The Blood Was On Their Shoulders:
Mapping Black Intersectional Identities within Curatorial Practice

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Performance Curation.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my late brother Abdul Jaamal Muhammad (1992–2015) and my dear friend and collaborator IMMA who continues to teach me about intersectional Black joy in the wake of loss, fugitivity, and illegibility.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the artistic projects that hold Black women, trans, and queer intersectional identities as the focal point for creative engagement, conversation, and study. Drawing from predominantly Black, queer, and feminist research materials and methodologies including the texts of James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, José Esteban Muñoz, Fred Moten, and others, I collect data through interviews, rehearsals, performance showings, readings, and personal reflections that give voice to the ways in which artists and artist-curators creatively render themes of societal trauma, loss, fugitivity, queerness, and trans perspectives as a strategy for survival and healing for self and community. To provide a critical lens into the art practices of selected artists including Ni’Ja Whitson, M. Lamar, and Vashti DuBois, I introduce the Socio-Choreological Mapping ideology as a conceptual frame for creating more inclusive cultural spaces for people of color. To conclude, as an autoethnographic feature within this thesis, I build parallels between my own work, the community of artists to which I belong, and the larger sociopolitical issues our projects confront.
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INTRODUCTION: SOCIO-CHOREOLOGICAL MAPPING AS AN IDEOLOGY FOR RADICAL INCLUSION

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


When we speak radically of the dark divine, the invitation is for each and every one of us to transcend race and gender, to move beyond categories, and into the interior spaces of our psyches to encounter there the ground of our being, the place of mystery, creativity, and possibility. For it is there that we can construct the mind that can resist, that can revision, that can create the maps that when followed will liberate us.

–bell hooks, Lorde: The Imagination of Justice

What does a radically inclusive curatorial practice look like? How does this practice become a lived experience that moves beyond the confines of the predominantly white cultural institutional frame? Through my travels, I have consistently encountered a lack of supportive inclusionary cultural spaces for people of color. Throughout Europe and the United States performance curators and audiences alike continue to ask the same questions in regards to creating more inclusive spaces for Black and Brown people: How do we begin to break the border between art and culture to allow diverse audiences to feel more welcome inside predominantly white spaces? In her blog post, “Policy Briefing: Towards a Decolonial Curatorial Practice,” the independent curator and educator Chandra Frank speaks directly to these questions. She makes a case to broaden and decolonize modern curatorial practices by altering the current conventional predominantly white structural frames of curation. Frank writes:
A decolonial curatorial process is committed to undoing coloniality that is embedded in the existence of the Western museum space, and disrupts the power dynamics that lie beneath the development of exhibition making. This commitment creates an environment where the incorporation of alternative epistemologies becomes a core part of the politics of curation. That said, the application of this informed process requires the curator and the institution to contribute to the unearthing of hidden histories. (Frank 2015)

Before I discovered the language to identify my curatorial practice, I found the act of organizing performance, exhibition, and the humanities fascinating because of my consistent impulse to focus my thinking within Black study and artistic communities. My first job, as a teen usher, was at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan. For me, that museum was a place of refuge, mentorship, employment, professional development, and community. It sparked my engagement in “conversations about cultural equity, cultural democracy, cultural justice” (Sele 2017). I understand my curatorial practice today because of the foundation I gained within those museum walls.

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

Unfortunately, due to embedded systems of coloniality, this curatorial ideology—while shared by many—is not a standard practice. In his essay “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” Peruvian sociologist and scholar Anibal Quijano writes,
The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality. (2000: 533)

The result of racialized power as a colonizing force affects both the colonizer and the colonized rendering the power-holder a slave to his own disfigured desires to own and rule other people. The concept of care as it pertains to curatorial practice simply cannot co-exist within this “perverted logic” (Fanon) of racialized institutionalized power. Frantz Fanon, in his acclaimed text *The Wretched of the Earth*, writes about the distorting effects of colonization where he says,

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

With this understanding of the corrosive effects of colonization and racialized power within the American project, I am left with even more questions: How does care operate as an essential part of survivalist tactics and freedom strategies for diasporic people? Does whiteness distort curatorial practice? Are predominantly white institutions (PWIs) able to care for Black and other “minoritarian” (Muñoz: 1999) people? How do we curate health for ourselves and each other in the wake of such overwhelming tribulation?

If alternative decolonial epistemologies are to become a core part of the politics of curating, practitioners within the field must be willing to wield a paradigm shift within their institutions (as they relate to education, activism, and the sustenance of culture). A commitment to undoing coloniality in curation must be a central goal for those in positions of

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1 The American project refers to the creation of America within a historical context, a cultural production built at the intersection of modernity and a colonial ideology.
power if we are ever to realize radically inclusive cultural spaces for Black and Brown people.

Artist and scholar Nicole Martin speaks to this point in her essay, “Rep’ing Blackness: Curating Performance as a Practice of Radical Care,” where she outlines a series of radical care attributes. She writes, “Radical care does not shy away from the unfamiliar. Radical care is unamused with ego and considers community the cornerstone of practice. Radical care is gracious, healing, and affirming” (2015: 56). In my own curatorial projects, such as *Black Male Revisited: Experimental Representations Through the Ephemeral Form* (2014), *legible/illegible: opening beyond the space of identities* (2015), *Imaging Justice for the Dark Divine* (2015), and, most recently, *The Blood Was On Their Shoulders* (2017), I have worked to institute these same strategies of collective care and inclusivity by centering the voices of young women, Black, and queer artist-curators allowing us to frame the curatorial rationale and presentation of these projects as a team.

Curation, when practiced with radical care at its foundation, is inevitably inclusionary and holds itself accountable for oversights. Curating as a radical care practice affirms bell hooks’ position of creating a kind of justice that can “resist, that can revision, that can create the maps that when followed will liberate us” (2011: 243). The work of undoing coloniality is not simple because the American project is built on a systemic colonial doctrine. The case might even be made that modernity is intrinsically linked to coloniality whereby “race and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification” (Quijano 2000: 534). Thus, the work of undoing the racialized practices so deeply rooted within contemporary society is exhausting. The racial biases informing curatorial practices in the United States is still deeply entrenched in colonial systems of power and require a communal
methodology that allows the laborious work of imaging justice and implementing
decoloniality to be shared among multiple individuals whose goals cohere.

While my curatorial work centralizes Black and minoritarian communities, much of
my academic study before graduate school was rooted inside a traditional predominantly
white liberal arts training of literature, performance, and visual arts. To create my inclusive
curatorial ideology, I draw from my academic performance studies in complexity theory and
Emergent Improvisation (under the tutelage of Susan Sgorbati at Bennington College) and
am influenced by dance theorist and mathematician Rudolf Benesh’s term “choreology.” He
coined the term in 1955 with dancer Joan Benesh—his wife—to notate movement systems in
the body (Kando 2016). I situate choreology and Emergent Improvisation within a Black
social context to consider how Black and Brown people move together, document,
communicate, and realize their own freedom strategies.

Clear examples of Socio-Choreological Mapping (SCM) application can also be
found in trans-digital reality and social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter,
#TransIsBeautiful and #GirlsLikeUs. These examples, when considered through the lens of
performative movement actions created by Black and queer women of color, decentralize the
voice of one single curator. Decentralization allows the behaviors of Socio-Choreological
Mapping to have the nuance, reverberation, and emergent complexity needed to empower
any person seeking to participate within the environments they inhabit. The versatility of
these systems allows multiple points of entry within the digital world, the real world, and the
psychic/theoretical world. A self-proclaimed activist can tweet, write, march in protest,
create a mural or theatrical work, all as legitimate notated or archived forms of performed
protest, civil rights participation, and solidarity written onto society’s cultural record through
social media, newspapers, cell phone recordings, tagging, or otherwise mapping one’s presence within an environment.

With my research on Socio-Choreological Mapping, it has become clear that the role of the curator is deeply situated within the practice and sustainability of care (for self and others). Some examples of projects that centralize care and serve as examples of how SCM works successfully in partnership with various institutions include The Gathering (a project created by Camille A. Brown that has been held at New York Live Arts and Gibney Dance among other locations), Dancing While Black (a project created by Paloma McGregor that has collaborated with institution such as BAAD in the Bronx and BAX), and Dancing for Justice (a project created by Brittany L. Williams with team members based in Trinidad & Tobago, Miami, Detroit, and DC). These curatorial projects, while created by a single artist-curator, encourage deep collaboration between institutions and artists/activists allowing new voices to enter the institutional frame and cause much needed disruption. For example, in her January 2017 Dancing for Justice newsletter, Brittany L. Williams writes,

The need for artists, cultural leaders and art and cultural organizations to deeply invest in a racial and economic justice model is critical because all communities including white America will depend upon it. White people and white cultural institutions, and leaders-it’s time that you get your hands dirty in the struggle. It is time to put aside fragility and dive into fugitivity. It's time to put your whiteness on the line and organize your people-we need maroonage. The requirement for white fugitivity and maroonage is self-examination and a full investment in Black liberation. (Williams 2017)

Choreographer/dancer/movement organizer Brittany Williams offers definitions:
“Maroonage historically refers to those independent societies formed by African slaves who escaped from the plantations during slavery. Many of these communities rose to become an independent city and State Republics which had to be recognized by white colonial powers. Many partnered with indigenous Native American nations. There were dozens of successful Maroon settlements all over the New World throughout the 300 years of chattel slavery. In modern terms “Maroonage” refers to the creation of sovereign self-sustaining institutions independent of the State and the dominant powers that be. These
Her statement illustrates a call to action while also offering possible steps that white cultural leaders in positions of power can take to create more equity within their institutions and lives.

My goal in writing this thesis—as artist, academic, and curator—is to consider care as a technology derived from centuries of documented and undocumented fugitive knowledge (Harney & Moten: 2013) while providing case studies that highlight value systems that are integral to the SCM conceptual frame. To define this conceptual frame even further, I draw from predominantly queer and/or feminist minoritarian research materials including the texts of Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, bell hooks, José Esteban Muñoz, and Fred Moten.
Chapter 1: “(Black) Fugitivity in the Wake of Loss” is divided into two sections: reality and digitality. In Section 1: Reality, I offer a narrative about the loss and personal grief that triggered my need for self-care and community building, and eventually led me to begin articulating SCM as an ideology or way of thinking that can be applied into curatorial practice. Section 2: Digitality, focuses on how Black, queer, and/or trans artists such as M. Lamar, IMMA, and Jacolby Satterwhite use the digital sphere as an opportunity to create online audiences for their various creative works and social justice movements working both inside and outside of the predominantly white cultural frame. I conclude this section by
circling back to the theme of loss as a means to consider the overwhelming amount of Black and Brown folks who have been murdered and as a result have become famous through the digital sharing of their deaths. The performance of Black death as it operates inside and outside of white dominant cultural must be considered because much of the creative works by artists highlighted in this thesis—M. Lamar, Ni’Ja Whitson, and myself—are fueled by this harsh digital reality.

In Chapter 2: “Mapping Diasporic Intersectionalities in The Blood Was On Their Shoulders,” I provide a performance analysis of a project I created and co-organized with Ni’Ja Whitson and Tara Willis. Our project, The Blood Was On Their Shoulders, was presented at Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX) in February 2017 and serves as a case study for how the collaborative nature of our creative process is a core value of SCM as it relates to the concept of diaspora and intersectionality.

Chapter 3: “Curating Black Joy at The Colored Girls Museum” exemplifies SCM through the work of artist-curator Vashti DuBois and The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) (2015). In three sections, outlining three separate incarnations of TCGM, I reveal examples of the spaces Black women create for themselves to allow healing, listening, and happiness to occur as forms of Black Joy. The concluding chapter, “Curation as a Practice of Self-Care,” focuses on one of the most important SCM value markers: self-care. Here I offer an autoethnographic rendering of my own creative and curatorial practice as the core argument for a need to focus self-care as part of the critical work of curating. Furthermore, as examples for how this ideology operates within and for communities of color as organizing tools and holistic subversive disidentified methodologies created by minoritarian individuals (Muñoz 1999), I highlight the works of various interdisciplinary artists building correlations between
uses of SCM and the artist-curators who incorporate its elements within their lived experiences, creative curatorial practices, and organizations.

