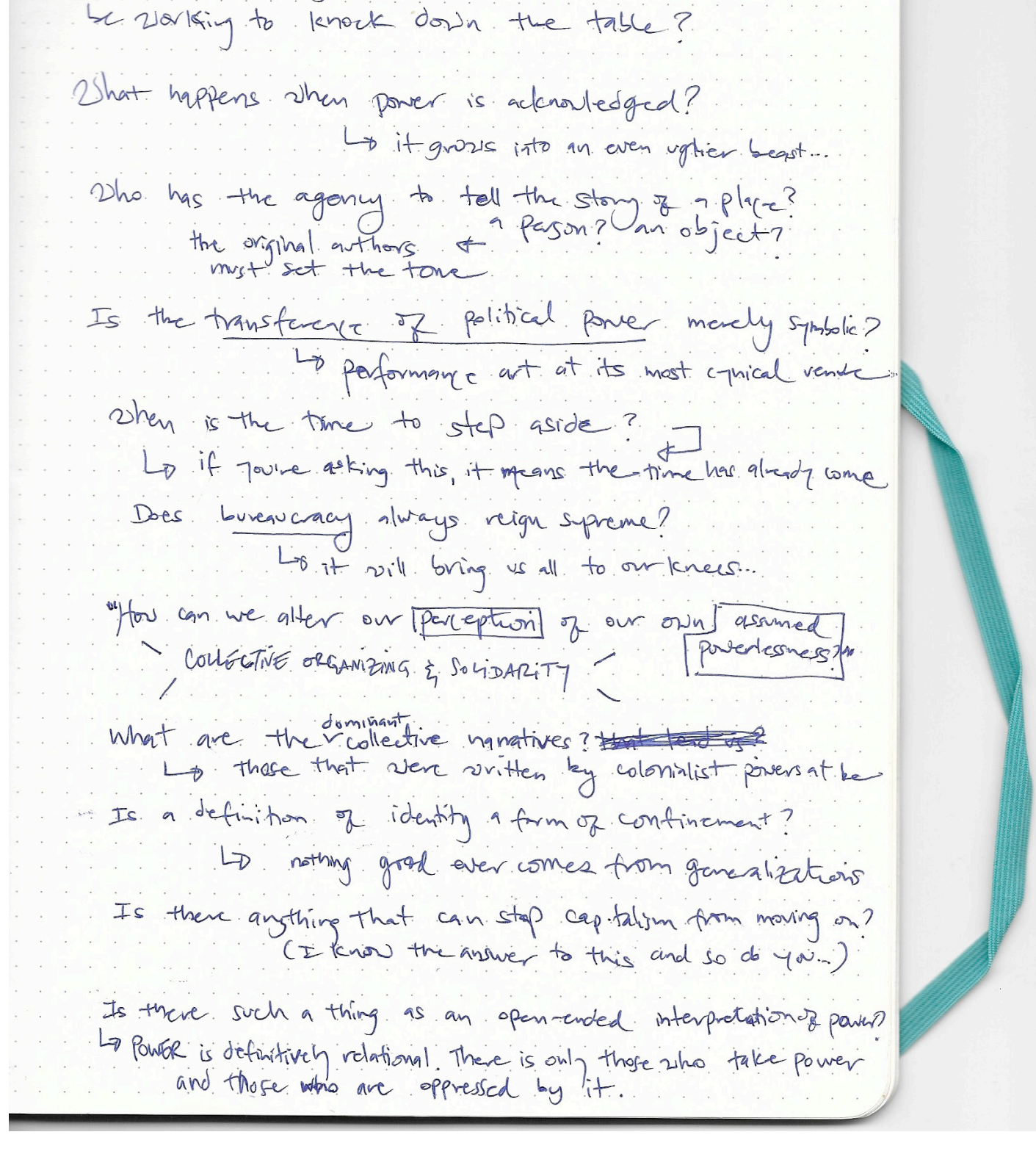
CFAR's *Papers on Power* is a series of commissioned essays for which artists, writers, activists, and cultural producers have been asked to respond to the question "What is power?" in whatever form best relates to their work and thinking.

