CURATING THE END OF AMERICAN RAPE CULTURE:
RACIAL, SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE,
POWER AND TRANSFORMATION IN INSTITUTIONAL
LANDSCAPES OF CULTURAL MEMORY

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PREFACE

It is necessary to acknowledge the work and individuals that have led me to this writing. This scholarly study has largely been made possible by my community of student-scholars and professors at my alma mater Hampshire College. Thank you for a lively academic rigor that thoughtfully considered the lives of students as something worth fighting to protect. The organizing work that I conducted with my classmates and allied faculty at Hampshire during Action-Awareness Week to create an actively-anti-racist educational institution and the cultural organizing initiating an annual Black History Month Performance have, in part, inspired my direction in my graduate work. I therefore would also like to thank the Five-College Dance and Theater Departments, Djola Branner, Priscilla Paige, Marcus Gardley, and my Division II and III committee members.

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In the present moment, I would like to thank the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance for its support in the development of this thesis, especially the co-founding team of Sam Miller, Pam Tatge, and Judy Hussie-Taylor who engaged me in the inaugural pilot years as a certificate student. I would also like to thank Wesleyan’s Center for the Arts for the remarkable administrative support and for being such welcoming hosts during our intensives. A special thanks to Noémie Solomon for continued encouragement at each step along the way. Another thank you to the faculty at Wesleyan for remarkable coursework, especially Gina Athena Ulysse
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have made sacrifice to make our work possible. Ashé.

In the tradition of Sarah Ahmed’s text *Living a Feminist Life*, let this work embody not a 
prescriptive set of ideals to adopt to address rape culture, but rather serve as a line of ethical 
questions that help spark a commitment to defining a more equitable and just world.
INTRODUCTION

VIOLENCE AS INTERPERSONAL, STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC

I came to the subject of rape due to my personal observation that curatorial institutions lack policies and resources to address rape culture and remain resistant to develop greater capacities for supportive space for survivors of sexual violence. Violence employed as weapon of power is primarily implemented through identity categories of race, gender, class and sex. These identity designations often intersect, forming hierarchies.

In this research thesis, I explore transformative critical pedagogies as applied in contemporary inquiry-based curatorial practice and gallery education within curatorial institutions as a means of intervention and healing the hegemonic pandemic strictures of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy which constitutes American rape culture. I introduce the systemic structures of violence as they relate to my position in my research. I continue onwards to discuss theoretical, art historical and communal contexts of curatorial practice with strategic possibility to end American rape culture. Lastly, I share the methodology of black liberatory systems used in my research and as an emerging curator within a curatorial institution navigating rape culture.

Through interrogation of three curatorial institutions mentioned below, I create a case study on the nature of racial, sexual and gender-based violence in the context of curatorial interventions. My case studies include Bill Cosby-related artifacts and commentary on the National Museum of African American History and Culture Smithsonian’s inaugural exhibition “Taking the Stage,” The 2017 Whitney Biennial’s inclusion of Dana Schutz’s painting Open
Casket (2016), and my first assistant-level institutional curatorial role at The Shed in New York City.

As I write a master’s thesis on the brink and in the aftermath of the election of the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, there is a public resurgence of the symbols of white supremacy alongside a contemporary awareness of the socio-political implications of curatorial practice. Such events take place beyond a single curatorial institution’s historical record, impacting a larger populous that bears witness to the art objects presence, in public spheres as well as within the walls of art galleries and museums that in turn also serve the greater public.

CONTEXT(S): THEORETICAL AND ART HISTORICAL

My work investigates the role in which curatorial institutions are participating in the preservation and regeneration of rape cultures. My goal is to articulate opportunities for interventionist strategies for benevolent cultural change by curatorial institutions. I believe curatorial institutions may participate in the end of American rape culture and its larger host of patriarchal violence.

My research has been informed by critical thinkers on the subjects of race, violence and curating social change. In chapter two of The Will To Change: Men, Masculinity and Love (2004), author bell hooks introduce readers to the name of the larger system in which patriarchy sits. She names the chapter “Understanding Patriarchy” and this system as the “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 29). Here hooks makes the distinction between support for the ideology of change, and support for changing existing structures. hooks writes: “I often tell audiences that if we were to go door-to-door asking if we should end male violence against
women, most people would give their unequivocal support. Then if you told them we can only stop male violence against women by ending male domination, by eradicating patriarchy, they would begin to hesitate, to change their position” (hooks 29). The violence of American rape culture is deeply seated as a central tool of patriarchal violence. In order to eradicate patriarchal violence, each and every one us must sever our complacency to the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

This hesitance to change structures of violence, when one desires an end of violence may seem counter-intuitive. Understanding violence as tool to satisfy a craving to obtain perceived power, may enable us to understand the initial desire hook’s references to stop male violence against women as alleviating the nature of pain in one’s burden of conscience. In this case, living within a violent system allocates various privileges alongside oppressions for all participating subjects.

What functions underlie the tools of the inherent violence of rape culture within the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy? What purpose may this patriarchal violence hooks describes serve? In Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (1997), Saidiya V. Hartman introduces the notion of ‘slave making’ grounded in the constancy of violence, which has been tethered through the process of reconstruction and the humanist movements, as modes of redefining the procedures, strictures and circumstances of the slave class (8). To undergo a genesis project to understand the founding grounds of the United States Nation may also provide vital information regarding the process by which it’s contemporary institutions (arts and cultural institutions included) function. In this way, the past informs the contexts of the present, foregrounding cultural memory as a fabric of meaning-making in contemporary cultural production vis a vis curatorial practice.
In her first chapter “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance,” Hartman examines the role of joy in the chattel slavery economy, as it relates to the figurative capacities for blackness residing in their value anchored in “metaphorical aptitude.” Here she states, “the desire to don, occupy, or possess blackness or the black body as a sentimental resource and/or locus of excess enjoyment is both founded upon and enabled by the material relations of chattel slavery” (Hartman 21). Thus, Hartman provides a succinct analysis of the racial category of blackness as inherently celebrated and enjoyed within the literal material exchange of black flesh through slave trade. Such analysis is crucial for interrogating the realm of aesthetic engagement of identity within the arts which includes artistic and cultural production as exhibited and formulated in the curatorial realm at the site of the art museum, alternative cultural institutions, as well grassroots movements in cultural and artistic production.

Violence may also be understood through examples given in the work of James Tyner’s *Space, Place and Violence: Violence and the Embodied Geographies of Race, Sex and Gender* (2011). Here Tyner states “violence is a social and spatial practice; that direct violence is an act to regulate people through a discipline of space” (XI). Violence has implications on space, and thus how people orient themselves within space.

How may curators – including myself – understand exhibition-making as spatially related to the structures of violence that inform the curators working within the institution’s walls, be they literal walls of a building or the metaphorical structural walls of a collective organization? Exhibition-making is a spatial enactment of actualized ideals, through a temporary manifestation for utopian creative visions to live in an ephemeral present. The creative act of erecting these visions in space re-appropriates the spatialized violence and poses new possibilities for anti-violent post-rape cultural futures.
In terms of art historical examples of exhibitions utilizing violence in curatorial frameworks and art, I return to the 1992-3 Whitney Independent Study Program curatorial project. “The Subject of Rape” exhibition is one of the few examples of curatorial practice inserting itself in the conversation on rape and art. Other notable examples in art history include Suzanne Lacy’s early performance work *Three Weeks in May* (1977). This work focused on exposing the extent of reported rapes in the city Los Angeles, during as the title suggests, three weeks in May of 1977. Authored by Susanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, and two artists known as Ariadne: A Social Art Network, utilized public space as a site of rape. Over thirty events were performed by a range of artists, as well as guerilla sidewalk events, and public self-defense demonstrations. Voluntary women also spoke and shared their experiences with sexual violation within the gallery, utilizing ritual within the gallery space as a grounding structure (Lacy).

Fig. 1. Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May* (1977). Archival Photograph.

Another seminal performance art work invoking a confrontation with American values on consent, violence, and gender is Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964). While Lacy is positioned as a white American woman artist, Ono is a Japanese multimedia artist with a differing approach to performing gender and race as it intersects with American rape culture. In *Cut Piece* Ono positions herself stationary, seated alone on a floor in her fine garments, with a pair of scissors
before her. She provides the audience with the fluxus-derived instruction to take turns using the scissors to cut small segments of her clothing which they are welcome to keep (MoMA 2018 Web). Here Ono is positioning herself as an object to be enacted upon by an audience which slowly strips away her clothing, exposing her material body to be observed. *Cut Piece* alone has been widely written about and has been canonized as a feminist art work, where the art itself allows the audience to observe some of their own choices and behaviors with interacting with women. The context of art provides a particular frame for inquiry and reflection upon these choices then written about and understood over time as the work is often recreated in contemporary contexts, revealing how communities approach this instruction within our imperialist, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. *Cut Piece* therefore functions as a reveal on each audience sample group’s behaviors within the prevalence of American rape culture.

Fig. 2. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece* (1964). The Museum of Modern Art.
In my writing, I work on the shoulders of curatorial interventionists and activists such as the 1992-3 Whitney Independent Study Program curators of “The Subject of Rape” exhibition. In 1992, Monica Chau, Hannah J.L. Feldman, Jennifer Kabat, and Hannah Kruse were selected as the four Helena Rubinstein Fellows of the Whitney Independent Study Program. In their culminating curatorial project, entitled “The Subject of Rape,” they created an ambitious curatorial rationale that engaged the dual nature of “subject,” indicating both a topic, or a theme, as well as an individual affected and informed by a set of theoretical, linguistic, and ideological structures. Rape therefore was addressed as a thematic subject, and an act affecting an individual survivor and as all persons living in a culture where “rape exists as a means of control and violent domination” (Chau 8). Their exhibition dealt with the event of rape itself, and its representation articulated through various artistic voices materialized in different works of art. In addition, the ISP fellows name their concern explicitly:

With the ways in which women and men speak and are heard when they name themselves, the culture in which they live, and the power which structures this culture in specific relation to the event of rape. To speak about rape from such a subject position reinstates these previously silenced voices in societal discourse, a reinstatement that becomes critical in establishing positions of power for marginalized groups. Such an activist curatorial practice aims to both increase the awareness about rape and mark the importance, the possibility, of addressing it, so that ultimately we may work to end it.

(Chau 8-9)

Here lies an opportunity for intervention, to create cultural change through a curatorial concept enacted. Where an intentional relationship with a subject such as rape, being a discursive
topic and person subjected to the act, is represented in art objects and audience members bearing witness. This curatorial model – caring for and considering both art and audience together as a meaningful exchange and essential consideration of the curatorial work – represents an opportunity to directly address and orient a shift toward an end of rape culture. Curatorial institutions can directly address rape culture without a dwelling in its nightmarish qualities. Successful interventions to rape evade the threat of re-traumatization for the public, as they consider care for both objects and people within an institution. This end may be achieved through the process of acknowledgement, which constitutes as a viable structure to affect change. In my writing, I work on the shoulders of the Whitney Independent Study Fellows, as well as all those whose work investigates the role in which curatorial institutions are participating in the preservation and regeneration of rape cultures in order to articulate opportunities for interventionist strategies for benevolent cultural change. Curatorial Institutions here are understood as agents of change, functioning under the combined participation of both artist(s) and cultural worker(s), in a bond which is unique and greater than the sum of its parts.

The United States as well as colonial powers around the world, were founded and made possible by institutions such as genocide, slavery and rape. These institutions are organized around the principles of fear, violence and bodily subjugation and operate via residual reconstructed systems of oppression. The operative process of these institutions is most often cyclical, where the traumas and their initial systems for generation are inherited across generations dating from the founding functions of the United States. These trauma’s compound with new traumas created every day within the cyclical system of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy.
Yet, I believe there is a possibility for something other than the continuation of violence, to be initiated in the imagination present in the arts, communally experienced on the common ground of the constructed curatorial institution(s) of culture. This imaginative power of the arts is a complete force on its own. Just as the will of the people, in protest and policy, is a distinctive force of individuals comprising a complete force as a collective. These collective forces represent opportunities for interventions, to create benevolent futures as a form of ethereal medicine profoundly and uniquely effective when utilized in congress with other modes of healing tailored to an individual’s needs.

For example, a contemporary public audience may very well be informed by the historic tethering of a constant violence Hartman describes and therefore cultural institutions may anticipate audience’s experiences and needs and program accordingly. In the case of the exhibition “Mickalene Thomas: Mentors, Muses, and Celebrities” at the Aspen Art Museum under the leadership of Museum Director Heidi Zuckerman, Domestic Violence and Suicide Prevention specialists were invited to participate in a lunch and discussion focused on how such subjects affect women alongside Thomas’s work (Douglass 1). This sensitivity to the museum’s public became national artworld news, due to its uncommon nature. The support services marked a turn toward a curatorial practice of caring for audience as well as art works, where museums are historically known for an almost exclusive focus on the latter. Simultaneously, it raised questions about audiences present at museums and the reception of racial and gender experiences as they relate to class and geography. Thomas’s work raises different questions or responses in an environment such as Aspen, as opposed to her reception in an environment like her major solo show at the Brooklyn Museum. It is these situational geographic contexts that layer on meaning to art works, as they are tethered by their social impact with the audiences experiencing the
work, and the containers by which curators exhibit the works of art. With such sensitivity, professional healers are brought in anticipating traumas presence and need to be addressed adequately within a curatorial institution.

The sentiment of communal power in healing trauma is echoed in Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.’s text *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2015). Here Bessel outlines many of the operatives of trauma and its prevalence in contemporary life. He states in a closing chapter *Choices to be Made:*

My most profound experience with healing from collective trauma was witnessing the work of South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was based on the central guiding principle of *Ubuntu,* a Xhosa word that denotes sharing what you have, as in ‘My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.’ Ubuntu recognizes that true healing is impossible without recognition of our common humanity and our common destiny (351).

Rape culture must be understood as a collective trauma, as part of the American cultural fabric. Curatorial institutions serve as a tool for the public to experience our world collectively through art, providing an opportunity for an Ubuntu principled communal healing.