I argue for SCM as a healthy alternative for the creation of radically inclusive care-giving within the dominant culture of the art world and the larger society as a whole. Through collected interviews, rehearsals, workshops, performance showings, readings, and personal reflections that give voice to the ways in which these artists and curators render themes of fugitivity, illegibility, and healing in their work, I will question if we—as members of the cultural sector and American citizens invested in the resistance—are genuinely committed to providing the socially engaged artist-activist with the sustained resources needed to continue creating the maps that will liberate us.
CHAPTER 1: (BLACK) FUGITIVITY IN THE WAKE OF LOSS

The movement of things can be felt and touched and exists in language and in fantasy, it is flight, it is motion, it is fugitivity itself. Fugitivity is not only escape, “exit” […] fugitivity is being separate from settling. It is a being in motion that has learned that “organizations are obstacles to organizing ourselves…”

–Jack Halberstam, Introduction, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*

Can this being together in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused, this undercommon appositionality, be a place from which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? Not simply to be among his own; but to be among his own in dispossession, to be among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything.

–Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*

Before I knew who I was, my being was already rendered non-human, invisible, illegible, criminal, disposable, trauma-stricken, policed, a thug, a nigger, a negro, colored, an incomprehensibly Black fugitive. But even as these labels mark my past, I choose how they obtain the power to mark my future. Black theory allows a space for infinite imaginative performance and psychic experience to occur. It allows escape, refusal, transgression, and practices of freedom to be felt and materialized in the body, transmitted into action through creative forms of expression and activism. As a Black artist-curator I am a remarkable expression of freedom and futurity risen from a stolen past. The practice of creating and curating live performance is deeply intertwined with the ability to dream limitlessly and, as a result, “create the maps that when followed” (hooks 2011: 243) articulate the possibilities for a liberated society.

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

With this chapter, divided into two sections: Reality and Digitality, I first provide a personal history of the loss that led to the articulation of my SCM ideology. I then discuss that while the internet has provided a performance platform for Black and Brown artists to share their work, it has also created a performance platform for Black death, a digital purgatory where the suffering of Black and Brown people has been captured and shared repeatedly. In digital spaces, the dead do not only die once (as in non-digital reality), but over and over and over again. Digital-reality has rendered the Black dead into ghost celebrities, a phenomenon that continues to haunt me. History petrifies me with its clever, trickster-like ability to resurrect itself. The past, much like Black presence in America, is constantly being chased, running from its own shadow. The past refuses to be still, it rides the “interplay of the refusal of what has been refused” (Harney and Moten 2013: 96). It is a performative loop weighed heavy with societal loss.

Section 1: Reality

My Black being came into existence within an American context where loss is an epigenetic system embedded in the DNA of how I have come to understand the performance of my identity; knowing loss is an epistemology located in my blood memory. The strains trace back to my father’s too frequent disappearing acts (whether physically or psychically absent) and to a distant relationship I barely maintain with my sister born in Lagos, Nigeria (we have never met in person). I know loss in the shape of my 22-year-old brother who was murdered outside a 7-Eleven in Denver and in the alcoholic tears and schizophrenic episodes
that led to my mother’s premature death at the age of 36. I know loss because I never held my baby sister, never saw her face because she died just days after she was born.

Within the American colonial project, historical loss is the single unifying factor that still connects us, that holds us “always living in the push toward our death” (Sharpe 2016: 10). We wear the markings of our colonized, eradicated pasts in our skin rendering us through the gaze of a dominant society that is “organized according to its ignorance of [our] perspective—a state that does not, that cannot know [our] mind” (Wagner: 1).

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

Civil rights activist and director of The Spirit House Project, Ruby Sales, eloquently speaks to this matter in her 2016 *On Being* podcast interview with Krista Tippett where she argues that the calling of the contemporary moment is to attend to the “spiritual crisis of white America” (Tippett 2016). Sales asks how do we as a nation in a “21st-century capitalist
“technocracy” develop a series of theologies that “raise people up from disposability to essentiality?” Sales affirms that this issue of disposability goes “beyond the question of race” and that the lack of understanding for poor and working class white Americans (also living on the edge) is what makes “Donald Trump essential, because although we don’t agree with him, people think he’s speaking to the pain that they’re feeling.” Sales exclaims, 

It’s almost like white people don’t believe that other white people are worthy of being redeemed […] I want a theology that gives hope and meaning to people who are struggling to have meaning in a world where they no longer are as essential to whiteness as they once were. (Tippett 2016)

With her position so clearly articulated as one of the core problems plaguing the US, I return to one of my leading questions for researching The Blood. What can Black thought teach all people about living, being, and creating meaning in world where “we were never meant to survive” (Lorde 1995)? The SCM concept is an ideology I needed to research and name because I had to figure out a strategy for my own survival in the wake of loss, a strategy that might translate into various communities and creative practices. Learning how to exist inside this wake was how I was able to begin identifying SCM, and as a result, allow myself to find new meaning within my life’s work as an artist-curato.

For my Socio-Choreological Mapping ideology to be successful within the white cultural frame, more inclusionary practices within the arts field must occur. A reorganized methodology surrounding the consistent and highly problematic implementation of “predominant whiteness” must occur within the field of curation (Wethers 2015: 15). Today, diverse voices within predominantly white institutions are found either on the stage or on the gallery walls. Periodically, diversity may also be located in the ghetto of the security and
facilities departments of PWIs. Rarely are racially diverse voices a central part of the leadership within the staffing and board structure.

Artist-curator Marya Wethers brings attention to this phenomenon in her essay “Thinking from Within” by aligning it to the “layers of an onion, with some diversity displayed on the outside but greatly decreasing as you look more inward—from the programming on the stage (some brown), to the audiences in the house (occasionally brown), to the administrative and technical staff and governing boards behind the scenes (little to no brown)” (2015: 15). Likewise, in her article “The Diversity Problem at American Museums Gets a Report,” journalist Claire Voon writes,

Just as certain jobs were heavily weighted to one gender, some are heavily specific to non-Hispanic whites. Low-level jobs like security and facility-related ones are pretty evenly split, but curators, conservators, and those working in publication and registrar are over 80% non-Hispanic white. Digging into the demographics of near-top-tier positions, non-Hispanic whites constitute a whopping 84% while Asians represent 6%, Blacks 4%, and Hispanics 3%. (Voon 2015)

Figure 2 from Hyperallergic. New York, NY. 2015.
These statistics are not surprising. We live in an incredibly pain-stricken nation, still trying to heal from the traumas of war, enslavement, and segregation. And while many enlightened white contemporary curators and artistic directors know the importance of incorporating Black and other minoritarian voices into their staffs, exhibitions, and performance seasons, much of the art world is still managed under a structurally violent white supremacist’s doctrine that ordains European aesthetics and creativity as the highest level of intellectual and/or conceptual rigor. Even if it is not practiced, I believe most people within institutions recognize the importance of diversity within art and culture. The issue, in my opinion, goes far beyond the concept of creating diversity within predominantly white spaces.

What I am arguing for is a revision in the way we care and support Black bodies once we manage to situate them within the walls of the predominantly white institution. No matter the capacity (staff member, artist, audience, board member), I question if the modern American white institution is actually capable of delivering the kind of care and hospitality needed to sustain members of minoritarian communities? People of color have been forced to work within spaces where the white gaze and its corresponding micro-aggressions are endured on a daily basis to gain respect within the framework of the institution. Poet Claudia Rankine considers this in her book Citizen: An American Lyric. She states:

a friend once told you there exists the medical term—John Henryism—for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism. They achieve themselves to death trying to dodge the buildup of erasure. Sherman James, the researcher who came up with the term, claimed the physiological costs were high. (2014: 11)

Section 2: Digitality

In response to this cultural erasure, many artists of color have managed to become far less dependent on cultural institutions. The internet has changed the way visual and
performance art is experienced. The mainstream distribution of the world-wide web has allowed multiple artists a platform to challenge the structural racism within the art field. Today, contemporary Black experimentalists can work online and/or in video and film mediums to push their work towards greater public consumption, and in some cases monetize their work without the backing of an established cultural institution. Digital platforms circumvent the institution as mediator, connecting the artist directly with public.

Experimental Black male and transgender artists such as M. Lamar, IMMA (formally IMMA/MESS), Lawrence Graham-Brown, and Jacolby Satterwhite, among others, have created significant audiences for themselves online. The hyper-Afro-queer futuristic digital personas they often portray in their works locate them in situations that create structural, multi-layered, and sexually complex mystique. These artists use their bodies—sometimes as sexual subjects, sometimes as radical racial metaphors—to bridge the gap between “high” and “low” art, pop and avant-garde, all the while connecting their work to digital audiences as a means to distribute their work to the public regardless of gallery or venue representation.

But just as the internet has excelled the careers of many Black artists, it has also aided in the viral sharing of Black death. Advancements in cell phone technologies have allowed many of the illnesses that plague Black communities to be displayed online, gaining an international audience, simultaneously making celebrities out of murdered Black people. In her book, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being, scholar Christina Sharpe asks: “What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death” (2016: 10)? With the constant threat of death looming like an evil shadow over our heads, the potency of this question feels particularly vital. The contemporary digital age has Black, Brown, Native, immigrant, trans,
and other minoritarian bodies situated under constant surveillance. I cannot turn on the news or open my multiple social media channels without being consistently delivered messages of civil unrest, violence, resistance, terrorism, and murder within (and imposed upon) minoritarian communities.

As a person of color, I recognize that not only is the viral sharing of Black death exhausting, it reinforces the issue of non-mattering that gave birth to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The global pandemic in social media sharing where Black bodies are virtually distributed either being bashed, humiliated, or murdered (more often than not, these bodies are young men and/or queer people of color) is an alarming and disheartening fad of trauma sharing. It does not only perpetuate the sensationalized pornography of Black pain and grief, but also reignites the violent action with each press of the play button, thus creating a continual loop where the cycle of agony being inflicted replicates itself, mutates, and gains power. Artist, composer, and vocalist M. Lamar has devoted much of his current creative practice to the art of mourning. In our interview about his work and practice he says, “mourning is the centerpiece of my work and has been the centerpiece for quite a long time.”

In response to Black death, he continues:

The horror is obvious right after you see a 12-year-old child being shot on videotape in the case of Tamir Rice, or The Legacy of Emmett Till, or Mike [Brown]. There’s so many names—Sean Bell being shot 50 times in 2006. The horror is pretty much on display at all times, and so I think that the romance part of it is – lately in my work. [It] has been very much a romance with the dead; not really letting them go in any kind of way, not moving on. A lot of the philosophy in my work is not about moving on. It’s not about grieving and getting on with it, but having that loss be central to what makes your subjectivity in the world as you perceived it. I will not ever get over your death. I will not ever reconcile that. It’s forever changed me, and it’s with me at every moment. (M. Lamar 2016)
Images of Black death are corrosive, not only to those documenting them, but also to those watching. Today, where media moves literally at the speed of light, images carry a deeply significant weight. The ways in which we share and transmit information affects the way we think about ourselves and communicate with each other. The scholar Fred Moten confirms that the American desire to feed off the devastation of Black and brown bodies is nothing new, it “stretches across a long history of brutal violence” (Moten 2003: 195).

The policing, killing, lynching, and public assassinations of these bodies by negrophobic badge-and/or cape-wearing white men is an awful habit. America has a long, deranged history with this kind of pass-time, too often displaying the mutation of these bodies in the public domain as if it were a pop concert. Loss and mourning have always plagued the Black minoritarian experience in America, and even more specifically the Black mother’s experience because too often she is left with the unfortunate duty of burying her child. In the preface to her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, feminist scholar bell hooks argues that “[B]lack men endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity” (2003: xii). She writes:

> Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence they are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the nineteenth century but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day. Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it. (2003: xii)

When so many lives are hanging by a thread, I am forced to consider the role of radical care and decoloniality even more closely. What is the connection between curation and larger societal issues? How do artists of color curate spaces, environments, and communities that
feel safe and bring to light the sociopolitical issues of the contemporary moment that are valid and deeply integral to all people both on and off the performance stage or museum? Is it the role of curators and artists to concern themselves with these questions? As cultural citizens, I believe it is our duty to respond to these circumstances. Most curators and artists of color have a deep knowing and practice of this whereas many of those operating within white dominant culture, who have positioned themselves under the cloak of whiteness and neoliberalism, are just becoming “woke” to the urgency of the matter now that many of their civil rights are also in danger. Arguably, it may very well be the historical lack of social engagement, political investment, and the delusion of national socio-economic progression among white curators and producers in positions of power within most cultural institutions throughout the US that got us in this predicament of ill-defined curatorial mission and societal understanding in the first place.

Today, due to continued technological advancement, a multitude of diverse representations of Black masculinity are being portrayed in the public domain. From popular iconic images of RuPaul to Barack Obama, we are living in a post-civil rights era where Black folks are rooted in, but far less restricted by the deleterious constructions of Blackness. The internet, more than any other invention of the twentieth century, has given birth to a non-hierarchical approach to negotiate difference and engage with people who are other. It has also altered the ways in which the public interacts with venues as well as the curatorial practice museums and performing art centers must take to become more viable in the lives of art consumers.

