



Donald Trump is the Perfect Man for the Job

Kemi Adeyemi

I hesitated some about whether to cancel my class the morning after Donald Trump was elected president. I actually had not finished watching the results roll in the night before. The cold that had been brewing in my body took full shape at the same moment that the café full of white people in Seattle where I had been watching took in a series of sharp, collective breaths at the realization that Hillary Clinton might not win this. I slept quietly and woke up exhausted.

Several of my colleagues teaching in colleges and universities across the nation cancelled classes, and talks and colloquiums were cancelled or postponed for reasons that ranged from self-care to crippling devastation. I wanted to cancel class because I was tired and ill, but also because my lack of surprise that white America would elect Trump had tipped over into complete, if critical, apathy.¹ This was surely a coping mechanism, a gathering of emotional resources for the coming onslaught of disbelief by masses of people who had fooled themselves into believing that liberalism and “good” or “sane” voting choices happen by proxy: that their neighbors, colleagues, friends of friends, family members, bosses, students, teachers, grocers, and postal workers were surely Clinton supporters because they themselves were. My apathy was of course rooted in my own self-protection as a black queer woman whose community was going to be deeply affected by the coming regime; an inability to process that those most

proximate to me, including family members, may have (and did) cast their votes against me.

More than anything, I considered cancelling class because I was unsure that I could be an objective guide for the tight-knit group of students in my Black Feminist Geographies class—a group composed primarily of black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latinx, Middle Eastern, immigrant, international, queer, transgender, genderqueer, and veteran students—who were likely processing feelings of devastating loss after, what was for most, their first time voting. Belying my apathy and exhausted from obsessively refreshing websites hoping for news that might draw me out of the darkness, I went off to teach my class.

The impromptu workshop I ran once I arrived came out of this mix of exhaustion, critical apathy, and a fundamental need to be around other people. It emerged out of the students' burgeoning grounding in black feminist and black queer studies, complementing the deconstructive tendencies of (white) queer studies with a steadied awareness of how the material realities of race, gender, class, and sexuality always determine the forms, functions, and limits of national belonging. I began the class by opening space for students to acknowledge their feelings about the election as real, valid, and critically informed, allowing them to reflect on what it felt like to have their seemingly collective decision undercut by something so arcane as the electoral college, and what it feels like to be continually denied the voice the law purports to guarantee you. But what do rights, lawfulness, and voting do for a room of young QPOC people! The workshop subsequently strove to connect students' personal feelings of responsibility as voters to the actually existing forms and functions of governance; to make them aware that, yes, they are given great power with their voting rights, but also to be highly suspicious of that which the state seemingly benevolently "grants" us. As the workshop evolved to help students consider how feelings become politics, I intended to give them an actual tool to wield when faced with the seemingly illogical machinations of political rhetoric that is steeped in, depends on, and itself wields feelings as politics. In times like those ahead of us, this workshop can and should be further tinkered with so that students can work towards an understanding that the realm of the rhetorical/discursive is as critical a terrain of resistance as marching, legislative advocacy, slacktivism, and other modes of resistance.

I began the workshop by giving students several minutes to articulate their visceral thoughts and feelings as they'd developed over the previous 12 hours. After everyone had the opportunity to share, I turned toward the directed question *So, how does something like this happen?* to initiate the process of moving personal narrative into constructive, collective outlining of the ways that ideology takes shape as/in civil practice. The students responded with explanations that

Clinton had not captured the imaginations of a broad enough cross-section of people, that the Democratic Party fucked up royally by tanking Bernie Sanders and elevating a candidate who is in many ways just as devious as Trump, and that The Patriarchy simply does what it wants.² My students smartly identified and wrestled with the myriad reasons that Clinton failed, largely based in their perception that she is not skilled at masking the corruption embedded in her political practice as well as in her very spirit, making it difficult for voters to measure the purity of their own. It was much harder for them to articulate how galvanizing around Trump, whose political performance was also staged in the realm of the psycho-emotional, resulted in an electoral victory. When subsequently directed to account not for Clinton's perceived failures but for the rise of Trump, my students offered cogent examples of how he had, they argued, "brainwashed" everyone. More than anything, the students pointed to how Trump publicly expresses people's most private beliefs, offering himself and his speech as sites of cathexis for seemingly disenfranchised white, working-class Americans. "Something like this happens," the group argued, "because Trump represents racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia."