# DISMANTLING THE HOUSE: BEFORE AND AFTER THOUGHTS

YAELE S. AMIR

**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):



**&:**  
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

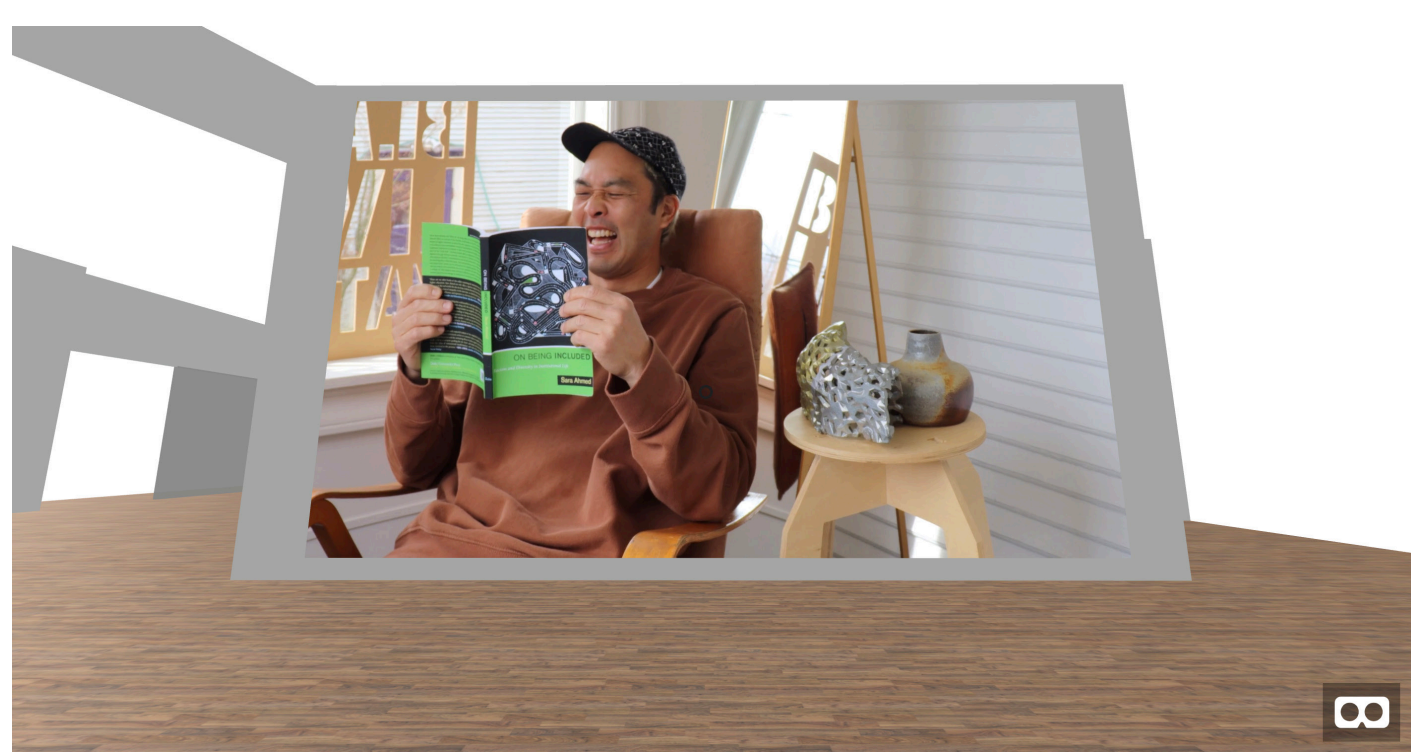
In the face of a global pandemic, an escalating climate crisis and a social uprising – governments, corporations, and society's various institutions have wielded their authority forcefully and with little compromise. Abuses of power have seeped into every aspect of our lives—from financial stability, 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 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 communities—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>

**After:**

Reading through the notes in the journal I kept while developing Dismantling the House, I recognize a hint of uncharacteristic naivens in the entries from the early days of the pandemic. I recall 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.

**References:**

1. PPP's Think Tank & Feel was held virtually on December 12, 2020. Roundtable participants included: Susan Caffaro, 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. 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.
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.