In a time when financial and educational resources in the arts are scarce across the board, no matter one’s race or gender, if contemporary institutions are to remain embedded in
the criticality of current artistic concerns, then they must be in constant discourse with artists, producers, and curators who are on the horizon, self-taught, outsider, minority, and independent. More than ever before, individuals are in control of their experiences, carefully curating the cultural content which they ordain as most important to their lives (as displayed most concretely by social media), and so the role of the art institution of the future is to create more spaces for this kind of experiential, innovative, even-leveled, interaction to take place without judgment, prejudice, and highbrow critique. Because “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde: [1984] 2007: 110), in order to implement the real work of diversity, inclusion, and radical care, cultural hubs must meet Black and Brown people with new creative strategies. The tools and frameworks used to support the work of the artists of color need to be just as multilayered, dynamic, and radical as the work itself. Curators and presenters can no longer use passé systems of promotion to support work and make hires if their institution is to remain vital for decades into the future. The American cultural institution has spent hundreds of years mastering tools of non-inclusion and segregation to locate, intrigue, and attract white, wealthy prospects. Now it is time to devote the same amount of energy to invite the “dark divine” (hooks) and gain the trust and attention of more Black and Brown communities, allowing them the cultural equity, support, and care they deserve.
CHAPTER 2: MAPPING DIASPORIC INTERSECTIONALITIES IN THE BLOOD WAS ON THEIR SHOULDERS

I am an ancestor in training. The length of my training is unknown to me so it is with great urgency that I fully cultivate in my current life that which my ascendants will ask me for support with in the future. In order to be petitioned with prayer in the future, I am continuously clarifying what I need in life now so my ascendants know what to put on my altar in my afterlife. I am always discovering forms of pleasure and nurturing, so that I may clear the paths to those pleasures for embodied loves when I myself no longer have a body [...] If I do not press my skin more deeply into the materials of my everyday life—the objects that are part of the inheritance I offer—I deny future bodied kin the comfort of my present knowledge. I commit to recognizing happiness in my life so my ascendants may find clearer pathways to their own. Through the practice of self-care, I will be a mighty ancestor—able to provide a meaningful inheritance to any queer who may utter my name in prayer.

—Indira Allegra, “How Does Your Self-Care Practice Promote Healing For Future Generations?”

The axis where Blackness and queerness intersect is fatal. I locate the genesis of The Blood Was On Their Shoulders (2017) at this intersection; the project examines this fatal location as the place where information is carried through blood memory, through heritage and culture, through and beyond the physical limitations of the body, and through death. In this chapter, guided by the texts (the literary maps) of Black, feminist, and/or queer scholars, I offer a performance analysis of my project The Blood Was On Their Shoulders (The Blood) and share some of my observations in creating and co-organizing with two artist-scholars: Tara Willis and Ni’Ja Whitson. Drawing on the use of Black and queer feminist texts to guide our thinking, our structure, and our communication strategies, I apply the conceptual framework of SCM to our creative investigation. The performance of The Blood is used in this chapter as a case study of SCM. I argue that performance can and does have the ability to heal societal trauma while creating community and networks of power and support for minoritarian people, and most specifically the Black queer.
How does one create a network of power within the midst of Black queer fatality?

Calvin Warren highlighted a similar concern in his 2013 presentation for the American Studies Association: *Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory & Ethics.*

The “Black Queer,” then, is a problem for thought [...] and to suggest that it does not “exist” is to indicate that it is outside of meaning and humanism’s grammar. To assert its existence would amount to a conceptual contradiction because “Blackness” is the ontological position of the derelict object unredeemable, and “Queerness” is the site of a subjectivity pushed to its limit—pushed, but yet within the scope of humanity. The two positions are not reconcilable, and when they do intersect, the result is fatal. (Warren, 22)

For those of us who perform within the constraints of this particular intersection, within the constant “push towards our death” (Sharpe 2016: 10), we understand that to exist in the world means to linger inside the wake of both being and non-being. The Black queer troubles the parameters of being and non-being because “blackness is always a disruptive surprise moving in the rich nonfullness of every term it modifies” (Moten 2003: 255) or, as Warren states, the suffering of the Black queer “lacks a proper grammar” (Warren 2013). So our option is to exist and locate our power in the wake, in “the work” of “the wake” (Sharpe 2016: 17). Sharpe attests “wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans*local and global levels” (19). It is here, in the wake of this fatal intersection, in the praxis and theory of mourning that I locate *The Blood.*

For queer and trans people of color (QTPOC), the need to engage in a radical self-care practice is literally a matter of life or death. It means curating a set of strategies for oneself that might be shared with our “ascendants” (Allegra 2016) because the fragility of our lives, of our skin, seems to be the least of anyone’s concern who may exist within the more privileged intersection of presenting as white, cisgender, straight, and male. For
QTPOC, what cannot stand to be lost is the psychic wealth, magic, and strategies for healing that have been cultivated over centuries. In creating a project like *The Blood*, what became the most important tools of creation are the Black queer methodologies of care that we inherit through the texts of the elders and ancestors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, Essex Hemphill, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, José Esteban Muñoz, Alice Walker, among others. We map the self-care practices of these scholars through their writing, their images, their objects, their love stories, and their radical acts of pleasure and pain so that we may “record what others erase” (Anzaldúa 1981: 169).

While dominant culture (and sometimes cultures of the oppressed) might render our queer Black bodies as disposable through the “distorted logic” (Fanon) of the colonizer, we affirm that our intersectional\(^3\) cultural production is essential. So that even if our lives don’t matter, our deaths are not in vain. Our continuum of protest, activism, performance, and civil rights remind all people that the fight for Black queer lives, which began before us and will continue well after our time on this planet is done, is the constant motion that unites us to our elders and ancestors. This motion exists whether our bodies activate it or not. It is a “motion that is free of the systematic oscillation that begins and ends at the illusion of the originary, the primordial—the systematic oscillation that, therefore, never ends” (Moten 2003: 130).

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\(^3\) I draw from the work of Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw who named intersectionality theory in the 1980s. It is defined as “the study of how different power structures interact in the lives of minorities, specifically black women” (Adewunmi: 2014).
Ni’Ja, a gender non-conforming artist, Tara Willis, a cis-gender mixed race artist-scholar, and myself a cis-gender queer-identified Black male artist-curator have been working together for the past four months on *The Blood*. What I find to be particularly powerful about curatorial practice in relation to Black queer performance study is the ability it has to help people locate themselves and each other within shared community through movement, language, and ideas. Black and Brown queer audiences know when a project is put forth that centralizes their experiences and they understand when they have been erased. Incorporating this knowledge, we structured the performance as a series of physical autobiographical narratives filtered through a system of theoretical movements and psychic states curated in and around the body.
Each of the co-organizers bring his/her/their own set of questions into the room. The presentation (in figure 3) is the first of two performances at Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX). The audience is predominantly young QTPOC. They have entered into a landscape reverberating with the sounds of scholars such as Arundhati Roy, Alice Walker, and bell hooks. Tara Willis and I sit on stage paging through various texts. I am reading the work of West Coast artist Indira Allegra: “Through the practice of self-care, I will be a mighty ancestor—able to provide a meaningful inheritance to any queer who may utter my name in prayer” (Allegra 2016: 1). While Tara reads lines from “There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé,” a new poetry collection by Morgan Parker. The table at which we sit holds a bottle of red wine, glasses, essential oils, music playing devices, and beloved texts. The audience sits in the round. The space is intimate. Ni’Ja enters the performance space, head covered with dreadlocks designed to hide their face.

In a recent interview pertaining to the making of The Blood, Ni’Ja states,

Part of the investigation for me is how can we reimagine masculinity? Can we imagine a Black body that isn’t at birth dangerous or at birth endangered? Something about the danger of the revolutionary aspect of Black love felt like the key for me. (Whitson 2017)

A belief shared by Ni’Ja and myself centers around the idea that queerness has much to teach all people about ways of seeing, reading, and understanding Black identities. Blackness and queerness orbit inside a cosmology. There is no finite point, a place to land cannot exist.

Ni’Ja continues:

Queerness exists as an obliteration of binarism. It doesn’t exist because something else is or doesn’t exist to be in counterpoint to an existence. It is itself. It is becoming, a constant questioning; it causes a constant questioning. I feel blackness occupies that same, very empowered, very limited [position]. It is a no space that is every space. I think queerness as a scope of identity teaches us about the way that there is a scope of
identity within blackness. Blackness itself requires us to be in movement with it. (Whitson 2017)

Our shared research in *The Blood Was On Their Shoulders* centers around the development of a queer language, a technology around shape shifting in performance. For Ni’Ja, existing within a trans queer body translates directly to their creative approach. Ni’Ja states,

That’s one of the primary ways that non-binary gender and sexual identity manifests in my work. I think it is a magic making that queer folk, indigenous folk, Black folk have. I think it's a part of our healing practices and our speech practices and survival. I am looking at the ways that the body can shift space; can literally shift space, state of being and presentation of self in the live. That is an actual technology that we can exercise. That's one of the ways that it shows up. I think it also shows up by a refusal to obey the proscenium or even the rules of any space I find myself in. Wherever my work is presented that space has to become mine in some ways. It means often times completely reimagining what it is. That almost always means a reordering of where people are situated to view work, where my movement, my physical body moves in this space. To be unbound by physical locality is another strategy that I employ. (Whitson 2017)
Asking questions that pertain to the development of queer language and performance practice is part of our creative kinship. *The Blood* seems to reveal this kinship. Our project is about more than creating a curatorial intervention within the realm of live performance, it centers on who we are and how we share tactics for healing that translate into our everyday life. Through a series of theoretical conversations, the project gives us space to teach each other, share knowledge, and new ways of engaging in a self-care centered creative practice.

*The Blood* reveals an emotional sharing of a gender non-conforming identity, a person in the process of a reckoning between their own understanding of their body and the way it is perceived on stage. These rich temporal complexities of interior and exterior selves are made visible through spoken word and the use of objects such as ice (representing a constant transformation and passing of time) or a sneaker (a metaphor for urban life,
consumer power, and materialism). The body becomes a vessel through which the objects take on a multitude of meanings.

Anytime a Black queer allows themselves to be seen on stage, the stakes are high. The danger of the white gaze, one historically rooted in Black death within the American project, can be a real obstacle to overcome as an artist. The emotional reverberations of the gaze last long after the performance is done. What I find as the most powerful proclamation within *The Blood* is Ni’Ja’s position as a person who has taken back the possession of their body and its history. Through various movements and spoken texts a refusal to be victimized by the past arises. Ni’Ja defeats toxic and/or abusive masculinist behaviors that may attach to anyone who understands themselves as male or on the masculine spectrum. Near the conclusion of *The Blood*, Ni’Ja steps outside of the room. We only hear them moving. A light flickers on. We see only their shadow moving along the side of the wall.

My goal with *The Blood Was On Their Shoulders* is to delve into theories that have been integral to my own development and thinking on fugitivity, Black life, loss, and queer intersectional identities. Through the lens of SCM as a way to argue for the importance of centralizing radical care, healing, and alternative strategies of survival within predominantly white cultural institutions, this performance project brings attention to the “crisis of meaning” (Sales: 2016) that currently plagues the creative sector and the United States as a whole.

“Socio-Choreological Mapping is an ideology that considers a curatorial practice that visibilizes emergent and historical practices of care-giving already deeply embedded in Black, indigenous, and other minoritarian communities” (Peskin 2016). Moving with the understanding that culture is notated both in and outside of “staged” curatorial frameworks,
SCM expands the notion of choreology as an alternative system of documenting the socio-historical record. In planning for the project, we wanted to consider the living archive as possible strategy for documenting the work. This was how Tara Willis was most important to the project. She holds in her body a specific knowledge of the process, presentation, and archival systems used within the project, because she (and the notes, questions, sounds, actions she produced) was the archival system.

As evidenced in *The Blood*, SCM is a lived experience. We discovered it within the simple practice of being present together while locating each other in community without fear, without borders. In its most radical definition, SCM disrupts the colonial racialized readings of bodies and the spaces they inhabit, which inevitability creates inclusion for historically disinvested, misread, and illegible individuals. It is “an explicitly political” alternative ideology for creating inclusive performance ecologies.