The institution of slavery is a founding violence that constructed the vast majority of colonial nations around the world, where bondsmen and bondswomen’s labor generated the wealth that fuels overarching violent colonial structures that govern the modern world. Trauma is a cultural embodiment to the foundation of the United States, entrenched in the corporeal fabrics of its resident’s bodies, minds and social interactions. For instance, in her seminal essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense J. Spillers delves into
the unique condition of African-American socio-political life. Where the [white] American status quo may be ruled by patriarchy, for African-Americans matriarchy is the norm disqualifying individuals from property inheritance rights in ruling class capitalism as parentage to prove the male heir is unfounded (65). I understand Spillers argument as a statement this de-facto matriarchy as crippling what otherwise may be a level playing field for negro assimilation into the white cultural norms via securing capital wealth across generations. Spillers continues on to note “‘Ethnicity’ perceived as a mythical time enables a writer to perform a variety of conceptual moves all at once. Under its hegemony, the human body becomes a defenseless target for rape and veneration, and the body, in its material and abstract phase, a resource for metaphor” (66). Here rape is a given, and the ‘body’ is understood within multiple spheres of meaning created from the distorting nature of this trauma. Spillers continues with her analysis on the African-American captive body and notes the “New-World, diasporic plight marked a theft of the body – a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire” (Spillers 67). These words describe the precarious condition of the dehumanization process that severs terms that traditionally represent human conditions, but which cannot accurately account for the realities within the atrocities actualized by the trans-Atlantic trade. For instance, Spillers continues this expression stating she “would make a distinction in this case between ‘body’ and ‘flesh’ and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberation subject-positions” (Spillers 67). This distinction is useful as we understand processes of agency and the conditions of dehumanization where one is enacted upon as an object like ‘flesh.’ In these examples from Spillers, the effects of such trauma are profoundly felt.
As we study the culture(s) of the nation(s) on shared lands of Northern America, also known by the indigenous as Turtle Island, we may witness the institution of slavery generated the bulk of the wealth in the United States, as well as most colonial institutions across the globe. Healing humanity, and those living within the various scales of humanity offered, is a process that must occur using multiple venues, including curatorial institutions of culture. These trauma-affected nations, indigenous and colonial, in cycles of war and peace, in dynamics of captive and captor, and lives of nomad and settler have traversed these polarized tides and now the possibility for a new, non-binary cycle, dynamic and life has emerged. Curatorial institutions provide an opportunity to reclaim space within settler colonialism, and re-appropriate its usage for critical examinations of cultures, as well as celebrations and affirmations of cultures adversely affected by the oppressive birthing processes of said nations. The process of generating art, which can be a performance of culture despite a complex post-colonial history, is an appropriative gesture in identity reclamation (DeFrantz 5).

Herein lies a possibility for interruption, as well as the simultaneous possibility for the replication of all realities including those primarily rooted in violence. I believe society must accept a collective reorganization of equitable shares of cultural values expressed in the reverence for humanity. Such reorganization routes itself in a system that resituates itself in all directions, and at each level in perceived hierarchies, upheld by the ghosts of their collectively imprinted memory on the cultural psyche. The truth is, the old hierarchical system of the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy has already abandoned us dwellers in the “western” hemisphere. Although this framework of a “western hemisphere” and associated culture has permeated the greater globe, its geographic ideological definition as a region west of the Prime meridian, a line established arbitrarily by the dominant “powers that be” in Europe
created a system to coordinate against the geologically established equator based on the axis of the earth on its rotation around the Sun. The establishment of a prime meridian currently internationally accepted at the point through the Airy transit telescope at the old Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London.

Consider the fact that international agreements for measuring spatial locales in longitude have been defined by a single telescope in London, positioning itself at zero degrees center. This force of western cultural influence informs and illustrates the impact of cultural norms within and far beyond a single society. Western culture is the dominant culture and force within the United States as well. Although this thesis focuses on American rape culture, let this geographic example of power be an indication of the global implications of the cultural value systems, trends and governance within the United States. The analysis of American rape culture thus has implications for international rape dynamics, although the intricacies of theses relations are beyond the scope of this particular thesis.

When the 45th U.S. President made his historic visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture on Tuesday, February 21st, 2017 he pledged to unite a nation divided over race, as well as to elevate the space of the Museum as a site of healing (Trump). It is critical to recognize the relationship between stated intent of an institution and how the goals of public leaders or individuals press upon and merge with an intuition’s self-image. Are museums elevated sites? By whom and for whom?

In this thesis, I also explore the claims of the imperative of democracy, and the nature of what a people demand of their institutions of culture as they stand upon our settled colonial lands, to reflect and produce our systems of value. I wish to ascertain to what degree can an institution be charged with healing a nation with many traumatic histories.
Utilizing the work of bell hooks in her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* I will underscore the uses of departing from systems of oppression, to create new possibilities. hooks references the work of author Gary Zukav in *The Seat of the Soul*, and his work alongside Linda Francis in *The Heart of the Soul*. These texts articulate understandings of layers of feeling, where anger often comes in place of numbness, which masks depths of deep hurt for men (hooks 116). Anger, therefore, often functions as an emotional palimpsest, overwriting authentic feeling, and therefore the inherent humanity and soul of men within the bounds of the *imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy*.

**METHODOLOGY**

As I situate the founding element of contemporary institutional and governing structures with the institution of slavery, I simultaneously recognize the potential to employ models that have succeeded in various modes of subversion, resistance, freedom and liberation as inherit goals when facing the evil perils of bondage. I engage philosophical, corporeal and spatial strategies sourced from the Afro-Brazilian martial art Capoeira. While Capoeira is an art form made popular in nineteenth century Brazil, its linkage to the enslaved Africans correlates to the spiritual metaphors and rituals sourced from Ifá, a Yórùba-based orisha worship divination system, with related lineages in Cuban Lucumí and Haitian Vodou. These systems have been successfully utilized in uprising against enslavement by colonial forces, and forging independence from imperialist empire. Guiding metaphors from these interrelated traditions are used to discuss possibility for institutional interventions in American rape culture.

The technical aspects of my methodology include gathering oral histories of resistance to imperialism by activists, capoeiristas and Ifá worshipers. Although many of my interview
subjects were a part of my chapter on Fred Ho, this work ultimately was released from this thesis so that I may focus on institutional frameworks and less on small-scale artist-led organizations. I have also visited various archival sites, and museums themselves to interact with primary sources related to artists and subjects included within this research thesis paper. My case studies explore agents of change, which function along metaphorical lines of a capoeira jogo. The methodical insertion of capoeira and black liberatory forms, serves as the optimism in maneuvering through rape culture.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Language is a tool that is only as useful as its effectiveness to communicate its intended idea. As words can differ in their application, according to their context, I will offer a few definitions to terms used in my thesis to better define my cause. I offer a few more pointed terms related to the intricacies of the power dynamics involved in American rape c bulture.

*Amelioration* is a concept I am referring to as a benevolent force of increasing or valorizing reverence for humanity. The context in which I use it is related to previous usage laid out in reference to the abolitionist movement in the British West Indies. In Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition (2016), Paula E. Dumas details the varied use of the term by discussing its use as a process by which to raise the standards within the existing structure of colonial slave ownership, as a form of plantation management. However, amelioration did vary in meaning among users. While Dumas claims West Indian colonists coined the term as a form of reinforcement of slavery through improved efficiency (Dumas 4), the humanitarians referred to the word as a form of improving social conditions with reduced racial hierarchy and thus subordination. Essential on both sides, the term was used to exemplify
an effective method to delay or defeat efforts by abolitionists. Those in favor of amelioration positioned slavery as material benefit to both slaves and colonies, in a reformist fashion to improve living conditions for slaves in lieu of granting their freedom. Recognizing this troubling history with the word, I wish to acknowledge, while referencing colonial histories of slavery, I use this word strictly in a benevolent sense although this history is still present and contextualized alongside my chosen usage.

In the case of liberation strategy, *Jogo de Dentro* is a philosophy practiced and expressed in a capoeira game as well as a traditional toque or “rhythm” played on a Berimbau (a bow like percussive instrument used in capoeira). *Jogo de Dentro* means “Inside Game” in English. I use the term in relation to play within structures of imperial powers or empire, to deconstruct the strictures through the game of inside participation. *Jogo de Dentro* is understood alongside *Jogo de Fora*, which translates to “outside game” in English. An iconic Capoeira Angola song is titled “Jogo de Dentro, Joga de Fora,” expressing through its verses translated into English, the beautiful and crafty game of Capoeira Angola, noting in separate versão’s (verses) the inherent beauty of the movement, and then of the beauty within the privilege to play the game itself. Within this thesis, both I and Dave Chappelle play the *Jogo de Dentro* through our maneuvers as curators, Chappelle of mass media, and myself on the emergent scale at The Shed. Chappelle’s narrative throughout this thesis illustrates his initial career being unknown to a figure such as OJ Simpson, while moving toward distance due to patriarchal violence. Chappelle’s angst over Cosby’s centerpiece on the American rape culture narrative cost him the loss of his superhero status, as Chappelle enacts his contribution as a curator of these media events.
Additionally, it is useful to lay out a definition for a central structure organizing the processes outlined in this thesis. Curatorial institution is a term I use in place of the common colloquial reference of cultural institutions. To express the basis for this shift of industry terms, I will use a parallel example of the institution of Print media. Whereas ‘news sources’ such as The New York Times operate under its founding slogan is ‘All The News That's Fit To Print,’ readers must regard the ‘News’ read by that particular publication to represent a curated sample of events within the News, a larger continuous apparatus of events. Therefore, the task of media outlets is to operate within a function of curation, presenting selections of truths with aesthetic alignments, fonts and sizing while maintaining uniformity across issues for the sake of brand recognition. Therefore, media such as The New York Times could arguably receive notoriety around the choices they make as a publication (the true power and agency within the institution), as opposed to representing or being ‘News’. In this sense, I recognize culture to be part of an eternal apparatus, of past, present and future innovations. Institutions that operate as the collectors, exhibitors and preservers of cultural artifacts are in a sense not institutions of culture themselves. They are institutions that enact a set of functions on behalf of culture, the primary function of which is curatorial.

Rape I define for the purposes of this paper as the act of violation where an individual or group forces sexual contact with another person’s genitals through use of force, coercion, or through incapacitation and unable to provide consent for such acts. Rape as it is discussed in a legal setting has a narrower definition, but for the purposes of understanding rape, it is not necessarily that which needs to be proven or substantiated through the U.S. legal system or court of law, but rather is defined on the basis of the engagement or non-engagement of consent between both parties.
This thesis explores the prevalence of rape culture within institutions, and the curator’s responsibility to serve an end of rape culture from within, while engaging figures such as Chappelle who functions as a popular culture curator utilizing the media threads linking across these institutions. By speaking and naming this culture, while engaging and supporting all who survive despite the prevalent violence, we can effectively end rape.
CHAPTER 1

Bill Cosby, Dave Chappelle & “Taking the Stage” at the NMAAHC

Although much-anticipated, the 19\textsuperscript{th} and newest member of the Smithsonian Institution, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) was imbued with controversy upon its inaugural season announcement. When disclosing the inclusion of Bill Cosby–related artifacts in the exhibition “Taking the Stage,” the NMAAHC was immediately faced with pressure from the public—including Patricia Leary Steuer, who holds assault allegations against Cosby—to alter its exhibition program and text to reflect the current political climate calling out sexual abuse by public figures (Bowley “Museum’s Plan”). These public demands were amplified by the scrutiny of the media, foregrounding questions around a curatorial institution’s ethical responsibility to address the representation-related asks of the public they are chartered to serve. The exchange exemplifies the NMAAHC’s role in documenting and historicizing American culture and American rape culture as they pertain to the museum’s permanent exhibitions and collection.

FOUNDING CURATORIAL INSTITUTIONS VALUES WITHIN AMERICAN RAPE CULTURE

The NMAAHC was initially conceived in 2003 with the mission to be a “healing space” intended to commemorate, provoke and celebrate African Americans while achieving relevance for a widened audience (Bowley, “How Do You Tell”). The museum opened on September 24, 2016 with 12 inaugural exhibitions. “Taking the Stage,” “Musical Crossroads,” “Visual Art and
the American Experience,” and “Cultural Expressions” comprise the fourth-floor Culture Galleries and the “Power of Place,” “Making a Way out of No Way,” “Sports Gallery,” and “Military History Gallery” comprise the third-floor Community Galleries. The History Galleries spans concourses one, two and three, including centerpiece exhibitions such as “Slavery and Freedom” (“National Museum”). The breadth of exhibitions marks an institutional narrative aiming to balance themes of African-American achievement, resiliency, and strife, which the museum presented to record-level audiences\(^1\) in an opening period coinciding with Bill Cosby’s publicly observed legal proceedings.

The NMAAHC currently defines itself as metaphorically standing on four pillars:

1. “It provides an opportunity for those who are interested in African American culture to explore and revel in this history through interactive exhibitions

2. It helps all Americans see how their stories, their histories, and their cultures are shaped and informed by global influences

3. It explores what it means to be an American and share how American values like resiliency, optimism, and spirituality are reflected in African American history and culture

4. It serves as a place of collaboration that reaches beyond Washington, D.C. to engage new audiences and to work with the myriad of museums and educational institutions that have explored and preserved this important history well before this museum was created” (“About the Museum”).

\(^1\) 2.4 million visitors in 2017 (“Visitor Statistics”)
“TAKING THE STAGE” AND THE LEGACY OF AN ALLEGED BLACK AMERICAN RAPIST

These outlined goals of the NMAAHC make clear a commitment to exploration and storytelling with a journalistic integrity, enabling the museum experience to be accessible for all visitors. The “Taking the Stage” exhibition feeds directly into the institution’s core mission with a focus on the presentation of African American icons in theatrical performance traditions.

Fig. 3. (left): “Taking the Stage” Title; Fig. 4. (right): Installation photograph of Bert Williams by Katrina De Wees.

