What Would It Actually Take To Deconolinize: Response to Distinguished Lecture

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What Would It Actually Take To Deconolinize: Response to Distinguished Lecture

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I approach Thomas Haakenson's lecture not as an art historian, but as a Black anthropologist who also engages the work of major art museums and their attempts to engage a broader public, particularly in cities such as Detroit and Berlin, where the preeminent museums are in the center of the city and simultaneously seen as White spaces.

Because I knew I had to write this piece, I went back again to the "Who is Queen?" exhibit also addressed in Haakenson's lecture, to take more notes and think about it more in relation to decolonization. Again, one of my primary experiences was one of being policed. This time, I didn't even get in. Because it was cold, I brought my violin. I was meeting a friend who was already in the museum. I had my COVID-19 immunization records ready. But still, they didn't let me in. When I first tried to enter through a door in the middle, the security motioned, somewhat rudely, to the door to the left. How was I to know? There was no sign to this effect. Already feeling, again, as if I wasn't really wanted in this space, I went to the door to which they were motioning. Without really speaking with me, they talked to each other about needing a supervisor. With the exception of the man who eventually came to talk to me directly, they were all Black. But their Blackness seemed to be beside the point. Their bodies and motions were like tools for a broader establishment. The extent of what I mostly remember hearing from them was, "No." That was from the supervisor when she eventually came. They were already in the midst of their "security" mindset. Could I take it with me? "No." Could I check it in? "No." They didn't say why. They just said, "No."

My friend didn't have time for the exhibit anyway. I was going to go afterwards, but we went instead to a restaurant nearby. She told me about how one of her other friends was boycotting the museum because of its colonialism. I also spoke about the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) as a White space. She noted that, well, people already

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know that the New York MOMA is in a White space, but Detroit? That's a Black city. Even there, the Museum often seems like a White space.

Nearing the time of a return visit to New York, when I look on a calendar, I see that the exhibit is already gone. I won't get to see it again, at least not in that space. For whom is the exhibit anyway? I am reading the Manifesto in the *Black Dada Reader* by Adam Pendleton,[1] the same artist who produced the exhibit "Who is Queen?". I am struck by several lines:

> i think "what black arts did was inspire a whole lot of black people to write" (336)

In my case, it is not only the art, but also the refusal to allow me to engage the art on my own terms. It is all of the policing, the policing, in particular, of my body.

In the Manifesto, I am not sure what Pendleton's statements mean for someone who is not already part of the context that already values their art. Did Pendleton ever try to enter the museum to see his exhibit on my terms?

I remember going to a conversation between another Black artist, Isaac Julien and Kaja Silverman, then a prominent film theorist at UC Berkeley. I love Isaac Julien's films, but I remember asking him: "Why the museum?" Why should this be the space for his activism? Both Professor Silverman and Isaac Julien looked at me as if they didn't know what I was talking about, as if my question was irrelevant.

I forgive Julien, but I still have the same question.

I also very much value Pendleton's art. On my first visit to "Who is Queen?", on the occasion that the security guards did let me in, even if they policed my every move, I watched the film over and over again. I didn't want to miss any second. And I wanted to take in the sounds. The sounds in that space were incredible, as were the images. The use of Black and White seemed to mix past and present activism, Black Lives Matter and civil rights.

I was also struck and moved by the film about Jack Halberstam, the Columbia University professor who was addressing questions of gender, swimming, and the locker room.

The physical structure of the exhibit, what Haakenson calls scaffolding, made me want to climb it, but the impulse was tamed by the even stronger fear that I would be further policed.

That policing made me want to spray paint, "White Space," in the center of the exhibit. But I knew that that would lead to my arrest. I didn't want to make that sacrifice, but maybe next time I should; otherwise, how would the museum be confronted with the fact that they were actively trying to prevent me from experiencing the museum as a member of the intended audience.

I recently heard a report on "Freakonomics" on NPR, on the relationship between the art market and major museums. Museums, especially the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, play an important role in establishing the value of an artist's art. Rich people buy the art, but museums play a critical role in establishing the value because they lend the art credibility. They have less money to buy it, but their prestige adds enormous value.

