

MoMA

24 hours with Xaviera Simmons

Xaviera Simmons shares an intimate day of rituals, images, and thoughts on America's construction through white supremacy and capitalism.

Xaviera Simmons Aug 16, 2019

This feature is part of our A Day series, in which writer Heidi Julavits invites artists to share an account of their day with us.



5:54am: Open my eyes and stare at the blank white wall ahead. Breathe and lie here with the first thoughts that come to mind. Like so many morning thoughts of late, I find myself contemplating/processing a variation on a theme that begins with some form of a similar question: How might America, or is it American capitalism, be adjusted so that this American-constructed racial caste system bends toward something that looks like justice? What methods might we/I use to stay focused toward political shifts that will change all of our material realities? Something like this— —



Xaviera Simmons. *A Country Built On Free Labor*. 2018

Whenever this type of thought forms in my morning headspace I usually conclude that, at the end of the day, The United States (composed of taxpayers; new, recent, and older immigrants; Northerners; Midwesterners; Southerners and islanders; many corporations; some individuals and their families; most elite educational institutions; many banks; insurance companies; hospitals; textile manufacturers; the tobacco and sugar industries; so many arms of federal, state, and local governments; the Supreme Court; etc.) has to construct methods of reparation to the descendants of American slavery (through acts of Congress, the Senate and House of Representatives????) as a foundational shift towards a new type of Democracy, one that isn't rooted in the supremacy of "whiteness," which is clearly what we live with now.... And then perhaps more colonial powers will be forced to follow suit (understanding that different groups have different claims on different countries).

— it doesn't even bother me anymore that this is a 6am thought —

6am: Breathe.... love up my lover — light candles throughout the apartment — (daily ritual from my mother who used to practice a form of Buddhism) — Think, "I should go/I want to go and see other people's exhibitions today," though my calendar says I have to remain present to my own studio practice — ugh, even though today I would rather see what's happening elsewhere.



Xaviera Simmons. Performance still from Pier 54 commissioned by The Friends of the Highline. 2015

Breathe... love up my lover——light
candles throughout the apartment.

7am: Open the windows for the cross breeze.... Listen for birds (like the ones I hear when I go upstate) but acknowledge the drilling construction across the street out of my window here in the city....shower/shear/braid and unlock hair ritual/grind espresso beans/froth simple coconut milk and place espresso maker on the stove top (this is a daily ritual).

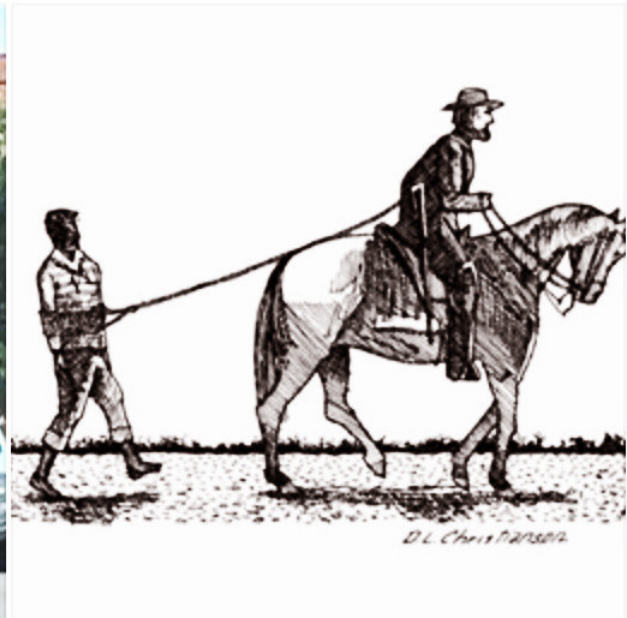
8am: Write with pen and paper; loose thoughts for the day. I “read the papers” or at least the headlines and short narratives found online. Peek at, but mostly avoid social media (say goodbye to the lover sometime around this time).



Xaviera Simmons. *CODED* (prize mock up). 2016

9am: Loose thoughts— —What time is our flight to Milan? Which projects need the most attention today? I need to send my [CODED](#) prizes; they are years overdue! Why are there so many homeless black people in New York City, in Los Angeles? Are they mostly part of that first or second generation whose lineage is drawn from Southern share-croppers, two or three generations from American slavery? America, to this minute, has an abysmal, segregated, and subpar educational system (across the board)— —keeping human beings in constructed but real categories as oppressors and oppressed.... Some folks leave high school not knowing how to read, most of those “some folks” are “black American folks.” Think about how without an overhaul on the distribution of wealth, resources and education, the growth of “minority” communities actually equals more low-wage labor force for our capitalist system. Lower wage, underpaid workers are being replaced by lower-lower waged workers. No one thrives in this model except the institutions/corporations and their directors— —yikes....