Another observation in *The Blood* was that much of the Socio-Choreological Mapping concept happens within psychic planning and intentional methodologies where bodies engage in a live performative action. Through the act of moving together (viewers engaged in the psychic act of witnessing) through pleasure and pain, audiences reinterpret their bodies and environments into stations of freedom, healing, idea-sharing, and restorative justice. SCM engages imaging in live performance and discourse as an iterative process that unfolds over time to create a picture of a whole—time spent with an idea, time spent with a collaborator, time spent with an audience, time spent with an image, time spent in community.
CHAPTER 3: CURATING BLACK JOY AT THE COLORED GIRLS MUSEUM

won’t you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.
−Lucille Clifton, The Book of Light

Section 1: The Colored Girls Museum at Wesleyan University

Poet Lucille Clifton acknowledges the daily attempts by her would-be cultural assassins (white supremacy, poverty, racism) to take her life; she asks us to celebrate their failures. Cultural assassins go by many names and weave a complex web creating a bleak reality for communities of color. Perhaps the most disheartening representation of these deathly forces is the poverty-stricken state inside which many Black and other minoritarian people are forced to live. Low-income urban “projects” and “ghettos” are inflicted with a multitude of societal ills, including: drug addiction, poor mental health, food deserts, high academic dropout rates, police brutality, and high percentages of incarceration. Yet miraculously, despite all the obstacles facing Black life in America today, we continue to survive and curate centers of healing and care to rehabilitate both ourselves and those within our reach. One such example is The Colored Girls Museum (TCGM) in Germantown, Philadelphia founded by Executive Director Vashti DuBois; TCGM began as an urban pop-up gallery and performance space in the Philadelphia FringeArts Festival in 2015 (titled: The
Colored Girls Museum: Open for Business). DuBois’s work at TCGM reminds me of my years as a teen walking through the halls of the Museum of African American History in Detroit (MAAH). I am met with a similar curatorial intention. I understand now that traces of SCM as a concept were located inside the institutional framework of MAAH; that MAAH was part of the genesis of SCM.

![Image of Colored Girls Museum](image.png)

Figure 6 from of The Colored Girls Museum Website. Philadelphia, PA. 2015

In this chapter, I examine the spaces Black women create for themselves to allow healing, listening, and practices of pleasure to occur as one of the core values of SCM. Even within dire circumstances, Black women conjure a joy that combats systematically oppressive structures. The TCGM is the perfect example of a flexible space producing technologies of care meant to celebrate Black women and girls while also opening doors to anyone in need of the message. In other words, Socio-Choreological Mapping is embedded
in concept, values, and implementation of TCGM. The SCM that is displayed in the life practices of Vashti DuBois and her team of co-curators is a way of making visible both emergent and ancient practices of care-giving which notate the stories of the colored girl at all stages of her life. In an attempt to acknowledge and circumvent this systemic issue of Black feminist erasure, I intentionally wrote this chapter to be the most expansive within my thesis focusing solely on the work of DuBois and TCGM.

Vashti DuBois uses TCGM as her platform to facilitate a conversation between herself and the visual artists she works with, many of whom have a multidisciplinary arts background. Her goal is to create a sanctuary inside of her own “house-turned-museum,” honoring the experiences, narratives, and herstories of “ordinary colored girls as they submit objects to the museum that are significant to their experience of being a colored girl” (DuBois 2016). To walk through the museum is to walk through the home of almost any Black nana or auntie where black and white “quiet” (Campt 2014) portraits hang holding the archive of the family. It is a history lesson in Black genealogy that traces back generations. The home is the foundation and the colored girl, the colored woman, is its glue. DuBois understands that creating the sanctuary-like feel of TCGM requires the submission of objects by multi-generational Black women and girls, objects that are significant to them. Not only do “the objects both stand in for the colored girl herself, but they hold the energy of her story and her meaning” (DuBois 2016).

For DuBois, there is a real need to celebrate “the ordinary colored girl” because far too few places exist, if any at all, that actually “examine the power and the voice of the ordinary colored girl at all stages of her life for the simple act of getting up in the mornings,
for being who she is” (DuBois 2016). Those are not images that we see often displayed in the public domain. DuBois explains:

Most of us were raised being told that we had to work ten times as hard to get half as far, and The Colored Girls Museum exists to lift that burden from our shoulders and to have us acknowledge and notice how in our ordinary selves we’re doing extraordinary work, and how ordinary is beautiful, and how ordinary is revolutionary, and that if a colored girl were sucked out of the universe, there would be no universe because she is, in fact, the glue. (2016)

DuBois offers a powerful metaphor to consider in relation to self-care, fugitivity, Afro-feminist futurity; namely, the concept of Black women and girls as the glue of the universe. It is a sentiment similar to that of scholar Hortense Spillers who proclaims in her essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”: “I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name […] My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (1987: 65). Throughout American history, we know the Black woman to be the backbone, “the bridge” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) of not only the Black family, but the white family for which she worked, for whose children she helped raise. From the field to big house, she has worked and cleaned. She has marched for civil rights while also mending the pants of the marchers and feeding them. She has written about the struggle; she has archived her pain and in so doing this, has archived the world. All the while, her struggles and triumphs too often go unseen. Spillers continues,

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated” […] dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement, as the [captive] human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (1987: 68)

Even in her most mundane presentation of self, the colored girl is always in a perpetual state of psychic and emotional labor, if for no other reason than her consistent
erasure from the canons of dominant society, which is a kind of repeated murder. While Spillers’ essay presents an image of the inner workings of dominant cultures that need to hold Black bodies in a constant state of metaphorical “captivity and mutilation,” Clifton’s testament is a counter-argument to this blood-thirsting, colonizing, white-masculinist thinking so skillfully revealed by Spillers. Clifton repels interference from her perpetual attempted assassinations; her Black womanhood will not allow them the satisfaction of her defeat. Instead, she celebrates their failed attempts to dislodge her and asks her reader to celebrate with her. Similarly, DuBois creates a museum that allows the colored girl to be honored, centered, and celebrated. She allows us to witness her multiplicities, her heartaches, and her magically irreplaceable joy. Even in the quotidian state of performing her everyday life, she (the colored girl) is an emblem of strength. Much like the glue holding the foundation together, the colored girl’s power and ability is bypassed and ignored. We rarely see her in a way that acknowledges her capacity to not only survive, but also hold together entire families, communities, and nations (as exemplified by our former first lady Michelle Obama).

Vashti DuBois began her work heralding civil justice for women and girls many years ago while still an undergraduate student at Wesleyan University. “I used to do this thing called ‘Women’s Work’,” she explains:

I wanted women of color to be in community together because I knew people from different communities, and we [women of color on campus] really didn’t...I became aware of how many of us were coming to the university with an art practice, but so many people were actually at Wesleyan to be lawyers, doctors, and [other professionals]. Their art practices were really just part of their education to become excellent to do this work. They weren’t or didn’t see themselves as having the time to be practicing artists anymore. (DuBois 2016)
DuBois saw the lack of community organizing among women of color (WOC) as an opportunity to locate like-minded women and gather in special interest houses on campus where they could share their art and stories. Locating oneself through the act of locating others via the shared practice of artmaking and exploration of theory is a fundamental component of the Socio-Choreological Mapping ideology.

SCM is not a new system, but rather an attempt to reveal what I believe has been a deeply embedded part of Black and minoritarian life from the beginning of the Black American’s narrative in the USA. It has and continues to function inside the “mysticism of the flesh,” which Fred Moten connects as a qualifier of Blackness (Moten 2013). DuBois and her community of WOC would transform a special interest house into their own living room, a “Women’s Workspace” (DuBois 2016) where, all WOC could come to participate in a “sacred self-made sanctuary” (DuBois 2016). She would encourage the visual artists to exhibit their work on the walls, while other women would bring in everyday objects from their rooms. This effort to create a personalized feeling of home and inclusion for WOC was realized inside Wesleyan’s predominantly white institution (PWI).

Much like the work of Black feminists who stretch the possibilities of space, DuBois also desired to reorganize the spatial possibilities between herself and her newly-found academic sisters. Even if there were as many as 50 women who wanted to participate, each story was heard and every dance was observed. Each woman a witness for the others. Showing up for each other regardless of time constraints allowed them to view one another in a more fully realized manner. DuBois curated these early renderings of the TCGM every semester she was present on campus.
Section 2: The Colored Girls Museum at The Girls Center

_Above all else The Colored Girls Museum is a safe space to be a colored girl._
—Vashti DuBois

The act of curating a radically inclusive Black feminist space is a form of building resilience for the self as well as for the communities that house the self. In his book _Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty_ (2009), Stuart Elden cites postcolonial scholar Edward Said in regards to the politics of creating counter strategies against imperial powers. Elden quotes, “Geography is therefore the art of war but can also be the art of resistance if there is a counter-map and a counter-strategy” (Said). Expanding on Said’s thought, geographers Camilla Hawthorne and Brittany Meché attest,

> Once this counter-strategy is created we can begin to “displace [what Hill Collins’ describes as] the white-masculinist cartographic gaze,” the “partial perspectives, situated knowledges, and […] subjugated knowledges,” and in doing so attend to the intertwinnings of spatial, racial, gendered, and other forms of violence” (2016: 18).

The work of centralizing the voices of women of color displaces the white masculinist gaze, and as a result creates new spatial possibilities for tending to the various form of violence that continue to harm oppressed people. The simple act of creating and holding space for WOC is a politicized action and holds significant meaning for people who are rarely given space to be heard, seen, or acknowledged.

Shortly after completing her studies at Wesleyan University, DuBois moved to Philadelphia where she took a job as Director of The Girls Center in North Philadelphia. The Girls Center is a program run by the Congreso Health Center, a public health management corporation with a bilingual staff located in the West Kensington section of Philadelphia. DuBois worked most closely with girls between the ages of 13 and 17. Known as a “step-down program,” the Center was the last stop before a girl was placed either in a residence or
a boot camp facility. “It was a collision course of young women coming into this particular facility, restorative justice, but it really wasn’t *restorative* justice.” In addition to the challenges of being caught up in the juvenile justice system, The Girls Center was not a full-time day school. As a result, many of these young women were leaving the Center without having fully completed their high school coursework. In response, DuBois shifted the program from a traditional school day model to an art project based curriculum, which would address the educational disparities deeply present in the program. There were many girls there: some as old as “17-year-olds who were reading on a fourth grade level.” The newly revised, art-focused curriculum allowed DuBois and her staff to work with individuals where they found them academically “and then move them along without ostracizing anyone. It was also very healing.” The young women found themselves in The Girls Center for multiple reasons, many of which were simply out of their control. Aimee Meredith Cox discusses a similar kind of issue in the introduction to her book, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* (2015) where she writes,

> Black girls and young women living in or close to poverty are the population most adversely affected by the implementation of [...] laws and reforms. Their vulnerabilities, however, are concealed by their displacement from the dialogues that swirl around them, even as these dialogues are grounded (on all sides of the debate) on intractable assumptions about Blackness, youth, gender, sexuality, and class. (2015: 5)

The needs of Black women and girls too often exist outside the qualifiers of citizenship within the framework of our society. As a result, this demographic is forced to choreograph systems of survival, healing, and rehabilitation specific to their own needs, a performance of self that centralizes their own requirements for community. DuBois admits that despite all of the therapeutic, social, and case management services that the Center had in place, it didn’t
suffice. In her attempt to assert reaffirming and complex images of Black womanhood, DuBois turned The Girls Center into the second incarnation of *The Colored Girls Museum*. In the reincarnation of TCGM at The Girls Center, the young women in the program would be their own curators and creators of their personal narratives. Original artwork by residents of the program were installed throughout the building as another spatial intervention, allowing these young women to implicate themselves into a larger lineage, a direct technology to insert their work into a “counter-canon.” “Her artwork, her objects, were being installed in different places in the museum, in places of honor so that she could own that space and she could sanctify that space as her own. When we invited people in to tell her story, the backdrop was her home space. That was the second iteration” (DuBois 2016).

**Section 3: The Colored Girls Museum: Open for Business**

*This version of the Museum takes place in a residence in Germantown, Philadelphia. A Colored Girls Home is converted into a Museum disguised as a Bed and Breakfast. This added layer allows curators and actors to play with the concept of disguise and camouflage as a necessary feature of the Colored Girls Existence—if people know she is a Museum they may in some way harm her—disparage her or dismiss her—thus she covers her true intentions.*


DuBois’ third and most recent incarnation of the TCGM opened in Germantown, Philadelphia in 2015 as part of the FringeArts Festival with the title *The Colored Girls Museum: Open for Business*. The TCGM is engineered to be a pop-up event; a multiplicitous space for healing, affirmation, and restoration as well as an educational center, an archive, a 21st century underground railroad. The idea of the TCGM is based on the principle that she (the Museum) can go anywhere there is a need for her. It is a flexible construct that fits comfortably inside a house, a neighborhood, a school, or a street corner: “the idea is that this moment of bringing a museum into your circumstance allows you to honor the colored girls
in your world. It allows you to tap into that ordinary extraordinary colored girl wherever she is and whoever she is. That’s really her genesis” (DuBois 2016).