Comedy has been a core performance tradition within the African-American art of storytelling. The famous vaudevillian-era comedian Bert Williams is featured within the “Taking the Stage” exhibition for his prominence in the history of African American performance. Williams is quoted next to his own image on the wall, stating, “It was not until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of humor developed” (see fig. 4). Williams’ words allude to the arduous struggle for black humanity during his time of fame, an era of rampant racial stereotyping and inequality (“Bert Williams”). Despite this struggle, Williams’ ability to see himself as human despite denigrating stereotypes allowed great achievements to spring forward in his career with his gift of comedy. Williams’ understanding allowed him to achieve
unprecedented success, which in turn created opportunities for others to succeed, including comedians Bill Cosby and Dave Chappelle.

Bill Cosby has an impressive legacy of achievement with many positive outcomes for the advancement of black entertainers and black culture at large. In relation to the widespread sexual assault allegations, many argue—including the NMAAHC’s Founding Director Lonnie Bunch—“that his [Cosby’s] legacy has been severely damaged” (“Lonnie Bunch on Bill Cosby”). In June 2017, Kyle Kim, Christina Littlefield, and Melissa Etehad created a timeline published in various news sources including *The Los Angeles Times* that overlays Cosby’s achievements with his alleged crimes. The montage-styled narrative complicates the public’s previously perceived history of Cosby’s legacy, rupturing a collective cultural memory of the quintessential black “father figure” with the contemporary narrative alleging serial rape.

Cosby was first accused in civil court in 2005 for the alleged 2004 rape of Andrea Constand in Pennsylvania. The case was settled confidentially with 13 Jane Does who corroborated Constand’s story (Kim). Cosby’s testimony was unsealed in 2015, and prosecutors reopened Constand’s case, catalyzing additional women to step forward with allegations of sexual assault against Cosby. Cosby’s lawyer claimed that racial bias was at play for the first time in 2016, as 12 of the 13 accusers were white (O’Donnell). Race does have implications in the court of law: historically, this has been shown for black men in the famous case of Emmett Till, whom I will discuss further in this and the following chapter. However, it was not simply white woman characterizing Cosby as a rapist, complicating the legal narrative of racial bias. It was another black male comedian named Hannibal Buress who vastly broadened the public’s awareness of Bill Cosby’s status as a rapist when a joke of his went viral on social media. A clip

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of Buress’ joke is available on YouTube with over a million views (“Hannibal Buress Called Bill Cosby a Rapist During a Stand up”).

DAVE CHAPPELLE ON BLACK MEN, RAPE, AND PATRIARCHIAL VIOLENCE

In a related popular comedic tribute, Dave Chappelle elaborately took up the Cosby conundrum in his recent Netflix comedy special, *The Age of Spin: Live at the Hollywood Palladium* (2017). Chappelle orients his special around the four times he met OJ Simpson (another black male figure of patriarchal violence), an organizing principle acknowledged by the press as “brilliant” (Juzwiak).

Chappelle introduces OJ as the African-American National Football League player most well-known for the trial and acquittal of the murders of his former wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ron Goldman, as he laments about Los Angeles police and widespread racism within the criminal justice system. For further context, Chappelle recommends his audience watch the Netflix documentary television series “Making a Murderer,” which depicts convicted murderer Steven Avery’s unprecedented legal troubles despite his whiteness. Although Avery’s legal defense fund totals $250,000, a figure parallel to OJ’s, his case is not resolved in his favor, which Chappelle jokes makes Avery the most troubled white man in the history of the justice system that was designed for him to succeed (*The Age of Spin*).

Chappelle recounts the story of his first encounter with OJ, in which OJ approached the then 18-year-old comedian after a show to praise his performance. Chappelle recalls meeting OJ’s “soon to be slain wife” in the same encounter (*The Age of Spin*). As his act progresses, Chappelle describes his time in a greenroom at the Oscars.

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3 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVALQI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzB8dTVALQI).
In his act, Chappelle introduces two movie producers whom approach him to ask if he has any film ideas. He improvises pitches for two superhero movies, making assumptions about what each producer would like to see based on how Chappelle profiles them. The first is about a gay sous-chef who saves people but is easily forgotten because he continually changes his costume in stereotypical gay fashion, attaining the film’s title, “Same Hero, New Boots” (*The Age of Spin*). The second film idea features a superhero who has the power to save people in disasters yet can only activate this power via light contact (“just a couple of pats”) with a woman’s vagina. Chappelle notes that this hero is unattractive and often short on cash, and therefore does not have easy access to women’s vaginas. Due to the pressures of performing the saving, the hero rapes. Chappelle’s live audience gasps and laughs simultaneously in response. Chappelle interjects that rape is the dilemma for the audience, continuing to state on behalf of the hero that “he rapes, but he saves a lot of lives. And he saves way more than he rapes, and he only rapes to save. But he does rape” (*The Age of Spin*). What does one do with that analogy? Dave Chappelle will get us there later in his comedic journey.

Chappelle continues by recounting his second encounter with OJ, in which OJ, recently released from jail, walked into a restaurant filled with white people in which Chappelle was celebrating a deal with agents. Chappelle couldn’t help but audibly gasp OJ’s name, initiating OJ to walk over to Chappelle, reaching over everyone else at the table to greet him and shake his hand. Although he describes having bonded with ‘The Juice’ as the only other black person in that room, Chappelle could tell that OJ did not remember meeting him the first time and did not take it personally. One of Chappelle’s agents voiced her disgust after OJ left asking Chappelle, “How could you? How could you shake hands with that murderer?” Chappelle responded,
stating, “with all due respect, that murderer ran for over 11,000 yards. And he was acquitted, so fuck it. The glove didn’t fit” (The Age of Spin).

The significance of the exchange between Chappelle and his agent centers on the dilemma of the previously mentioned super hero who saves lives, but rapes. Chappelle’s performance begets the same central question of what to do with black public figures who have contributed valuable assets to society, despite correlated violence, harm and controversy, especially when the legal system does not resolve the question’s political conundrums nor align with a vast majority of the public’s intuitive sense of what truly occurred. The official narrative provided by the justice system is adopted by society at large. Therefore, Chappelle can say “fuck it” and dismiss the reality that a heinous crime may have occurred on the simple basis of the public narrative about a glove’s contour and fit (The Age of Spin). It’s my observation that institutional narratives have significant impact on mass consciousness as it pertains to American rape culture and therefore share a responsibility toward its end. Chappelle utilized the justice system’s institutional narrative in his curated storytelling of current events to highlight how we are all complicit in accepting or believing an institution’s stance on rape culture.

Chappelle describes his third encounter with OJ, which occurred after he finished the second season of Chappelle’s Show at a comedy club called The Improv. Chappelle claimed he kept OJ’s presence quiet during the performance, wanting to prevent a panic among the club’s majority white audience, only acknowledging him with a signal at the end of the show (The Age of Spin). After the performance, OJ appeared in Chappelle’s dressing room, where the two along with Chappelle’s friends shared a long, pleasant conversation. Once OJ left, Chappelle and his friends concluded that, despite OJ’s apparent friendliness, “yeah he did that shit…they felt the murder in the room” (The Age of Spin). Chappelle in this instance is referring to what Focusing
professionals in the field of psychology often refer to as the “felt sense,” a way of knowing by sensing through the wisdom of body (Cornell). This wisdom is highly significant when dealing with violence and assessing one’s safety in a room with another individual.

Body wisdom and the “felt sense” can be useful resources to determine personal understanding and values when external measures such as courts are unable to make a conclusive determination of truth or justice. Consider the individual bodies that gather together to define a curatorial institution’s value systems, be it a digital platform such as Netflix or a new cultural institution such as The Shed. American rape culture impacts each human’s sensitivity to and awareness of rape, enabling an inherent ability to trace its presence on an interpersonal plane. Ancient knowledge systems like the “felt sense” are vital when contemporary civilizations’ systems fail to achieve justice against rape. In many media-heavy cases involving sexual violence and public figures, verdicts are inconclusive, and trials like Bill Cosby’s are dismissed as mistrials or defendants like OJ Simpson are acquitted. The intersecting factors of celebrity, wealth, success, race relations, gender dynamics, and respectability politics convolute impartiality and thus the viability of a jury’s process toward determining justice. To address rape culture, each individual must tune into their “felt sense” as a counterpoint to the institutional narratives that currently enable the cycle of the patriarchal violence.

The Whitney Museum of American Art situated its inaugural exhibition “America Is Hard to See” in the Renzo Piano building as a read on the contemporary American historical moment through art. Dave Chappelle titled his special in similar curatorial vain *The Age of Spin* whereas our time is one where “we don’t even know what we’re looking at” (“America Is Hard to See”) (*The Age of Spin*). Therefore, publics have turned to the curatorial institutions that participate in the representational politics of these alleged agents of patriarchal violence as a
measure to determine outcomes of justice alongside each individual’s “felt sense.” It is therefore imperative for curatorial institutions, by way of the individuals who make up these institutions, to operate from an intellectual and sense-oriented ethical stance that furthers the process of achieving an end to American rape culture. This requires each individual within an institution to state clearly what they did within that institution, to enable collective understanding of our complicity with the systemic dynamics of patriarchal violence.

Chappelle’s *The Age of Spin* comedy special allows the audience to travel with him in his process of evaluating truths and personal beliefs around other black men’s patriarchal violence. We begin with Chappelle as he first engages with the celebrity OJ as an emerging comedian; as he later defends “The Juice” to dissenting agents; and as he and his friends collectively affirm their belief that OJ did commit murder, despite the acquittal in trial, their admiration for his athletic achievement, and his kindness and levity in conversation. Chappelle utilizes his positionality as a storyteller and comedian to curate an intervention in the narrative that black male achievement exists alongside black male violence. Chappelle does this while showing his own slowed process recognizing OJ’s and Cosby’s patriarchal violence due to his own admiration of these black men who have supported and made his work possible by their achievements. Here Chappelle implicates himself in his criticism of black male complacency in patriarchal violence, while asking us to understand his shortcomings with compassion.

Chappelle goes on to contemplate society at large, and its state of constant traumatic events unraveling the difficulty of coming of age in contemporary society when so much is unknown or difficult. Chappelle identifies a cultural history of controversies, serial police shootings, public bombings, and assassinations, the shifting economics in which women gained independent income post-World War II, the civil rights movement, and an altered collective
consciousness as a result of a government agency testing mind control drugs that ended up expanding minds. Chappelle then claims, “while all this is happening, Bill Cosby raped 54 people!” (*The Age of Spin*).

Chappelle emphasizes the extreme nature of these numbers. “If he had raped 30 less people, that’s still two dozen rapes!” (*The Age of Spin*). Chappelle counts the bonus hours of sleep involved, totaling over 600 hours of rape. Noting it only takes 65 hours to get a pilots’ license, Chappelle remarks that if we equate rapes with aircrafts then Cosby “would be top gun for sure” (*The Age of Spin*). Chappelle recalls another recent show of his in Syracuse at which he spoke at length about Cosby, triggering a white woman to interrupt his act to claim that he is “a fucking asshole for saying these things” (*The Age of Spin*). Although Chappelle agreed with her statements, he drew the line when she equated her suffering as a woman with his own. Cosby continues to talk about the nature of empathy, and that he cares for Cosby’s alleged victims. Chappelle asks his audience to consider what it is like for him, a 42-year-old black comedian, to learn that Cosby—obviously a hero of his—may have done something so heinous. Chappelle admits that he didn’t want to believe the allegations, thinking that these women must simply want to destroy Cosby’s rich legacy. When the number of alleged sexual assaults became greater than 30, Chappelle thought that probably only 10 or 12 of the women were telling the truth (*The Age of Spin*), accounting for the slow process of acceptance coinciding with denial.

Bill Cosby has a legacy that Chappelle notes is impossible to neglect. In *The Age of Spin*, Chappelle states:

I’ve never met Bill Cosby, so I’m not defending him. Let’s just remember that he has a valuable legacy that I can’t just throw away. I remember that he’s the first black man to ever win an Emmy in television. I also remember that he’s the first guy to make a cartoon
with black characters where their lips and noses were drawn proportionately. I remember that he had a television show that got numbers equivalent to the Super Bowl every Thursday night. And I remember that he partnered up with a clinical psychologist to make sure that there was not one negative image of African Americans on his show. I’m telling you, that’s no small thing. I’ve had a television show. I wouldn’t have done that shit.

He gave tens of millions of dollars to African American institutions of higher learning and is directly responsible for thousands of black kids going to college. Not just the ones he raped.

Here comes the kicker, you ready? Here’s the fact that I heard, but haven’t confirmed. I heard that when Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and said he had a dream, he was speaking into a P.A. system that Bill Cosby paid for. So, you understand what I’m saying? The point is this: He rapes, but he saves. And he saves more than he rapes. But he probably does rape (Juzwiak).

Cosby supported numerous institutions of higher learning and is personally responsible for sending thousands of black children to college, to which Chappelle interjects, “not just the one’s he raped.” The line breaks into the layers of complexity involved with men like Cosby, who serve a noble purpose in society yet bring about much harm. The question, then, is how do we tell this complex, layered story of a figure like Bill Cosby, whose relationship to his craft is simultaneously linked to his positive cultural impact and to allegations of his sexual misconduct and violence toward women? The difficulty of such duality is a reality we all must sit with: the truth that those with powers to do good also abuse those same powers.
In the Chappelle analogy, the ethical value of “do not rape” could very well apply. A single superhero need not be the one doing all the saving when his actions cause harm. I would argue that, without money to trade into sex work or the charm or attractiveness for casual hookups, this superhero’s ability to save may only be activated by the power of consensual sexual relations with a woman. The event where a woman enables the life-saving “superhero” gift of a man positions the original gift and “superpower” as her consent. Yet, the question Chappelle asks the audience to ponder is: is there an acceptable ratio of raping vs. saving? In the value system of ending American rape culture, it is imperative to state it’s not the superhero’s job to rape to stop a building on fire, but rather a fire department’s job to save without causing undue harm to life. There is no acceptable ratio with rape in the equation.