Value seems to be drawn less from the social impact. It may be impact within the art world, but where do people who look like me [Black anthropologists] figure?

Other lines from the "Manifesto" strike me:

> BLACK DADA.
> Did our conceptual artists join hands with our freedom fighters?
> Did they demonstrate in Birmingham?
> Did they cover their faces when the hoses were turned on them? (342)

If the museum is one major sight of my injury, how does the art figure that it contains? "Who is Queen?"

In his "Manifesto," Pendleton writes: "white dada remains within the framework of european weakness" (338), a quote taken from Tristan Tzara's "Manifeste de M. Antipyrine" (1916).[2]

I'm not sure what to make of Pendleton's *Dada Dancers*, referenced in Haakenson's lecture. There are so many layers. One can see crosses on bare chests and then words. But the words seem illegible. I also see palm trees being blown by a heavy wind.

Haakenson quotes Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang: "When metaphor evades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness."[3] What does Haakenson want to say about decolonization by including this quote? Is he doing the actual practice of decolonizing? Who is in the right position to assess what decolonization means or how it feels? If Fanon is right when he sees in decolonization the emergence of an African bourgeoisie (see *Wretched of the Earth*), then hasn't that term already been taken and corrupted. Does the claim lead to its own legitimization, somewhat like "antiracism" or "diversity, equity, and inclusion" work now? Does the distinction between the real versus the "metaphorical" decolonization serve to legitimize those who would claim that the task is already done, like those who say, "this is safe space," precisely at the moment I find myself being injured? Shouldn't they be asking me if I experience this as a safe space? Am I being harmed? Are they harming me?

It is worth recognizing that even asking me might not suffice. I may feel compelled to comfort them, to say that I experience their harm as care, to recognize their love, even if I feel it as a knife lodged in my neck.

Elizabeth Mackinlay and Katelyn Barney claim, according to Haakenson, that "decolonization is a concept that takes on different meanings across different contexts—it simultaneously evokes [a] historical narrative of the end of empire, a particular version of postcolonial theory, a way of knowing the resists the Eurocentrism of the West."[4] In spite of its evocative power, can "decolonization" actually do what it is claiming?

Conclusion

We have a lot more work to do. Art is, of course, changing the world, but I don't want to get caught up in the reifying contemporary relations of power by legitimating artists who appear in the MOMA over those who appear in the street or at Theater X in Moabit in Berlin. In my forthcoming book, *Blackness as a Universal Claim: Holocaust Heritage, Noncitizen Futures, and Black Power in Berlin*, thinking, in particular about theater, I argue that perhaps the rehearsal is the revolution.[5] It is part of the everyday revolutionary imagination necessary for broad-scale social change. In any event, there are no police or security guards in that art space. They also don't possess any stolen artifacts that need to be returned. People are constantly debating. And they are also doing things like organizing asylum for those threatened with deportation, taking advantage of their location on the grounds of a church to offer *Kirchenasyl,* even though they are not a religious organization. Many of the members are Muslim or atheists or Marxists, anticapitalists, or nonaligned. In any event, decolonization for them is not a metaphor. It is also not embedded in a single act. It is everyday life, a process, the process necessary for social change.

Notes

1. Adam Pendleton, "Manifesto: Black Dada," *Black Dada Reader,* ed. Adam Pendleton (London: Koenig, 2017), 333–346.
2. Quoted in *Looking at Dada*, eds. Sara Ganz Blythe and Edward D. Powers (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 4.
3. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.
4. Elizabeth Mackinlay and Katelyn Barney, "Unknown and Unknowing Possibilities: Transformative Learning, Social Justice, and Decolonising Pedagogy in Indigenous Australian Studies," *Journal of Transformative Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 55.
5. Damani Partridge, *Blackness as a Universal Claim: Holocaust Heritage, Noncitizen Futures, and Black Power in Berlin* (Oakland, CA.: University of California Press, in press).