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Contradiction is the Rich Place

A conversation with Shellyne Rodriguez

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Shellyne Rodriguez is a radical thinker, militant, and artist who lives, works, and organizes in the Bronx. Her work, *Loitering gato (billo)*, is on this issue's cover. ARB sat down with Shellyne to talk about the work of community engagement, anti-authoritarian action, the role of art and artists in struggle, and the relationship between class and identity.

ARB: How did you get radicalized?

SR: When I was in high school, I was a member of the Universal Zulu Nation, which was partially a street gang, partially a political organization, partially a hip hop conservation deal. One of the important things about Zulu was political education. Now, the quality of the content was questionable: Zulu took a page from the Nation of Islam and there was some conspiracy theory stuff like Illuminati, this kind of shit. But it was a stepping stone into being a politicized individual. One of the main tenets of Zulu Nation was knowledge itself: knowing where you came from, studying about Africa, studying about the slave trade, about the history of Puerto Rico, all these things. That was the first outwardly facing radicalizing that happened.

I think life radicalizes us, you know. I'm a woman of a certain age, I grew up in the crack era. So if that shit don't radicalize you, I don't know what does. I was in Zulu at sixteen, and during that time [the murder of] Amadou Diallo happened, and all these things came together. When I left, the politics stayed with me. I ventured out on my own, and not to be a cliché but I found Che Guevara's autobiography and Assata Shakur's biography, and the Cuban revolution and the Black Panthers. That was the year I went to D.C. to protest Bush's inauguration and I remember how we all were waiting to turn it up like the WTO protests in Seattle. There was always a kind of seeking on my own. I didn't formally end up back in a radical movement again until Occupy Wall Street.

I was just a regular chick from the Bronx, going down to Wall Street trying to help and take part in the assemblies. Then, when Occupy folded, a bunch of people from the Bronx found each other and formed Occupy the Bronx, which eventually developed into Take Back the Bronx. Because the Bronx is already occupied by the NYPD and slumlords. I was in that group for ten years. So, it's been kind of a collage of radicalizing.

ARB: What are you working on now?

SR: I work with my own cadre which I don't like to speak about too publicly. But I can say these two things. I think that in this particular political moment, as it pertains to New York City, it is very difficult to organize in a big extroverted way because the level of counterinsurgency we faced here during the George Floyd moment and after, has muddied the waters. There was a lot of cannibalism on the left that sowed distrust. The Ford Foundation had pledged one billion dollars to "support social justice initiatives" that summer and so there was also a tsunami of social-justice oriented NGOs on the ground that nobody had heard of, who had a lot of presence. Because people don't have militant study as part of their radicalization, they don't know the difference between an NGO and the grassroots—and the pros and cons of both. When that is the situation, and you're on the street with people with these different levels of commitment and understanding, it can be very dangerous. It makes it hard for coalition building. So what needs to happen now, needs to happen on a small scale.

Because of all of the counter insurgency and the dismantling of that moment—that crescendo that crashed—we're back to square one. There are things happening; NGOs are organizing around immigrants and essential workers, and the Amazon labor union organizing seems very exciting. Everything at its own scale, at its own gradient. But for grassroots organizing, it needs to be small. It needs to be quiet, without the spectacle of social media which invites unsolicited demands.

ARB: And surveillance from the state. Social media is talking to yourself—widely broadcasting a self-reflective presence, ideas and ideals that aren't connected to the reality on the ground.

SR: I agree, but I also think that exhibitions of resistance are important. Marches are important. But they're not the only thing that's important. I understand the use of social media. I think we need to fight the propaganda war. We need to be there. But it's a double-edged sword. Someone needs to do that work, but right now it's not for me. What I value right now is planting seeds.

I think that reality on the ground is where it's at. To call yourself a feminist or

an abolitionist, because you believe in the values theoretically—I think "What the fuck does that actually mean?" How do you apply it?

So, you're like 'FREE THEM ALL,' and you're standing outside the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, holding your sign and the guys inside are flickering their lights—and then you free them. They come outside, and the first thing they do is say, 'What's up bitch? Give me some pussy.'