Dave Chappelle’s joke alludes to the satirical and provocative activism of The Yes Men, who in 2005, infiltrated a financial conference by impersonating Dow Chemical company members after the Bhopal disaster⁴. They delivered a presentation on “acceptable risk,” providing a golden skeleton mascot devised from a ratio weighing loss of human life against an acceptable profit margin. The Yes Men position the audience’s complacency valuing profit over life as the ethical deficit. The last recorded exchange at the conference features an audience member clarifying the model was about loss of human life while stating he found presentation “refreshing” (“Yes Men”). These actions by The Yes Men (and Chappelle’s use of satire) are akin to the practice of malandragem in capoeira, a form a trickery highly useful to navigate away from treachery by mirroring aspects of the treachery itself. In order to end American rape culture, we need not entertain justifications for patriarchal violence, and wholeheartedly commit

⁴ [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUE9-vROYuU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUE9-vROYuU)
to eliminating rape and value the sanctity of human life by naming and revealing those who rape understanding the act of naming as its own treachery.

The power of comedy as a form of storytelling to reflect on our cultural moment is striking in the case of Dave Chappelle. He tackles some of the most difficult subjects and makes them possible to discuss by providing a reference point outside of the dialogue taking place within the media and criminal justice system.

The fourth time Dave Chappelle encountered OJ, he was in Los Angeles with Chris Tucker. This was after Chappelle had quit Chappelle’s Show, and he and Tucker were both “missing” (The Age of Spin). OJ asked if he could take a photograph with both of them, and at the same time they both said “No.” Chappelle said, “Sorry Juice, my career is too flimsy to survive a picture with you” (The Age of Spin). Chappelle’s refusal of OJ’s photo request illustrates the dynamic of being tainted by association. The initial instinct Chappelle had to bond with OJ in their second meeting despite the trial had died down with time and perspective on OJ’s presence as a black male in contemporary society. It is now in Chappelle’s best interest to create distance, rather than extend his hand to OJ. Although Chappelle discusses OJ and Cosby at length, he uses his voice as a black male orator on black culture to narrate the violence of patriarchy in a method that compassionately addresses his own hesitance to initially recognize and speak up for justice. Largely, the superhero concept creates a false relationship to our understanding of helping others. Those who do great in society also have the potential to do harm, and often both co-exist. It is the responsibility of curators of cultural memory in our curatorial institutions to recount these narratives with accuracy and balance, as Chappelle has done in his comedy special.
BILL COSBY, RAPE AND THE NMAAHC

Bill Cosby is recognized in the National Museum of African American History and Culture for his work on *The Cosby Show*, most notably in a single archival display on the ground level. The text acknowledges the breadth of allegations against Bill Cosby for sexual misconduct and notes that they have had serious repercussions on his “reputation.”

Cosby himself has invested in numerous cultural institutions, including the NMAAHC. The “Taking the Stage” exhibition is described by the Smithsonian in the following format: “Taking the Stage explores the history of African Americans in theater, film, and television to celebrate their creative achievements, demonstrate their cultural impact, and illuminate their struggles for artistic freedom and equal representation” (“Taking the Stage”).

On March 31, 2016, NMAAHC founding director Lonnie Bunch made the following public statement in regard to “Taking the Stage:”

There have been many misconceptions and mistaken notions about the presence of Bill Cosby within the National Museum of African American History and Culture’s exhibition, “Taking the Stage,” that explores the history of African American participation in film, theatre and television. This is not an exhibition that “honors or celebrates” Bill Cosby but one that acknowledges his role, among many others, in American entertainment . . . Like all of history, our interpretation of Bill Cosby is a work in progress, something that will continue to evolve as new evidence and insights come to the fore. Visitors will leave the exhibition knowing more about Mr. Cosby’s impact on American entertainment, while recognizing that his legacy has been severely damaged by the recent accusations (“Lonnie Bunch on Bill Cosby”).
Fig. 5. (top) & Fig. 6. (left): “Taking the Stage” installation photographs; Fig. 7. (right): Detail photograph by Katrina De Wees.
The exhibition’s early criticism came from the idea that including artifacts would have indicated a celebration of Bill Cosby at the time of the rape trials while instead the institution takes a stance of defending its choice of inclusion and tempering the reality of the overall institution including two artifacts related to Bill Cosby in a single exhibition, among over 30 exhibitions and thousands of art objects and artifacts. Therefore, the publicity associating the institution and Bill Cosby, may have created a skewed perception of the reality for a visitor experience.

“Taking the Stage” is part of the NMAAHC’s top-floor Culture Galleries. Upon entering this floor from the elevators, visitors enter a round with four exhibition experiences. The building designed by “Lead designer David Adjaye and lead architect Philip Freelon, together with their architectural team Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup, won an international competition in April 2009 to design and deliver the museum to the people of the United States” (“The Building”).

Within the context of “Taking the Stage,” Cosby as a figure is iconic to the African American presence on film and television, his inclusion in the exhibition is warranted. The choice in the curatorial work to minimize his inclusion to two artifacts was also tasteful, and the mention of his rape allegations alongside those artifacts allows for connections with the contemporary audience by acknowledging his historical impact as it relates to the present.

“Taking the Stage” as well as the exhibition “Making a Way Out of No Way” were both curated by Kathleen Kendrick, former curator at the Smithsonian National Museum for American History and now curator at the NMAAH (“Kathleen Kendrick”). Both of these exhibitions indicate a sense of the indomitable spirit inherent in African American history, with “Making a Way” focusing more on instances of activism and social progress, whereas “Taking the Stage” focuses primarily on obstacles in the performing arts arena and the significance of
advancements within that arena for the progress of African American society as a whole, through the vehicle of representation as positive affirmation.

**BLACK MALE ENTERTAINERS WITHIN PATRIARCHIAL AMERICAN RAPE CULTURE**

The significance of looking at one black contemporary performer discussing the reality of another black performer is intrinsic to Chappelle’s as well as the NMAAHC’s curated historical narratives. Dave Chappelle and Chris Tucker respectfully declining to take a photo with OJ on the basis of their careers being too flimsy makes a point clear: the actions of our black public figures have an effect on society at large as well as on other blacks in the field. This was first acknowledged in the third sighting when he saw OJ in a crowd and kept it quiet, only to later engage in private conversation with OJ in the green room, after which Chappelle’s friends felt a sense of OJ’s murderous activity. OJ was no longer someone Chappelle would associate himself with. OJ no longer was a figure who upheld the virtues of the African American experience, and Chappelle’s interest in advancing himself and the race meant a decision to distance himself from OJ publicly.

In the context of a public institution that acknowledges history, it is a choice for an institution to associate itself with a controversial individual who has committed violence or harm. In the case of Bill Cosby, his mention in the NMAAHC’s “Taking the Stage” was necessary in relation to the history of African Americans in film, television and performance. However, his presence in this exhibition was minimized in relation to the reality of his image in tandem with the numerous allegations of sexual misconduct.

Chappelle laments that Cosby was a personal hero of his. For Chappelle’s generation, Cosby represented a safe father figure for African American achievement. His professional
presence granted him a degree of trust. One can argue that Cosby consistently abused this trust, as evidenced by the cases of alleged sexual misconduct. Just as Cosby’s celebrity identity lent him trust, OJ Simpson’s celebrity identity lent him credibility. Dave Chappelle, as another black male and beneficiary of many of their public actions, also lives a life a bit removed from consequences of the law: he jokes about his experiences evading speeding tickets while also living in fear of racial violence. Within American rape culture, these realities overlap and intersect with the violence these men inflict upon women.

Cosby was facing criminal charges of aggravated indecent assault against Andrea Constand, a former Temple University basketball staffer who alleges Cosby drugged and sexually assaulted her in 2004 outside his home in Philadelphia. Montgomery County judge Steven T. O’Neill declared the case a mistrial after the Jury was unable to reach a unanimous decision (“From Alleged Assault”). Although this case involved a single woman, numerous women came forward during the case to share allegations that Cosby had also raped and drugged them. The named women presenting allegations of assault include: Sunni Welles, Kristina Ruehli, Carla Ferrigno, Linda Joy Traitz, Joan Tarshis, Cindra Ladd, Linda Brown, Victoria Valentino, Autumn Burns, Louisa Moritz, Tamara Green, Colleen Hughes, Linda Ridgeway, Helen Hayes, Kathy McKee, Judy Huth, Marcella Tate, Margie Shapiro, Therese Serignese, Sarita Butterfield, Patricia Leary Steuer, Joyce Emmons, PJ Masten, Linda Kirkpatrick, Renita Chaney Hill, Janice Dickinson, Janice Baker Kinney, Beth Ferrier, Heidi Thomas, Barbara Bowman, Rebecca Lynn Neal, Beverly Johnson, Sammie Mays, Chelan Lasha, Helen Gumpel, Jewel Allison, Jennifer “Kaya” Thompson, Lise-Lotte Lublin, Edin Tirl, Lili Bernard, Kacey, Angela Leslie, and Chloe Goins (“Bill Cosby: A 50-year”).
The NMAAHC’s “Taking the Stage” exhibition includes reference to Cosby’s presence in The Black Stuntmen’s Association as well as his role in *The Cosby Show*. Chappelle reminds the audience that *The Cosby Show* was a pinnacle for black entertainment in the fact that Cosby partnered with a psychologist Alvin Francis Poussaint, to ensure that there were no negative portrayals of African Americans on the program. The *Los Angeles Times* issued a chronology of when Cosby’s alleged victims claim assault took place with Cosby’s accomplishments overlaid, to portray in real time the public celebration alongside the degradation of these women’s lives. The violence to women by black men is apparent both in Cosby and OJ’s actions, and Chappelle provides an opportunity to pair their celebrity and impact on society through his curated storyline.

Recently in 2017 numerous allegations came out against film producer Harvey Weinstein, accusing him of abusing his power in the film industry to help women advance their careers. The parallels between Cosby and Weinstein are striking. The voices coming out about assault are emerging en masse (“Harvey Weinstein Paid Off”).

Dave Chappelle released *The Age of Spin: Dave Chappelle Live at the Hollywood Palladium* and *Deep in the Heart of Texas: Dave Chappelle Live at Austin City Limits* on Netflix on March 21, 2017 (*The Age of Spin, Deep in The Heart*). These specials were filmed right after the height of Cosby’s rape allegations and his trial in criminal court. Dave Chappelle released his final comedy special of the trilogy titled *Dave Chappelle: Equanimity* on Netflix on December 31, 2017.
CURATORIAL INSTITUTIONAL STATEMENTS ON RAPE CULTURE

Previously, in 2014, another Smithsonian institution, The National Museum for African Art (NMAA), created an exhibition called “Conversations: African and African American Artworks in Dialogue,” which included a third of its art objects from the private collection of Bill and his wife Camille Cosby. The NMAA issued a public statement as the “Conversations” exhibition continued into 2015, when court records of Andrea Constand’s 2005 charges were unsealed resulting in an outpour of other women accusing Cosby of assault.

The message the Smithsonian posted was a significant account and is included below:

A Message to Our Visitors about This Exhibition

Allegations that publicly surfaced when we opened this exhibition in November 2014, now combined with recent revelations about Bill Cosby's behavior, cast a negative light on what should be a joyful exploration of African and African American art in this gallery.

The National Museum of African Art in no way condones Mr. Cosby's behavior. We continue to present Conversations: African and African American Artworks in Dialogue because it is fundamentally about the artworks and the artists who created them, not Mr. Cosby.

Most of the objects are from the permanent collection of the National Museum of African Art. About one-third are on loan from Camille and Bill Cosby. Though the exhibition does recognize their role in assembling those works, the purpose of the exhibition is to examine the interplay of artistic creativity in African and African American art — something that has been part of our museum's history since our founding more than 50 years ago. The exhibition brings public attention to artists whose art has not
been seen, art that tells powerful and poignant stories about African American experiences.

We invite you, our valued visitors, to provide your comments in the Visitor Book we have placed in the hallway at the exit to this exhibition. You can also email your comments. This exhibition closes January 24. (“Message to Our Visitors”).

The significance of the NMAA’s institutional statement is that there is an implicit consideration of the exhibition’s audience, the viewer. It directly requests feedback in the form of comments from viewers on their way out. The NMAA gives value to their audience’s experience in this statement by soliciting their feedback. The practice of considering the viewer does not in this case require a removal of the objects in question, as the art itself tells an important story by being seen for the first time in a public setting (“Bill and Camille Cosby”). This interaction with the public is what situates the significance of the exhibition as well as the power of curatorial institution. The Smithsonian institution would be remiss to not graciously consider this interaction in its planning. The interactive exchange enables meaningful reflection by engaging inquiry via prompted commentary. The commentary engages the public in a process of institutional meaning-making within the curatorial institution’s historical record, thus co-creating cultural memory with the public. This is an interventionist opportunity, where inquiry can be utilized to redirect American rape culture toward its end in concert with the public.

In the case of the NMAAHc, as a new Smithsonian Institution with a differing relationship to Cosby, the decision of curator Kathleen Kendrick was to reduce the number of Bill Cosby-related artifacts included in the “Taking the Stage” exhibition, and to mention the allegations of sexual assault in the exhibition’s text. The fact is that sexual assault allegations
against Cosby do exist. These allegations cannot be ignored and have meaning when experiencing the “Taking the Stage” exhibition’s work in every printed label naming Bill Cosby.

Fig. 8. “Taking the Stage: TV Pioneers,” installation shot by Katrina De Wees.

Fig. 9. “Taking the Stage: TV Pioneers,” detail photograph by Katrina De Wees.
I take particular interest in the questions the NMAAHC faced as it opened. Although part of the existing Smithsonian Institution network, the NMAAHC has established a unique mission and made choices to publicly define its institutional identity. My work at The Shed, New York City’s newest cultural institution dedicated to commissioning and presenting art of all disciplines, carries a task similar to that of the NMAAHC, as it also embarks on establishing its mission and institutional framework through programmatic and curatorial choices. As we work toward our opening in spring 2019, we have outlined our institutional values and inaugural artist season. We have made some revisions considering the cultural landscape, and seized opportunities to balance various thought leaders on staff to build a curatorial program that reflects aspects of cultural diversity within New York City. However, the responsibility and commitment to ending American rape culture has not been made explicit by the institution’s values, and therefore the work to end it continues by individuals on the inside utilizing the jogo de dentro principle. The possibility to end American rape culture may best be understood with additional analysis of curatorial practice alongside the following chapters on the Whitney Museum of American Art, concluding with my work at The Shed.

