Crisis in the Gallery: Curation and the Praxis of Justice

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The story is [...] we are still talking/thinking about diversity, inclusion, multiculturalism (conversations that started three or four decades ago) when we need conversations about cultural equity, cultural democracy, cultural justice. We are still talking about a paradigm shift when, in reality, we are often engaged in (unspoken) power struggles. We are fighting a revolutionary struggle on two battlefronts with a two-edged sword: the need to build, support, sustain community-based/culturally-grounded/culturally-specific institutions on one hand; and opening up opportunities for board participation/employment opportunities in 'major/mainstream' organizations on the other.

Baraka Sele

Colonial Distortion

What does a radically inclusive curatorial practice look like? How does this practice become a lived experience that moves beyond the predominantly white cultural institutional frame? Throughout my travels in Europe, Canada, and the United States, I have consistently encountered a lack of supportive inclusionary cultural spaces for individuals who identify as trans*, queer, disabled, Black, indigenous, and/or people of color. Performance curators and audiences alike ask me the same question in regards to creating more inclusive spaces for people who exist outside the sphere of white cisgender hetero-normality and ability: how do we begin to break the border between art and culture to allow diverse audiences to feel more welcomed inside predominantly white spaces? In her blog post, *Policy Briefing: Towards a Decolonial Curatorial Practice*, the independent curator and educator Chandra Frank makes a case to broaden and decolonize modern curatorial practices by altering the current conventional predominantly white structural frames of curation:

> "A decolonial curatorial process is committed to undoing coloniality that is embedded in the existence of the Western museum space, and disrupts the power dynamics that lie beneath the development of exhibition making. This commitment creates an environment where the incorporation of alternative epistemologies becomes a core part of the politics of curation. That said, the application of this informed process requires the curator and the institution to contribute to the unearthing of hidden histories." (Frank 2015)

Before I discovered the language to identify my curatorial practice, I found the act of organizing performance, exhibition, and the humanities fascinating because of my consistent impulse to focus my thinking within Black study and artistic communities. My first job, as a teen usher, was at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan. For me, that museum was a place of refuge, mentorship,

employment, professional development, and community. It sparked my engagement in "conversations about cultural equity, cultural democracy, cultural justice" (Sele 2017). I understand my curatorial practice today because of the foundation I gained within those museum walls.

As I have grown to define it, curating is a practice that requires "unearthing" hidden histories to reveal social structures and creative practices through *oblique or slant* readings of modernity both inside and outside the cultural institution. Curating involves selecting, organizing, and presenting live works, objects, and ideas to realize the possibility for one's own imagination (and perhaps spark the imagination of others); curation shares embodied practices and resources to centralize new cultural production, and practice radically inclusive strategies that heal, induce care, and support multiple expressions of freedom for all people.

Unfortunately, due to embedded systems of coloniality, this curatorial ideology is not a standard practice. The concept of care as it pertains to curatorial practice simply cannot co-exist within this "perverted logic" (Fanon) of racialized institutionalized power. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon writes about the distortive effects of colonization:

"Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it." (1963: 210)

With this understanding of the corrosive effects of colonization and the crisis located within institutions of the American project, I am left with a series of inescapable questions. How does care operate as an essential part of survivalist tactics and freedom strategies for diasporic people? How does predominant whiteness distort curatorial praxis? Are predominantly white institutions (PWIs) actually able to care for Black and other "minoritarian" (Muñoz 1999) people? How do we curate health in the wake of such overwhelming tribulation?

If alternative decolonial epistemologies are to become a core part of the politics of curating, practitioners within the field must be willing to wield a paradigm shift within their institutions (as they relate to education, activism, and the sustenance of culture).

A commitment to undoing colonial structures within curatorial practice must be a central goal for those in positions of power if we are ever to realize radically inclusive cultural spaces for *all* people.