And then what do you do?

ARB: Right, you're a feminist and an abolitionist—How do you deal with the contradictions?

SR: Yeah, contradiction is the rich place. It's that cream in the center. In all the places where change occurs, we have to deal with the dilemmas. Do you say 'Oh, never mind, forget it. Put them back in the cage?' Nobody wants to think about the reality of it. Then class comes into it—there's class implications. There's so many angles to thinking about the problem.

ARB: I taught in the Bronx for some years. Nearly every one of my students had been harassed because of Stop and Frisk but many students, even those who had experienced that harassment and violence, supported the existence of the police. They were often more angry about cops not showing up in time when they were called.

SR: It feels unfathomable that we could have abolition in these neighborhoods and that's by design. Police literally manage all of our interpersonal relationships. That's why people think 'How could we possibly get along without police?' We always need a mediator to come and break up the fight and we've been conditioned to think he has to have a badge. It goes back to why political education in a public forum in the neighborhood is where it's at right now—because we don't know how to be neighbors to each other. The fabric is completely broken.

ARB: Can you talk more about counterinsurgency at work in the American left?

SR: One of the ways counterinsurgency is at work is through the control of political discourse in so called "movement spaces." Black Radical tradition teaches us that racial capitalism is what's for dinner. If you don't understand how race and capitalism work together, you're either a class reductionist, or you're a liberal identity politician. It's really like that. Americans hate

to think about class. They don't want to talk about it because it's antithetical to chasing the dream. Like if I have to think about my class position, I can't be busy thinking about how I'm gonna be an entrepreneur. Unexamined bourgeois ideology.

My latest pet peeve observation is that nobody knows what the fuck neoliberalism is but everybody's getting hurt by it. Inside the United States, not just outside of the United States. I went to Ecuador this summer for the uprising, and literally anybody, any random person standing beside you, can break down neoliberalism like David Harvey, and be like 'Nope—Gasoline should not be this price, this is fucking austerity. You're not going to do this to us and we are coming.' Literally, anybody in the street will break down the economics. We are not educated here in the U.S. in this way, and it's by design. When you divorce class consciousness, when you divorce anti-colonial struggle and thinking, when you divorce understandings of empire, understanding what imperialism is, when you divorce all of that from conversations about identity, all you get is clamoring for representation. And what is it that you're clamoring for? For your identity to be represented. You want a seat at the table of empire.

This is why we need militant study. If you're talking about, "as a queer person," "as a black person," "as a Latinx person," as an "insert-identity-here"—I deserve these things, I want these things, but there is no politic attached to that, there's not specifically a politics shaped by anticapitalism, of anti-imperialism, of anti-colonialism, then you are just clamoring to join empire. And you are an enemy.

We understand very clearly that the white cis hetero Christian body is in decline. They know too that this identity is in decline. So the monster, the spirit of all of that, knows it needs a new host. It needs a new fucking home, and so it's looking for it. There is no better representation of that image than the fucking, stupid U.S. President and Vice President.

You have this withering away, decrepit, senile President, literally being fucking propped up by a Black South Asian woman, who is a fucking cop. There is no better image than that, you know—out with the old, in with the new. And it is going to enter.

If you're talking about, "as a queer person," "as a black person," "as a Latinx person," as an "insert-identity-here"—I deserve these things, I want these things, but there is no politic attached to that, there's not specifically a politics shaped by anticapitalism, of anti-imperialism, of anti-colonialism, then you are just clamoring to join empire. And you are an enemy.

What are we clamoring for? Are we clamoring for a multi-culti fascism? Are we clamoring for rainbow capitalism? What are we clamoring for?

ARB: Yeah, we're clamoring to be let inside the cage.

SR: And this is again, by design. Look at every movement that we have had—I'm talking Black radical tradition right now. I'm talking Black Liberation struggle right now. The civil rights movement was a liberal reformist movement. Until the very end, when King said, 'reform to revolution' and launched the poor people's campaign—and they put a fucking bullet in the man.

