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## ***Museums, Academy and Call-out Culture: A Defense***

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In her searing article "Enough Already with the Statements of 'Solidarity,' Arts World," Kaisha S. Johnson narrates four incidents in which attempts by institutions to advance their equity practices, diversify their programming, or make their granting processes more equitable failed repeatedly for seemingly administrative or procedural reasons.<sup>1</sup> Through specific examples, Johnson focuses our attention on how the vehicles of philanthropy and the bureaucratic mechanism that distribute these funds predetermine exclusion on the decision-making and receiving ends. "You need money to raise money," is how I summarized it for my students. "It ensures that individuals or organizations who do not have the infrastructures, or reserve resources, are left out of the game and the access it affords to influence change." My complementary example of unpaid internships was instantly understood. For most of them, Johnson's assertion that the recent flood of solidarity statements with Black people is disingenuous resonated deeply. Coupled with tokenism, amnesia, or other examples of marginalization that Johnson makes tangible, the financial and social prerequisites to participate in the cultural field form the sieve of white supremacy. As a step in the struggle, I propose to foster a culture of accountability by harnessing a healthy call-out culture.

But this story is not about how well I understand institutional flaws or how woke I am. It isn't even about my core belief that the ability to bring about meaningful change is contingent upon a redistribution of resources and a new economy. This is actually a story of an act of exclusion over which I inadvertently presided. Inadvertent, because the outcome was in many ways the opposite of my intentions. Inadvertent, also, because it was shaped by such variable circumstances as collaboration, institutional constraint, and the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. I took responsibility for it nevertheless, because if we are to work through the thicket of reality, then someone is going to have to embody the discourse and be accountable for its failures.

So what happened? The story is that my museum studies students, led by Jillian Marriage, at California State University, Long Beach put together a symposium called "[Forms of Reparations: The Museum & Restorative Justice](#)," which initially proposed to deal with the state of decolonization in museums. With endless work invested in the project, we nevertheless collectively overlooked the fact that our university is [on the sacred ground of Puvunga](#), and that our campus Native American Graves Protection Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) lab, managed by Cindi Alvitre, is considered a museum because it holds ancestral remains. We thus put under erasure the real work done by our colleagues in

American Indian Studies (AIS), whose communities invented the very terms we were appropriating via academic channels. It advanced, as professor Craig Stone courageously pointed out to me, a careerist art world-centered lens over the radical local work done day in and day out. This was not an incidental oversight. It signaled what, for museum studies, is more than a curricular problem—a failure of interdisciplinary commitment, my failure to apply the very criticality I teach about, to look beyond the limited margins of my methodologies and field.

So why did the oversight take place? In effect, the symposium was a response to events that took place in 2018, when university administration fundamentally misunderstood a project by Conceptual artist lauren woods. The artist’s transformation of the University Art Museum into [American Monument](#) led to the concomitant firing of the museum director Kimberli Meyer, who invited the artist and collaborated with her on the project, and subsequently to the “pausing” of the project itself.<sup>2</sup> An ongoing nomadic monument and archive documenting the loss of African American and Black lives to police brutality, this living artwork is a platform for analyzing the construction of race, material violence, and structural power. The loss of the first iteration of *American Monument* was traumatic for our BIPOC (Black and Indigenous, People of Color) students, many of whom worked on the process leading up to the exhibition, requesting materials via the Freedom of Information Act and engaging the archives in a profound educational and transformative experience. They formed a group called Concerned Students of Color and battled the university administration to reinstate Meyer and the exhibition, to no avail. Their request for a symposium was passed on to the next generation of students, who then accepted the responsibility to keep this specific discussion going.

“So why aren’t you telling it like it is?” my colleague, Stone, exclaimed. In reality, my students and I had succumbed to implicit and explicit pressure by university administrators and the new museum director to move on. To avoid confrontation, we cloaked our intentions under the larger umbrella of museum protest today. We invited several curators and administrators who have been fired or mistreated for bringing oppositional or radical perspectives to larger institutions, but we did not necessarily make the connection implicit. Ultimately, conversations led to rewriting the symposium description and planning future collaborations with AIS.