Curation, when practiced with radical care at its foundation, is inevitably inclusionary and holds itself accountable for oversights and omissions. American scholar Nicole Martin speaks to this point in her essay *Rep'ing Blackness: Curating Performance as a Practice of Radical Care*, where she outlines a series of radical care attributes: "Radical care does not shy away from the unfamiliar. Radical care is unamused with ego and considers community the cornerstone of practice. Radical care is gracious, healing, and affirming" (Martin 2015: 56).

In my own independent curatorial projects such as *Black Male Revisited*: *Experimental Representations Through the Ephemeral Form* (2014), *legible/illegible: opening beyond the space of identities* (2015), *Imaging Justice for the Dark Divine* (2015), and, most recently, *The Blood Was On Their Shoulders* (2017), I have worked to institute these same strategies of collective care and inclusivity by centering the voices of women, queer, trans*, indigenous, and people of color (QTIPOC) artist-curators, allowing us, as an ensemble, to frame the curatorial rationale and presentation of these projects.

To create this inclusive curatorial ideology, hereby named Socio-Choreological Mapping (SCM), I draw from my academic performance studies in complexity theory and Emergent Improvisation (under the tutelage of Susan Sgorbati at Bennington College). I am also influenced by the concept of "choreology", coined in 1955 by dance theorist and mathematician Rudolf Benesh with dancer Joan Benesh – his wife – to notate movement systems in the body (cf. Kando 2016).

SCM is a framework for situating how people *move* together, document, communicate, and archive themselves in the world. Bridging the concepts of choreology (or the practice of movement study and notation) with Emergent Improvisation (dynamic, self-organizing systems operating in open-ended environments), I focus my research specifically inside a Black/minoritarian social context to identify how QTIPOC

realize their own freedom strategies both within and outside of spaces that have been historically foreclosed to them.

Decentralization of a single stakeholder or leader and collaboration with members of the local community is fundamental to the curatorial ethics and inclusive application of SCM. It is critical because it allows the behaviors of Socio-Choreological Mapping to have the nuance, reverberation, and emergent complexity needed to empower any person seeking to participate within a shared goal or project. The versatility of decentralized systems allows multiple points of entry within the digital world, the physical world, and the psychic/theoretical world. A self-proclaimed activist can tweet, write, march in protest, create a mural or theatrical work, all as legitimate notated and/or archived personal forms of performed collective protest.

Clear examples of SCM ideological application can be found in trans-digital reality and social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #TransIsBeautiful and #GirlsLikeUs. These examples, when considered through the lens of performative movement actions created by Black and queer women of color, decentralize the voice of one single curator. In identifying Socio-Choreological Mapping as a conceptual framework for inclusivity, it has become clear that the role of the curator is deeply situated within the practice and sustainability of care (both for self and others). Some examples of projects that centralize care and serve as examples of how the model of SCM works successfully in partnership with various institutions include *The Gathering* (a project created by Camille A. Brown that has been held at New York Live Arts and Gibney Dance among other locations), *Dancing While Black* (a project created by Paloma McGregor that has collaborated with institution such as Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance and Brooklyn Arts Exchange), and *Dancing for Justice* (a project created by Brittany L. Williams with team members based in Trinidad & Tobago, Miami, Detroit, and DC). These curatorial projects encourage deep collaboration between institutions and artists/activists allowing new voices to enter the institutional frame and cause much needed disruption.

My goal in writing this paper – as artist, academic, and curator – is to implicate SCM as a curatorial framework considering care as a technology derived from centuries of documented and undocumented fugitive knowledge while providing case studies that highlight value systems that are integral to the SCM conceptual frame. I argue for SCM as a healthy alternative for the creation of radically inclusive care-giving within the dominant culture of the art world. I ask my readership to consider if we – as members of the cultural sector and global citizens invested in the resistance against white supremacy and coloniality – are actively committed to providing the socially engaged artist-activist with the sustained resources needed to continue creating the intersectionally collaborative socio-choreological maps "that when followed will liberate us" (hooks 2011).