Another way the TCGM exemplifies the conceptual basis of SCM is in its attention to alternative leadership models; the TCGM operates within a collective structure. DuBois believes that “the most powerful leadership that we can have is collective leadership because then everybody feels a sense of responsibility and ownership for the thing itself. That’s how things survive” (DuBois 2016). While DuBois oftentimes takes the role of leader at the TCGM, she is very clear that it is the trifecta approach that keeps the Museum alive. DuBois is supported by two Black men: Ian Friday, Associate Director, and Michael Clemmons, Curator. Again, she offers a counter-narrative to the popular discourse where Black men work in partnership with the initiatives of Black women, instead of the story where “We’re usually the ones behind them frying the chicken or doing whatever it is that we’re doing to make sure that shit happens” (DuBois 2016). She affirms that working with Friday and Clemmons has been a powerful experience because she respects them greatly, and as a result, these relationships have challenged her to reconsider how she understands and speaks of what “the movement towards liberation and healing is going to be for all of us.” Their shared leadership model has created the space for loving debate among the three where they are able to express their individual needs, expectations, and beliefs. “In regards to Black women and girls,” DuBois states, they are able to “imagine blazing new ground [that] offers an alternative model of what leadership might be able to look like in our community.” She continues,

I think that in our community it’s pretty clear that the colored girl herself is really the engine that drives our community. That’s no disrespect to anybody. That’s the way we’re structured. That’s the way we’re built. At the same time, our ability to be in
partnership with one another as men and women is really vital because there’s also a narrative that the world likes to continue to drive, which is that Black women are out here by themselves and ain’t nobody escorting Black women. There are some cases where that is absolutely the truth, but it is not the whole truth. It’s not the whole truth. (DuBois 2016)

DuBois concludes, “In order to imagine a different set of outcomes and scenarios, we have to be able to model something different... that’s part of what is going on [at TCGM] when you look at our leadership” (DuBois 2016). Similar to the value of community building embedded in SCM, DuBois understands that it takes a community of artists, scholars, and story-tellers to realize the TCGM. Early on this process, a collective team of inaugural artists dared to display their work and share their stories. A community of men and women came together with their central mission being to look at the world through the lens of the colored girl; to celebrate her now and for lifetimes to come.
CONCLUSION: CURATION AS A PRACTICE OF SELF-CARE

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed futures.

− Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival,” The Black Unicorn

[T]hose of us from marginal groups who were allowed to enter prestigious, predominantly white colleges were made to feel that we were there not to learn but to prove that we were the equal of whites. We were there to prove this by showing how well we could become clones of our peers. As we constantly confronted biases, an undercurrent of stress diminished our learning experience.

− bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

During my first year at Bennington College in 2001, I launched my research in the Visual and Performing Arts building (commonly referred to as VAPA) with a project I called The Night Dances. It was a kind of secret project; I told only a few select people. At midnight, I would venture to VAPA’s Martha Hill Dance Studio, douse the lights, and use the night vision feature of my camera to record myself dancing for hours. These were some of my earliest attempts to materialize the complexities of my Blackness inside the predominantly white space that was Bennington College, and my first attempt at executing Socio-Choreological Mapping through a performative lens similar to the research I did with The Blood.

In this conclusion, I consider SCM as pedagogy linking my early explorations with art making and embodied theory to my contemporary approach to curatorial practice. SCM is a way of thinking and considering the self in relationship to the work as well as the
environment inside which the works takes place. It is a psychic process before it becomes
realized in lived practice.

In her book, *The Physics of Blackness: Beyond The Middle Passage Epistemology*, scholar Michelle M. Wright states,

Blackness cannot be located on the body because of the diversity of bodies that claim
Blackness as an identity. Blackness, then, is largely a matter of perception or—as
performance studies theorist E. Patrick Johnson observes—made up of moments of
performance in which performers understand their bodies as Black. (2015: 3)

*The Night Dances* was an early attempt to begin a conversation with myself about what my
performance of Blackness would mean. It was an effort to locate some aspect of myself while
creating a space where my unconscious could perform freely with my environment. Perhaps
another kind of unarticulated set of Black identities would emerge? Might it be possible to
disrupt the finite notions of colonized Black identity already programmed into my perception
of self? I wanted to better understand how I might be in dialogue with the various
intersectionalities that were beginning to surface inside me. Eager to decolonize my
performance of Blackness inside my daily life at Bennington College, *The Night Dances*
became a means for me to vent, to unleash my creativity and find the refuge, space, tools,
and systems of self-care I needed to materialize the unknown portion of my identities. While
I could not openly articulate this internal need at the time, I was incredibly thirsty to locate
myself and those like me inside my performance practice and education.

Years before I was exposed to the writings of Michelle M. Wright, James Baldwin,
Fred Moten, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, José Esteban Muñoz, and Stuart Hall, *The Night
Dances* allowed me to begin a nascent investigation of fugitive theory, Black existentialist
thought, and explorations into digital-reality performance. But somehow these Black and
Brown scholars and poets were omitted from my learning. Why? I believe a significant
amount of mentorship, embodied knowledge, and cultural negotiation was lost to me—and
the entire community of Bennington College—because there were so few representations of
racial diversity among the faculty, students, and staff. I believe Black and Brown professors
simply would not have let this kind of literary omission take place at a renowned liberal arts
college, although it can be argued that scholars of color teach the white supremacist
heteropatriarchal canon because otherwise tenure may not be an option, so the act of teaching
outside the white masculinist lens is a radical act.

During my senior year (2004), I fled Bennington College to study abroad at the
University of Kent, Canterbury. It was there that I came across bell hooks’ 1999 text,
“remembered rapture, the writer at work.” It must have been on a reading list given to me by
my writing instructor, Patricia Debney, who was vital in expanding my literary canon. hooks
was integral to my acceptance and understanding of myself as a young writer. I had to learn
how to hear myself again, how to listen to my voice. hooks’ proclamation spoke to me.

Writing is my passion. It is a way to experience the ecstatic. The root understanding
of the word ecstasy—“to stand outside”—comes to me in those moments when I am
immersed so deeply in the act of thinking and writing that everything else, even flesh,
falls away. The metaphysics of writing has always enchanted me. (1999: 1)

I remember reading this passage and hearing myself say: yes, this is how I feel. The act of not
only reading, but also the act of producing written and other practices of embodied theory
(song, dance, curation) is healing. Written and performed expression give us the tools to
know ourselves and therefore care for ourselves by “equipping” ourselves with a truth
(Foucault 1997: 285).
Care of self is related to the way in which writing forces the writer to look deeply inside themselves to reveal portals that exist on what Moten and Harney refer to as “the other side of an unasked question” (Harney and Moten 2013: 96). For people of color, the act of writing and using what James Baldwin calls “Black English” is an implementation of SCM ideology (Baldwin: 780). Writing is a curation of language to create imagery, emotion, and a documentation of the historical record that will impact the lives of future generations. Writing as self-care becomes especially important for writers and artists of color because historically the narrative of history has been told primarily through a white masculinist lens. Through writing, the artist curator engages in an act of freedom design, where creativity is limitless and allows one to locate the true north for themselves and others.

In 2013, I found myself again at a kind of artistic crossroads where I would have to take on a practice of unlearning certain kinds of normalized creative tactics dominant within the post-modern franchise of professional American concert dance. During that year, I took on a practice of decolonizing my creative work in order to become the kind of artist and thinker I knew was forming inside me. Similar to my practice with The Night Dances, I found myself wanting to express myself through digital media to reveal a complexity of Black masculinity rarely caught on camera. The project was titled Black Male Revisited: Revenge of the New Negro, but this line of research continued to evolve into various configurations of video and live performance, including works entitled other.explicit.body. (2013/14) and #negrophobia (2015). This series of projects was very much influenced by a theoretically queer ecological study of performance and curation. The idea that a site can serve as a container for multiplicity and queer study rendered as a lens through which one might unpack certain truths regarding Black masculinity continued to captivate my thinking.
With the 20th anniversary of Thelma Golden’s *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art* exhibition approaching the following year in 2014, I found myself deeply inspired by the writings and curatorial approach of Thelma Golden, Director and Chief Curator at The Studio Museum in Harlem. I set out to create a platform that would celebrate the original exhibition while continuing to push forward and open a conversation as to how performance and Black trans identities might fit into the ‘Black Male’ exhibition lexicon.

In her essay *My Brother* written for the *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* exhibition catalogue (1994), Golden writes, “One of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century is the African-American male—‘invented’ because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fear and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male’s existence” (19). I found this passage particularly striking for three reasons. First, the concept of being *invented* articulates a specific framing and perspective in regards to the creation and experience of the Black male’s presence in America. Second, the idea that the invention became a catalyst for fearmongering within the American psyche articulates a very clear understanding of the Black male positionality within the current political climate. And third, the notion of truth as a concept embedded neither in the conception of the invention or in the result of the series of fears projected onto him struck a chord in me emotionally.

Curating for me has always been an immensely personal, vulnerable process. This was certainly evident in all of the projects I realized while working in New York City (2012-Present). *Black Male Revisited: Experimental Representations Through the Ephemeral Form* (BMR), presented at Danspace in the Lower East side of Manhattan was an immensely taxing and rewarding experience. The project seemed to hit on a specific cultural pulse at the
moment because communities that usually fall on the periphery of society were being
centralized. The closing ritual of the weekend-long event was entitled *Ephemeral
Experiments in Sound, Light, Bodies and Music* featuring legendary improviser and
choreographer Ishmael Houston-Jones and internationally celebrated composer and DJ King
Britt. Following the BMR project in February of 2014, folks continued to approach me
about the impact of the project. Off the heals of the BMR events, the following year I was
asked by Movement Research to co-curate the Movement Research Spring 2015 Festival.
The co-curators, Samita Sinha, Layla Childs, and myself titled the project *legible/illegible: opening beyond the space of identities*. Having just lost my brother in January of 2015, the
legible/illegible project (followed by a series of other curatorial projects) became an outlet in
public mourning. How might I translate my personal grief into a constructive series of
projects based in communal healing?

There were a number of factors that made the *legible/illegible* project an incredibly
healing experience for me. My co-curators Samita and Layla were an absolute dream to
collaborate with and as a result there was an even distribution of labor. We stayed in good
communication throughout the entire process. I was able to clearly voice my needs early on
in the dreaming stage of the process for our curatorial practice to be pleasurable. The
Movement Research staff was incredibly responsive to the needs of the co-curators. They
provided us with intern support, a reasonable curatorial stipend in addition to a $4500
programming budget, access to workspace and studio space when needed for meetings,

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4 Other participants and performers over the weekend included nationally and internationally
recognized artists and curators including niv Acosta, IMMA, Holly Bass, Rich Blint, Greg
Tate, Paloma McGregor, James Haile III, Thomas Lax, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Whitney V.
Hunter (yon Tande), Cosmo Whyte, Sherman Fleming, Ni’Ja Whitson, and Gregory Walker,
Lawrence Graham Brown, Rafael Sanchez, and Sir Lady Indee.
access to the staff to answer questions and execute administrative needs such as the
distribution of contracts, artist fees, and logistical information.

In his essay *Movement Research as a NYC case study—my subjective view*, Levi
Gonzalez writes,

What struck me was that the diversity of representation in these events actually added
meaning and resonance to already strong work, rather than “watering it down” or
diluting the individual artistic voice. It allowed that individual artistic voice to have
echoes and reverberations across a larger spectrum of ideas. This demonstrated the
power of diversity in curatorial practice. And it is no surprise that it was a team of
artist curators, with extremely limited resources, who managed to frame and harness
that power. (2015: 27-28)

Resources to support my curatorial and creative projects have always been slim. Thus, the
practice of curating Black, Brown, Natives people requires community building, bartering,
multiple meetings, and *hospitality* (if an organization cannot pay people of color well, the
least it can do is try to make artists and curators of color feel welcomed once an invitation
has been sent to present within a predominantly white institutional context).