Although I applauded the students' detailing of the climate in which Trump arose, I remained puzzled if not slightly unnerved by the subtle ways that the students themselves took up the language of representation to account for how Trump's discursive strategies render his rhetoric as distinct from his own person and personal beliefs. To be sure, the material implications and effects of his rhetorical style are and will continue to be deeply problematic. But when we who are targets of the hardening of sociopolitical ideologies into material realities do not become practiced in naming the literal terms of engagement we are subject to, we risk taking up and capitulating to adjacent terms ("white nationalism" and not "white supremacy," "alternative facts" and not "facts") that function to soften the blows of oppression, subjugation, and empire. This is in part because these terms abstract action from intention, and misdirect blame away from structures and onto individuals. When this happens, what one says and does can be distinct from what one means: I may have spewed racist rhetoric, the logic goes, but "I do not have one racist bone in my body."³ Of course, anyone who tries to critique and close this gap by coupling implicitness with intention, subconscious or otherwise, becomes paradoxically at fault.

In this rhetorical field that Trump is so very skilled in, what language do we give our students—those for whom abstraction serves to render their lives, bodies, needs, and desires to the realm of personal opinion and responsibility, and not forms of legislative value—to think and fight with? They need to learn and recognize the forms, functions, and effects of representation in order to valorize and wield the concreteness necessary to combat it. It is not, I told my

students, that Trump *represents* racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia,⁴ but that he *is* racist, sexist, misogynist, xenophobic, and homophobic. What sets of questions do we need to ask when we believe that his words and actions do not simply represent racism, sexism, misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia, but enact them?⁵ The workshop's line of questioning thus changed: *What if I told you that Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job?*

I asked it many times in a row to fill the silence as the students thought, and because the gravity of the election had begun to settle in after having watched my students wrestle with a range of intense emotions during the class session. I knew that I myself needed a mantra, a new coping mechanism for when and where apathy would leave off. *Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job.* I told my students to hear it and to repeat it to themselves. *Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job. Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job. Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job.*

In class the morning after the election, my students talked of feeling let down by The System, the government, and society at large. I workshoped *Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job* to teach them that these three concepts continue to exist because of the violent, possessive investment in white heteropatriarchy. My goal was to at the very least give them the tools to identify and articulate that The System, government, and society have never been—and never will be—out here in these streets for them.⁶ Having students hear and repeat “Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job” works toward this goal, in part because it forces them to deconstruct the very category of “the job.” Toward the end of the workshop, then, we set upon collectively listing the work that comprises the job of president. As each student contributed to the list, I and the other students worked with them to revise their definitions on the spot, guiding them in restating abstract concepts such as “upholding democracy,” “promoting freedom,” and “cultivating social welfare” in more concrete terms. This exercise in deductive reasoning pushed students to further query how these concepts operate: upholding, promoting, and cultivating for whom? Toward what end? What are the histories (told and untold) embedded within these concepts?⁷ I wanted them to be able to articulate that democracy is upheld, freedom is promoted, and social welfare is cultivated through initiatives and legislation that circle the wagons around elite and middle-class white people.⁸ With this in mind, I aided as the students continually, gently pushed one another to actually express, to say out loud, that the United States was founded on a violent colonial encounter, and that the job of president is itself emergent from and dependent on the racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia of this encounter. In other words, the president's “job” is to uphold and protect

racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia, as they are core virtues of the U.S. American constitution.⁹

I need my students to know there is nothing confusing or confounding about Trump's election nor the first weeks of his tenure, and that disbelief simply emerges from an incorrect assumption that the job of the president is rooted in a rational devotion to We the People. I need them to move away from disbelief toward a fundamental suspicion of Democracy, as well as The System, the government, and society—they are all in fact are working just fine when someone like Trump gets elected. My need, which is different from but related to “want,” is acute because their physical and mental survival as black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latinx, Middle Eastern, immigrant, international, queer, transgender, genderqueer, and veteran students depends on this move. Their suspicion will be labeled as crazy or paranoid, charges that are used to undermine the personal and intellectual work QPOC do to understand the roots and mechanisms of Western Empire. I need them to be prepared for this.

What if I told you that Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job?