Fugitive Survival

Before I knew who I was, my being was already rendered into a social construct that understands me to be non-human, invisible, illegible, criminal, disposable, trauma-stricken, policed, a thug, a nigger, a negro, colored, an incomprehensibly Black fugitive. But even as these labels mark my past and present, I choose how they obtain the power to mark my future. Black theory allows a space for infinite imaginative performance and psychic experience to occur. It allows escape, refusal, transgression, and practices of freedom to be felt and materialized in the body, transmitted into action through creative forms of expression and activism. As a Black artist-curator I am a remarkable expression of freedom and futurity risen from a stolen past. The practice of creating and curating live performance is deeply intertwined with the ability to dream limitlessly and, as a result, create the maps that can articulate the possibilities for a liberated society.

I like to imagine: what if my ancestors had not been colonized, reinvented, labeled, and rendered marginal? What if the diseased illusion of race had never become a preordained performance assigned to my body, and all bodies alike, for generations? What performance of self might I be able to engender had those before me been curated into a condition of freedom instead of enslavement?

Knowing loss is an epistemology located in my blood memory. My Black being came into existence within an American context where loss is an epigenetic system embedded in the DNA of how I have come to understand the performance of my identity. The strains trace back to my father's too frequent disappearing acts and sudden death. They take the shape of my 22-year-old brother who was murdered outside a 7-Eleven in Denver, Colorado. In the alcoholic tears and schizophrenic episodes that led to my mother's premature death at the age of 36. I know loss because my entire immediate family is dead, and so every day I live in the wake of that ultimate truth.

Blackness, "the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption [...], a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity" (Moten 2003: 1) forces us to imagine new experimental ways of practicing joy "in the wake of loss" (Sharpe 2016) because one is never quite at ease in the world. Always forced to live on the edge, Black life is constantly in the throes of the avant-garde, always considering new imaginative methods of being because it is constantly negotiating the obstacle of being. From popular music to visual art to literature, Black people habitually conjure care, magic, medicinal potions, stories, and other anecdotes of Black joy and survival for the world to eventually consume and/or shun. Black artists are vital to the contemporary cultural discourse now more than ever before. The cultural production that we offer the public domain is integral to the healing of *all* people as we attempt to navigate through this turbulent atypical political moment in world history known as the Trump administration.

In bringing attention to the crisis in the gallery that plagues the art sector within the US and Western world cultures, I return to one of my leading questions for researching this idea of self-care as a curatorial practice. What can Black thought teach *all* people about living, being, and creating meaning in a world where "we were never meant to survive" (Lorde 1995)? The SCM concept is a framework I needed to locate because I had to develop a strategy for my own survival in the wake of immense loss; a strategy that might translate into various communities and creative practices. Learning how to exist inside this wake, how to do the work

of the wake (cf. Sharpe) allowed me to begin identifying SCM, and as a result, allowed me to find new meaning within my life's work as an artist-curator.

But for my Socio-Choreological Mapping concept to be applied successfully within the cultural institution, more inclusionary practices within the arts field must occur. A reorganized methodology surrounding the consistent and highly problematic implementation of "predominant whiteness" (Wethers 2015: 15) must transpire within the field before a dynamic socio-choreological map can be realized.

The statistics are not surprising. According to a 2017 report by the Museum Board Leadership, "93 percent of museum directors are white, as are 92.6 percent of board chairs and 89.3 percent of board members." But even with this crisis of non-inclusivity ever present, I believe most white people working in cultural institutions recognize the importance of diversity both within and outside of the art sector. The issue, in my opinion, goes far beyond the concept of "creating diversity" within predominantly white spaces.

While many enlightened white contemporary curators and artistic directors know the importance of incorporating Black and other minoritarian voices into their staffs, exhibitions, and performance planning, much of the art world is still managed under a structurally violent white supremacist's doctrine that ordains European aesthetics and creativity as the highest level of intellectual/conceptual rigor.