This article is an attempt to observe my mistakes by using the “[maps](#)” created by colleagues of color. Implying the potential for advancement, maps are an apt description Dr. Porchia Moore gives to a long list of resource handbooks, annotated bibliographies, and a host of initiatives authored by museum professionals of color to guide institutions and individuals in anti-racist work. As a post on the *Mass Action* blog tells us:

On June 10, in a powerful call to action, wrapped in an elegant cartography metaphor, Dr. Porchia Moore underscored this disconnect between the statements and lived experience. She describes how museum professionals (often those with less access to structural power, and often BIPOC) have been creating “maps” for institutions to use to drive systemic change, and yet most of these efforts have been silenced—or perhaps even worse: tolerated enough to survive but not supported enough to thrive.<sup>3</sup>

Moore gives concrete examples listing what needs to change. But, as is becoming more obvious than ever before, a system based on the philanthropic excesses of capitalist society

will not facilitate the anti-racist structural overhaul, because capitalism depends on racism to ensure wide availability of cheap labor and now essential workers.

But we do not have time to wait for structural change. As a system of oppression, racism is inextricably linked to economic exploitation. We therefore need to combat racism concretely—that is, demographically and programmatically—in order to be able to imagine and advance the structural change we need.

If I was able to listen to what my Long Beach colleagues had to say, it is because when I turn in the other direction and face my white colleagues, I have similar, or at least somewhat equivalent, insight. As someone who is probably not a woman of color, but otherwise not white, I can best describe myself at this point in time, and in the American context, as a Jewish person with a foreign-sounding name who appears white to some people but not to others. In the context of my campus, where less than 18% of the student body identify as white, but the vast majority of the faculty do, students at the very least see me as an ally, if not simply a member of the non-white collective. Not only do my students share with me their grievances about their experience of our campus as an arena of white society and our faculty as white teachers; their confidence adds up to pressure on me to be their emissary, to do something about the perpetuation of the white supremacy we all see.

Straddling both sides, I can see with brutal clarity why and how things do not change. The institutional demand and the tendency of individuals is to self-congratulate. The university system of self-reporting for promotion perpetuates praise and reassurance of performance, while the reality of philanthropy or other forms of grant-dependency mandates constant proof of positive advancement. We craft our answers to get more money. We talk about criticality as we enact complicity.

For things to change, I need to put in an enormous amount of work, which, as in this case, leaves me vulnerable to criticism. It is also my duty to place myself in the uncomfortable place of pointing out mistakes to my colleagues. This soils the positive and celebratory atmosphere, and worst of all, it creates more work for them, which leads to resentment and potential withdrawal of concrete support. If you ask why the privileged won't lend a hand, it is because examples like mine also have a downward spiral effect. If we want all hands on deck, we need to put pressure on our privileged colleagues, no matter where they are on the hierarchy of privilege, to do the work, too: work on themselves and on behalf of others. It is not surprising that Black and Indigenous people are constantly leaving institutions. The system rewards those who do not try to change it. So how do we break the cycle?

Having survived criticism to tell this story, I want to advocate for an intellectually honest call-out culture, where mistakes are declared and discussed openly. Cancel culture, where a person is shunned, though, should be saved only for obvious and extreme cases: war, big pharma, or prison profiteers. On another scale, museum leadership called out on perpetuating white-supremacy, even if inadvertently, should also step down. But otherwise we cannot advance without mistakes. We need to call mistakes out and then cut some slack for recovery. To always be right is to be petrified. To see and, ideally, follow the maps our colleagues offer, we must first remove the fear of criticism.

The process of criticism was painful for me; very strong words were used, and my failure was paraded for all to see. But the only possible cure commenced with me seeing the burden that my failure placed on my critics. It was them carrying the load of the work. The lesson I

learned is to ask whose land are we on and to reach out to our host in the planning of the event. We need to address the limits of our methodology to recognize the work done by other stakeholders. To reframe our vision for the future, we start by fostering a culture of accountability, where expression of anger and disappointment can be openly discussed and accelerate solutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Kaisha S. Johnson, “Enough Already with the Statements of ‘Solidarity,’ Arts World,” June 5, 2020, <https://medium.com/@kaijohnson1/enough-already-with-the-statements-of-solidarity-arts-world-c2d1ee03e899>.

<sup>2</sup> Nizan Shaked, “After a Director Is Fired and a Work of Art Paused, We Must Demand Social Justice,” *Hyperallergic*, October 18, 2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/467456/after-a-director-is-fired-and-a-work-of-art-paused-we-must-demand-social-justice>.

<sup>3</sup> “From Statements of Solidarity to Transformative Action & Accountability,” (August 31, 2020), *Mass Action*, blog post, <https://www.museumaction.org/massaction-blog>.