In Dave Chappelle: Equanimity, a special recorded in Washington, D.C., Chappelle introduces the Emmett Till story as central to the fabric of American history, and his casket is currently on view in the NMAAHC in the special exhibition in the lowest level. In the next chapter, I will discuss Emmett Till through Dana Schutz’s Open Casket, a painting representing Till’s disfigured body, which showed as part of the Whitney’s curated narrative of contemporary society through art.
CHAPTER 2

Open Casket & The 2017 Whitney Biennial

Each curatorial institution harbors a unique organizational framework to generate exhibitions in alignment with its mission and institutional identity. The National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. faced public scrutiny prior to their inaugural season opening due to controversy on exhibiting art objects celebrating Bill Cosby and his legacy alongside numerous unresolved allegations of rape. Public uproar (or controversy) also fell upon the Whitney Museum of American Art shortly following the opening of its 2017 Biennial, which included the painting *Open Casket* (2016) by Dana Schutz. A group of artists and historians claimed that the painting, which depicted the murdered and disfigured body of Emmett Till, unjustly served as a spectacle of black suffering at the monetary gain of a white artist. The 2017 Biennial was the Whitney’s first in their new Renzo Piano designed building in New York’s Meatpacking District.

Although both public institutions, the NMAAHC is a federally funded venture, while the Whitney is a non-profit museum with investments from private foundations and local city government. Both institutions also rely heavily on private investments tallying millions from capital campaigns as evidenced in public record (“Founding Donors;” PricewaterhouseCoopers 17). Institutional funding often dictates accountability in the form of return on the investment in the service of public good. How do institutions respond to public protests that challenge an

5 “The City’s investment of capital funding of $52,000,000 obligated the Museum to operate the Museum’s building project (“Project”) for the benefit of the people of the City of New York as a not-for-profit world-class art museum or for such other cultural, educational or artistic uses and/or related purposes approved by the City for a period of thirty (30) years from the completion of the Project” (PricewaterhouseCoopers 17).
institution’s values and ethics as they pertain to social justice? How do such protests relate to an institution’s mission and to the approval of public funding agencies in terms of investment (PricewatersCoopers 17)? The curatorial practice that governs cultural institutions is linked to a history of exclusions that art institutions address within a two-tiered system of museum practice: mainstream cultural institutions, and those that are culturally-specific (Cahan 10). Often, culturally-specific institutions serve as launchpads for mainstream institutions’ curatorial inclusions of artists of color, a dichotomy that maintains a level of inequity in regard to funding streams and opportunities for artists of color. When mainstream museums include artists of color, they often do so in the form of a solo exhibition. This limits the opportunities available to most artists of color, in turn limiting the inclusionary effort (Cahan 10).

In Beyond Objecthood: The Exhibition as Critical Form since 1968, author James Voorhies introduces the movement known as “New Institutionalism,” which explores the rise of spectatorship as distinct from relational aesthetics within the trending blockbuster exhibition practice. He states:

This emphasis on the spectator coincided with the rise of the blockbuster exhibition and the need to rely on private sources for funding, which together assigned greater significance to the spectator’s presence. The economy associated with these mass audiences that turn out for large, entertaining activities has become one of the driving factors behind cities’, countries’, foundations’, and corporations’ effort to capitalize on the commercial value of the spectator—a practice that was in full force by the late 1990s and early 2000s. (Voorhies 17-18)

Here it is important to keep in mind the monetary value of spectatorship, in relation to the symbolism of Emmett Till given his place in the legacy of lynching in the United States.
Lynching as an American practice is defined by communal spectatorship of black death, gatherings including hundreds or thousands (Wood 1).

The 2017 Whitney Biennial, on view March 17–June 11, was the seventy-eighth installment of what the Whitney acclaims as the “longest-running survey of American Art” (Whitney Biennial, 2017). The 2017 Biennial was co-curated by Christopher Y. Lew, Associate Curator at the Whitney, and Mia Locks, an independent curator. The Whitney typically pairs an internal institutional curator with an external curator who may or may not work institutionally. Independent curators rarely land the opportunity to curate an exhibition as prestigious as the Whitney Biennial. Increasingly commonplace in the art market, independent curators generally offer lower-cost services and specialized knowledge within avant-garde artist networks to which institutional curators traditionally lack exposure (Milgrom). Mia Locks, although hired as an independent curator, has an institutional curatorial history. She had previously worked with Christopher Lew on exhibitions at MoMA PS1 and held a curatorial position at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, positioning her both within and outside the traditions of the institutional curatorial field. The 2017 Biennial’s co-curators, both early-career, were thought to bring a “new and fresh perspective” to the museum (Neuendorf). The Whitney’s Chief Curator Scott Rothkopf also led an advisory team for the Biennial that included “Negar Azimi, a senior editor at Bidoun; Gean Moreno, the artistic director of Miami arts nonprofit Cannonball; Aily Nash, a film curator; and Wendy Yao, a publisher and bookseller who helped start Ooga Booga and 356 Mission in Los Angeles” (Russeth). This team in full generated the iconic 2017 Biennial.

The 2017 Whitney Biennial featured work by sixty-three individuals and collectives. However, in this chapter I will focus on the inclusion of Dana Schutz’s painting *Open Casket* as
it relates to the larger survey exhibition and institutional context. An open letter by British artist and writer Hannah Black called for the painting’s destruction, due to its impropriety and offensiveness. Simultaneously, African-American artist Parker Bright protested the work by physically blocking it from view with his body in the exhibition gallery. The protest caught the attention of social media, raising the visibility of both the intervention and Black’s letter which Bright also signed (Goldstein). Black’s letter initiated dialogue around the meaning of black suffering and the ethical responsibility of museums in representing racialized violence. The introduction of Black’s letter is included below:

To the curators and staff of the Whitney biennial:

I am writing to ask you to remove Dana Schutz’s painting “Open Casket” and with the urgent recommendation that the painting be destroyed and not entered into any market or museum.

As you know, this painting depicts the dead body of 14-year-old Emmett Till in the open casket that his mother chose, saying, “Let the people see what I’ve seen.” That even the disfigured corpse of a child was not sufficient to move the white gaze from its habitual cold calculation is evident daily and in a myriad of ways, not least the fact that this painting exists at all. In brief: the painting should not be acceptable to anyone who cares or pretends to care about Black people because it is not acceptable for a white person to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun, though the practice has been normalized for a long time. (Greenberger, “Painting Must Go”)

Black’s letter describes a rationale behind the repeated request for the removal and destruction of the Open Casket painting. This letter was published on artnews, co-signed by a wide network of artists including: Amal Alhaag, Andrea Arrubla, Hannah Assebe, Thea Ballard, Anwar Batte,

Co-signatory Parker Bright positioned himself in the galleries in protest for up to 4 hours at a single time. In conversation with the artist after a protest shift, Bright disclosed his time was paid for by a crowd funding campaign that supported the activist gesture (Bright). His presence was later acknowledged by the Whitney’s president Adam Weinberg as he addressed the public in a discussion on race and representation, which I will discuss further in the next section of this chapter.

Fig. 10. Parker Bright protesting Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket*. Photograph by Scott W.H. Young (@HEISCOTT) (Greenberger, “Painting Must Go”).
Emmett Till is a historic figure who was lynched by a group of white men. In her essay “Black-Authored Lynching Drama’s Challenge to Theater History,” Koritha Mitchell states, “Lynching, as an anti-Black form of political terrorism, was a distinctly post-emancipation phenomenon. Whites suffered financial losses whenever a slave died, but once blacks were no longer chattels, there was no incentive to avoid killing them” (Mitchell 87). The economic stance Mitchell identifies on the value of black life signifies the lesser value of an emancipated or freed black man, thus emphasizing the danger of working toward liberation as it decimates prospects for survival within white supremacy. Till’s lynching exemplifies the precarity of freedom when it signifies a threat to white dominance.

In regard to curatorial propriety of representations of racial violence mentioned in Hannah Black’s letter, Roger Smith in A Pedagogy of Witnessing: Curatorial Practice and the Pursuit of Social Justice (2014) introduces a chapter titled “The Curatorial Work of Exhibiting Archival Photographs of Lynching in America” with a statement on ethics: “In his discussion of curatorial ethics, Hernández-Navarro insightfully argues that ‘every institution speaks and shows itself through its exhibitions.’ On these terms, a curatorial project animates an institution to speak while also speaking for it. In this respect, a curatorial project cannot fully escape the demand that it is representing an institution and attempting to fulfill its desires (e.g., engaging its mandate, securing its legitimacy, maintaining its currency)” (Smith 75). Smith, borrowing from the art historian and author Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro’s curatorial ethics, locates responsibility and agency within institutional curatorial practice to demonstrate an institution’s values. Smith thoughtfully selects this quote for demonstrating an institution’s values inherently include its mandate for self-preservation of legitimate power. Therefore, the curatorial decisions in the 2017
Whitney Biennial are intrinsically linked to the Whitney’s institutional identity and goals. The curatorial choice to include an artistic representation of a lynched Emmett Till reflects the lack of critical consideration on the part of both the individuals and the institution responsible for the Biennial’s curatorial conception.

Responsible curation does take into account representations of violence within an exhibition. The 1992-3 Helena Rubenstein Fellows of the Whitney Independent Study Program state in *The Subject of Rape* that they:

> Decided not to exhibit art that visually recreated moments of rape or imaged rape as a metaphorical structure. Integral to this desire is the wish to present rape itself as a *specific* cultural construction enabled within a larger set of institutions that work to guarantee misdistributions of power, rather than present it as a necessary fact of women’s lives. (10)

Here it is evident that the curators realized the ethics of representation and how a presentation of a violated human may reinforce aspects of lived violence due to a lack of interrogation. When depicting acts of horror upon a human subject, it is important to complicate the relationship of violence to the realities that make it possible. Schutz’s abstraction of Emmett Till’s body may depict a reality of the past, but it fails to question how that past came into existence. As a result, the painting reifies that reality at a time in which lynching in the form of police and state-sanctioned violence on unarmed black men is commonplace (“U.S. police killings”). As a Whitney Biennial traditionally reflects the time of its curation, it is necessary to complicate the reality of constant trauma in order to intervene with alternatives for a benevolent future.

One may argue that an audience’s response cannot be conceived of before an exhibition is public. Curator Adrienne Edwards, recently appointed as Curator of Performance at The Whitney (Greenberger, “Adrienne Edwards”), gained critical acclaim for her 2016 exhibition
“Blackness in Abstraction” at Pace Gallery in New York (Kerr). In an interview with Dylan Kerr for Artspace, Edwards speaks to her background in performance studies and curation, understanding performance as a lens in her approach to visual culture and art. She describes the effect the works in “Blackness in Abstraction”—many of which vibrate with the color black—have on the bodies that bear witness to them. Her vivid description reminds me of the boldness of performance works by Black Arts Movement playwright Ed Bullins, namely his theatrical piece *The Theme Is Blackness* (1966), in which the lights were turned off in a theater so that blackness itself could be experienced by an audience (Bullins 209). One of the most famous capoeira Mestre’s Vicente Ferreira Pastinha who codified Capoeira Angola into its contemporary form, experienced blindness late into his life. Despite the blackness which consumed his sight, his knowledge of the form allowed him to play capoeira competitively within the familiar structure of the *roda* (Almeida 78). Such indicates the limitless potential within darkness, an inversion of circumstance capoeiristas call *bananeira* within a game (*jogo*).

Adrienne Edwards describes her curatorial practice as observing interactions once an audience shows up in a room with art objects, in true performative fashion. Edwards states, “I try to look at objects in relation to how they perform or what they do in the world.” Kerr responds that “It seems like the show is about developing something from these conversations rather than just reorienting objects in the space,” to which Edwards responds, “Totally, totally” (Kerr). This is to note that a curatorial methodology that considers performance as a relevant lens to view art objects in art history allows for the possibility that a work’s meaning does not simply land when an artist may have realized an idea in a formal object. The meaning of a work is activated through the exchange with the public that takes place in the live exhibition environment. In an
interview for *culture type* with Victoria Valentine, Edwards shares more about “Blackness in Abstraction:”

—the fact that this color is so deeply theatrical… I am interested in what these works do, what it does, the color, I mean. My interest in performance became transferred. Rather than a live spectacle experience, it became about how that work of art itself performed, which is simply to say how it presents itself and then how it elicits something from the viewer, so that there is some kind of exchange. There is a different kind of dynamic and that is different for every individual who is in front of it and different for every piece of work that is encountered. (Valentine)

Edwards here speaks to the performativity of art objects, restating the significance of reading a viewer’s response to an art object as part and parcel of how we understand the art work. The performative acts of protest to *Open Casket* allowed the Whitney to realize how the work spoke once the public entered the room. How aware was the Whitney of its audience, given its relocation to the Meatpacking District in downtown Manhattan? The public’s response to *Open Casket* triggered two significant changes to the 2017 Biennial’s initial curatorial program.

The first of these adjustments included a public conversation with the Racial Imaginary Institute featuring a series of panelists as well as a Q&A with esteemed cultural thinkers in the audience, archived and live-streamed on Facebook. In the second shift, the Whitney provided additional wall text next to Schutz’s *Open Casket* painting, recognizing the protests to the work.