Galveston, TX on Saturday August 3, 2019 near the intersection of 23rd and Church Street. #Galveston



— —non random thoughts: Do “white” people know they are only “white” here in America as a way to gain and use the advantages of America and also to be a part of the social structures that have systemically oppressed Black people who can trace their lineage back to American slavery as well as first nations populations whose ancestors were the original occupants and poor brown communities across the nation and beyond? Whiteness operates to oppress.

Are there actual farmers at the farmers market today?

— —Loose thought— —Are there actual farmers at the farmers market today? I desire a swim in the ocean....



Xaviera Simmons. *Untitled*. Summer 2019

10am: Walk over the bridge with Zaha (my dog). Always with big headphones on to soften outside noises (weekly ritual). I need some Toni Morrison talking through these headphones while I walk these three-four miles.... Drop off Zaha at B's office. Keep walking downtown.... text message with Viva, Sabrina, Ife, David, Marilyn, and Cat.

11am (ish): Board meeting; we have an urgent issue on our hands...keenly aware that on this Board, like most of the ones that I sit on, I am the only American person whose ancestors have lived here for three, almost four centuries; whose father was a sharecropper from Georgia and whose entire lineage on all sides is all some kind of mixed "race" group built by Southern American slavery. I hold that position on most of the boards that I sit on. Boards are slow to bring on new people, that's another thing to work toward.... I note that fact most times I walk into board rooms.... I note that to myself— —obviously— —always aware of the figure in space— —

America doesn't know people as daughters of sharecroppers or as descendants of American slavery, I mean we know but we don't really know.... like if there are descendants of slavery then there are descendants of planters and plantation owners. As a collective, the people of the United States don't understand their own narrative. Our collective narrative doesn't really account for the white people, their children, and so on across the country who oppressed negros for centuries, like till right now. Like the

shop owners who lynched and burned down whole black towns or the building owners who discriminated just an hour ago, or the long line of governors who advocated for racist policies, or the doctors who, because they didn't or don't like this or that negro or negroes, let this or that negro die a slow, painful death when they could have saved the soul.... Like what happened to Eric Dolphy in Berlin happened every day all day all over the United States for centuries till this day.... Ugh.... insert Marvin Gaye:

Make me wanna holler
And throw up both my hands



We still live with these white people today and, and...they had children and grandchildren who surely haven't as a collective shaken off all of their parents or grandparents' ways, views, and attitudes....

Negro-Colored-Black-African American-Person of Color are titles that don't get to the heart of the matter. America only knows people like me as "Black People" or "People of color." I strongly object to being labeled the blank term "person of color."

12pm: Board meeting continues. Emergency subsides, a little. I have got to get to my studio soon and work on this new set of paintings for one museum exhibition and sketch videos for another museum exhibition.

1pm: Walk back over the bridge toward my studio. Stop off at my apartment for a quick lunch break (some mix of vegetables and salad greens). Think about how Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is so racially segregated and how unattractive the architecture is. In the case of Williamsburg, cheap construction yields disgraceful design or vice versa. Contemplate why liberal white Americans (my friends and loved ones included), even artists, writers, educators, and journalists, aren't actually working toward becoming abolitionists (as in the abolition of our current caste system and its web of disparities). It would be radical if we were once again abolitionists; we need the term abolition to come back into fashion; these times demand the usage of that word....

Think about how you rarely see police cars consistently patrolling white neighborhoods but in predominately black neighborhoods, they are a constant drag on mental safety, stability, and sanity.

Wonder why I still live in my hometown of New York City?



Displace people to make way
for glass, metal, and concrete.

2pm: Studio. My studio has a skylight and high ceilings and while it's not a large space it brings me so much pleasure. It's a lovely space and it is pin-drop quiet most of the time, which I love as I feel like a monk when I am working.... The monks I lived with made more noise than I do in my studio.

I have to complete 200 small painted works by late August.... Distract myself with a little online chatter...purchase some things....



Xaviera Simmons. *Detail Of An Index*. 2015

3pm: Studio work. — — Why do people (all types of people) use the term “people of color” to describe all non-white people as if we were one unified collective with the same claims, issues, gripes, disparities, or struggles? Why do “liberal and progressive” white people accept their whiteness so easily — without much daily undoing of the implications and habits of whiteness as a system of oppression — —

The quietness of my studio is so nourishing.... I need many hours of time alone every day.