Basically, the resources provided (monetary and in kind) allowed the curators to
focus on the curatorial perspective without diluting the process with bureaucratic institutional
issues that fell outside scope of our control. As a service organization, Movement Research is
certainly not without flaws, but they are in a practice of actively implementing systems of
decoloniality. The staff and Executive Director continue to make clear strides to check the
aesthetics of whiteness or “white supremacy culture” (Okun:1) that are historically embedded
in the organization, in order to create a more inclusion space for the application of
community service and radical care.

These projects eventually led me to the creation of #negrophobia (2015), a
performance installation, memorial site for the dead (including my murdered younger brother
Abdul Muhammed), and a living digital archive. #negrophobia was an alternative exhibition site where the image gallery is located on the floor, and a live feed hub forcing the spectator to observe the work through the filtered gaze of a femme, Black, trans person continuously manipulating the digital viewpoints of the performance space. IMMA, my creative collaborator in the work, moves through space with a camera phone, turning herself into a kind of prism through which most of the work is transcribed onto a large projection screen. She directs the gaze of the audience zooming in on various individuals. She teases, provokes, entertains. A viewer might think they are watching IMMA when in fact they are ones being surveilled. The site of the performance is marked by a huge X adorned with the faces of Black men and boys and other archival materials from the lifespan and touring engagements of the piece. The staged environment that is #negrophobia consists of a DJ booth, a throne, a shrine, a grave where images of police brutality are projected onto the wall, and a large screen where the live feed of the performance is revealed to the viewer. As the audience enters the work, text from James Baldwin’s On Being White and Others Lies (1984) is frozen on the live feed screen.

Part séance turned performance lecture, #negrophobia brings into focus the theory and practice of various Black writers and artists of what Fred Moten refers to as the “Black radical tradition” (2003). Most prevalent in the staged performance of #negrophobia are texts by bell hooks, Nina Simone, James Baldwin, and Audre Lorde. As artists, thinkers and philosophers, they ground the work. They reveal that ‘trope of truth’ (Golden: 1994) about Black identities rarely distributed into mainstream society that is so incredibly needed if we are to extinguish the corrosive series of phobias that plague the current political climate. While creating #negrophobia, I was consumed by the idea of composing a site that could
house a psychic triangulation of reality, theatricality, and digitality. The world I was manufacturing attempted to hold all three themes equally.

The composition of the audience situates them inside the work; they are forced to witness the performance of others and themselves as part of a whole complex ecology greater than themselves—a meeting ground, a place for like-minded individuals that are considering similar ideas, practices, systems, and ways of being together. An important feature of the Socio-Choreological Mapping ideology and vital to my practice as a maker and curator is the creation and understanding of community.

Most recently, in the rehearsal process for the project carrying the same name as this thesis, *The Blood was on Their Shoulders*, I and my co-curators (Tara Aisha Willis and Ni’Ja Whitson) found ourselves considering these same questions in regards to trauma and healing, trying to unpack, possibly, what Fred Moten calls “an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question” (2013: 97). More specifically, our leading question of inquisition for the project: *What is it that is but refuses to be because, in fact, it was never meant to be at all?* After several embodied reading exercises using this question as a prompt, I conclude that the answer is Blackness. In his book *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*, Bryan Wagner identifies Blackness as an “existence without standing in the party of exchange. Being Black is belonging to a state organized according to its ignorance of your—a state that does not, cannot know your mind” (2009: 1). As Black people forced to either conform to white social norms “a state that does not, cannot know [our] minds” or risk utter annihilation, it’s worth asking what shape might my practice of living, curating, creating art might take given the opportunity to exist outside of a normative white masculinist gaze and system of oppression?
Dr. Howard Pinderhughs, speaks of the residual effects of oppression and trauma within Black communities. He proclaims:

There’s historical and structural violence that has had an impact on all of us. It’s status that has had an impact at the community level, that we have to take account of. I think we’ve come to the point where we understand as communities that lots of our young people and adults are walking around with individual trauma. (2016, Washington, DC)

The diagnosis of trauma within Black and other minoritarian communities is nothing new. Black people in America have been forced to master the art of coping within the wake of trauma which becomes evident in both the people and the environments inside which these people are forced to exist. Pinderhughs continues,

When I speak about traumatized communities, most people think about a large number of people, individuals, who have trauma, but what I’m talking about also is that our communities, in terms of the social fabric and social relationships in our communities, the physical environment, the built environment in our communities and also the structure of opportunity in terms of economics and education have all been either undermined, destroyed, or turned on its head where they now produce violence instead of produce health, wellness and community. (2016, Washington, DC)

Socio-Choreological Mapping requires these kinds of issues to be constantly considered. It studies the power of image making and its sharing as both an action of empowerment and deconstruction. In locating the vital curatorial question “What is it that is but refuses to be because, in fact, it was never meant to be at all?,” within The Blood, we (audience and organizers) as participants within SCM consider the metaphorical complexities and illegibilities of Blackness, asking each other to reassess the power of imaginative thought as a tool to decolonize our thinking, undo the learned protective reflexes we employ to protect our oppression, and challenge standard stereotypical notions of Blackness, thus
redefining it for ourselves in the present moment as an infinite space of limitless evolution and possibility.
Vashti DuBois: Okay, my name is Vashti DuBois. Presently, I am the executive director and the founder of The Colored Girls Museum. I come to that work as a director and as a writer, although there isn’t a whole lot of writing in this now. I’m using the director side of my skillset to facilitate a conversation between myself as a director working with visual artists mostly, but artists of multidisciplinary background, to create an environment inside of this house-turned-museum that is a sanctuary and that really honors the experiences, and the stories, and the histories of ordinary colored girls as they submit objects to the museum that are significant to their experience of being a colored girl.

Part of what creates the sanctuary is, in fact, the submission of these objects that are significant because the objects both stand in for the colored girl herself, but they hold the energy of her story and her meaning. The reason we celebrate the ordinary colored girl is that there are very few places – there are none that I can think of – that actually look at the power and the voice of the ordinary colored girls 0 to 100 just for getting up in the mornings, for being who she is. Those are not images that we see in the world. They’re not voices that we really hear from.

Most of us were raised being told that we had to work ten times as hard to get half as far, and The Colored Girls Museum exists to lift that burden from our shoulders and to have us acknowledge and notice how in our ordinary selves we’re doing extraordinary work, and how ordinary is beautiful, and how ordinary is revolutionary, and that if a colored girl were
sucked out of the universe, there would be no universe because she is, in fact, the glue.

That’s not something that many people acknowledge, whether they know it or not.

Sometimes I think because we’ve been taken for granted so much, it’s not even something that we know or acknowledge ourselves. That’s really what I see my work as being, really being a facilitator of an environment that allows us to have this conversation.

Jaamil Kosoko: That’s really powerful. I love this idea of using her as the glue, using the metaphor of glue, because we rarely actually see the glue. We see how the foundation…

Vashti DuBois: Is held together.

Jaamil Kosoko: …is held together, but what’s holding it together? We rarely see her in that way, so that’s a really special metaphor there. Can you speak a little bit more about the history of The Colored Girls Museum and how it came to be?

Vashti DuBois: Sure. Like many things, it has several different starting points, and then it has an ignition, the thing that ignited it. Years ago, actually when I was an undergraduate at Wesleyan, I used to do this thing called Women’s Work. I wanted women of color to be in community together because I knew people from different communities, and we really didn’t – it was like Ajua Campos was the Latino House, and the Asian House, and the Malcolm X House. There really weren’t places where we were actually coming together.

In my own conversation with different women from different communities, I became aware of how many of us were coming to the university with an art practice, but so many people were actually at Wesleyan to be lawyers, doctors, and Indian chiefs. Their art practices were really just part of their education to become excellent to do this work. They weren’t or didn’t see themselves as having the time to be practicing artists anymore. There
were some phenomenal artists who were going on to become doctors, lawyers, and Indian chiefs.

This opportunity to just get together in the special interest houses and share our art with one another was the beginning of something like this. What we would do is we would take the special interest house and transform it into our living room, our Women’s Work, women of color living room. The visual artists put their work up. People brought stuff from their rooms. We really took over the space.

Then the performing artists, if there were 50 of us and it took from 6:00 to 2:00 in the morning for everybody to share their dance, or share their food, or share their performance, then that’s what we did. It really created a sense of community and allowed us to see each other in this way that we might not necessarily have an opportunity to. I did that every semester that I was there. That was one iteration of it.

Then I moved to Philadelphia. I took a job as a director of a place called the Girls Center, which was in North Philadelphia. It was a program that was run by Congreso. It was an extended day treatment program, and we worked with girls from 13 to 17 years of age. It was a step-down program from residential placement and boot camp, and it was the last stop before you were placed in those facilities. It was a collision course of young women coming into this particular facility, restorative justice, but it really wasn’t restorative justice.

We weren’t a full school day, so a lot of the young women, in addition to being in the juvenile justice system and having that be a challenge in terms of their education and everything else, they were also going to get out of the Girls Center not having all of their credits for junior high school and high school. One of the things that I did was I shifted us
from a traditional school day model to what we like to call structured (pause) …. It will come to me in a minute.

It was art focused, so that meant that we were able to address the educational disparities from 13 to 18 because we would have some 17-year-olds who were reading on a fourth grade level. Because art was the mechanism that we were using to do the education through, we were in a better position to be able to adjust all of the educational needs because the art gives you a very specific focus. It allows you to work with individuals where you find them and then move them along without ostracizing anyone. It was also very healing.

What wound up happening is that I really wanted our young women to see the range of complexions philosophically, and really of colored girls. They were coming with all kinds of stuff. Most of them were in the juvenile justice system because the preceding things were abuse of some sort. Some of them were there and they had no business being there. Some were there because they had been truant from school, and they were truant because they were being bullied.

In one or two cases, we had predators waiting for these young women outside of school. There were all kinds of things. The court system was not really interested in their specific stories if they were truant for a number of days or if they wound up in a particular situation. Even a young woman who was being sexually abused by her stepfather and her brother wound up in the juvenile justice system. What was she doing there?

We had therapeutic. We had social service. We had case management. We had all of these things, these tools, but they were being pathologized for these reasons that had nothing to do with what their real needs were and what the circumstances were that were bringing them there. I wanted them to be able to see themselves with all of their complexities, see
examples of colored women in a range of different circumstances and situations, and I could not think of a place that we could take them.

What we did was we began to turn the Girls Center itself into what would have been the first colored girls museum truly beginning with the girl herself so that images of her, that she was creative, were going up on the wall. Her artwork, her objects, were being installed in different places in the museum in places of honor so that she could own that space and she could sanctify that space as her own. When we invited people in to tell her story, the backdrop was her home space. That was the second iteration.

The third, we opened in the 2015 Fringe Festival, and the name of that show was *The Colored Girls Museum: Open for Business*. In our description, we said that The Colored Girls Museum was being settled by a collective of artists, and it was disguised as a bed and breakfast because if people knew that she was a museum, they might seek to hurt her, as she’s a colored girl. That was the backstory for even the opening of The Colored Girls Museum. It was part of an interesting narrative, but I actually was only half joking in that.

She’s been around for a year, and that first year, our thinking was we were going to see how it went and then back out of it at the end of the Fringe and maybe come back in the following year. We were going to do a business plan and all the things that they tell you you should be doing. What happened is that we applied for a foundation grant. We didn’t get it, but we became finalists, and that generated press. We got an article by the Smithsonian, which was followed by a news thing by this outlet and that outlet. We basically wound up remaining opening.

The Colored Girls Museum was engineered to also be a pop-up event, so our idea was that she could go anywhere there was a need and work with the indigenous colored girls in
that place to spawn a colored girls museum that represented their work, and their issues, and their concerns. That could be in a house, in a neighborhood, in a school, but the idea is that this moment of bringing a museum into your circumstance allows you to honor the colored girls in your world.

It allows you to sanctify that space in a particular way. It allows you to tap into that ordinary extraordinary colored girl wherever she is and whoever she is. That’s really her genesis. We’re now moving into our second year, and it’s been a hell of a year, I have to say.

Jaamil Kosoko: That’s so special. Maybe you could talk about your relationship to community organizing and how healing and womanist practices, however you want to describe that or make sense of that term, how that infiltrates your practice in the community.

Vashti DuBois: Sure. In the beginning of when I applied for a grant with the Leeway Foundation, I remember saying that I did not choose to be an arts activist. I think that many Black folks don’t choose it. It is an outcome of being a woman, of being Black, of being poor, of being a single woman, just having those other affiliations. When I get ready to put my hands on a piece of artwork, it necessarily, whether I’m intending it or not, raises all of these things because those are the perspectives that I speak through.