“I hear you,” responded one student. “I’m just not ready to feel those words come out of my mouth.”

Two weeks after the election I had a check-in with my class and I was surprised to learn that they had not discussed the election in any of their other classes, which ranged from political science to fine arts classes. They were relieved when I offered the first half of our session to talk about their increasingly pessimistic (and critically apathetic, to be sure) understanding of the actual power wielded by “the people,” yet they were finding outlets to activate their distress. A couple of students had been involved in a woman of color led march on campus where one had given a speech: “I got on the mic and was talking and talking and then I just yelled out *Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job!* The crowd didn’t even know what to do with me!” The class laughed with her, reveling in that feeling of inclusion that arises when students have collectively worked through difficult themes, texts, and times. Another student who had been at the rally laughed as well, saying, “Yeah! I was there and I was, like, the only person to yell back!”

Donald Trump is the perfect man for the job. I told them to hold that sentence in their mouths, to say it to themselves over and over until they understood it. Because what else do they have in this world but mantras to remind themselves that they aren’t crazy, that the world is in fact functioning completely logically. It’s just that this logic is always going to work against them and that few people will believe them when they try to name it. If they say it to themselves over and over, though, they might at least be able to comfort (if not save) themselves and one another.

NOTES

1. As I explore in a current work-in-progress, critical apathy emerges out of and is tethered to an awareness that to possess nonwhite skin means to be in a state of constant terror, and it honors those moments when the response is to shape an alternative, disaffected yet performative relationship to it. Critical apathy is ultimately a self-aware, structured indifference that emerges in the entanglements of play and pain that infuse queer of color everyday life. It does not mean checking out and ignoring or pretending like we are beyond the mundane and the extreme violence that our bodies seemingly invite. It does not mean putting this violence and terror in so much perspective that they become flattened and evacuated of deep meaning or part of the ever-growing heap of threats that haunt us to the point of despondency. Instead, thinking with and through critical apathy is to believe in and understand the space between (and relation of) *fuck everything* and *the world is fucked* as an important “strateg[y] of endurance and subsistence [that does] not yield easily to the grand narrative of revolution,” to use Saidiya Hartman’s words. Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors,” *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 171.
2. Throughout the course, students used the phrases “The Patriarchy” and “The System” to variously refer to actual white men, the possessive investment in whiteness, hegemony, and Empire. At times, I pressed them to be more specific when using these phrases, while at other times they served as multifarious abstractions that students found productive in their slippages.
3. Raphael Chestang, “EXCLUSIVE: Donald Trump Addresses Anti-Immigration Comments: ‘I Don’t Have a Racist Bone in My Body,’” *etonline.com*, July 1, 2015, accessed April 14, 2017, http://www.etonline.com/news/167197_exclusive_donald_trump_addresses_anti_immigration_comments_i_don_t_have_a_racist_bone_my_body/.
4. When we say that he merely represents these tenets, we agree to the terms of engagement handed down to us—terms that abstract, obfuscate, and deny responsibility.
5. There is robust literature on how words *do* things, much of which is indebted to J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).
6. It is also our job as queer faculty of color to teach them that legal “advances” on the terrain of, for example, marriage equality is not an advancement but merely a reiteration of normativizing structures of whiteness and heterosexuality meant to reinforce our expulsion from the symbolic nation that renders our literal belonging therein as just as precarious as ever.
7. To be sure, the students had been practicing these questions all quarter. By the morning after the election they had engaged with, in order: Patricia Hill Collins, the Combahee River Collective, Katherine McKittrick, Frantz Fanon, Kyra Gaunt, Adrian Piper, Lorraine O’Grady, Nicole Fleetwood, Rashaad Newsome, Martine Syms, Frances Beale, Senga Nengudi, Saidiya Hartman, Lorna Simpson, Angela Davis, Simone Browne, and Wura-Natasha Ogunji.

8. Although working-class and working-poor white people are often the beneficiaries of legislative action, I wouldn't go so far as to say that the government is actively invested in them.
9. By "constitution" I gesture to the formal, capital "C" document outlining the core tenets and beliefs undergirding the U.S. civic body, and I mean to gesture to the repertoires of comportment that are rife with discourse of race, gender, sexuality, and ability that the ideal subject thereof supposedly reflects (e.g., the "upstanding citizen").

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