— — Some non-black friends are really doing so many things right to change these systems, I salute them (Cat!). I wish, in my studio practice, that I could paint like Henry

or Kerry or build like Leonardo or be as free as Dash or romance like Huma or draw like Kara or paint like Cecily or photograph like Tina Modotti or be as fierce an advocate as Amal or as humorous and intelligently quick as Ms. Vanjie (a new favorite reference). At this point in my life, I kind of secretly wish that I could understand what it takes to be a policy maker. I wish that I could work to politically shift systems— —At this point in my life I am excited to become a parent, sometime soon.

4pm: Studio work— —Paintings and photographs and text based works; the American South, the vitality or not of pan-Africanism, the drama that is called “government” and “race,” “sex,” “race” and the news, and poorly educated art critics and law and architecture and books and book delivery systems. — —Emails and fragrant floral and herbal aromas.



Xaviera Simmons. *Sundown (Number 30)*. 2018

My studio has candles burning most of the time, and scents through a diffuser all day long (Buddhist habits inherited from my mother).

5pm: Studio work with sound: Iranian Classical Music and Aretha (damn!) — — more Toni Morrison soundbites — — the color mustard and its variations are really beautiful to work with these days....

6pm: Studio work: Faith Ringgold's painting *American People Series Die #20* (1967) is serious business. That's a remarkable painting.... I need to stare at it for a while to remember her visual vocabulary — — she's a master. I also love thinking about her letters and writings I encountered in MoMA's archives.



Faith Ringgold. *American People Series #20: Die*. 1967

Why do people use the term “people of color” to describe all non-white people as if we are one unified collective with the same claims, issues, gripes, disparities, or struggles?

7pm: Studio Work: Sundown. My skylight lets me know it's almost time to go — — I do not enjoy working late, as in past 7 o'clock, unless I have to. I want to go home and make dinner and watch my shows :) — — still wondering when most of my liberal white and non-black friends (queer/nonconforming, gay, or straight) will declare themselves anti-racist abolitionists and work to shift the structures we live within.... That would be the/a bomb if they did it consciously and collectively — — like, if Decolonize This Place stayed focused just on American capitalism and its entire connection to Southern slavery as the foundation and 400 years of continued “white” domination they would surely build a healthy blueprint for the kind of abolitionist work for today's era. I really appreciate what they are doing across the spectrum of political engagement right now though.

.... Continue to do studio work, here till 8pm.

8pm: Walking home from my studio to my apartment takes an hour. Long Island City through Greenpoint to Williamsburg. Segregated worlds. I think people who move to these neighborhoods now in this era are intentionally desiring to live segregated and not amongst a large swath of black people— —Headphones on.... Walking home I have this memory of when Greenwich Village was very male and very gay and to my memory there were lots of beautiful men that lived there; my mother's best friends lived there, I was young visiting them. Harlem, I remember at that same time was a beautiful, hectic street cacophony of bodies and sounds and scents and textiles and tastes as you walked up 125th street; these hyper-sensual memories are pre-Mayor Giuliani, who killed the "natural" human "free-er" landscape of this city in favor of advanced capitalism in the form of architectural extremism. Displace people to make way for glass, metal, and concrete. Displace people who for centuries legally were capital for an architecture that is a signal for the workings of capital— —something like that.

9pm: My home cooking: Fava Beans with orecchiette, garlic, ramps, and homemade basil pesto (side of habanero) with a local natural wine.... My home is soft— —last moments of quiet before the dog (Zaha) and my partner return.

10pm: Night-time in full swing— —Calm— —

I love this season's episodes of *RuPaul's Drag Race*— —I also text message with an assortment of friends on the east and west coasts while watching the show. Check on our flight to Milan. Order a few books for some new friends who have relocated here from Italy and Norway; these newly immigrated "white" friends who have no idea the real history here (Ummm, even grown Americans have had a terrible education on the fundamentals of HERE— —yikes) these friends who ask, "What can I do?" I start with *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, and *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*— —basics.... (Pray that they will keep reading after these recommendations and tell them to start there...basic American history). Pour tea and scan online for some more Morrison articles and soundbites.

11pm: Finish this season of *Drag Race*. (Mainstream now— —for sure, creatively inspiring still— —yes!) I loved watching Silky, Yvie, and Ms. Vanjie especially, though glad that Yvie won (work in progress) and yes, her dad is very, very attractive (her mom too, she didn't get the same love online as the dad though.... patriarchal society....). Yvie out of drag resembles an ex of mine, (but that's another story)....

12am: Lights dim, love up on the lover, lights out.