The Whitney Biennial’s wall text introduces the program, established in 1932, as an event that “has often been a site for critical discussions about contemporary art, while providing an opportunity for deep thinking and reflection on the broader cultural concerns of a given
historical moment.” The curators of the 2017 Biennial continue with the following curatorial statement:

This Biennial arrives at a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics, and many works in the exhibition challenge us to consider how these realities affect our senses of self and community. Throughout the exhibition, artists test the limits of timeworn structures and protocols, claim space for direct experience and personal agency, and create alternate zones or worlds. Some spotlight particular social issues, such as financial debt, violence, or access to equal opportunities, while others model imaginative ways of relating to history and place or represent the importance of reverence for the land. Still others embolden the pleasures of slow contemplation or formal abstraction, inviting us to pause and pose questions in a tumultuous world.

(Whitney Museum)

Fig. 11. Installation view of 2017 Whitney Biennial (Floor 5), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 17–June 11, 2017. Photograph by Matthew Carasella.
In order to engage with the “deep thinking” and “reflection” it claims as the Biennial’s intention, the Whitney seems to have relied on the impulses and responses of its public to inspire and, in some cases, demand these discussions. The site of the museum becomes activated by it’s public.

The choice to include *Open Casket* in the 2017 Biennial was in line with a curatorial thread highlighting the contemporary art market’s return to painting, as well as Schutz’s technical ability to abstract concepts and emotive forms across multiple paintings within the Biennial. When I initially viewed the work, I saw it was quite small. Hung relatively low, the painting required viewers look down, as if looking upon a body lowered into a casket. The painting illustrated a resemblance to a human form, juxtaposing formal dress with a disfigured face. Till’s face was smeared with retexturized brush strokes, morphing his skin into darkened, reddened, muddied browns on a polygonal palate entrenched in sharp shifting depths. Although there were overt hints to the troubling disfigured materiality of Till’s face, I found the image fell flat conveying more than depths of color, missing a connection to the significance of his identity and historical narrative. Upon first glance, I recognized Schutz’s material, surface-layer investigation involved in the generation of the art work as well as its placement in the gallery adjacent to other works engaging black and brown people such as Maya Stovall, Harold Mendez while hung against the wall leading into Kamasi Washington’s sound and video installation.

**PREVIOUS BIENNIAL CONTEXT**

Like the 2017 Biennial, the 2014 Biennial received an outcry from the public, including a protest staged by participating artist group the Yams Collective whom decided to withdraw their art from the event. The primary catalyst for public outrage was the decision to include work
by Joe Scanlan, whose *Donelle Woolford* project depicted a fictional African-American artist hired to enact the vision of her black identity as dictated by the white male artist Scanlan. The *Donelle Woolford* project sparked deep debate about race, class, and privilege in the art world, and about the Whitney’s institutional complicity with white supremacy. Joe Scanlan, a self-identified white cis-gendered male, engaged *Donelle Woolford* in a creative exercise to explore what he terms “willful white male idiocy” (Wong).

![Image](image.png)


In response to including Scanlan’s work. In the 2014 Biennial, and the Yam’s collective’s withdrawal, the Whitney as a cultural institution began to receive public critiques of institutional white supremacy embedded in the museum’s values and curatorial work (Davis). This critique in a large part may have led to a 2017 Biennial curated by two curators of color for the first time in the institution’s history. In this particular case, the curators, both Asian-American, fell into the same tone-deaf practices of what I term *curatorial insensitivity to the black body and personhood*. The insensitivity to the legacy of corporeal trauma on the black
body and iconographic racist imagery was raised by an audience member at the Whitney’s public program on April 9, 2017:

“I’ve been really thinking about whether justice can be achieved through an image. This subject makes me very emotional. I did not grow up in America, I’m not American. And the first time I saw that image my stomach flipped. Obviously that picture was allowed because we, humanity needed to think about justice. And I think that is one word that I haven’t heard enough tonight. I say that because, constantly putting Emmett Till’s picture up as the image that was taken, or as a painting means that we are still protecting the person who lied. And I find it interesting that Carolyn Bryant’s name doesn’t come up enough in this, because she is responsible for what happened to that boy. And I think that we need to start naming those who are lying every day instead of perpetually showing the image of those who can no longer speak for themselves. And so, to me, focus should be shifted away from the boy who needs to rest in peace and his family who needs to finish grieving, and from the color of our skin and to start asking, why did you lie? And why is your image protected?” (“Perspectives on Race” 2:01:47)

This audience member’s comments are precisely the line of questioning needed in a curatorial presentation of Emmett Till. What is the purpose of showing the disfigured body of a lynched black boy? What does that symbolize for the contemporary art audience? These questions are pertinent to a twenty-first-century museum practice. Today, more than ever, Bryant’s lie exemplifies the fatal impact of white supremacy’s fear of black male sexuality. How can you recreate his torture and present his image, which symbolizes the cultural trauma of a narrative of false rape given credibility by the word of a white woman over that of a black boy? What would it mean to interrogate the depiction of the violence of white supremacy by
attributing that violence to its source: the lie and all artists and curatorial projects that protect the liar’s image?

What is the role of the curator in these discussions on the ethics of race and representation? Do artists share responsibility in the consideration of these themes? The bringing together of these sixty-three works of art in the 2017 Whitney Biennial tells an aesthetic story of contemporary American art and American culture. For an institution that claims to value discussion, the Whitney seemed ill prepared to engage in conversation. This is due to the method by which the Whitney uses the materiality and subject of blackness without adequately including black artists, thus contributing to their erasure. The parallels between Schutz’s use of blackness as a white artist, and Joe Scanlan’s use of blackness as a white artist in the 2014 biennial speaks to a curatorial through line reflective of the white supremacist tendencies within the Whitney Museum (Davis).

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING AS RESPONSE

The 2017 Whitney Biennial’s public program responding to protests of Schutz’s painting was a conversation entitled Perspectives on Race and Representation: An Evening with the Racial Imaginary Institute. The conversation was held on Sunday, April 9, 2017 at 7:30pm on the Whitney’s first floor in Kenneth C. Griffin Hall. For an unplanned program, this occurred swiftly, effectively and was timed in an accessible window so that guests with traditional work schedules may attend. Adam D. Weinberg, the Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney Museum, introduced the conversation and its moderator, Claudia Rankine of the Racial Imaginary Institute. The evening included contributions from Elizabeth Alexander, Christopher Benson, LeRonn P. Brooks, Ken Chen, Malik Gaines, Lyle Ashton Harris, Terrance Hayes, Ajay
Adam Weinberg began his introduction by first introducing himself, continuing on to state, “When the 2017 Biennial opened, just over three weeks ago, seems like a lot longer, the exhibition touched a nerve against the backdrop of the current political climate. This year’s Biennial and the responses to it have ignited a debate about the ethics of representation, and the responsibility of artists and museums in addressing race and violence” (“Perspectives on Race” 00:00:21 – 00:00:43). Weinberg acknowledges Parker Bright’s protest and Hannah Black’s open letter as crucial catalysts for the organization of that night’s conversation, noting that, although they as well as Schutz declined to speak at the event, the conversation is intended to be open for debate. Weinberg continues:

The Whitney Biennial historically has been a challenging exhibition. And no Biennial stands apart from the critical responses to it, whether they are positive or negative. This program reflects the Museum’s commitment to taking these criticisms seriously and inviting conversations even when they are difficult ones. Tonight, like many of you, I am here to listen and to learn. Museums like the Whitney can play an important role in this particular moment in the United States. They serve many audiences who bring different expectations and desires by displaying the works of artists with divergent points of view. Exhibitions like the Biennial do not simply mirror the world around us. They create a space in which it can be reimagined. I am honored and grateful to Claudia Rankine for joining us in this dialogue and helping to convene tonight’s distinguished group of speakers. (“Perspectives on Race” 00:01:27 – 00:02:22)
Weinberg then acknowledges Rankine’s awards, including her recently announced 2017 Guggenheim Fellowship and accolades for her book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), which uses prose, poetry and visual images to investigate the ways in which racism is present in everyday life. He continues by describing Rankine’s work with the Racial Imaginary Institute. When Claudia Rankine introduces the Racial Imaginary Institute, she acknowledges:

Our name ‘Racial Imaginary’ is meant to capture the enduring truth of race. It is an invented concept that nevertheless operates with extraordinary force in our daily lives, limiting our movements and imaginations. We understand that perceptions, resources, rights, and lives themselves flow along racial lines that confront some of us with restrictions and give others un-interrogated power. These lines are drawn and maintained by white dominance, even as individuals and communities alike continually challenge them. Because no spared life is untouched by race, the Racial Imaginary Institute convenes a cultural laboratory in which the Racial Imaginaries of our time and place are engaged, read, countered, contextualized and demystified . . . We are committed to the activation of a democratized exploration of race in our lives. This is why I am pleased we are all here to think publicly about the ways race plays in this year’s Biennial. Your presence today is a step towards making our conversations anti-racist endeavors. Endeavors where we respect each and every one who speaks, with the understanding that feelings are tied to a cultural knowing, which is experienced differently by each of us.”

(“Perspectives on Race” 00:04:18 – 00:06:02)

Here Rankine positions the primacy of race in the everyday, reconfirming the necessity of the Whitney’s discussion without directly acknowledging the entire public program’s initial
oversight. Rankine graciously serves her role as the esteemed host, offering legitimacy to the intellectual concepts of race without providing an institutional critique of how the subjects of race and representation have or have not landed within the Whitney’s curatorial awareness. As a moderator, she effectively withholds her perspective but perhaps her choice (or the Whitney’s choice and her compliance) toward neutrality perpetuates a discursive culture cocooned in the realm of ideas, devoid of action. How might an activist idea move toward an active step toward change? How does anti-racism move from a concept, to a practice? I believe it is the work of artists such as Parker Bright and Hannah Black, that call a command of action to address inequity and thus activate an anti-racist practice.


Rankine completes her quote referencing the significance of feelings being tied to a cultural knowing. Consider the theatrical functionality of Bright’s protest as a public objection to anti-black racism within a hotbed of white supremacy. His protest was driven by the certainty of the violence he viscerally recognized as a black man (Bright). Saidiya Hartman states in her
analysis of slave making: “‘The very dangerous evil’ of slavery and, in particular, the crimes of the slave trade were well suited to the stage of melodrama. The crime of the trade was seen as a crime of the heart—‘the outrages of feelings and affection.’…Thus when one is considering the crimes of slavery, the popular theater is as central as the courthouse” (Hartman 27). In the context of Hartman’s analysis, Bright’s performative protest is remarkably relevant to the historical record of anti-racist action. Within the metaphoric capoeira game, this moment of reassessment is known as a chamada, where two players pause and trace the edges of the roda for what appears to be a theatrical dance. This is a moment where two players reposition themselves, and cunningly trick one another to re-enter the game in a revised context. When you don’t like how a table is set, you can flip over the table.

THE PUBLIC ROLE OF THE CURATORIAL INSTITUTION

The placement of art has implications for the public when curatorial institutions serve the public both inside and outside of its walls. In a 2002 interview with Carolee Thea, curator Mary Jane Jacobs speaks about her urban upbringing in New York City, about how she curates shows with the objective of adding value and insight to a place and to social issues. The two begin to discuss the connections between Jacobs’ and James E. Young’s ideas on monuments. Jacobs acknowledges Young’s view that monuments “can never replace public and individual responsibility” (Thea 25), understanding the expanding role of art beyond the monument model. Jacobs names the city of Charleston itself as “a living memorial to slavery – and to the problematic economic relations that built this society” (Thea 26). Thea extrapolates that memorial, then, is an activity rather than simply an object in Jacobs’ case. Jacobs understands monuments as living methods to commemorate continuously present ideas.
Borrowing from the discussion between Jacobs and Thea, it is relevant to consider the art and monuments present and not present in the living monument that is the contemporary city itself. On May 19, 2017, New Orleans Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu gave a public speech announcing the removal of four confederate monuments in the city deemed a public nuisance. He introduces the history of the city and its inhabitants, first acknowledging Indigenous nations such as the Choctaw and the Chitimacha, then the enslaved Senegambians, the free people of color, the Haitians, and the presence of two empires: France and Spain. He emphasizes the necessity of confronting the reality that New Orleans once hosted America’s largest slave market, where thousands were sold and shipped up the Mississippi River, enduring the miseries of rape and torture. Hundreds were lynched in Louisiana; whose courts enshrined the “Separate but Equal” doctrine. Landrieu goes on to state:

So, when people say to me that the monuments in question are history… it immediately begs the questions: why there are no slave ship monuments, no prominent markers on public land to remember the lynching’s or the slave blocks; nothing to remember this long chapter of our lives; the pain, the sacrifice, the shame … all of it happening on the soil of New Orleans. So, for those self-appointed defenders of history and the monuments, they are eerily silent on what amounts to this historical malfeasance, a lie by omission. There is a difference between remembrance of history and reverence of it… As President George W. Bush said at the dedication ceremony for the National Museum of African American History & Culture, “A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws and it corrects them.” (Landrieu)

The significance of a public monument is noted in Landrieu’s statement that “there is a difference between remembrance of history, and the reverence of it.” Monuments of history
signify a reverence or celebration rather than simply serve as a historical document. Landrieu addresses arguments equating the removal of confederate statues with historical erasure by later quoting of President George W. Bush’s assertion that “A great nation does not hide its history. It faces its flaws, and it corrects them” (Landrieu). He continues by situating the monuments in their historical context:

These statues are not just stone and metal. They are not just innocent remembrances of a benign history. These monuments purposefully celebrate a fictional, sanitized Confederacy; ignoring the death, ignoring the enslavement, and the terror that it actually stood for. After the Civil War, these statues were a part of that terrorism as much as a burning cross on someone’s lawn; they were erected purposefully to send a strong message to all who walked in their shadows about who was still in charge in this city. (Landrieu)

Landrieu states that the goal of the ‘Cult of Lost Cause’ is rewriting history to hide the truth, a strategy of abuse known as gaslighting (“Gaslighting”). The purpose of this strategy was to send a threatening message about power and control in the city of New Orleans. Landrieu makes his position clear that the Confederacy was on the wrong side of history. “You elected me to do the right thing, not the easy thing . . . This is not just about statues, this is about our attitudes and behavior as well. If we take these statues down and don’t change to become a more open and inclusive society this would have all been in vain” (Landrieu). Landrieu’s words convey an understanding that a monument has an impact on the attitudes and viewpoints of a city’s inhabitants. The removal of an art object is a clear contemporary example of a public intervention to address the social ill of enslavement in the name of moving toward reconciliation and healing. Through addressing the reality of memorialization in the maintenance of traumatic
histories, decisions may be made in the interest of advancing life for all people. The removal of a monument signifying white supremacy is a decision that advances life for all people.