What I am arguing for is a revision in the way we care and support individuals who are QTIPOC once they arrive within the walls of the predominantly white institution. No matter the capacity (staff member, artist, audience, board member), I question if the modern American white institution is actually capable of delivering the kind of care and hospitality needed to sustain members of minoritarian communities who have been forced to work within spaces where the white gaze (and its corresponding micro-aggressions) are endured on a daily basis.

In response to this cultural erasure, many artists of color have created their own strategies and managed to become far less dependent on cultural institutions. The internet has changed the way visual and performance art is experienced. The mainstream distribution of the internet has allowed multiple artists a platform to challenge the structural racism within

the art field. Today, contemporary Black experimentalists can work online and/or in other audio-visual mediums to push their work towards greater public consumption, and in some cases, monetize their work without the backing of an established cultural institution. Digital platforms circumvent the institution as mediator, connecting the artist directly with public.

Experimental Black artists such as Juliana Huxtable, M. Lamar, IMMA, and Jacolby Satterwhite have created significant audiences for themselves online. Their hyper-afro-queer futuristic online personas situate them within an alternative, multi-layered mystique generating a dynamic digital following. These artists use their bodies – sometimes as sexual subjects, sometimes as radical racial metaphors – to bridge the gap between "high" and "low" art, pop and avant-garde, all the while connecting their work and ideas directly to audiences as a means to distribute their work to the public regardless of gallery or venue representation.

When so many lives are hanging by a thread, I am forced to consider the role of radical care and decoloniality even more closely. What is the connection between curation and larger societal issues? How do artists of color curate spaces, environments, and communities that are brave enough to bring to light the sociopolitical issues of the contemporary moment? It is the role of curators and artists to concern themselves with these questions. As cultural citizens, I believe it is our duty to respond to these circumstances. Most curators and artists of color have a deep knowing and practice of this. Whereas many of those operating within white dominant culture, who have positioned themselves under the cloak of whiteness and neoliberalism, are just becoming 'woke' to the urgency of the matter now that many of their civil rights are also in danger. Arguably, it may be the historical lack of social engagement, political investment, and the delusion of national socio-economic progression among white curators and cultural producers in positions of power within most institutions throughout the US and the Western world that landed us in this crisis of monotonous curatorial praxis and vague cultural understanding in the first place.

In a time when financial and educational resources in the arts are universally scarce, if contemporary institutions are to remain

embedded in the criticality of current artistic concerns, then they must be in constant discourse with artists, producers, and curators who are on the horizon, self-taught, outsider, minority, and independent. Now more than ever before, individuals are in control of their experiences, carefully curating the cultural content which they ordain as most important to their lives (as displayed most concretely by social media), and so the role of the art institution of the future is to create more spaces for this kind of experiential, innovative, horizontal interaction to take place without judgment, prejudice, and highbrow critique. Because "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde [1984] 2007: 110), in order to implement the real work of diversity, inclusion, and radical care, cultural hubs must meet Black and Brown people with new inclusive strategies that center their needs and concerns. Institutions must be willing to work with and alongside communities of color to create programming that speak specifically to the concerns of those communities. The tools and frameworks used to support the work of socially engaged artists need to be just as multilayered, dynamic, and radical as the work itself.

Hand over your old tools and allow those who exist on the outskirts to enter into the center! Watch and listen! Curators and presenters can no longer use passé systems to support work and make hires if their institutions are to remain vital for decades into the future. The American cultural infrastructure has spent hundreds of years mastering barriers that facilitate non-inclusion and segregation to locate, intrigue, and attract white, wealthy prospects. Now it is time to devote the same amount of energy to centralize the "dark divine" (hooks 2011) and gain the trust and attention of disabled communities, QTIPOC communities and the like, allowing them the cultural equity, support, and care they deserve!

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