We know this is what happens. Look at Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter was good for a year. Then it was all running on fucking fumes from the people who really believed and kept it going. People kept it going. But they NGOed that shit right away.

ARB: And where do we end up?

SR: We end up with BLM leadership trying to explain why they own a six million dollar mansion. Right now there's some other major exec at BLM that's been siphoning off ten million dollars in donor funds. This BLM fucking drama is happening at the same time that they're saying Mutulu Shakur has six months, and they will not release him so that he can die with his family. Mumia is still in jail with a whisper of a campaign for his life propped up by the hard work of MOVE and the Campaign to Free Mumia. Our freedom fighters are literally dying in jail and Black, liberal reformist motherfuckers are getting rich, using their identity to align with empire.

ARB: It's the same with gay rights. It's the same with the women's movement.

SR: Yeah. All of it is cooptable. I'm speaking from that position that's my own. As a Black woman, a Black Caribbean woman, born and raised in New York. And as a queer woman too—my experience is this one. It's all the same shit. Fanon told us.

Now you're seeing Citibank ads that say you can choose your pronoun on your debit cards. And one by one we're seeing people from the trans community who come from a soft left position, literally plucked out of these NGOs, becoming poster children, being in ads for Citibank. Lack of militant study leads you right into the mouth of the dragon, bro.

ARB: I want to make sure we get to talk about your art. What's driving the work? How do you bring all of this into your art practice?

SR: When Covid happened and we all had to shelter in place, it grounded all the planes so to speak. We had to get off the street and get in the house. I said, 'I guess it's time to really make art now.' Because before that, all of my energy was going into the organizing work.

I made some paintings, I kinda tried. And then I decided that I'm already an asthmatic, and I live across the street from the Cross Bronx Expressway, so I should probably not be breathing in mineral spirits. So I thought, let me take it back to the basics. Let me just make some drawings. And what am I going to make drawings about? What the fuck else am I going to make drawings about? The people. The people who I live near—the people I see every day. What other subject do I need? Simple, you know. It's place based. And it grew from that. Who is here? Who's around me? How are we living together? Representations of the Bronx as Black and Puerto Rican kids who invented hip-hop is dated. The children of that generation are middle aged folks now. In reality, if we look at the Bronx today without nostalgia, it rivals Queens in terms of being an immigrant enclave. My neighborhood is very Bangladeshi and very Mexican, and Dominican. It's a melting pot, but not in that liberal multicultural way. I think of it more as a kind of internationalism that is actually really localized. And that thinking was eventually sharpened through my collaborations with Strike MoMA.

ARB: What were some of the first things you focused on with Strike MoMA?

SR: Comrades from Strike MoMA, and comrades from Decolonize This Place, who I've collaborated with for some years now, looked into who's on the boards of these places, and found what they call 'interlocking directorates.' All of these assholes sitting on these boards form a governing body of influence over literally all of the institutions that we think are benevolent, neutral spaces.

To make a case in point; Paula and James Crown, who sit on the board of the MoMA—and also, just fuck MoMA, you know—they're on the board at MoMA, and they fund the education programs. Who are Paula and James Crown? Come to know they're also on the boards of JP Morgan and own General Dynamics.

General Dynamics is, for the folks who don't know, one of the biggest weapons contractors out there. At the time of the Strike MoMA actions in 2021, General Dynamics was providing the bombs that were getting dropped on Gaza, at the same time that they were dropping bombs on Yemen, at the same time as putting down uprisings in Colombia. So, you dig a little. It's very easy. You start digging, and you're like 'Oh, General Dynamics was awarded a contract with the US Military where they upgraded all of the surveillance technology in what's called the US Southern Command.'

You have a front line on the streets in Gaza and Bogota, and they're saying, 'we know that this motherfucker is over there.' In New York, we're here with our Colombian comrades, we're here with our Palestinian comrades, and we can touch them here because there is a proximity inside empire.