In the case of New Orleans, Landrieu states that the monuments in question present a legacy of limited potential for many of its residents, and that where one is limited, so are others. While referencing freedom, Landrieu brings up the decision as a form of curation.

We should stop for a moment and ask ourselves — at this point in our history, after Katrina, after Rita, after Ike, after Gustav, after the national recession, after the BP oil catastrophe and after the tornado — if presented with the opportunity to build monuments that told our story or to curate these particular spaces … would these monuments be what we want the world to see? Is this really our story? We have not erased history; we are becoming part of the city’s history by righting the wrong image these monuments represent and crafting a better, more complete future for all our children and for future generations.” (Landrieu)

Landrieu’s words can also be traced back to the grassroots organizing of Take ‘Em Down NOLA, an organization whose efforts began two years prior toward the removal of these statues, sparking New Orleans City Council toward a vote in favor of removal in 2015. This same year on June 17, 2015 Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist, gunned down nine people at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina, including the Senior Pastor and State Senator Clementa C. Pinckney. This led to a public demand for the removal of Confederate flags and symbols of white supremacy across the nation including activist and artist Bree Newsome who gained national attention for her courageous act of climbing the flagpole in front of the South Carolina Statehouse to lower its Confederate flag (Phillip). The political climate
encouraged Mayor Landrieu to make a public commitment to removing Confederate monuments in New Orleans.

The notion of art in favor of serving public good or a good for a public is often attributed to a certain form of evangelism, as I’ve received in critique from public scholars such as Felicity Allen, who advised this work. I’ve also heard the term used by curators turned philanthropists such as Rashida Bumbray, mentioned in reference to her work with the Open Society Foundations (“Navigating Careers”). Similarly, critics pose the idea that art in service of an idea, art in service of a people, or art that is socially minded may be likened to yet is not the same as art activism or artivism. Art has the potential to raise questions, and an exhibition is a container and vehicle to activate modes of inquiry as positioned by gallery educators.

Can a communal act of gathering around an event be a curatorial strategy to engage truth? Can art and storytelling lead a public to foster a new collective identity and belief in the world they would ideally like to bring forth? How might a curatorial practice engage a system of questioning to foster a more humane, ethical, and just world?
CHAPTER 3

Emergent Curatorial Strategy at The Shed

In the song “Poetic Justice” from Kendrick Lamar’s 2012 album good kid, m.A.A.d city, featured artist Drake recites “And they say communication save relations, I can tell, / but I can never right my wrongs unless I write them down for real.” An interventionist act may be as simple as writing down wrongs with a pen in order to right them. Drake poses a question for potential curatorial statements, where institutional writing, functioning as a public scribing of art history, can connect an artist’s work to a cultural signifier within a communal archive of a museum. Here, a curatorial institution’s text, like a published lyric, may cause a shift or rift in public thought by leaving an experiential cultural imprint. Text is the medium by which values are made real, whether in the case of the added wall text about Bill Cosby at the NMAAH, or in the case of the added wall text about Open Casket at the 2017 Whitney Biennial

I look toward channeling my change-making interventionist work within my professional contributions to the arts and curatorial projects. As an emerging professional, my contributions are yet to be written. I joined the staff of The Shed, a commissioning center for all art forms as well as popular culture, as a Curatorial and Production Assistant on October 30, 2017 in order to engage the cultural archive of a public art institution. I was invited into this unique opportunity largely due to my experience at The Studio Museum in Harlem, where I worked in museum education and administered the organization’s Artist-in-Residence Program for Thelma Golden and the curatorial department. While completing my bachelors at Hampshire College, I worked
at New World Theater based at the University of Massachusetts, and last year I freelanced with Hi-ARTs (formerly the Hip-Hop Theater Festival) in East Harlem. I have a long-term commitment to the emerging performing arts community in the Northeast region of the United States. Dance has been a particular focus of mine. As well as serving as Danspace Project’s Curatorial Fellow for the 2012 Judson Now Platform honoring the 50-year anniversary of Judson Memorial Church, I have worked as a freelance dancer, performer, and dramaturge, touring my original choreography internationally and touring domestically with black womanist art collective Body Ecology, led by Ebony Noelle Golden of Betty’s Daughters Arts Collaborative.

When The Shed approached me about the curatorial position, I had already begun working toward my master’s degree in performance curation, of which this thesis is the final component. As I began defining myself as an interdisciplinary curator, I took on freelance and contractual assignments. I bounced between Frieze Art Fair in New York City, and the American Museum of Natural History, where I worked first as a Development Associate and later as an assistant to the Senior Vice President of Institutional Advancement, Strategic Planning, and Education. The Shed offered an opportunity to make a new long-term institutional commitment in a primarily curatorial role that centered my professional aspirations and educational investment. I saw an opportunity to realize my vision for an emergent interdisciplinary institutional curatorial practice.

I joined The Shed believing that the position offered an opportunity to build a meaningful curatorial practice. I marveled at the prospect of joining an institution uninhibited by an institutional history and working toward actualizing a twenty-first-century institutional model, given its unusual position as a cultural non-profit start-up. Controversy often induces headaches for public institutions and their employees, especially when such controversy pertains to curating
artists alleged as sexual predators and related deviant behavior and injustice. The Shed is an artist-led institution, our leadership believes we follow the ideas and vision of an artist first and foremost as a gesture of commitment, without concern for controversy associated with the artist. The Shed’s commitment to artists is primary, making the process of working through controversial matters a secondary concern. This positionality is also informed by the nature of The Shed’s service to the public as a presenter of all artistic disciplines, cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities to fully reflect the breadth and diversity of art in New York.

In February 2018, The Shed announced its opening program, a unique off-site event called *A Prelude to The Shed* scheduled to take place in May 2018 before The Shed’s official opening in spring 2019. Referred to internally as “Prelude,” the event features new work by William Forsythe, Tino Seghal’s *This Variation*, and special concerts by ABRA, Arca, and Azealia Banks (Hixon). The event aims to celebrate The Shed as a center for all artistic disciplines.

![The Shed](image)

*Fig. 14 A Prelude to The Shed* rendering courtesy of NLÉ Works.
I personally raised concerns around the inclusion of Azealia Banks given her history of homophobic and transphobic statements (Saul). Although Banks has apologized for her statements and spoken publicly about issues of mental health, my concern centers on the use of hate speech and the centering of artists who may be in the process of recovery before they have had adequate time to heal (Real). In its decision to include Banks, The Shed was more interested in her talent than it was concerned about the feelings of the communities she may have offended, which potentially included Prelude audience members and featured artists. The Shed engaged an artist with a history of controversy without concern for anything but the art to be experienced, while we within the institution braced ourselves for the possibility of new controversy to emerge in our work.

In regard to questioning institutional programmatic choices, Sara Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life* that “Living a feminist life does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct, although it might mean asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world)” (Ahmed 1). Ahmed indicates that a line of questioning may serve as a practical mode of engagement with feminist life. Here, feminism is not prescriptive. There are no tell-tale forms for bringing this theory to life; rather, it functions through an ongoing practice of inquiry. Ahmed makes this point lucid when she states, “To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable” (Ahmed 2). The very acts of living and questioning and the will to press against hard-set histories describes the discipline and vigor that living a feminist life requires.

Positioning oneself as curious about programming choices with an interest in ethical integrity can be interpreted as confrontational and uncollegial. In my case at work, I have operated on a trend of voicing injustice. After naming my critiques of The Shed’s programmatic
choices to my coworkers, I was encouraged to continue speaking up. In fact, I was told my voice was required to help preserve the integrity of the organization in a private setting among individuals who were invested in protecting others who did not want to be tainted by association with controversy. With this expressed appreciation for my critical voice, I continued to provide critique when necessary, to learn it is thankless job when my institutional critique fairly extended to include my supervisory colleagues with firing power.

When I first reported sexual harassment from a coworker, the allegations were dismissed due to “insufficient evidence.” I received no help from my colleagues and had been subjected to daily discomfort flaring up my symptoms of having survived previous traumas. It became necessary for me to speak directly about what needed to change. I pointed out workload discrepancies with the goal of preventing late nights that would put me at risk. I also identified gender bias in relation to my workload response. My actions of institutional interventionist work led to my being written up with a warning for use of “inappropriate tone.” I was informed further disciplinary action would take place, leading to termination if I did not discontinue my “inappropriate” commentary. Shortly after being informed I was an invaluable team member, I was suddenly at risk of termination. Although my write-up explicitly mentioned that the warning was in response to my challenging a directive in the form of stating bias was in place, I was verbally told in the same meeting that I was welcome to challenge my colleagues as long as it wasn’t in the form of documented writing.

The institution is interested in correction, without documentation of who may be enacting its flaws. In this case, accountability is evaded alongside personal responsibility, and the messenger of injustice may be eliminated for delivering unflattering truths. As a consequence, various documents I’ve created as well as data tracking workflow trends have routinely been
deleted from our shared drives. These actions may be coincidental, with questionable timing. Although curatorial work is about art, it is also very much about navigating power dynamics and personalities concerned primarily with protecting their relationships to institutional power, as opposed to shaping the institution’s power for public good.

In my own work as an emerging curator, it has taken time to secure a curatorial home in regard to institutional affiliation. Although curators in contemporary art generally develop their careers by working across various institutions, my journey has been to find an institution that values my perspective as an interdisciplinary curator looking to work primarily in visual art and performance without having to privilege one form over the other. Prior to its 2017 Biennial, the Whitney seemed to be a promising institution for engaging what I externally observed to be the highest-caliber contemporary art curation in New York City. Many of my own colleagues affiliated themselves with the Whitney at some point in their careers, through participation in the museum’s independent study program or serving on its curatorial staff.

In late 2015 through early 2017 I began a series of final-round interviews at the Whitney for three positions. The first was to coordinate the tours program alongside the museum’s visitor services and education departments. A similar role to the one I served at The Studio Museum in Harlem with less intellectual engagement on art, the role’s focus was administrative and customer service work. Although it offered an opportunity to work in an institution I held in high regard, the position did not align with my professional goals. I continued to apply for other positions and eventually was invited to interview for a curatorial position. At first glance, the curatorial project assistant role seemed quite generic. As I began to further my research on the curator involved, Jay Sanders, I learned that his work at the Whitney exemplified exactly what I hoped to do. By serving as Curator and Curator of Performance at the Whitney, Sanders engaged
various artistic disciplines with equal intellectual rigor and merit, making room for a meaningful repositioning of art historical narratives of contemporary art, which, in fact, traditionally did engage performance. Unlike the narrative at The Shed which aims to foster new narratives of artistic cohesion, Jay’s curatorial practice involved an archival unearthing of the existing interdisciplinarity of art history. Jay utilized the platform of a museum as an archival host for display and discursive engagement. Jay had worked extensively with the Judson Memorial Church performance tradition, noting its presence in an annex space the Whitney hosted at its old home in the Upper East Side of New York.

I was deeply moved by the interview process, as Sanders disclosed that he was working on developing an exhibition on free jazz pianist Cecil Taylor. This elicited deeper excitement in me given the material he was working with. Sanders began the interview explaining that earlier in the day he had spoken on the phone with Diane McIntyre, who mentioned an interview I published with her that included a photograph of her company Sounds in Motion dancing in Studio Museum’s old loft on 5th Avenue featuring Cecil and his band. The photograph would be included in the archival display of the exhibition Sanders was working on with senior curatorial assistant Greta Hartenstein, and Sanders acknowledged the fact that I was already engaged in the work he was pursuing with this exhibition. Although my interests and affiliations aligned well with the position, the reality set in that curatorial work is disproportionately underfunded. This particular position was beneath my historic compensation, as it did not offer a benefits package with healthcare despite being full-time. The HR team seemed to introduce the position as a temporary one even though the staff required a long-term commitment. These contradictions around support informed my understanding of the institution’s investment in and valuing of labor. Knowing the high cost of maintaining my health, I knew it would not be feasible as a long-
term work opportunity. These conditions would affect my ability to meet the standards of excellence, as I would not receive what I needed in order to thrive. I would need to maintain a dependent in a violent home and would continually experience disruptions out of my control dampening my dependability on deliverance in a highly demanding time-sensitive career. Sanders offered to do his own development work to raise money for my position, but this ultimately was not possible given the timeline of the hire. Another young curator who had the ability to accept the job without substantial adjustments did so, under a form of decision making I don’t fully understand. My response was I was the first choice of the curators, whom I initially thought were making the hiring decision, although they were the second interview after HR (who also noted my experience was perhaps beyond the scope of this precarious temporary position). Here I began to note the complex multilayered process of institutional action, and its contradiction in the talent it seeks to hire and the willingness to provide an appropriate fiscal return.

I continued to look for work and found that it was difficult to find a curatorial role that would provide the support I needed to furnish my independence and enable myself to move away from an abusive household to truly begin my career. The pursuit of curatorial work necessitated a willingness to position myself as dependent: I would make “enough” money to live above the poverty line, yet not enough to sustainably afford rent, food and my medical expenses. Pay in non-profit curatorial work generally is too low to afford living in New York City but high enough to qualify for basic means in New York State (meaning non-access to federal support systems such as Medicaid and food stamps). Colleagues of mine recommended finding ways to relocate to nearby towns to support my practice. I found a room in Philadelphia, about 2 hours away by bus, which rented at $300 a month with two roommates. This would be affordable at the
Whitney salary; however, it would necessitate approximately 5 hours of travel per day. The time spent commuting and at work would prevent me from being able to care for myself, to form a supportive community, or to have time to work toward finishing my master’s degree.