Also, in a more intentional way, I consider myself a pretty freaky-deaky arty directory type before I became a mom. When I got pregnant with my daughter and I had her, I became a single mother, and the first of my arty friends to become a mom. It changed everything. It changed the way people looked at me and interacted with me that I hadn’t really necessarily noticed before I became a statistic.

Every place, just from going to get my prenatal care, the sort of questions that I had – I looked young for my age – just the assumptions about so many things about my education,
about my family background, just stuff, these impositions. I was so struck by that because we don’t often talk about our privilege as colored folks, but everybody has privilege somewhere or another. I had the privilege of having had an exceptionally good education and gone to good schools, and being in really interesting company for much of my life. Although I came from economically challenged circumstances, I never considered myself poor. My mother did a really good job.

Jaamil Kosoko: Hiding it.

Vashti DuBois: Hiding it, but also her interpretation of what poverty was, she was in charge of that. As far as she was concerned, it was not only about having food on your table, but about a way of seeing yourself and being this in the world. Of course, my mother, coming from the South, wealth was about land ownership, and even though we were in one of the poorest sections of Brooklyn, we owned our house. My mother’s family owned their land in Ahoskie, North Carolina.

Land ownership was very important, just like reading was very important. The ability to be literate was about wealth. To be able to engage intellectually is wealth. I did not grow up, even when I went to the fancy schmany private school, feeling like I was poor.

After becoming pregnant with my daughter and returning to school as a single Black mother, I made a very intentional decision. I was a theater major in my first tour of duty at Wesleyan, and I went back as a women’s studies major because I really – I promised the universe that my work, as soon as I got out of school that second time, that the first two years of my life I was going to dedicate to working with other single mothers because I knew then firsthand how difficult it was as a practice, but also the ways in which the world oppresses you and attempts to limit your vision of what you can be and who you can be.
I didn’t set out to be an organizer or a justice advocate. I like to think that I set out to try to imagine how I could be the pied piper of a certain kind of information. I really wanted to work with other single moms because I wanted to point out these loopholes that you could run through to continue to live the biggest life that you could live. I had the privilege of having run through that opening in the fence, and I felt like that’s something that I could give other women. I felt like I was in a really unique and powerful position to do that because I had just done it.

Some of the women that I work with would talk about my education as the thing that allowed me to do it, but I got to talk about my past, where I came from, that I had been on my own since I was 13 years old. I was clear how blessed and lucky I’d been. It wasn’t a case of me being brilliant. A lot of it was luck, and I was blessed. I made some good decisions along the way, and I made some poor decisions along the way. I had a pretty hapless time, but I felt like all of that contributed to an authenticity that was powerful as I moved between these different worlds and was able to connect to them.

I organize now with this work of The Colored Girls Museum. It’s a collective structure. I always say to people when I take job, as soon as I take the job, I’m trying to work myself out of it. My idea is that the most powerful leadership that we can have is collective leadership because then everybody feels a sense of responsibility and ownership for the things itself. That’s how things survive.

Even The Colored Girls Museum, when we’re interviewed, typically, reporters only want to talk to me. They don’t want to talk to Ian Friday, who is the associate director. They don’t want to talk to the curator, who is Michael Clemmons, because they’re really focused on this womanist feminist – that makes me furious because on the one hand we so very often
talk about how Black men don’t support the initiatives of Black women. We’re usually the ones behind them frying the chicken or doing whatever it is that we’re doing to make sure that shit happens, but that we don’t get that in return.

Two things have been really powerful about working with two men I respect greatly, and who I’ve known for a long time, and who are excellent in their practices. It’s challenged me to think about how I talk about what the movement towards liberation and healing is going to be for all of us, and it’s created the space for us to go back and forth in a really loving way to talk about what the needs, and the expectations, and the beliefs are of Black women in a really loving way and to begin to imagine blazing new ground and offer an alternative model of what leadership might be able to look like in our community because I actually do think – I think that in our community it’s pretty clear that the colored girl herself is really the engine that drives our community. That’s no disrespect to anybody. That’s the way we’re structured. That’s the way we’re built. At the same time, our ability to be in partnership with one another as men and women is really vital because there’s also a narrative that the world likes to continue to drive, which is that Black women are out here by themselves and ain’t nobody supporting Black women. There are some cases where that is absolutely the truth, but it is not the whole truth. It’s not the whole truth.

In order to imagine a different set of outcomes and scenarios, we have to be able to model something different, and I hope that at The Colored Girls Museum that’s part of what is going on; is that when you look at our leadership, you’re looking at the team of collective inaugural artists without whom this would not even be possible because they said yes when we didn’t even know what this thing was going to be, and we’re also looking at the leadership of myself and two Black men who are committed to looking at the world through
the lens of the colored girl, and celebrating that and celebrating her. I think that that’s extraordinary.

Jaamil Kosoko: That’s really great. I think we can wrap up. I just wanted to say that there is something innately beautiful (but also brilliant) about having the kind of tenacity to be able to seek out the opportunity that you needed to enter into certain environments with any number of disinvestments that you might’ve had on your shoulders, and to negotiate and navigate those environments, then to go out into the world and share that story.

There’s no lack of brilliance, I think, and independence that it took to be 13 and find that road. Sure, there is luck. Sure, there are blessings along the way, but I think we need to really embrace that innate blessed brilliance that is generative and that’s really palpable and clear, that’s reverberating off of you, the spirit of you and the work that you’re doing with your collaborators and community. I just feel like that’s worth saying.

Vashti DuBois: Thank you for saying that. I will say this: That history is what makes me surefooted in this particular work because it is extraordinary that I am here the way that I’m here. In the work that I’ve been blessed to be able to do throughout my life, I’ve met this extraordinary ordinariness over and over again in others who look and sound like me. You would never know.

It’s less of an anomaly than we know. That’s the crazy part. That’s why, to me, the celebration of the ordinary colored girl is yes, let me celebrate you. I absolutely know what it took for you to get here, wherever the hell it is you are. I know what it took for you to get here. I always say when we celebrate anyone, we celebrate the deepest parts of ourselves, when you truly give it up for somebody. That’s what this is. I’ve got to give it up for the people. It’s a labor of love, I have to say.
Jaamil Kosoko: Thank you for giving it up. Maybe you’ll be able to continue to do this work well into the future. Thank you so much.

Vashti DuBois: Thank you.
Alexander subscribes to James Baldwin’s formulation, in The Evidence of Things Not Seen, that Till’s murder—which in its particularity is not unlike a vast chain of such events that stretches across a long history of brutal violence—can stand out, resonate, or be said to produce effects, only because of the moment of its occurrence, a moment possible only after the beginning of the insurrection and resurrection it is claimed to have sparked.

Fred Moten, “In the Break: The Aesthetics of The Black Radical Tradition”

I first came to know the work of vocal artist and composer M. Lamar in 2013. Curious to learn more about this negrogothic devil worshiping free Black man as he self-describes himself, I found myself following his work mostly online. In the years since 2013, he has released books, and several albums and visual films. M. Lamar is an artist with whom I share an interest in Black theory and alternative lifestyle. We are both deeply inspired by what Moten calls the “Black radical tradition” of art making.

M. Lamar quite plainly puts mourning at the centerpiece of his work. Several years ago, he came across the work of James Cone while doing lynching research for a project.

M. Lamar: I’d been doing all this lynching research; like lynching, cutting off the penises of Black men during lynching, and then pickling them, and selling them. Then they would divide the crowds, cut off a finger, or a toe, or those kinds of things. I came across Cone’s book The Cross and the Lynching Tree and was completely changed. It made all the research I’d been doing, all this work that I’d been doing at this point in my life crystallize in that moment.

Essentially, James Cone wanted to take back the lynching tree from the lynchers and have Black folks render it a site of empowerment and resistance, similar to how Christians
use the horrific death of Jesus on the cross as a reimagined act of self sacrifice for all of humanity will to accept Christ as their Lord and savior. But this narrative falls short for the historical narratives of Black people in American. They are overly identifying with this symbol of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice for us. James Cone is saying, “These lynched Black people in the 20th century have made the sacrifice for us, essentially. From that point to this point, really all of my work has been made under that cross. It’s been made under the lynching tree and the cross, under the tree, but sort of blending those together.

I’ve been obsessed recently with this idea of resurrection, but from a demonic position rather than a biblical one. I think that, really, resurrection in Revelations is not unlike a demonic kind of a [practice] to me, if you really get into it, all this reckoning, and the stars are falling, and all these things that happen in Revelations, it seems very close to a demonic possession, or process of raising the dead, or séance-like thing.

My relationship to mourning has been sort of – yeah. I think it’s centered around James Cone’s work and how I’ve been able to make that into my work or adapt that to my own sensibilities, my occult sensibilities, my investment in certain kinds of pagan practices of magic. Also, Fred Moten has – his book, In The Break has this idea of falsetto and Black music as having occult-like qualities, sort of demonic, of occult-like qualities. I work primarily in my head voice, although I’ve been working with these very low wail demon voice kinds of things, like in sort of a low bass baritone thing.

Mostly, my operatic training, my vocal training, has been as a soprano. As an opera singer, I’ve been trying to perfect a kind of European bel canto technique for years. The point of that, too, is related back to this idea of creating or fabricating a voice that would be worthy of raising the spirits or communing with or speaking to the dead. I think that just any old
voice isn’t going to do it. You know what I mean? Just any old sound isn’t going to connect with that, so part of my practice has been about cultivating a particular kind of sound, and as a composer, writing music, compositions, that also can speak to that.

I write the music for my pieces and librettos, and then I also make videos installations construct images. All of this is sort of like feeding into these general themes of loss, of what it means to grapple with loss, then ultimately what it means to construct a new self from that or subjectivity rooted in that loss, but that can sort of create subjectivity that’s about – I don’t know – something new in terms of ways of living as a Black man on the planet in the US context that’s so deeply rooted in white supremacy.

I was just kind of all over the place.

Jaamil Kosoko: No. Not at all...

M. Lamar: It’s all related to what I call my negrogothic esthetic, which would just be about this blending of romance and horror, like the gothic novel right. The two main components of gothic novel are romance and horror, and I think my negrogothic esthetic, I think, that there is this romance and horror. Lately, the romance has been a romance with the dead, almost these love songs to the dead.

The horror is obvious – it’s fairly obvious right after you see a 12-year-old child being shot on videotape in the case of Tamir Rice, or The Legacy of Emmett Till, or Mike Brown. There’s so many names – Sean Bell being shot 50 times in 2006. The horror is pretty much on display at all times, and so I think that the romance part of it is – lately in my work has been very much a romance with the dead and not really letting them go in any kind of way, not moving on.
A lot of the philosophy in my work is not about moving on. It’s not about grieving and
getting on with it, but having that loss be central to what makes your subjectivity in the world
as you perceived it. I will not ever get over your death. I will not ever reconcile that. It’s
forever changed me, and it’s with me at every moment.

I think there is something, I think, very romantic about that in a gothic way, but it’s
also – about a kind of indignation because of the ways in which so many of us have been
taken. It’s not old age, or cancer, or even HIV. Even HIV, though, there’s sort of political
moment in history was very much charged because of the lack of resources that were given to
[queer folks] in the ‘80s and early ‘90s. I think that when you have these kinds of
government assassinations, these lynchings for which there is no answer, this mass
incarceration, that’s a systemic thing.

I think that holding onto these deaths – it becomes about that indignation and also
becomes about a constant resurrection; Fred Moten talks in the break about what Emmett
Till’s image on the cover of Jet magazine meant to Black people at that moment. I think it
was 19 – was it ’53? Do you know if it’s ’53? I think it was 1953.

Jaamil Kosoko: I believe it was ‘53 or ‘54.
M. Lamar: Yeah. He talks about that image being like a resurrection of Emmett
Till, it being this moment when we could all remember him, remember his dismembered
body, and then it would live forever, really. I think that that kind of – I guess that’s all I’m
talking about really. What does it mean to have these people with you at all times and not to
kind of – I don’t know – move on?
I think at one point, I was talking about the phases of grief. I’d skipped the ones about – I don’t remember which ones they are, but I was very much in anger and in bargaining, but bargaining with the dead, in fact. I’ve sort of just adopted a few of them that I liked.

I wouldn’t take the ones that I didn’t like, the ones that I didn’t feel were useful in terms of a certain kind of indignation. Certainly anger, not denial. No denial. That’s also safe, but – yeah. Anyway, I don’t know. In terms of how this stuff actually executes – how this works in practice. I’ve been making these pieces. *Negro Antichrist* was the first long-form composition that I made that was sort of like trying to deal with the history of Black people from slavery to Jim Crow to lynching. Then actually, in that piece, there’s a resurrection dealing with resurrection. That was in 2010.