It provides the potential for that kind of interconnected struggle. That's the macro. Then I've been making what I call mix tapes that bring together, in a micro, my community: You've got the Bangladeshi woman next to some old Puerto Rican dyke that hangs out on my block, we call her India. So now you have India and Bangladesh next to each other. It's a play on words, but you got this Puerto Rican woman, and this Bangladeshi woman who don't speak to each other. There's a language barrier. There's a cultural barrier. But let that fucking heat and hot water stop working in the building, and all of a sudden there's a common denominator, and we're knocking on on each other's door, like 'do you have hot water?' Because come January ain't nobody trying to be without heat or hot water. And so how is it that our solidarities can be micro and macro, mobile and local, inside the same place at the same time? I think about that shit in my work. And this is a complete, hostile challenge to liberal multiculturalism—which again feeds back into what I was saying about identity politics without struggle.

ARB: How does it feel to have a coveted success in capitalistic terms, and to be connected with a prestigious gallery?

SR: You know, a gallery is a fucking gallery. They're merchants. I'm selling drawings, which is to say I'm selling my labor like everybody else. With some caveats. But what I liked about PPOW was its history in New York. I like that they represent the estates of David Wojnarowicz and Martin Wong, and that they were representing this work at a time when nobody gave a shit about their work. Now there's this look-back towards the eighties, and so it's popping. But I thought, because of how much I ground myself in this history—because I'm a fucking New Yorker through and through—this is a relationship that could work.

ARB: How do you feel about your art potentially hanging in MoMA or the Whitney where many PPOW artists end up?

SR: Listen, while I'm alive and can help it, my work won't be in those fucking museums. I'm not even physically allowed in the MoMA to begin with, so forget about my work going in there. But the real issue is that we don't have a space for these things to be stewarded in the right way, because we are not free. We live under empire. And so all of the so-called institutions—as I just finished talking shit about MoMA—are monsters. Universities too! So where does the work actually go once you make it? Now I could withhold; and I've withheld making work for a long time. I always make work, but I didn't do anything with it. It's just that once you want to show it, there are no mechanisms that I would be comfortable with. So, when PPOW came knocking, I said, Okay, this is a contradiction. I'm going to engage in a contradiction.

My grandmother used to say. If you've been poor in your life, you know how to live because you can survive on white rice. I always apply that thinking to myself as an artist—like it doesn't fucking matter what is happening, I'm always going to make art. I was making art before I even thought about a BFA in my mid 30s, I'm always going to make art. It's not about a career or PPOW. This is a lifelong endeavor, because it's who I am.

What I said to PPOW is listen, I have some stipulations about where my work can live and who it gets sold to. I know that you have collectors who don't cross my boundaries. That's fine. But for people you don't know, here's my list of what I want. I don't want my work sold to weapons manufacturers or contractors, investors in prison building, investors in the so called Puerto Rican debt and land grab, and absolutely no one having anything to do with Israel. This is a very small line in the sand, but it's something. It self-selects who will even try to collect my work, and repels some of the assholes. It takes a position in a world that literally does not. No one else to their, or my knowledge has created these kinds of boundaries around the selling of their work.

Of course, they asked what about diversified portfolios. 'It's hard for us to know these things...blah blah, blah...' But, they were cool with it. They said 'This makes it difficult for us, selling art is really hard. But we can work with this.' I said, I'm not asking you to become investigative reporters. I'm not gonna say that I wouldn't put my work in some small museum, in some state university museum, but it depends. It's on a case by case basis.

Lucy Lippard said, artists are the only workers that really own the means of their fucking production. You know, if we don't make it, there is no market.

So, the least that we can do is create boundaries on our shit and hold a line, and have the impetus to create new spaces and new ways to show what we're doing now. This list for PPOW is a very small gesture, but you know what it does. We know this because we're organizers, and we know how to take the fucking street. Gain a few blocks up against the fucking barrier. You're pushing against the fucking barrier. You move the barrier back a couple feet. So more of us do that shit, and now we're negotiating from that place, and then what can we demand or take next? And then next? How do you affect change? Culture is to be shifted and changed. We know this as cultural workers, that we can change consciousness. So let's go.



BX third world liberation mixtape no. 1 (Wretched Freak to the Beat) by Shellyne Rodriguez. Color pencil on black paper 2021