To this day, many people in the field still ask me why I wouldn’t pursue such an opportunity, without consideration around equity. Individuals that live with chronic illness such as myself need to seek out employment that fulfills basic salary and benefit requirements. When a position is created with minimal support, it opens the door to privileged applicants with access to private wealth while closing the door on applicants without such access. Having moved in and out of freelance jobs due to post-traumatic stress from my experiences of violence, I knew that I needed a stable structure of employment to manage the stress of an arts career alongside my own condition in a society inundated with violence.

I was later able to accept the position at The Shed, as it met my minimum salary requirements as well as provided the baseline benefits I needed, namely healthcare, paid sick and vacation leave, and an indication of room for growth. As curator Adrienne Edwards acknowledges about her field: “It’s a system itself, and it’s hard to understand how one gets access to it. I don’t know how many times I’ve talked to artists about how to get gallery representation, or how to get the support they need to fabricate a work. There’s a real economics to being able to do this work. That’s why I say it’s such a deep privilege to do this” (Kerr). Edwards is accurate in her assessment that the practices of art-making and curation would not be possible without substantial economic investment, indicating an element of class privilege at play within the art world.

With the privilege of a curatorial position at a new cultural institution with deep financial investments and a capital campaign close to closing on its goal of $550 million, I understand my
presence at The Shed to be significant (“The Shed”). Holding my position is a privilege, and my hiring was part of a trend to move the curatorial field toward inclusivity. Although a black, queer, disabled individual, I was invited to the position on the merits of my professional accomplishments. I was approached by the curator, who was conducting recruitment research via Linkedin. My being a native New Yorker was an added benefit, given the institution’s primarily European leadership (Hausam). Although my salary is by no means substantial in relation to the number of years I have worked in the arts and my level of education, in a field in which inequity is the norm, The Shed offers a competitive compensation for my position. With far more resources, it does have a responsibility to do more with more. There are opportunities to make employment more accessible to various populations that are talented and dedicated to serving artists.

My primary role at The Shed has involved working with early and mid-career artists in an open call program that looks to commission artists to create new work (“Open Call”). I am also working to create a residency program for artists in an on-site lab at the Shed. This program is being generated presently and has not yet been formally announced. It is remarkably exciting to work through the initial phase of creating an institutional program that considers and meets the needs of New York City’s arts landscape. To fulfill our responsibility to find the best possible programming for the institution and the larger community it intends to serve, we host roundtable discussions with artists and industry veterans to advise us as we develop this program.

In her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017), adrienne maree brown introduces the audience to how emergence may apply to employment through sharing observations in her own non-profit work. She states:
“Sitting with some of the questions of how I could transform the heartbreak I have experienced in nonprofit work into lessons that could offer other paths forward, I found that part of the opportunity was to pay deeper attention to how the natural world has solved these same problems. I do believe that what we pay attention to grows, so I wanted to stop growing the crises, the critique. The elements in this book are a way to shift my attention to the positive, to what I want to grow” (46).

It is important to consider the power of intentionality and language in curatorial interventions. An intervention is only as effective as the language used to name it. As words can differ in their application according to their context, @BeninCitizen offers a few definitions that lend humor to a sincere discussion on inequity. To start, social media usefully highlights elements of contemporary dominator-culture. In a post from October 22, 2015, Joshua Idehen (@BeninCitizen) provides a few helpful definitions of socio-political terms using the metaphor of a mother’s labor of laundry. The comedic entry provides a clear example of how a simple list of definitions can provide a specific context and tone to an otherwise theoretically nebulous realm. Idehen’s words shed light on the organization of thought in the digital realm, engaging audiences similarly to the curatorial projects of cultural institutions. Idehen’s list of terms, provides an entry point to gendered positions of labor within various social and oppressive systems. He allows entry to language typically academically complex, connecting how we conduct our work illustrates our links to these systems. I will link my labor experience at The Shed to Idehen’s analogies below:

“A list of terms explained (@BeninCitizen: 2:44pm)
• **Capitalism:** your mum washes your clothes. You pay her a dollar. She Complains. You call the police and claim she’s rioting. (@BeninCitizen: 2:45pm)

• **Fascism:** your mum does the washing wiliest fearing for her life. (@BeninCitizen: 2:51pm)

• **Nazism:** your mum does the washing. You gas the laundry room. (@BeninCitizen: 2:51pm)

• **Liberalism:** you watch your mum do the washing and feel really really bad. “Something must be done” u say. Something may or may not get done (@BeninCitizen: 2:53pm)

• **Misogyny:** you hate your mum whether or not she does the washing. (@BeninCitizen: 2:57pm)

• **Patriarchy:** your mum doesn’t exist. The washing is mysteriously done (@BeninCitizen: 2:57pm)

• **Matriarchy:** your mum does the washing. You do the washing. You are really happy {pulling} your weight in the house (@BeninCitizen: 3:00pm)

• **Feminism:** your mum insists you grow up and do your own washing. (@BeninCitizen: 3:01pm)

• **White feminism:** your mum hired a woman of color to do the washing (@BeninCitizen: 3:02pm)

• **Colonialism:** you barge in mum’s room. Claim you “discovered” it. Dump your dirty clothes on the floor (@BeninCitizen: 3:23pm)

• **Neo Capitalism:** your mum does the washing. You pay her a dollar. You get her to do your mates washing. Your mate pays you €50. (@BeninCitizen: 3:45pm)
- **Mansplaining**: you mum does the washing. You tell her how best to do the washing. You have never done the washing. (@BeninCitizen: 4:37pm)

- **Sexism**: of course your mum does the washing. Duh. (@BeninCitizen: 4:39pm)

- **Rape culture**: it’s mum’s fault she does the washing/ she asked to do the washing/ she doesn’t do the washing as much as she says she does (@BeninCitizen: 5:05pm)

- **Hip hop**: everyday I’m hustling/ every day I’m hustling/ when I bring the basket/mama put the washing in. (@BeninCitizen: 5:08pm)

I highlight @BeninCitizen’s socio-political definitions as examples of engaging critique through creative metaphor, framing structural oppression in terms of micro-aggressive dynamics at the site of women’s labor. These definitions provide a humorous entry point to situations that stand in for grave, complex realities. Strung out in a period of three hours, the tweets became a viral sensation. The effectiveness of social media as a means to connect trends in ideas and movements is profound. As Idehen comments in his article “Twitter is like sex with an ex,” Twitter, while being a central player in the digital world, is also a playground for fascists, and voices for change are often muddled or drowned out by dissent. It may be an effective site for voicing ideas, but it is not an effective platform for discourse. Idehen, a UK-based poet and musician and social justice warrior, uses the platform for a creative yet accessible conversation about society.

My writing employs many of these terms as used in their academic context around the power dynamics of American rape culture. Many of the oppressive realities Idehen lists intersect with my daily embodied experience as an emerging professional curator and as a black and queer curator. The metaphor of a woman’s labor is especially apt for conveying the micro-aggressive
realities of how these oppressive power dynamics play out in daily exchanges. As Idehen introduces the nature of capitalism’s retaliation around the woman’s labor complaint, I see this evidenced in my work at The Shed, as well as the Neo-capitalism within sexism as the labor structure befalls us. In each and every disciplinary warning meeting I am told that my labor challenges are my own fault, that I asked to be treated in the ways I deem to be unfair, and that my statements reporting abusive powers are inaccurate. The list goes on, to reconfirm the usefulness of Idehan’s analogy to discuss workplace gendered response across intersecting oppressive systems.

As maree brown stated earlier in her focus toward what she wishes to grow through observation, she signifies her perspective of intentionality within emergence. A beginning sets a tone for much of what may become possible. At the start of a capoeira game, two players bow at the bateria (orchestra) under the berimbau. Often a slow game begins with a queda de rins (known as a fall on the kidneys). This is a movement where a player suspends their body on a single side folding on an elbow. An unusual point of balance, this slow and grounded inversion sets an intention at the start of the game of what may be possible from the ground to lift a body away with adequate support. What maree brown states she wishes to grow in the garden of her focus, will flourish with the intentionality of cultivation. These metaphors of nature also require an eye toward naming and weeding out the factors that may stifle growth. In order to effectively end American rape culture within curatorial institutions, all must name the intersecting elements of patriarchal violence that may stifle the beauty we aim to grow.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the reality of the prevalence of rape is reflected in contemporary art institutions in the curated art on display. Rape is branded onto the psyches and social realities of the publics in attendance. Rape also lies within inescapable aspects of contemporary culture as evidenced by Dave Chappelle’s storytelling in his Netflix trilogy. The stories told through art about ourselves and the culture we live in are significant parts of in how we understand and participate in that culture. The questions curators ask about individuals and society may inform how audiences understand themselves in society. And the questions audiences are willing to answer can indicate where a culture is willing to go as tides inevitably change toward new aesthetics and art forms.

Contemporary art institutions are catching up with the work of artists who expand genre and form, and curators of contemporary art are learning to expand their practices of framing and contextualizing artists accordingly. As the Whitney Independent Study Helena Rubenstein Fellows of 1992-3 stated in *The Subject of Rape*, their exhibition aimed to draw attention to the larger institutional structures that enable misdistributions of power where rape is able to take place. The emphasis on addressing violence in this activist curatorial intervention contextualizes why rape is not a necessary part of human life, but rather part of a specific construct of systemic oppression. Violence begets violence. Imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy is a system of oppression that intersects vast misappropriations of power to create many forms of injustice such as rape.

Art allows for a potential to renew the wonder and gift inherent in life, and curators act as the caretakers and custodians of this potential to maintain faith in the goodness of humanity. In the face of systemic oppression, terrorism, and global catastrophe, art provides a form of
sanctuary as well as of cultural reform. Art is not necessarily an escape from social ills when it serves as sanctuary. As is evident in this thesis, art is always tied to its social context, as the artists who are making work are part of the very social fabric that constitutes rape culture. The question this thesis asks is: how do we develop a curatorial practice that can intervene in systemic oppression?

Curatorial engagement through inquiry can be a method of social reform. Art objects tell stories, as do the artists who create them. Contemporary curatorial work is about context. Curation is now socially understood as an art form and extends far beyond the traditional gallery walls. Curators select digital spatial layouts and curate film series at independent media houses. While some curators engage in exhibition-making in contemporary art institutions, others engage in taste-making in less formal, noncanonical settings.

In the case of Bill Cosby at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, there is a direct relationship between his life and his career in the arts. The power and wealth he has amassed correspond to the prevalence of allegations against him. Artists live in a world in which they are known and respected for their art, and their art, in turn, is known and evaluated in relation to the artist’s ethics, politics, and actions. An artist who rapes will always be known for their rape, regardless of any good they may offer the world. Chappelle’s recanting of his reverence for Cosby’s accomplishments is a prime example of this. The wealth and power Cosby accumulated has also been used for philanthropic efforts, which have in turn lent to further influence and power to his name. These dynamics of power shift as allegations and court proceedings against Cosby continue to develop. Cosby and figures like him, who have allegedly abused their wealth, celebrity, and influence to commit acts of serial rape and sexual assault, are to be understood with the complexity their benevolent contributions to humanity alongside acts
of harm. The large number of women testifying against Cosby, in addition to the information that Cosby previously admitted to using sedative drugs for the purpose of having sex with women, is evidence enough that Cosby intentionally engaged in non-consensual sex. The legal proceedings will only determine whether or not that evidence is court-verifiable in the case of his assault of Andrea Constand.

Whereas Cosby is alleged for crimes in his personal life, there are artists who take it upon themselves to represent violence in their own work. Representation of violence is distinctively separate from the act of violence itself, yet it falls under similar sets of ethical parameters. When these representations fail to consider the relationship between their aesthetic goals and the material subject(s) of trauma, the consequences impact society at large. Dana Schutz’s portrayal of one of the most horrific, unforgettable events in American history was met with public backlash that called attention to the ignorance of both the artist and the institution that chose to represent her work. Trauma and violence are not all one in the same, nor are themes of black struggle. Lynching is a kind of violence specific to the slave-making state, as Hartman describes in *Scenes of Subjection*. Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 and his memory is evoked amidst police shootings in 2018, reinscribing the constancy of violence, trauma and fear for black people in America. The exhibition of this work by a white female-identified artist portraying violence caused by another white woman is a statement that an institution gives credence to white female creative exploration at the expense of the trauma of black viewership.

When an artist makes institutional work that is in need of refinement to address the standards of oppressed nationalities, the artist and the presenting institution will be held accountable by activists. This typically takes the form of open letters, in which ideas are personalized and shared with a broad public to increase awareness around the matter at hand.
Violence as a fact of reality is not an invitation to make curatorial claims that affirm its necessity within our society. It is the purpose of curatorial institutions to interrogate culture, to inspire and engage a vision for a better world, or one that reflects current efforts to uphold values of social progress.

At The Shed, I bring this curatorial interventionist value system to my work as a curatorial and production assistant. The internal resistance I faced six months into my role, even by those who claim to support my curatorial growth, is evidenced in the efforts to make a pathway for my removal on the subjective grounds of the “tone” of my documentation of injustice. To document social ills is to threaten an individual’s access to power by association with a crime (be it civil, criminal, or of manner of being). The efforts to admit culpability in a system that does not encourage justice are efforts without support. Understanding the process of justice will occur only if individuals can be honest about their participation in a system that is unjust. An individual’s participation in that system cannot be singled out for fear of their removal and the system continues on without them. Individuals often participate in systems of injustice to protect themselves out of fear of termination. By choosing to participate to self-protect, they perpetuate injustice.

Currently, I notice a trend at The Shed in which individuals employed into position of power are entrusted to maintain certain dynamics that serve to silence responses to injustice. To name an allegation within an institution, as the NMAAHC did with Bill Cosby, is to make the voices of many women audible and visible. This serves as another form of documentation and validation of the right of women to live in a world without rape. Curators have a responsibility to address injustice, as well as to create possibilities for engaging culture in methods that enable a benevolent discourse to come forward. It is important to remember that the goodness in
humanity is always present. Curators must deepen their sense of responsibility to craft exhibitions inquiring about our realities in society for our culture to be understood and revised. Then, with these curatorial interventions, a culture without rape may emerge.
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