Since then, I’ve made this requiem called *Speculum Orum: Shackled to the Dead*, which is a slave ship requiem, again, about remembering very literally those bodies and those spirits and having them ever-present. *Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche* was this piece that then followed that, which is sort of about – a lot about the prison situation with the Black people and also the kind of constant surveillance in which we find ourselves, but from – again, if this was looking from plantation times, that kind of surveillance would be the plantation overseer – to the kind that leads to this mass incarceration question.

Then this latest piece, *Funeral Doom Spiritual* and *The Demon Rising* – both those pieces are not historically based, but they’re focusing more on this future place, imagining these – what mourning could look like and what this kind of coffin carrying – I call it a kind of coffin carrying – across centuries would look like 100 years from now, of this supernatural being who’s continuously carried the coffin of his most beloved, most of all, and what that –
what plays itself out at that – in that great morning when their beloved finally gets to come back or that great day.

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Jaamil Kosoko: I have another question for you. That was great. Thank you so much for that detail. I wanted to know a little bit about how community – and this could be metaphorical community, visual community, audience. How does your relationship with community play a role in this idea of grief and mourning, particularly in the public domain?

M. Lamar: I don’t have an answer for that, really. I’m so ambivalent about interacting with living beings. I think I’m much more comfortable communing with the dead than actual – I’m just so ambivalent about it that the work that I do is mostly about my own spiritual journey. I deeply hope and suspect that it does, but really, I guess it’s more of a hope that the work could be useful for someone else on their journey, that my journey could be – either it could model, or it could be an example of, or the work could literally be of some use within processes of mourning, grief, and constructing one’s self, like constructing one’s subjectivity.

I don’t have a good answer. I kind of hate the word community because I’m just like, “What community? What community are we talking about? Are we talking about Black people?” I don’t know if Black people in the US constitutes a community just because there’s so much diversity among Black people. I’m not convinced that Black people even, as a general matter, have any interest in my work.

I guess I have objective evidence that many Black people are, in fact, interested in what I’m doing as a process. I also think a lot about what I’m doing in terms of my own mortality, my own legacy. I don’t necessarily believe that my work will have use necessarily in my lifetime. I’m just hoping that it can survive me and then be useful maybe even for future generations of Black people in struggle.

The struggle is so much about our own sense of ourselves, our own sense of how we construct ourselves, view ourselves in opposition to white supremacy, right? I’d like to think
that the work could model for something – it could be useful for – my life, my particular construction of self could be – and then the work, ultimately, the work I make could be of some use to people.

I don’t know what – I have no other answer for these kinds of question of community. I haven’t been able to negotiate that stuff in my life very well. All I really do well is make work. I think I’m not bad at that. In terms of what – any kind of contribution I could have to this lineage, any kind of – if I could have any meaningful input in the long conversation of what Fred Moten calls the Black radical tradition, that – to me, it’s such a grand tradition. There’s so many great people in that, just great, great, great, great, great thinkers, and artists, and philosophers, and makers, and craftspeople.

If I could just have any kind of – even be a footnote in the history, that would just be so meaningful to me. The only thing I can do, really, is make my work. I don’t think I have any other insight. I could talk about my work and what I’m trying to do with my work, and I have some ideas about culture and politics. I could talk about those. I think that they may be insightful. They’re based on my own particular point of view, but also all the reading that I’ve done.

Jaamil Kosoko: I think what I was getting at – is this idea of community, we can kind of turn it on its head. This could be the community of the dead that you are deeply in relationship with, it seems, and how your work, instead of serving the world of the living, might be serving more this world of the dead and this idea of resurrection.

M. Lamar: I think you’re onto something. I think that they’re all – I’m not a Christian now, but I grew up Christian. There’s always in the spiritual, “Give me Jesus. You can have
all this world, but give me Jesus.” Then the spiritual says, “When I come to die, give me Jesus.” Then the spiritual is, “Dark midnight was my cry. Dark knows my cry.”

For me, I think that all the worldly things are not that interesting to me. I think that people are so – I don’t know what to call it – but in living, I guess, a good life or something, of living well on this plane at this time. That’s not really of much interest to me. I mean this world is not – I don’t find it that useful, that pragmatically helpful for me.

Maybe the kind of conversations I’m having with the afterlife, with other planes altogether, other spheres is just much more interesting to me. I remember when I first saw Cecil Taylor videos, Cecil Taylor talking. One of the things that was so compelling to me about Cecil is that he seemed to be living on another plain, like somewhere out there. I was like, “I want to live there.” I was like, “I want to be him.” George Clinton said about Sun Ra in 1978 or ’79, he said, “That brother is out to lunch at the same place I eat.”

I love this idea of just being somewhere else, like being not here. I think there’s something very – I think it’s very appropriate to disassociate from this contemporary context because it’s just so brutal. There’s not a lot of love and not a lot of possibility for Black men in this context. It makes me want to go – it lets you look like Barack Obama, and maybe have a white mother, and then you can go to prep schools that lead to Harvard that lead to being the president.

You know what I mean? For him, it’s a very lovely – this world has been very lovely. I think that for most – for the rest of us, it’s a different story. I’m just trying to make some other place elsewhere, myself. I think I most connect with folks in the radical tradition, the Black radical tradition, who seem to be somewhere else, who seem to be somewhat of this
world, but are really – their consciousnesses, their imaginations, their vibe, it’s just somewhere else.

I think that the brutality of capitalism, the violences of white supremacy and patriarchy, all of those things are just not – I don’t find them very inspiring or very useful. Yeah. I want to commune with – in other spheres, in other dimensions. Sun Ra’s investment in space, space as being the place who is also just very much about something else, finding something else besides this world as it’s constructed.

If you’re even just vaguely aware of what’s going on politically, culturally, and socially, there’s not much hope, really, in this world. Cornel West always talking about being an agent of hope. He’s not optimistic or pessimistic, but hopeful. I find hope difficult in the current situation, so I – my solution, if I have one, it’s inadequate, certainly, but it’s just to try to exist somewhere else. My somewhere else, land or world, is often in conflict with the reality and the brutality of my physical self in this physical plane. There’s lots of dissonance. There’s lots of – yeah – friction.

We know that race is this story, this made up story. It’s a lie, basically. It doesn’t really exist, and yet, there’s so much violence that’s come in. Gender, we know, doesn’t exist. It’s a made up construct, and yet there’s patriarchy, yet there’s gender oppression. At one level, sort of overly identify with these Black artists, these Black US artists in what Fred Moten calls the Black radical traditions seems somewhat arbitrary in that sense, and yet there is a spirit realm. Again, this goes back to the spirit. This goes back to whatever kind of connection – I just feel a deep ancestral connection, a connection that is beyond intellectual understanding, even. I feel an intellectual connection, but there’s a deep spiritual.
It’s in the music. It’s in our music. It’s in the way we speak, the way we dress, the way we walk. Yeah. I am in this skin for the time that I am here, right? This body is a very temporary thing, but I’m in this skin. I think that it’s been helpful for me to identify, maybe overly identify, with the W.E.B. DuBois, Leontyne Prices, Mary Andersons of the world.

I’ve been thinking about all these Alpha-Negroes. Cornel West talks about the Alpha-Negroes, too, like the Oprah Winfreys, or the Michael Jordans, and Serena [Williams], these Black people who would just succeed, who would just succeed no matter what. Barack Obama, I think, also, you could put him in that category. These people who are just going to succeed no matter what regardless of racism, regardless of all these systemic barriers in their way.

Art is the only thing that’s – as a very young child, art was really the only thing that allowed me to dream and to survive, really. The retreating that I could do into the world of aesthetics via paintings, like reproductions of paintings that I would see as a child, or music – it just seems like all the possibilities of the world were in art-making. As a very young child, I wanted to be a great artist. I didn’t know all the names of free jazz, these free jazz people, then that I do now, but that, to me, is a kind of culmination of any kind of high modernist moment in a kind of deep existential moment of what the possibilities are for Black music.

Certainly, hip-hop is a different kind of thing in terms of popular music and sampling in a post-modern sensibility, but in terms of the kind of high modernist moment, I think that Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor represent a high modernist moment of a culmination of the spiritual. Everything that we learn musically from the blues, and then from jazz, and be-bop, and all these sub genres of jazz, the cool period, all that stuff, just being like an amalgamation. I think, a culmination of this very long history.
It’s a conversation, and I like what you just said. I think that’s really beautiful, a community of the dead. I think that when you – I do think that when you see someone like Cecil Taylor, or Sun Ra, or Ornette Coleman, what they are doing in the music is creating a community of the dead. All of this history of Black music from the spiritual that happened under slavery, the 200 years of slavery, as oral tradition only, that somehow survived miraculously.

It’s amazing. You just think about how the spiritual even exists now, not being written down until, I think, 18-something, 1867, I think it was. No one notated it until then, early 20th century, right? We’re talking late 19th to early 20th century. The music at its best – Erykah Badu. I feel like she – there’s a gathering always with her, too, in her spirits from all of these histories and these traditions.

This isn’t just a style. When I was talking about the blues and being in the blues tradition, I never wanted people to think about me playing 12-bar blues, or pentatonic scales, or some kind of – something that is familiar to them. I want it to evoke a commingling of spirits, all the spirits that created this music on the ground. I think that when you get certain kinds of things going, vibes going –

Sun Ra was very adamant about this question of feeling in music. There’s some kind of feeling happening. It’s not just about scales, or notes, or certain kinds of styles. It’s about feeling. It’s about spirits commingling in a very particular kind of way. I’m not even convinced that white people can play jazz or blues. They can play the notes, certainly. I don’t know if they can co-mingle. I think maybe they have their own spirits to co-mingle with. One of my favorite singers is a white woman, Diamanda Galás. In so many ways, what she’s doing has created a blueprint for the way I work. She’s a pianist and a singer, and she makes
these long-form pieces about mourning. She is very much a blues lady, but she’s very rooted in her Greek traditions of these mourning singers, these women who would sing in the Greek tradition around funerals and just wail for hours and hours. She’s very connected to that, so even though she’s using our scales, along with scales that come from her tradition, she’s got her own blues. It’s not Black music. It’s absolutely connected to her Greek and Armenian heritage.

Jaamil Kosoko: Yeah.

M. Lamar: I feel you with this community [of the dead]. The best that I could hope for as a performer is that I’ve created the conditions through which the spirits can work through me. These things can move through me, that I can be a vessel. That’s a lot of work, though. There’s a lot of preparation. That’s a lot of discipline, to use a Sun Ra obsession term, a lot of discipline that’s involved in creating the conditions through which a spirit can move, or the Spirit. It could be this communion happening, this community of spirits. That’s a lot of work and a lot of discipline as an artisan, but then also a lot of, hopefully, a deep spiritual relationship to yourself and to various kinds of histories.

We can understand intellectually, but do we feel them deep in our bones? Feeling is a big deal. Fred Moten also has a book that he wrote about Cecil Taylor called the Feel Trio. I love this idea of just feeling. Even in my relationship to time in my own music, I don’t have some regimented 4/4, 6/8, or whatever the time is. The time is always sort of floating. There’s a floating relationship that I have to time. It’s a lot about the feeling and the vibe.

Jaamil Kosoko: That’s beautiful. I love that idea of feeling and how that really pertains to the Black tradition, and to so many traditions as well. I think this is brilliant. This is a lot
of really good content. Are there any other things that you’d like to expand upon before we end?

M. Lamar: I will say that I see the interview also as kind of a part of my art. There’s what I’m doing in my work, but then the interview, I take it really seriously as just an extension of what my practice is because we’re talking about creating access to what I’m doing. I love – I feel a lot of pressure, though, when there’s a video interview because potentially videos will exist forever. I think about how many of these interviews I watch of Sun Ra or Cecil Taylor. There’s not necessarily a lot of them because they weren’t popular, but the ones that do exist, I treasure them because they’re just these jewels. I think that’s a big deal. That is one thing I have to say.

Jaamil Kosoko: Thank you so much. M. Lamar, it’s been an immense honor and pleasure, not only to be in conversation with you today but to have been able to work together a bit, and hopefully, keep this dialogue going.

M. Lamar: Yeah, I think Friday’s was really great. I hope so. I think we’re onto something. As you say, it’s an ongoing conversation to have in public. Hopefully American Realness will happen and then other future endeavors.

Jaamil Kosoko: Exactly, and I’ll keep you posted. I’m going to reach out to him today. I just wanted to send that material to you first to look at.

M. Lamar: Okay. You have a great day.

Jaamil Kosoko: You as well. It’s been really real. Thank you.


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